

OLIVER R. BARCLAY

Animal Rights: A Critique

The concept of animal rights and the difficulty of defining it is examined. The positions of the leading thinkers of the animal rights movement are reviewed. Neither the criteria of 'the ability to suffer' or 'being the subject of a life' are found satisfactory. Christian thinkers in this area often do not use the concept of rights, but the position of Andrew Linzey, who does so, is criticised. It is argued that a broader and more soundly established Christian approach in terms of responsibilities for and duties to animals and to the whole creation is much more satisfactory. The term animal rights is best abandoned in favour of these other concepts. A brief outline is given of a Christian approach.

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Professor Peter Singer, who is one of the leading advocates of animal rights, states that, 'Although there are one or two 19th century thinkers who assert that animals have rights, the serious movement for animal liberation is very young, a product of the 1970's'.¹ This quite rightly does not prevent the literature from going back to Jeremy Bentham² and other earlier writers. It does, however, mean that it is important to see the animal rights movement in the context of the much older and more extensive issue about human rights, and the older and largely Christian-inspired concern for animal welfare that has not used the concept of rights.³ The considerable success and emotional attachment given to the concept of rights when applied to humans is one reason why it has been so enthusiastically taken up by what Singer calls the 'animal liberation' movement. If human rights were not a widely accepted concept (however vaguely defined), it could not have been usefully applied to animals.

Human Rights

If the philosophical basis of human rights was clear and generally agreed it would give a good foundation for the discussion of animal rights, but

1 Singer, P., *In Defence of Animals*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1985, page 1.

2 Jeremy Bentham is repeatedly quoted for his remark in 'The Principles of Morals and Legislation' (1789) where he says that the question is not 'can they reason?', nor, 'can they talk?', but, 'can they suffer?'.

3 See Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: changing attitudes in England 1500–1800*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983. After a very full review of the literature he comments: 'the campaign against unnecessary cruelty to animals . . . grew out of the (minority) Christian tradition that man should take care of God's creation', page 180.

unfortunately that is not the case. Where human rights are not based on any concept of God-given rights the arguments multiply and the strength of the positions being taken varies enormously. The founding fathers of the USA found it necessary to declare in their Declaration of Independence in 1776 that the 'self-evident' rights they sought to establish 'are those to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them'.⁴ Similarly, the Declaration of the Rights of Man which was the foundation of the French Revolution of 1789 declares that 'men are born and remain free and equal in rights'.⁵ It speaks of the 'natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man', but then goes on to speak of their 'rights and duties'.

By the time we come to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948 the same basic situation obtains, 'Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and unalienable rights of all members of the human family as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world'.⁶ Only in Clause 29 do we come to the fact that everyone has duties to the community. One would not expect documents of this kind to contain philosophical justification, and the fact that these rights are taken as self-evident is usually traced back to the writing of John Locke (1630–1704), or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, particularly in his book, 'Social Contract' (1762). The declarations quoted above have elements of the philosophies of these writers.

The result is that the predominant justification of human rights has been either that they are 'self-evident', or that they derive in some way from the laws of nature, or that they are the result of a social contract in which people have agreed to accept these rights.

In practice, therefore, we are left with rights conferred by these agreements, such as the UN Declaration. To claim that they have these rights people can appeal to the fact that their nation signed the Declaration of Human Rights. That at least short-circuits any philosophical discussion about their being self-evident or due to the laws of nature.

4 They further state, 'we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. To secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed—that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it . . .'.

5 The Declaration of the Rights of Man goes on to mention liberty, private property, the inviolability of their person and resistance to oppression, they are further described as having the right to be equal before the law, freedom of opinions, even religious ones, freedom of speech and of property.

6 The number of rights has increased by then, of course, so that it includes, for instance, the right to leave any country including their own and to return to it, the right to enjoy another country's asylum from persecution, the right to a nationality, the right to marry and found a family, the right of freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and to take part in the government of their country, the right of social security, to work, to rest and leisure, and to education, including the statement that education shall be free at least in the elementary and fundamental stages.

