

The Value of a Sparrow

Dr. David Robertshaw Sermon, Forest Home Chapel, May 24, 2015

Based on Luke 12. 6-7 “Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings and not one of them is forgotten before God”

From **The Ascent of Man.**

By Jacob Bronowski

Man is a singular creature. He has a set of gifts which make him unique among the animals: so that, unlike them, he is not a figure in the landscape. In body and in mind he is the explorer of nature, the ubiquitous animal, who did not find but has made his home in every continent.

Among the multitude of animals which scamper, fly, burrow and swim around us, man is the only one who is not locked into his environment. His imagination make it possible for him not to accept the environment but to change it. It is a different kind of evolution, not biological but cultural.

Many of the early scientists, such as Isaac Newton and Johannes Kepler, were also theologians and recognized that the God-given attribute of man for rational thought was best expressed if that attribute was used to describe the properties of the natural world. In so doing, they, therefore, praised God.

Their science was of a deductive nature and based on observation. The first person to actually measure blood pressure was the Reverend Stephen Hales and his observations took us into the arena of experimental science. The relationship between science and religion, however, has not always been a happy one and Andrew Dickson White proclaimed that a warfare existed between science and religion due to the fact that the discoveries of science were at times in direct conflict with the dogma of religion, which was considered to be incontrovertible. Galileo was forced by the Inquisition to retract his theories concerning the

heliocentric movement of the earth around the sun and was jailed for his discoveries. Nowadays,

fundamental physics and theology have largely overcome the schism between science and religion

in that the revelation of a natural order to the planet and universe which can be described by

physical laws, leads to a theology of the natural world. The situation, however, is less clear with

respect to the relationship between the biological sciences and religion. On the one hand,

physicists see a beautiful order and reality of the world, whereas biologists, even with modern

molecular biology, see a perplexing world around them which is difficult to interpret in a

theological context in part because we are part of that biological world. One would expect that

the unifying hypothesis provided by Darwin's explanation of the development of life on earth is as

basic to biology as quantum mechanics is to physics. It is disheartening, however, that even

today this field of biology is threatened and the teaching of evolutionary theory is still vilified by those who support a literal interpretation of creation as expounded in the Bible.

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h a rigid interpretation of biblical events thus hinders the generation of new ideas and may possibly diminish scientific progress.

One of the major demarcations between science and religion has been that scientists do not try to invoke the supernatural to explain the natural world and do not rely on divine revelation in order to understand it. They do not partition knowledge into that which is of a divine nature and that which is revealed by deduction and explanation.

As with all scientific discoveries, Darwin's theory has continued to be explored and revised and one theologian has concluded: "...natural selection is a patient process without the intervening purpose of a "designer" being at work to bring it into being."

The first president of Cornell, Andrew Dickson White, was especially interested in what he proclaimed as thw "war between Science and religion"

Concerned that children's minds should be closed to the outcomes of scientific enquiry, especially evolutionary theory, the National Academy of Sciences has addressed the specific issue of creationism and pled for teachers to encourage expressions of doubt, when doubt exists, since from doubt comes enquiry and experimentation, and from thence comes knowledge. The search to know is a uniquely human quality that leads to human fulfillment. Knowledge is from within us and not from the outside; it is self-discovery. An illusion of knowledge and a dogmatic claim of truth, carrying with it no uncertainties, dulls our true human mental attributes and only leads to intellectual complacency.

At the front of Sage chapel on the Cornell campus are three figures surrounded.

with philosophy sitting in the middle, surrounded by inquiring children. Three of the

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figures represent the sciences with biology holding a bird's nest containing eggs, and with a human skull and a marine sea star at her feet, thereby reflecting discovery in all of biology, including man. Biology, through the triumphant discoveries in molecular genetics, has become the most prominent of the sciences and it may be claimed that we are now in the "Age of Biology." By its nature, biology is almost entirely an experimental science but the "why" and the "how" of experimental biology has become subject to another form of condemnation deriving, not from theism but from the Animal Rights movement. It relates to the question as to whether or not animals should be used to advance knowledge in biology by both teaching and research. The Animal Rights movement owes its origins to the Cruelty to Animals Act in Britain of 1876, legislation which was aimed primarily at ensuring that general anesthetics be used during experimental surgical procedures. The Animal Rights movement, however, takes a much more radical position and one that is totally opposed to the use of animals in biomedical research or teaching irrespective of whether or not pain is suppressed or eliminated by anesthetics. There is another group of individuals who are concerned not with the rights of animals but with animal welfare. They tend not to be opposed to biological research, but want animals to be treated as humanely as possible. The American Veterinary Medical Association, an organization which one would expect to provide reasoned, useful guidance on this issue, states that, "Animal rights is a philosophical view and personal value characterized by statements by various animal rights groups. We, that is the AVMA, do not endorse animal rights, but do support animal

welfare, animal welfare being a human responsibility that encompasses all aspects of animal well-being, including proper housing, management, nutrition, disease prevention and treatment, responsible

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care, humane handling and, when necessary, humane euthanasia." The division between the two philosophical viewpoints, rights and welfare, is drawn at the line between what is murder and what is euthanasia. Most people would draw that line between humans and all other species. Those of the animal rights movement have a value system that recognizes little, if any, separation between human life and other forms of life, essentially giving all living creatures equal worth.

