

DIGNITY IN NON-HUMANS: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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My mother-in-law, Doreen, died shortly before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. She had had Alzheimer's for about ten years and spent the last six years of her life in a specialist Alzheimer care home unable to recognize me for the last three years and her one child, Jenny, to whom I am married, for the last two.

The care home, as good care homes do, tried their best to help Doreen maintain her sense of dignity, even after this was not, I suspect, of conscious importance to her. Each day, for instance, even if she gave the appearance, as she usually did, of simply wanting to stay in bed, they would ensure that Doreen got up, got dressed in day clothes and spent some time out of her room.

When she died, the prepaid funeral plan that she had was, by coincidence, with Dignity Funeral Directors, who did a good job at both the funeral service itself (where I was the officiating minister) and at the interment of her ashes, with those of her husband, some eighteen months later.

I mention all this because I suspect any of us would have done the same. There simply seems something appropriate about treating someone with dignity even if, because of dementia or other circumstances, they may not appreciate it – and those who are being buried or cremated certainly don't appreciate the care that family members, friends and other put in and the respect that they manifest.

And yet, there has been a long tradition in many of the world's religions for doubting that it makes sense to talk of non-humans, however aware and mentally alert they are, possessing dignity.

Religious understandings about dignity in non-humans

Most religions privilege humans over the rest of creation. So, in Judaism, Christianity and Sufism (within Islam), humans are created in the image and likeness of God – *imago Dei* (Takeshita, 1982; Robinson, 2011; Rabie-Boshoff and Buitendag, 2021). Despite the importance of this concept, it features infrequently in scripture – occurring only three times, for instance, in the Jewish scriptures. As Rabie-Boshoff and Buitendag (2021) point out, its importance, despite its scriptural scarcity, seems precisely to be to do with the fact that it is taken as a means of distinguishing humans from non-humans and in a way that aligns humanity with the creator. Furthermore, we can note that other claims about the distinctiveness of humans – that non-humans can't use tools, lack genuine intelligence, do not have feelings, lack self-awareness, aesthetic awareness and a moral sense and so on – can and have been empirically investigated with findings that weaken the distinction between all the other animal species on Earth and ourselves (understood as members of the species *Homo sapiens*). The claim that we are made *imago Dei* is different. We can try to explain what it means in scientific language but those with the appropriate religious faith can always fall back on scripture.

However, there have been substantial moves within the Abrahamic faiths to come to a deeper understanding of the purpose of God's non-human creation. In part such moves have resulted from greater awareness of ecological considerations (Page, 1996). The net result of such thinking has been to soften the binary distinction between humans and the rest of creation. For a start, theologians nowadays are more likely to insist that there is much that humans can learn from other creatures. Re-readings of the scriptures have revealed how much they say about the natural world that previous generations seemed hardly to notice, for example: 'Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any

chief, officer or ruler, she prepares her food in summer, and gathers her sustenance in harvest' (*Proverbs* 6:6–8); 'Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!' (*Luke* 12:24); 'And your Lord inspired the bee, saying, "Take you habitations in the mountains and in the trees and in what they erect. Then, eat of all fruits, and follow the ways of your Lord made easy (for you)". There comes forth from their bellies, a drink of varying colour wherein is healing for people. Verily, in this is indeed a sign for people who think' (*Qur'an* 16:68–69).

Furthermore, there is a danger of reading too much into *imago Dei*. By far the greater emphasis in the Abrahamic religions is of the distance between God and all of creation. Of course, God cares for and sustains creation, but God created it and there is therefore an ontological distinction *between* God and the created order that is of a different kind to the distinctions that exist *within* the created order.

Despite all this, other religions can generally be characterized as being more positive about animals than the Abrahamic ones. Several Asian ones, in particular Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, ascribe dignity to animals (Chapple, 2014). At first sight it might be thought that this claim does not sit well with the fact that Hinduism (best considered as an aggregate of the beliefs and practices of ancient Indian cultures and traditions) sees a hierarchy among living creatures with humans at the top. The position of each kind of animal within this hierarchy is revealed by *karma* (actions and their consequences) so that good *karma* is rewarded by reincarnation further up the hierarchy and bad *karma* by the opposite. However, the sacred texts of Hinduism, for instance in the *Rig Veda* and the *Atharva Veda*, praise those who show sensitivity toward animals (Caruana, 2020).

Perhaps more significantly, the idea that there is a clear hierarchy with non-humans below humans below the gods is troubled by the fact that reincarnation occurs among the gods who may appear as animals. Krishna is one of the most widely revered of all Hindu deities and is seen as the divine cowherd (Simoons *et al.*, 1981). The festival of Gopashtami, which falls in the early autumn, commemorates the occasion when Krishna, along with his brother, first took his father's herds of cattle to graze in the forests of Vrindaban in Uttar Pradesh. At this time, cattle are given a rest from work, are washed, decorated, fed special foods, and worshipped. Indeed, cows are worshipped on many other occasions. To walk three times round a cow just before or while it is giving birth is equivalent to a very lengthy pilgrimage, some would say to walking around all India.