Animal Rights

When we consider animal rights, the situation is even more confused. Mary Midgley comments on the use of the word rights: 'This is a really desperate word. As any bibliography of political theory will show, it was in deep trouble long before animals were added to its worries'.⁷ The majority of animal rights activists do not worry about a philosophical basis. Thankfully, however, a number of the most energetic advocates are professors of philosophy who are concerned about trying to establish a proper philosophical foundation for the concept, and it is important to examine what they are saying. If all reference to divine validation is excluded, as it is by most animal rights advocates, then the debate centres round trying to find a criterion for rights either in a general ethical duty, or in some aspect of the way the world is made, or both. There is a wide variety of views, but the two most commonly accepted criteria are 'ability to suffer' and being 'the subject-of-a-life'. These are first of all statements of how the world is. Competent thinkers in the field have adopted them and argue the case on these bases. Professors Singer and Regan have been the leading thinkers here, although they have a fundamentally different philosophical standpoint and have had to refine and to some extent alter their positions as time has gone on. 'Ability to suffer' has been developed by Peter Singer into a complex form of utilitarianism. His problems are exposed by Williams⁸ and are criticised most searchingly by his co-belligerent Tom Regan.⁹ Singer starts with the assumption that the greatest good of the greatest number is an agreed ethical principle and also the assumption that animal suffering, or 'deprivation' is equivalent to human suffering in principle if not always in degree. He has qualified a form of hedonistic utilitarianism in his earlier book, 'Animal Liberation'¹⁰ where he tries to measure the total 'quantity of happiness in the world'. He has now adopted what Williams called 'Replacement-Preference Utilitarianism' in his later book, 'In Defence of Animals'.¹¹ Here he bases his argument on the combination of pleasure (including the long term preferences and wishes of humans or animals in the calculus of happiness or deprivation) with the acceptance of killing one animal which may make it possible to replace it with an equally and more happy one of the same sensitivities—which would increase the total happiness in the world. This means that he has to be willing

7 Midgley, Mary, *Animals and Why they Matter*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983, page 61. Dr. Midgley is another professional philosopher arguing for animal welfare but not animal rights.

8 There is a comprehensive critique of the philosophies of Singer and Regan in David Williams's article in *Science and Faith* No. 7, December 1986, under the title 'A Christian critique of the philosophies of the animal rights movement'.

9 Regan develops a very substantial criticism of Singer and his utilitarianism in his book, *The case for animal rights*, London and New York, Routledge, 1984.

10 *Animal Liberation*, New York, a New York review book, 1975: London, Jonathan Cape, 1976.

11 *In Defence of Animals*, edited by Peter Singer, Oxford and New York, Basil Blackwell, 1985.

'probably' to allow the killing of a 'brain damaged human infant' (page 8) and, of course, abortion of such. Any sharp distinction between humans and animals he dismisses as 'speciesism' which he says 'is as indefensible as the most blatant racism' (page 6). This, of course, has been taken to extremes by some of the belligerent organisations. Some have admitted that if their activities led to the killing of laboratory workers experimenting on animals, they would not mind because a nice animal is no less to be protected from suffering than these very nasty people. This modified utilitarianism has great difficulties and not many people follow Singer in this, but the practical policies are in the end not very different from those of the other leading philosopher, Tom Regan.

