

INTEREST GROUPS

GOD, ANIMALS & HUMANKIND

- Topic: Impasse and Beyond: About the Animals
Convener: Elizabeth Farians, Xavier University
Moderator: Daniel Scheid, Duquesne University
Presenters: Jame Schaefer, Marquette University
Elizabeth Farians, Xavier University
Respondent: William French, Loyola University

Treating animals as instruments for human use instead of beings with intrinsic values in their own right is a basic evil of human society. And yet it has been one of almost total theological neglect. In modern times this treatment of the animals with all of its consequent problems has reached epic proportions. We have reached an impasse.

We theologians must take up our responsibility and begin to deal with the morality of the animal issue. This is the purpose of the interest group “God, Animals and Humankind.” In fact, the animal issue is so basic to all of theology and to continued existence itself that we hope the group can be moved to permanent status within the Society.

Jame Schaefer of Marquette University began our meeting with an excellent paper entitled “Beyond Dualistic Thinking about Humans and Other Animals: Recognizing the Kinship of Creatures and Practicing the Ethics of Companionship,” analyzing the dualistic thinking that sets humans apart from other species. She underscored the problems with dualistic thinking in which humans are considered “apart from” other animals. Key problems include the promotion of an anthropocentric bias through which other animals are viewed merely as objects for human use and not valued intrinsically for themselves, the inconsistency that dualistic thinking has with evolutionary and molecular biological findings, and the lack of theological meaning for people who profess faith in God as the creator and sustainer of a good creation, who became flesh for our salvation, who enspirited the universe forward, and who calls the world with it diverse entities to authentic expression and completion.

Schaefer explained her quest for theologically-grounded ways of addressing the ongoing human causes of animal suffering, endangerment of species, and acceleration in the rate of species extinction, and she shared her findings in writings about the desert fathers, Celtic wanderers, English hermits, and St. Francis of Assisi and his companions that demonstrate their positive attitudes and actions toward animals. She identified and gave examples of seven categories of attitudes

and actions that suggest a strong sense of kinship that the holy men had toward the animals in their shared surroundings. Among these categories are protecting and feeding wild animals, acting piously toward them (with compassion, love, affection, kindness, devotion and steadfastness), and using familial language when referring to the animals and natural phenomena in their solitary homes.

In the second part of her paper, Jame highlighted basic scientific findings primarily from evolutionary, molecular, and ethological biologists that challenge dualistic metaphysics and help make the sense of kinship expressed by the solitaires and wanderers more deeply profound today. This scientifically informed sense of kinship suggests behavior that faith-filled people will follow. In the concluding part of the paper, she proffered five principles of “the ethics of companionship” to capture this behavior: (1) Acknowledge our physical relatedness to other animals while also recognizing our distinctiveness; (2) cherish our companionship with other animals and walk lightly with them in the web of life so they have the space they need to survive and flourish; (3) value the inter-relationships of other species in biological systems of which they are constituents; (4) acknowledge our radical dependence on other animals for human health and well-being; and, (5) demonstrate piety toward them by loving them for themselves and not simply for their usefulness to humans, devoting ourselves to their interests in surviving and flourishing, showering them with affection by tending to and protecting them from human and other intrusions that prevent them from meeting their needs, being kind to them as mutual travelers in our shared journey of life, standing up for and with them before others when they are threatened individually or as a species, showing compassion for their suffering while understanding that decay, death and emergence of new species are characteristics of temporal existence, and being generous to them without interfering with their self-expressions according to their natures. She argued that embracing these principles should move us beyond dualisms to more realistic and faithful ways of relating to the other animals that inhabit our shared planet.”

Elizabeth Farians spoke passionately about the need to address ongoing animal suffering now. Using the Christian Vegetarian Association pamphlet as a visual aid, Elizabeth was able to show some of the cruelties of factory farming and give some of the statistics. She also explained how in the “Theology and Animals” class which she designed and teaches at Xavier University, students completely filled the blackboard with classifications of how animals are treating cruelly in modern society. Again demonstrating the “impasse” and begging for compassionate and scholarly action.

After questions were asked and comments made on the two presentations, the status of this interest group was discussed. One more session is allowed under the current convention structure, and Elizabeth indicated that she would seek permanent status so concerns about animals can continue to be addressed at CTSA conventions.

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