They do not invoke Biblical texts to support their belief; since, in general, the Bible is utilitarian, as reflected in today's reading from Luke. They, thus, claim they have a higher moral status than the biologists and to make their case use abusive and threatening language against biologists. This puts the biologists in a very defensive position and, very often, the only response they provide is to draw attention to the benefits that have derived from experimental biology, particularly as it relates to the understanding and treatment of disease of both man and animals. The two ideologies are never debated, one group being the accuser and the other the defender. Both groups are sincere people but, obviously, the biologist, because of the material and social benefits that derive from their discoveries, tend to have greater support from the majority of people than do the upholders of the moral and legal rights of animals. As with many causes, the level of the rhetoric in terms of the use of strongly emotive and threatening language would appear to be proportional to the weakness of the argument. Comparable to Clarence Darrow's defense in the Scopes trial of the

Biblical interpretation of creation, their argument is open to reductio ad absurdum.

Thus, if you extend or qualify the concept of moral or legal rights from man to animals any attempt to exclude any living thing from having rights seems somewhat arbitrary and subject to ridicule and denies the distinctive nature of man. Such an example is the

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tendency by those who proclaim the rights of animals to focus only on domesticated species, such as cats and dogs, as worthy of special attention and ignoring, or relegating to a lower level of concern, those species that generate a certain level of repugnance, such as mice, rats and snakes. The love of animals is a selfish love related to the happiness and joy that animals elicit in man. It is forgotten that the human-like qualities of a pet are due almost entirely to its master.

Attributing self-hood to animals is an illusion. I quote from C.S. Lewis: "Man is understood in his relation to God. The beasts are to be understood only in relation to man, through man to God." Rationalizing the case for the moral rights of animals tends to fly in the face of the natural world, where death is just as vital as birth. The basic tenets of their beliefs as to what constitutes the welfare of animals tends to be simplistic and hopelessly (and unnecessarily) anthropomorphic. It need not be so. A certain degree of contentment of an animal can be defined by behavioral criteria associated with the availability of food, protection from predation and some little-understood psychological satisfaction. Recently, however it has been shown that there are identical hormonal responses when a dog owner and his/her pet dog greet each other. The proponents of the rights of animals can learn from a study of animal behavior? A few years ago, a woodchuck colony here at Cornell, being maintained for research purposes, was invaded and the animals released. Of eighty animals released from the colony, all but seventeen had returned within three days; most of the others

were killed by dogs or run over on the roads. The question, therefore, is whether such an action improved the psychological well being of the animals or that of the people who released them.

This is an example of an action which took place with little attention being paid to the outcome. An assumption was made that captive wild animals should be allowed their freedom, thus restoring them to a situation, which the animals themselves craved, and, in doing so, they were

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removed from the oppression of man. These sixty-three animals returned to a habitat in which they felt secure and which they knew best. There is no doubt that animal welfare organizations, by promotion of legislation and by influencing public opinion, have caused the manner in which animals are kept for research purposes to be improved and some unacceptable practices, such as the testing of cosmetics on animals, have been shown to be morally repugnant.

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y have also exposed excesses by scientists who, whilst being carried away by their discoveries, have lost sight of their obligations to their animals. Most of the laws relating to animal welfare have not been substantiated by carefully constructed experimental enquiry. The advances in the behavioral sciences in the last fifty years have resulted in well-tested tools that can be applied to the study of the welfare of animals and one hopes that when such studies are made they will be the basis for a rational legislation as opposed to a purely anthropomorphic assessment of animal welfare.

The single-most agonizing event for most investigators is not the infliction of pain, which in most cases can be alleviated, but it is euthanasia. Thomas Regan, an animal rights philosopher, defines it as "the ultimate irreversible harm because death is the ultimate, the irreversible loss." Death is not unique to animals and the first reading reminds us that human pomposity and arrogance is of nothing when we die. It is the nature of things that lions will seek their prey and we kill to eat, since we are both anatomically and physiologically omnivores, not herbivores. When we die, we leave a legacy; we leave our writings, we have been involved in the education of students, we have participated in debate for the enlightenment of ourselves and others that follow us. The evolution of cultures is based on the legacy of our forefathers. Animals that have been used in teaching and research, likewise have left a legacy; they have contributed to the

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advancement of knowledge. Fossilized remains of creatures are a legacy, since from them we have developed theories of evolution. Thus, their death is not in vain; it is irreversible but it is not a loss. It does, however, require that the investigator not be cavalier in the act of termination of life, but should pause to reflect that such a death is not a loss but honors and benefits those that come after. Threatening statements and actions from the militant faction of the animal rights movement have no part in academia. The behavior of such individuals

might be compared to that of the Inquisition that derided, abused and tortured individuals for their religious beliefs. My colleagues have received death threats, their students have been harassed but there has been no attempt to participate in any debate on the subject. President Hunter Rawlings enjoined the Cornell community to participate in civil discourse. Anything other than civil discourse within the walls of academia demeans the institution and behaviors such as have been exhibited on the Cornell campus in relation to the use of animals and our relationship with animals are not worthy of us. We should allow enquiry in an open forum based on mutual respect. If only those individuals who released the woodchucks had sought the advice of animal behaviorists, they would have understood that the loss of a stable environment is one of the most stressful experiences for animals. There is good experimental evidence as to what constitutes stress in animals and, thus, we must conclude that this incident was totally inconsistent with its intended outcome. Individuals, like myself, and I am a veterinarian, work closely with animals, get an understanding of their welfare and recognize that stress in animals only undermines the validity of the data that we generate. It is essential to us that stress not be a part of our research.

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I close with a quote from Shimon Peres:

"No matter what the size of your land, no matter what the wealth of your natural resources, no matter what the number of your people, what really counts is the level of your scientific effort, your investment in education, your ability to encourage the human mind to flow freely and stimulate new ideas."

Let that be.