Regan¹² is not happy with the utilitarian approach which judges actions only by their consequences. He proposes that we start by asking: 'what has inherent value?' He assumes that animals and humans are to be treated equally. Here he has to acknowledge that our beliefs about what does have inherent value are more instinctive than philosophical. He writes: 'inherent value then belongs equally to those who are experiencing subjects-of-a-life'.¹³ He has just argued that animals cannot be said to have less value than humans because some mentally deranged children, for example, have fewer capabilities than some animals. He values such things as reason, autonomy and intellect. He writes: 'we want and prefer things, believe and feel things, recall and expect things . . . the same is true of those animals that concern us'. He argues that since we instinctively value mentally deranged people so we ought equally to value higher animals. He earlier qualified the term 'the experiencing subject of a life' by the word 'conscious', but he has to qualify it further and his definition in the larger book is a sentence of 83 words in length.¹⁴ In practice it seems to mean warm blooded animals. So he continues in the same quotation above: 'whether it belongs to others—to rocks and rivers, trees and glaciers, for example—we do not know and may never know . . . but we do know that many—literally billions and billions—of these animals are the subject of a life in the sense explained and so have inherent value if we do'. Regan therefore concludes that we should not do to such animals what we would not do to humans. Therefore, all 'commercial animal agriculture' and 'all use of animals in science' are in his view excluded. If he discovered that plants were also 'subjects-of-a-life' he would, of course, be in difficulties because there would then be virtually nothing to eat. So both he and Singer in practice draw the line at the higher animals and leave open the question of mistreating insects and other lower animals that can be presumed to be neither conscious nor, in Singer terms, capable of 'preference'. Whether Regan would allow the killing of senile cows and wild animals is not clear, but frogs and butterflies, for instance, are not protected on his criterion.

12 *The case for animal rights*, op. cit. (9).

13 In his article in Singer, P.: *In Defence of Animals*, op. cit. (11)

14 Regan, T. (9), page 243.

There are two practical difficulties with this position. Firstly, why does this kind of organism have inherent value that is denied to other aspects of the world? Secondly, the boundaries are drawn at different points by different people. Regan has drawn it here to include infants, retarded people and all animals above a certain level. As a working definition it is at least reasonably clear, but rather arbitrary. He has difficulty in defining where exactly the lines should be drawn, as do the other authors in this field.

There are also philosophical problems, similar to those raised by the utilitarianism of Singer. It is not clear how Regan derives what ought to be done from a description of the state of affairs in the world.

This problem is illustrated by an interesting exchange between him and Richard Griffiths.¹⁵ Griffiths charges Regan's position with being guilty of the 'naturalistic fallacy' (the move direct from 'is' to 'ought'), a charge which Regan himself mentions but does not answer satisfactorily in his major work.¹⁶ Griffiths argues that you cannot say that since some animals are intelligent therefore they ought to have rights, or 'animals are capable of suffering therefore they ought to be spared it'. Regan replies: 'Logic has its limits' and does not really answer the charge. He tries to get round it in the following way. He describes a case in which 'a human being has been fiercely beaten almost to the point of death' without any justification. He agrees that it does not follow logically that any wrong has been done, but nevertheless we should all agree that it has. He says: 'there is no better place to begin with' than our shared, more or less instinctive, feeling that that sort of cruelty is wrong. Therefore, he says, we should accept the instinctive conviction that similar cruelty to an animal is wrong because it is not possible to find a morally relevant difference between animals and men. The mere fact of species difference is insufficient. The judgement, without further justification, that such treatment is wrong is the fundamental basis of his argument. Writers in this field have a *feeling* that to treat animals in this way is wrong and they are then looking round for arguments which justify it intellectually. A *feeling* of this kind may be a good guide, but it may not.

For instance, many parents have disturbed feelings about punishing their children in any way, but when they stop to think about it they will probably conclude that there are situations where to punish a child is good and healthy training which will stand the child in very good stead in the future. Feelings are not an adequate foundation for a policy, and if the philosophical arguments are not more convincing, so that even a professional philosopher falls back upon feelings, then it does seem that the rational basis of this position is not very strong. Regan is basically an intuitionist, a position he tries to justify.

¹⁵ In *Animals and Christianity: a book of readings*, edited by Andrew Linzey and Tom Regan, London, SPCK, 1989.

