CS Lewis and questions of animal pain, animal use and animal abuse

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Introduction

As one of the foremost Christian communicators and apologists of the 20th century, CS Lewis’s writings on animals, while only comprising a very small proportion of his voluminous literary output, are an important addition to our grasp of a Christian approach to animal use and abuse. Lewis had always been intimately connected with animals throughout his life.

Lewis’s maternal grandmother was an inveterate animal enthusiast. One of her grandsons writes of the Rectory at Dundela where Hamilton and Mary Warren lived ‘The house was infested with cats, their presence immediately apparent to the nose of the visitor when the slatternly servant opened the front door. The hand which the hostess extended [to the visitor] would gleam with valuable rings but would bear too evident traces of her enthusiasm as a poultry keeper.’ How much this love of animals transferred to his mother Flora is unclear but from an early age animals were very important, not to say central in his life. There always pets in the house – ‘a dog called Tim, a black and white mouse Tommy and lastly a canary called Peter’ at one point, and his announcement that his name was no longer Clive but Jacksie at the age of four seems to have been associated with his own dog of the same name being run over by a car.

Jack’s favourite children’s book, Beatrix Potter’s ‘Squirrel Nutkin’ was published when he was four and his first literary endeavours concerned humanised animals in ‘Animal Land’ and later Boxen with dressed up animals such as Lord John Big the frog, James Bar a bear and Viscount Puddiphat an owl. Wherever Lewis was, a link with animals seems to exist, be it the deer he saw every morning from his rooms in Magdalen College, Oxford or ‘Mr Papworth’ the crossbred terrier who moved into Lewis’ home ‘The Kilns’.

It was not long after that, that Lewis accepted that Christ was indeed God en route to Whipsnade Zoo ‘When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and when we reached the zoo I did.’ It was at Whipsnade, as his brother notes in his memoirs that Lewis was particularly taken by a bear named Bultitude, later to make an appearance in That Hideous Strength. While not suggesting a link between his interest in animals and his acceptance of Christ as his Lord and saviour on that occasion, Lewis certainly saw his faith as having a profound influence on his view of animals and man’s interaction with them.

Mrs Moore was as much an animal lover as Lewis’ grandmother and The Kilns became a fashionable retreat for stray dogs and cats. Chief among her pets was the dog Mr Papworth, who was somewhat mixed in breed, but predominantly a terrier. Though he never made an elaborate fuss over them, Lewis liked dogs too and Mr Papworth accompanied the family on all their holidays.
With this sort of interaction with animals it is not surprising that they played a larger part in his theological view of the world than for any other Christian thinker of his time. Lewis’s close appreciation and interest in animals is seen in his writings, from the lion Aslan and all the other creatures in the Narnia chronicles to the animals that join a woman in the new creation pictures in *The Great Divorce*:

> ‘What are all these animals? A cat - two cats - dozens of cats. And all those dogs ... why, I can’t count them. And the birds. And the horses.’

> ‘They are her beasts.’

> ‘Did she keep a sort of zoo? I mean, this is a bit too much.’

> ‘Every beast and bird that came near her had its place in her love. In her they became themselves. And now the abundance of life she has in Christ from the Father flows over into them.’

But as well as employing animals in his fiction writing, Lewis raises questions in his theological work. He notes specific concerns regarding human use of animals together with a more general discussion of the difficulties surrounding explanation and justification of animal pain in a world created by a loving and all-powerful God.

This latter discussion of animal pain in general is placed in a chapter in *The Problem of Pain* on the subject of animal suffering which is also dealt with in an essay with CE Load ‘On the Pains of Animals.’ The more specific issue of man’s use of animals in experimental work in which pain is an outcome appears in a pamphlet written for the New England Anti-vivisection Society in 1947, re-printed in the UK for the National Anti-vivisection society in 1948 and subsequently published as an essay in *Undeceptions* (Geoffrey Bles, London 1971) and *First and Second Things; Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Fount Paperbacks, Glasgow 1985).