There are many accounts in Hindu literature of how caring for a cow, its presence or even the sight of it brings good fortune and drives away evil or protects against it. Dust in the hoofprints of a cow is an ingredient in native medicines; dust kicked up by cows may be applied to a person's forehead, put on a newly born infant as protection against the evil eye, and sprinkled on a bride and groom (Simoons *et al.*, 1981). Of particular relevance in purification are the five products of the cow (milk, curd, ghee, urine and dung): 'These products ... play a significant role for orthodox Hindus in gaining and maintaining the state of ritual purity they so greatly desire' (Simoons *et al.*, 1981: 130). The reverence accorded to Indian cows has led to the establishment of cow shelters (*gaushalas*); here aged, infertile, diseased, rescued and abandoned cows are sheltered for the rest of their life, until they die of natural causes (Sharma *et al.*, 2019). There are thought to be some 3,000–4,000 cow shelters, caring for 600,000 or more cows (Kennedy *et al.*, 2018).

Buddhism retains from Hinduism the hierarchical view of beings and the idea of reincarnation (Caruana, 2020). Animals are regarded as sentient, while the doctrine of rebirth means that there isn't the ontological distance between them and humans that we see in the Abrahamic religions. Nevertheless, rebirth as an animal is not to be desired; Buddhists often portray the life of animals, wild as well as domesticated, as one that is filled with fear and

suffering. Furthermore, Barstow, writing of the moral status of animals within the Tibetan tradition, points out that while animals are sentient, they are less intelligent than humans. Accordingly, he concludes:

This lack of intelligence means that animals are assumed to be incapable of practising religion, meaning that they are incapable of alleviating their suffering on anything more than a temporary, worldly level. Nevertheless, despite their stupidity relative to humans, the Tibetan tradition also makes clear that animals have rich inner lives. They feel physical pain, of course, but also emotions such as fear, love, and desire.
(Barstow, 2019: 1)

In Japanese Buddhism, too, animals are considered sentient but of lesser mental capacity than humans. They are therefore seen as ‘spiritually hindered beings’ (Ambros, 2014: 256). While Buddhism is often portrayed in the West as being ‘pro-animal’, the reality is more complex. In Japanese Buddhism, Ambros concludes that:

premodern Japanese Buddhism displayed, as did Buddhism in general, a high degree of ambivalence toward animals by presuming a fundamental kinship between humans and other animals while also taking for granted that nonhuman animals occupied a subhuman status. Animals were regarded as living, sentient beings and ignoble beasts, as having superhuman powers yet being karmically hindered, as paragons of gratitude and beings culpable of evil deeds, as the bestowers of reward and punishment as well as embodiments of attachment, ignorance, and pollution.
(Ambros, 2014: 259)

Even though there are only some six million Jains, their position with regard to animals is such that it warrants discussion here. One of Jainism’s principal tenets is the idea of *ahimsa* (non-violence), so that virtually all Jains are vegetarians. As in Buddhism, there is a hierarchy of living things and a cycle of rebirth, from which humans need to be liberated:

It is the strictest religion as regards avoiding harm to animals. All living things are meant to help one another. Killing is not allowed, even in self-defense. Going further than Hinduism and Buddhism, Jainism considers nonviolence the highest moral duty ... One important prayer includes a plea for forgiveness from all living beings. The idea of *Jiva* corresponds somewhat to what Western thinkers call consciousness or soul but Jainism sees *Jiva* as present everywhere, in gods, humans, animals, plants, hell beings, and even in inert matter.
(Caruana, 2020: 9)

Mention of *jiva* leads into the growing interest in some theological circles of the possibility of panpsychism (Leidenhag, 2019). Long seen as a core belief within Vedanta (Deutsch, [1969] 1973), the spiritual foundation of Hinduism, panpsychists see mentality as fully natural, as fundamental to the universe, but not reducible to the physical. The growing interest in panpsychism is partly due to increasing explorations of the relevance of quantum theory to theology. While there are a range of views about this (Saunders, 2002; Leidenhag, 2019), at the very least such remarkable, yet well-established, physical phenomena as quantum entanglement (‘spooky action at a distance’ – to cite Einstein), in which, in certain circumstances, measurements on one particle (e.g., to determine its spin) *instantaneously* cause changes in one or more other, distant particles, raise questions about our understanding of the fundamentals of our universe (including the nature of causation and of time). There are

competing interpretations among physicists as to what is going on, but one feature of particular interest is that this seems like evidence for deep connections between entities in a way that is at least consonant with theological understandings of the universe that see something mysterious shared between all entities. Such phenomena as quantum entanglement give some support to the notion, as expressed in the Upanishads, that Brahma (ultimate reality) is pure consciousness (Deutsch, [1969] 1973).