¹⁶ Regan, T. (9).

We are then faced with the fact that the introduction of the concept of animal rights into the debates about the welfare of animals has not really helped to clarify the issues, but has only confused them. Undoubtedly the word rights has been used partly because it immediately conjures up an extremely widely accepted concept of human rights. Another professor of philosophy who is involved in this discussion, Bernard Rollin, makes the following interesting comment:

'One can view the growing concern for animals as an inevitable consequence of the liberation movements which arose in the 1960's. One animal rights leader told me only half facetiously that by the late 1970's, "we had liberated everything else!". Unquestionably, a generation which had witnessed the rise of moral concern for the oppressed—blacks, other ethnic minorities, women, homosexuals, people in the Third World, and so on—would inevitably turn the searchlight on animals.'

Rollin then significantly goes on to say in the same paragraph:

'in addition, we live in an era of increasing environmental awareness and, on a superficial level at least, environmental concerns are related to animal rights concerns (on a deeper level, of course, they tend to be inimical . . .)'.¹⁷

Animals and Humans

The animal rights literature rightly points out that their whole position depends on refusing to draw any sharp distinction between animals and people. As it is put by Regan:

'Some there are who resist the idea that animals have inherent value. "Only human animals have such value", they profess. How might this narrow view be defended? Will it be said that all—and only—humans have immortal souls? Then our opponents have their work cut out for them . . . Well, perhaps some will say that animals have some inherent value, only less than we have . . . What could be the basis of our having more inherent value than animals? Their lack of reason, or autonomy, or intellect? Only if we are willing to make the same judgements in the case of humans who are similarly deficient. But it is not true that such humans—the retarded child for example and the mentally deranged—have less inherent value than you or I. Neither, then, can we rationally sustain the view that animals like them in being the experiencing subject of a life have less inherent value. All who have inherent value have it equally, whether they be human animals or not.'¹⁸

To this it should be replied that although the essential difference is sometimes described as 'having an immortal soul', it is better to speak of

17 Rollin, Bernard E., *The unheeded cry*, Oxford and New York, OUP, 1990, page 169.

18 *In Defence of Animals*, [11] page 22–23.

humankind as being 'in the image of God' and as a result having the potential for spiritual life as well as animal life. Spiritual life is a different dimension rather like the difference between living and non-living things. It is the possibility of a personal relationship with God which starts in this life and is 'eternal life' (John 17:3). That is presumably why Jesus himself explicitly says that humans are 'of more value than animals' mentioning both sheep and sparrows.¹⁹ Regan judges the issue and defines his subject-of-a-life criterion in purely biological terms. Therefore he can see not only differences of degree between humans and higher animals, but apparently a difference of a more fundamental kind between 'conscious' animals and lower animals and plants which, apparently, do not have 'inherent value'. That could also be called 'speciesism' which is another term that tends only to confuse. The human species is distinct, like most other species. It should be treated according to its nature, as the others should also. They are not all essentially the same, differing only in degree.

In a Christian view, and Francis of Assisi notwithstanding, animals are not our little brothers in the fundamental sense. Nevertheless Jesus does say that the sparrows are of value to God, only of less value than humans. If Christians stress the greater value of humans that does not deny the real value of animals. Christians, therefore, must say not that people are alone in having value (the word inherent begs a whole range of questions) but that humankind is in a special category. People have a different and greater value to God and therefore have a greater value to us. The application of rights to minority groups of people cannot justify its extension to even the higher animals. The Christian evaluation of their position depends on other factors, such as those set out below, but Christians cannot accept this basic position of the animal rights movement which, though not always on the surface, emerges repeatedly in the whole discussion. To hold this Christian distinction should in no way be to deny that animals (all of them) have value and therefore must be respected and cared for.

