

Why Christians should believe in heaven for animals

I have been teaching undergraduates in this area for many years. I used routinely to receive essays asserting that 'Southgate is surely wrong when he claims there is a heaven for pelicans'. Often their justification was that *of course* (always a tricky phrase) non-human animals don't have souls.

Well, the concept of a 'soul' in this sense, some thing that is unique to humans, distinct from the body, and survives death, is very problematic. As a former experimental scientist, I find it difficult to believe in such an entity (what is it? where is it? what is it made of?), and hence in its use to assert human distinctiveness and unique survival after death.

So I part company from my former students' 'of course'. (Interestingly, more recent classes have been more receptive to the notion of some sort of post-mortem life for non-human animals.) But what *positive* reasons might I have for this notion?

First, there are some hints in the Bible. In two parts of Isaiah there is mention of a transformed relationship between predator and prey animals (11. 6-9 and 65. 25 – in the former passage it is clear that this transformed relationship involves humans – 'a little child shall lead them' (11. 6)). And in the New Testament there are hints that the redemption inaugurated by Christ is cosmic in scope (Rom. 8. 19-22; Col. 1. 15-20; Eph. 1. 10).

The second reason is a theological inference from the Bible, where humans are always depicted in the context of the rest of creation, and it would be curious if this were not carried forward into the realm in which relationships (presumably) are to be found at their richest and truest.

But the third and for me the most compelling reason is one famously identified by John Wesley in a famous sermon, 'The General Deliverance'. In this sermon Wesley, meditating on Romans 8.19-22, posed the question as to whether there might be 'a plausible objection against the justice of God, in suffering numberless creatures that had never sinned to be so severely punished... But', Wesley continues, 'the objection vanishes away, if we consider, that something better remains after death for these creatures also; that these likewise shall one day be delivered from this bondage of corruption, and shall then receive an ample amends for all their present sufferings.'

In other words, contemplating nature 'red in tooth and claw', as a later poet had it, could lead us to suppose that many animals suffer without having sinned. A loving God must surely compensate them for their suffering. Evolutionary considerations amplify this concern. To take the white pelican as an instance – like many similar birds, it typically hatches two chicks, the younger of which is only 'insurance'. In the vast majority of cases the insurance chick is pushed out of the nest by its elder sibling, and then starves. Its almost certainly short, suffering-filled life is part of a very effective evolutionary strategy. This example makes Jay McDaniel (and I) confident that there must be heaven for pelicans.

If that is accepted, two types of question remain for the theologian. First, what is the scope of this post-mortem life for other animals? Does God only compensate creatures sentient enough to suffer, or all those whose lives have known no fulfilment, or is every creature reborn into this redeemed life? Is Jürgen Moltmann right that 'If we were to surrender hope for as much as one single creature, for us God would not be God'? *Every creature?* Including every last bacterium?

Second, what is the character of this new life? Is it only a form of compensation in which creatures live a pain-free version of their previous life? If so, what about predators, whose lifestyle has involved tearing the flesh of others? Or do redeemed animals have altered properties or status? Do leopards lie down with kids? Do creatures have the opportunity to grasp their role in the great processes of evolution, as is differently proposed by Trent Dougherty, Bethany Sollereeder, and John Schneider?

Of course, these are angels-on-a-pinhead type speculations. But this is quite an active debate, taking rational trouble over mystery (as Karl Barth described theology). If this post-mortem existence, free of pain and decay, is only compensation, that presses the question (which all Christians should ponder from time to time): why God did not just create heaven? But if creatures have a radically altered cognition and behaviour, leopards lying down with kids, are they still truly the creatures they were created?

Perhaps Sollereeder has the best current formulation, in her book *God, Evolution and Animal Suffering*. She acknowledges that there is a form of redemption in the way creatures who die have their component parts recycled as new life. She emphasises God's moment-by-moment relationship with every life. But she also imagines that in a redeemed life creatures may gradually come to see the significance of their lives (including their suffering and death) as part of the overall pattern of creation and redemption, of which Christ is the centre. And in relation to patterns of predator and prey, she imagines those reconfigured along the lines of sporting contests. What was lethal contest becomes what both creatures can enjoy.

I have presumed in this short article that it is meaningful to speak of non-human animals as suffering. In doing so I side with the vast majority of animal behaviourists, but against 'neo-Cartesian' philosophers who question the continuity of reflective consciousness in other animals. The neo-Cartesians do us a big favour in reminding us how little we know about the interior life of other animals, and how readily we project our own experience on them, but I cannot endorse their conclusion. That said, this whole subject is part of looking hard at the world God has made, not over-romanticising it but recognising the extent of the violence and struggle it contains. Why that should be is a whole other set of questions.

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