Vivisection

Lewis starts this essay with the comment that ‘it is the rarest thing in the world to hear a rational discussion of vivisection.’ Lewis notes that emotion lies at the heart of the debate; either pity for animals used in such work, or pity for suffering humans relying on such work to relieve their pain. A key question is whether pain is an evil, and in this essay Lewis assumes without further discussion that it is. ‘Now if pain is an evil then the infliction of pain, considered in itself, must be an evil act. But’ as Lewis continues ‘there are such things as necessary evils...some acts which would be bad simply in themselves, may be excusable and even laudable when they are a necessary means to a greater good.’ The key question then becomes that ‘vivisection can only be defended by showing it to be right that one species should suffer in order that another species should be happier.’

Lewis notes that a Christian seeking to defend animal experimentation ‘is very apt to say that we are entitled to do anything we please to animals because they “have no souls”’.
Lewis asks what this could mean – is it that they have a lack of consciousness? Today, with advances in understanding of animal cognition we can argue against that, but even in 1947 Lewis asks ‘if they have no consciousness then how is this known?’ As we have seen above Lewis’s interactions with animals were many and varied from childhood. As Connelly notes ‘Those who visited him at his Oxford home, The Kilns, were often surprised to find the place not only spilling over with papers and books but also overrun by cats and dogs.’ Lewis argues ‘[Animals] certainly behave as if they had [consciousness] or at least the higher animals do.’ But rather perplexingly in the next sentence he goes on to say ‘I myself am inclined to think that far fewer animals than is supposed have what we should recognise as consciousness. But that is only an opinion.’

The other possibility is that the phrase ‘they have no souls’ may mean as Lewis says ‘that they have no moral responsibilities and are not immortal.’ But ironically, rather than rendering them suitable for whatever we would wish to inflict on them, Lewis notes that ‘the absence of a “soul” in that sense makes the infliction of pain on them not easier but harder to justify. For it means that animals cannot deserve pain, nor profit morally by the discipline of pain, nor be recompensed by happiness in another life for suffering in this.’

Animal Pain

This problem, which Lewis saw as a considerable one, he had previously discussed in ‘The Problem of Pain’. The problem of the book’s title is the problem of pain in a world created by an all-powerful and all-loving God. In his introduction Lewis explains that, asked to believe in a benevolent and omniscient spirit ‘all the evidence points in the opposite direction. Either there is no spirit behind the universe or else a spirit indifferent to good and evil, or else an evil spirit.’ The Problem of Pain is an attempt to argue against this, first by discussing the omnipotence of God, then his goodness. Lewis next turns to man’s wickedness, human pain and thence to the subject of hell, via God’s redeeming work which provides a way, as the old chorus puts it ‘back to God from the dark paths of sin.’ Yet this all relates to human turning away from God which depends on reason and understanding, which provide the foundation for human rebellion.

What, though of animal pain? As we saw above, Lewis was closely associated with pet animals throughout his life and must have come into contact with much animal suffering. In chapter eight of The Problem of Pain Lewis admits that ‘The problem of animal pain is appalling, not because the animals are so numerous...but because the Christian explanation of human pain cannot be extended to animal pain.’ Lewis asks three questions. First what do animals suffer? Secondly how did pain and disease enter the animal world? And thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, how can animal suffering be reconciled with the justice of God.

With regard to the first question, Lewis answers that we simply do not know. But that was half a century ago and now, with considerable scientific investigation our understanding of pain in the animal kingdom is on a much firmer foundation than it was when Lewis wrote that in 1947. Reviews such as those of Griffin, Gregory and Podznak among many others have shown much more clearly how close many animals
come to what we humans see as our appreciation of pain and suffering. And yet there are still differences in the depth of comprehension of the long-term implications of a painful stimulus which we as humans have and many other species may be spared. Lewis compares the statements ‘this animal feels pain’ and ‘pain is taking place in this animal’ since he considers that the term ‘feel’ ‘really smuggles in the assumption that there is a ‘self’ or ‘soul’ or ‘consciousness’ standing above the sensations or organising them into an “experience”.’ While Lewis acknowledges that it is ‘certainly difficult to suppose that the apes, the elephant and the higher domestic animals have not in some sense a self or soul which connects experiences and gives rise to rudimentary individuality’ he still considers that ‘at least a great deal of what appears to be animal suffering need not be suffering in any real sense.’ I am not sure we would be so definite today.