Of course the fact that Christians hold this distinction has been abused sometimes, though it is interesting that Bernard E. Rollin²⁰ blames not the Christian faith, but that kind of scientific depersonalisation of the whole of life which leads to regarding animals (and often people) as mere machines whose feelings if any are irrelevant. This depersonalisation created by science and used to justify cruelty in research is in his view the main culprit in the abuse of animals today, especially in scientific work. That tradition goes back to the explicit statements of Descartes.²¹

19 Matt. 6:26, 12:12, Luke 12:7.

20 Rollin, B. E. (17).

21 Descartes, S. R. in 'Discourse on Method' in *Philosophical Works of Descartes* trans. E. S. Holdane and G. R. T. Ross (London, CUP) Vol. 1 pp. 115-118 and presented in Reference 13 above. He argued that animals, as opposed to people, were mere machines.

Rights and Duties

The Declaration of Human Rights includes in a minor way the concept of duties. The Christian approach starts with duties or responsibilities and acknowledges rights only if they arise out of duties or responsibilities. In this view it is because there is a moral obligation (an 'ought') created by God or society that we can speak of rights. When, for instance, in the New Testament Paul speaks of his right to be supported by the churches he visits (though he will not use that right), he is stating that they are under an obligation and duty to support him and therefore he could claim such support if he wanted to. If society has accepted certain duties to people, or legally created certain rights, then those rights are valid because it is the duty of the state to put them into practice. The rights do not stand on their own. It is interesting that the statement of the American Declaration of Independence quoted above talks about 'the laws of nature and of nature's God' which entitles people to certain rights, while the Universal Declaration of Human Rights leaves out all reference to God and simply talks of inalienable rights. The animal rights movement is in far greater difficulty in establishing the basis of rights for animals. In a Christian view, however, we have duties to the whole of God's creation to look after it for him. Whatever may be the sad history of the abuse of human power, an honest look at the biblical passages compels one to think in terms of our duty to God, to society and to future generations to handle the whole of the resources that are given to us in a way consistent with the fact that they are of value to God. This includes a duty of treating animals in a humane manner.

Animal rights enthusiasts often want to distinguish their position from that of the previous animal welfare movements. They do not see the animal welfare movement as claiming enough on behalf of animals. But in making stronger claims for some animals they leave the rest with no defence. Also their stronger claim is too hard to establish and so appears to leave the whole case for animal welfare very weak. It is also important to note that the animal rights approach does nothing for the environment and is distinguished from it as a different issue.²²

There are two reasons for this. One is that it is difficult to extend animal rights downwards beyond the higher animals. The second is that starting with rights for a few species rather than duties to all inevitably narrows the whole field of discussion to the highly controversial concept of rights when other broader concepts are easier to establish.

An approach in terms of duties or responsibilities is able to embrace the whole environmental field and not to isolate higher animals from the lower animals, or from care for plants and non-renewable resources. It also brings in our concern for future generations. To isolate the issue of welfare of higher animals is likely to be counter-productive in the long run. Claiming

22 Rollin, B. E. quoted above (17).

too much for part of the environment appears to leave the rest exposed to human greed.

Christian approaches in terms of rights

Although the concept of animal rights does not attract many Christian writers, there are two explicitly Christian writers who are especially important. Stephen R. L. Clark, another professor of philosophy, in his book, *'The Moral Status of Animals'*²³ develops a vigorous case for the welfare of animals. He starts with 'a moral and philosophical sense' and emphasises our moral sense that it is 'not proper to be the cause of avoidable ill'. He goes on, 'if this minimal principle be accepted there is no other course than the immediate rejection of all flesh-foods and most bio-medical research'.²⁴ Nevertheless he is hesitant about the use of the language of rights. He states: 'on absolute terms it is plausible to say that nothing has any positive rights: all is gift, whether to us or to jackdaws, or to the young lions that seek their prey from God',²⁵ or again he acknowledges, 'animals perhaps have no positive rights: it is difficult to see on what basis we have any either'.²⁶ He develops the view that we have no 'rights to their (ie. animals) flesh or their service, or are in the right if we torment them'. Therefore, throughout his wide ranging argument he almost entirely avoids the use of the word 'rights'. He depends on our 'moral sense' of outrage at the treatment of creatures who have so much in common with us in physiology and in a lesser degree psychology. He also, like many non-Christian writers, holds that 'we have no extra standing in the world . . . the land is the mayfly's, the thrush's and the fox's as much as it is ours'.²⁷ The point is that he finds ample reasons for defending animals without resorting to rights. Few people could be stronger for the defence of animals, but the rights question he finds too controversial to be useful.