The overall conclusion is that humans may not be as distinct from the rest of the cosmos as we generally presume. There is an inherent worth to all entities, a notion that is not far from that of ascribing dignity to all entities. Even in the Christian tradition, there are instances that hint at the worth and dignity of all of creation, not just of animals. One thinks of St Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon*, with such passages as:

Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,
Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.

(St Francis of Assisi, n.d.)

Concluding thoughts

In Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Napoleon, the pig, famously changes the rule 'All animals are equal' to 'All animals are equal but some are more equal than others'. Some religious traditions see humans as special but not as separate from non-humans. Aristotle saw plants as having souls with the powers of nutrition, growth and reproduction, animals as having souls with the additional powers of perception and locomotion, and humans as having a rational soul thanks to our powers of reason and thought. He did not use the term dignity in regard to non-humans but I suspect he would have seen every organism as having a dignity appropriate to its nature (its form). We see this when we regard a majestic tree or the grace of some animals. Conversely, there are times when we recognize how the natural dignity of an animal has been damaged (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Polar bear at a zoo sometime between 1909 and 1932.

This understanding is not entirely dissimilar from Gerald Manley Hopkins's concept of 'inshape', the intrinsic form or essence of a thing. For Hopkins, every being in the universe 'selves' (enacts) its identity (Greenblatt *et al.*, 2006). A more prosaic version is to talk of the distinctive 'thingness' of things, the 'pigness' of a pig, for instance. It is this that makes behaviour appropriate in one species – think of a big cat hunting prey – that we would consider inappropriate in another.

It is also worth mentioning a longstanding strand of thought in which we fail to understand what it is like to be an animal. In mainstream philosophy this view is perhaps most famously put by Nagel (1974) in his article 'What is it like to be a bat?'. The thinking here is that a bat's mind is so different from ours that we cannot really conceive of what a bat's life is like, let alone what it is thinking, except at a somewhat superficial level. That being the case, we are likely to underestimate bats, and other species, with regard to their capabilities, including their moral capabilities (cf. Peña-Guzmán, 2022).

More fancifully, in some people's eyes, is the poet Malcolm Guite's account of visiting the grave of Charles Williams:

I HAD a curious experience in a graveyard last week. On my way to the University Church to preach a sermon at the conference's closing service, I thought that I would visit the churchyard of Holy Cross, and pay my respects to Charles Williams, who is buried there.

...

The churchyard of Holy Cross is wonderfully wild and overgrown, a haven for wild flowers, bees, and insects. Not many people seem to visit it, and, wandering on the paths there, which are so tangled with long grass and nettles, I wondered whether I could find his gravestone; for the paths seemed to wind in ways that I couldn't remember. The place was quiet, deserted, and still. Just as I began to feel that I might never find the spot, there was a movement at my feet, and a beautiful black cat appeared, purring and rubbing itself round my legs; then it turned and walked away. I followed, and it led me straight to Williams's grave, where it perched on a stone and asked for more fuss as its reward, purring all the time.

...

I left the churchyard and went to preach my sermon in the pulpit from which Lewis had preached his wonderful sermon 'The weight of Glory'. At the reception afterwards, I mentioned to the composer J. A. C. Redford ... that I had visited Williams's grave. Before I could tell him anything more, he said: 'You know, years ago I had a strange, almost a mystical, experience there. I somehow got lost in the tangled paths and couldn't find the grave, and then, from out of the undergrowth, there stepped a beautiful red fox, which looked at me, turned around, and trotted down the path that led me straight to Williams's grave.'

(Guite, 2022)

Before the Axial Age (from around the eighth to the third century BCE, a time when religions formalized and the first scriptures were probably written), religions were probably far more open to animistic and shamanistic thought, experiences, and practices than many of the world's organized religions are nowadays (Dunbar, 2022). Animism is the belief that all objects, not only animals but also non-living entities and places, perhaps even words, have a spiritual essence. Given the current unprecedented ecological crisis and the disengagement from nature that many people feel, it is perhaps unsurprising that animism is making something of a comeback – see for example, Harvey's (2017) *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. Related to animism is shamanism, religious practices that entail a shaman

acting as an intermediary between this world and the spirit world, often through altered states of consciousness. David Abram (2011) in his aptly titled *Becoming Animal* discusses from a Western perspective what it is like to be a shaman. It is increasingly common for people to live with a less strict dividing line between human and non-human animals, a feature that makes it easier for us to recognize their inherent dignity and worth.

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