From whence then does this pain, acknowledged by Lewis as an evil, arise? He notes that in earlier generations ‘the origins of animal suffering could be traced to the Fall of man. This is now impossible, for we have good reason to believe that animals existed long before men. Carnivorousness, with all that it entails, is older than humanity.’ Yet is this such a problem? Time-constrained events can have effects beyond their immediate temporal locus. The cross is one in point with its redemptive effects working forward as well as backward in time – Abraham was reconciled to God through Christ’s atoning death quite as much as someone sinning after that event. I see no problem with the separating effects of the fall of humanity having effects on the world before as well as after that event. Another possibility is that Satan’s evil grasp on the world had led to pain and suffering before man came on the scene. Jesus certainly attributes human suffering to Satan’s binding in Luke 13:16. If this is the case, Lewis says ‘it is worth considering whether man at his first coming into the world, had not already a redemptive function to perform. It may have been one of man’s functions to restore peace to the animals’ world, and had he not joined the enemy he might have succeeded in doing so to an extent now hardly imaginable.’ How relevant this is today where our impact on the world all too often further extenuates the pain and suffering of the animal kingdom rather than reducing and relieving it.

CEM Joad has objections to Lewis’s comments on this point. Common sense, he says, revolts against the idea of ‘Satan tempting monkeys’ The phrase in The Problem of Pain to which Joad objects is Lewis’s comment that ‘Satanic corruption of the beasts would be analogous with the Satanic corruption of man….In the same way [that man’s animality fell back from the humanity into which it had been taken] animals may have been encouraged to slip back into behaviour proper to vegetables.’ Quite what that meant might be debated, but Lewis apologises for the ambiguity caused by the use of the word ‘encouraged.’ Rather than using the word ‘corruption’ he acknowledges that ‘distortion’ would be a better word. Still the origin of pain, suffering and death in the animal kingdom could needs to be discussed.

Lastly Lewis raises the problem of justice – how can we reconcile the pain of animals, obvious as it is, with a loving and caring God? This brings Lewis to the possibility of immortality for animals; that their pain and suffering on earth can be mitigated – no, much more than that quite transformed – by a continuing life in the new creation. Paul
certainly sees this for we who believe and are reconciled to God, as in Romans 8:18. All
the sufferings of the present world cannot even be compared to the glory of the coming
age. How interesting then, that this comes immediately before the key passage on the
creation, subjected to futility…but this in hope that ‘creation itself will be set free from
its present slavery to decay, to join the freedom of the glory of the children of God.’
(Romans 8:21). Just as the situation the world finds itself in at present is somehow linked
to man’s sinfulness, so its release from that state will be bound together with peoples’
liberation from their rebellion against God.

Lewis has significant problems however with countenancing immortality for animals.
‘The real difficulty about supposing most animals to be immortal ‘ he writes ‘is that
immortality has almost no meaning for a creature which is not “conscious”...if the life of
a newt is merely a succession of sensations, what should we mean by saying that God
may recall to life a newt that died today? It would not recognise itself as the same newt;
the pleasant sensations of any newt that lived after its death would be just as much, or just
as little, a recompense for its earthly sufferings (if any) as those of its resurrected – I was
going to say “self”, but the whole point is that the newt probably has no self.'

Interestingly, given Lewis’ lifetime with companion animals and particularly dogs and
cats, he sees animal immortality linked with that of humans with which they are involved.
‘The error we must avoid is that of considering [the animals] in themselves. Man is to be
understood only in his relation with God. The beasts are to be understood only in their
relation to man and, through man, to God...Man was appointed by God to have dominion
over the beasts, and everything a man does to an animal is either a lawful exercise, or a
sacrilegious abuse, or an authority by divine right. The tame animal is therefore, in the
deepest sense the only “natural” animal – the only one we see occupying the place it was
made to occupy, and it is on the tame animal that we must base all our doctrine of
beasts.’