The other important Christian writer who has achieved considerable influence is Andrew Linzey, who constantly uses the word 'rights' in relation to animals. In his book, *'Christianity and the rights of animals'*²⁸ he says that in his earlier writings²⁹ he drew a line between those who must be protected, and those who need not, at 'the capacity to experience pain and pleasure'. He now believes that he must find another criterion because: 'What this criterion was searching for was some way in which the theological sense of community with animals could be assessed. To put it bluntly, I wanted to find some way in which the spiritual capacities of animals could be recognised as giving them a status beyond that of

23 Clark, Stephen R. L. *The Moral Status of Animals*, Oxford and New York, OUP 1977, references to 1984 paperback edition.

24 *ibid*, preface to first edition, page 1.

25 *ibid*, page 27.

26 *ibid*, page 28.

27 *ibid*, page 113.

28 Linzey, Andrew, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals*, London, SPCK, 1987, page 80.

29 Linzey, Andrew, *Animal Rights: A Christian Assessment*, London, SCM Press, 1976.

cabbages and greenfly'.³⁰ He starts with 'a theological sense of community with animals' and then looks around for arguments to defend it. One can debate the arguments, but it is very hard to argue with 'a sense of community'. When he calls it a theological sense one has serious doubts about its theological nature.

His first main point is entirely valid. This is that God is the Lord of all Creation and cares for it all. God has a claim on it all because he made it and maintains it in being. This is not open to dispute among Christians. He goes on, however, to develop a thesis which has two fatal weaknesses. Once more he is trying to claim too much for too few creatures. Because his case does not hold water it is in danger of ending up by achieving too little for all animals.

Linzey writes about what he calls the 'theos rights of animals'. This depends on his agreed starting point that God values the whole of his creation. When he talks about the 'theos rights' of higher animals, however, he is introducing a confusion, because what he means is *God's* rights in his creation and this is an entirely different thing from animals having rights. He has in a sense turned the concept of rights around, but cannot resist the temptation to use the word rights of animals.

Linzey accepts Regan's position as approximately the same as his own in practice and quotes Regan that 'rights are possessed by humans and animals who are mentally normal mammals of a year or more' (why not birds?). But Linzey differs from Regan in that Regan 'makes no use of the concept of God as the upholder and sustainer of value'.³¹ Linzey's whole position depends on the view that the value of the psychological and other features that Regan uses as a criterion 'can only be ultimately justified by reference to God's own right as sovereign Creator'.³²

Secondly, Linzey adopts a description of those animals which come under the category of theos rights as 'Spirit-filled, breathing beings composed of flesh and blood'. Without dogmatism he is inclined to the view that only animals which come clearly within that definition are the subject of rights. The phrase 'Spirit-filled creatures' occurs frequently in his treatment. He leans to the view that this means that only warm blooded animals fall clearly into the category of creatures possessing rights. Linzey as a Christian does make a distinction between man and animals, though its nature is not very clear. Regan, as we have noted, has virtually no distinction to make.

Linzey tilts sometimes at extremes, or positions that not many people would defend today—such as, that animals do not feel pain and they are not intelligent, or that man's 'dominion' described in Genesis 1:28 is equivalent to despotism or tyranny. This device often back-fires somewhat

30 Linzey (24) page 81.

31 *ibid*, page 82.

32 *ibid*, page 83.

because those who do not agree with him feel that they have been misrepresented and are less sympathetic to the discussion. Linzey has some good things to say about man's dominion as a mandate to rule God's world in God's way and not in selfish tyranny or exploitation, but he is a little frightened of the whole concept of dominion even though it is clearly biblical. He does not discuss some of the key biblical passages that others would use.³³ This is unfortunate and, like others, he over-reacts to its abuses and adds to non-Christian caricatures of it as in White.³⁴

Linzey's concept of 'Spirit-filled creatures' is crucial to his whole approach and it must be said that his biblical and other evidence for using this is very weak indeed and in fact is quite seriously misleading. His position depends on a very loose use of biblical passages. When, for instance, he quotes Psalm 104:24–30 he forgets firstly, that it is about *all* God's creatures 'both small and great' that swarm on the land and in the sea (surely that includes crabs, sea urchins, worms and the aphids that he excludes). Secondly, it is not stated that they are Spirit-filled, but that God's spirit *creates* a new generation to renew the face of the earth, in the same way that God's Spirit in Genesis 1:1 was active in the creation of all things, including the inanimate world. Again he concludes from Romans 8:18–23 that animals can be redeemed, but what the passage says is that 'the whole of creation will be delivered from bondage to decay when the redemption of mankind is completed'. He always uses a capital S for 'Spirit-filled' thereby implying that they are in the same category as people. Like Skinner and Regan he is claiming too much for too few animals and so weakens his whole case. One might agree that some animals may be thought of as possessing 'spirit' (small s), though the nature of this 'spirit' is very hard to define and describe. This, however, if it was carefully defined, could be used as a distinguishing mark of the higher animals which makes them worthy of special respect. Such a difference of degree amongst animals is probably more clearly described in terms of 'consciousness'.

Outlines of a Christian Response

The outlines of a Christian response could be put under the following headings, but cannot be elaborated here. Many of these points would be included in any discussion on the environment.³⁵

- 1 ***The worth of all creation.*** The Christian ought to hold that the whole of God's creation is of value to him just because it is his. 'The sea is his and he made it and his hands prepared the dry land'.
- 2 People are throughout the Bible assumed to be in a special position in

33 Such as Genesis 1:26–28; Genesis 9:3; 1 Timothy 4:1–4 and Psalm 8.

34 White, Lynn Jr. 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis', *Science* (10 March 1967), page 1203–7.

35 See Berry, R. J. 'Christianity and the Environment' and 'A Bibliography on Environmental Issues' in *Science and Christian Belief* (1991) 3 (1) page 3–18.

relation to God. At creation they are described as '*in the image of God*'. This does not apply to any other aspect of the creation and is repeated in the New Testament as a distinguishing mark of humans and a distinguishing reason why they must be treated with special respect.³⁶ People have spiritual dimensions that no other created thing possesses.

- 3 ***Dominion and greater value.*** One of the classical passages here is Psalm 8 where it is explicitly said that whereas the whole of creation shows God's glory, his name is majestic in *all* the earth, his glory is chanted above the heavens, yet man is put in a special position of responsibility over the whole animal creation. Genesis 1, of course, announces man's position of responsibility and Jesus himself stresses that we are of more value than sparrows. But, as we have said, it is a matter of more value, which does not allow the rest to be treated as of no value.
- 4 ***Stewardship of creation.*** Man is therefore put in a position not of despotic rule, but of a duty of stewardship over the whole creation for God. We are at best the tenant farmers. Sadly we have often abused our powers and must acknowledge that. Sometimes people have tried to give a religious sanction for cruel exploitation. The concept of stewardship and, because of our responsibility to future generations, of sustainable development, must be major themes in the whole environment discussion and apply especially to animals. Nevertheless, this and the responsibility of dominion mean that every time we dig our garden or plant a field we are interfering with the natural world, and we should do so not with apologies, but with confidence that this is what we are meant to do.
- 5 ***Higher animals.*** Leaving humankind aside, higher animals are in a special position because they suffer more and may suffer nearly as we do. Therefore there is obviously a greater responsibility for how we treat higher animals. Nevertheless, Jesus must have eaten meat at the Passover and certainly, even after his resurrection when free from all human limitations, ate fish.³⁷ The special position of animals does not mean that they may not be farmed or used for food. It requires special care in their treatment. But there is no line to be drawn above which we should not act and below which we may be more care-less.
- 6 ***Cruelty to animals.*** The Bible treats cruelty or thoughtlessness in the treatment of animals as a serious fault which is shown, for example, by our Lord's words where he confirms that even that most crucial of socio-religious commands, the keeping of the Sabbath, was to be over-ruled to avoid animal suffering.³⁸
- 7 One of the problems with writers such as Linzey is that they manage constantly to create a situation of doubt, or possibly ill-conscience, about a responsible stewardship of the world and the use of animals. Thus he asks, 'is pet keeping immoral in itself?', or, 'are wild animals best left

36 eg. James 3:9.

37 Luke 24:42, 43 and John 21:9-14.

38 Matthew 12:11; Luke 14:45. See also Exodus 23:4-5, 12; Deut. 22:1-4, 25:4; Pro. 12:10.

alone?'. In the last case he thinks that 'it *could* be our responsibility to respect what God has given and let it be' (my italics). But we have to decide, is it or is it not our responsibility to let rats be? If the answer is no, then we must control their population with a good conscience. Simply to question can give a guilty conscience about everything, and need a certain toughness to stand up to this kind of approach and to say that it is our duty and that we may, and should act and also enjoy animal food, etc. 1 Timothy seems to have been addressed in part to attack asceticism in relation to food and marriage. Both can be abused, but in 1 Timothy 4:1-4 it seems clear that the Apostle is authorising the use of 'everything created by God' for food. We are to eat what God has given us with thankfulness and not with an uneasy sense that it is a grudging permission, or concession to sin. It is God's provision for us in the world as we have it. It is sometimes argued that meat eating is a concession to sin,³⁹ but whatever its origin it is something which is God-given to us in our world, which is not utopia. 1 Timothy makes it plain that we should do so with a good conscience and indeed with positive thankfulness to God, '*everything is to be received with thanksgiving*'.

Conclusion

I conclude that the term 'animal rights' should not be used. However it is developed it is a misleading application of what is a controversial concept even in relation to humanity. But though I believe that we should avoid the term, we should not simply leave a vacuum. We should be committed, as Christians have been for a long time, to the welfare of animals and their proper treatment in the context of our responsibilities for the whole of the natural world. The case for animal welfare will be spoilt if claims are made which cannot really be substantiated. One or two bad arguments can discredit the whole. Our approach should not be in terms of animal rights, but rather in terms of the positive mandate given to humankind to look after the earth and to use everything in it constructively and in respect for the marvellous and complex beauty of what God has created. This does not mean that we should say that: 'Animals have no rights'. That is a strong negative statement that implies far more than its strict logical sense. We should say that the term is inappropriate as applied to animals.⁴⁰ They will be better protected by developing the concept of animal welfare and our duties to and responsibilities for animals, in the context of our overall responsibilities for the whole environment.

Dr. Oliver Barclay is a Zoologist, for many years Secretary of *Christians in Science* and one of the founding editors of *Science and Christian Belief*'.

³⁹ It is argued that because the right to take animals for food is only explicitly mentioned after the Flood in Genesis 9 it cannot have been the original idea. It is, however, a gift of the covenant made with mankind at that point and from then on.

⁴⁰ I owe this point to Mary Midgley, *op. cit.*(7) page 61. She follows it with a useful discussion of the problems of the legal and moral uses of rights terminology.