This is an unusual conception, as I see it, and Lewis was certainly taken to task on this
point by Evelyn Underhill the writer on mysticism, in her critical but appreciative letter
to him dated January 13th 1941. First Underhill praises Lewis’ discussion of the
cosmic fall ‘infecting the world with sin and its consequences.’ She sees his chapters on
human wickedness, original sin and the fall as ‘immensely important and illuminating.
‘Where’ she continues ‘I do find it impossible to follow you is in your chapter on
animals.’ She wrote of Lewis’ comment ‘The tame animal is in the deepest sense the only
natural animal…the beasts are to be understood only in their relationship to man and
through man to God’ that she found this belief ‘an intolerable doctrine of a frightful
exaggeration of what is involved in the primacy of man.’ She continued ‘Is the cow
which we have turned into a milk machine or the hen…turned into an egg machine really
nearer the mind of God than its wild ancestors?’ ‘If we ever get a sideways glimpse of
the animal-in-itself, the animal existing for God’s glory and pleasure and it by his light
(and what a lovely experience that is!), we don’t owe it to the Pekinese, the Persian cat or
the canary in its cage but to some wild free creature living in completeness of adjustment
to Nature in a life that is entirely independent of man.’ ‘Man’ Underhill argues ‘is no
doubt offered the chance of being the mediator of that redemption. But not by taming surely? Rather by loving and reverencing the creatures enough to leave them free."\textsuperscript{20}

Lewis seems to have had quite a different perspective on animals from Evelyn Underhill. Perhaps this is best illustrated in a quotation from Walter Hooper regarding the animal-human interactions at the Kilns, a suitable place to end this short essay on CS Lewis and his attitudes towards animals:

‘When I was living at the Kilns’ Hooper writes, ‘Lewis was affectionately termed “the Boss” by everyone there: his brother, secretary, housekeeper and gardener. Yet I never remember him speaking a sharp word or giving an order: it was his house, but he was “Boss” by virtue of his unfailing kindness and courtesy. The Kilns “family” also included two cats, an old ginger named Tom (a mighty hunter of mice when he was young, but them living on a pension of fish) and Snip (a Siamese which Lewis inherited from his wife and referred to as his “step-cat”). There was also a young boxer pup named Ricky. They recognised Lewis as the undisputed head of the house but he never made an elaborate fuss over them. He greeted Tom in the morning, stroked Snip when she jumped on his lap and passed the time of day with Ricky. Live and let live: just what they wanted. If the door of his study was open they just knew they were welcome within: otherwise not.’ One summer morning when Lewis was writing at his desk by the open window, Snip took a great spring and shot through the window. She landed with a great thump on top of his desk, scattering papers in all directions, and skidded into his lap. He looked at her in amazement. She looked at him in amazement. “Perhaps” he said to me “my step-cat, having finished her acrobatics, would enjoy a saucer of milk in the kitchen.” I opened the door for poor Snip and she walked out, embarrassed but with the best grace she could manage.”\textsuperscript{21}

Oh that we could mirror that image in our dealings with animals on a global scale, for surely that benign rule is itself an excellent picture, on a small scale, of the rule in the \textit{Imago Dei} which the first chapter of Genesis would have mankind exert in our dealings with the rest of the created world?

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\textsuperscript{1} RL Green, W Hooper, \textit{CS Lewis, A Biography}. (London: Collins, 1974) p17
\textsuperscript{2} \textit{ibid} p24
\textsuperscript{3} \textit{ibid} p116
\textsuperscript{4} CS Lewis, \textit{The Great Divorce} (London: Geoffrey Bles 1946)
\textsuperscript{5} CS Lewis, \textit{Vivisection. In First and Second Things; Essays on Theology and Ethics}, (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1985) p78-84
\textsuperscript{6} S Connelly, \textit{Animals and the Kingdom of Heaven} The Ark (Catholic Study Circle for Animal Welfare 194 2003 \url{http://www.all-creatures.org/ca/ark-194-animals.html} (accessed 20 September 2008)
8 ibid p117
11 C Short, A van Podznak *Animal Pain* (New York Saunders 1991)
12 *The Problem of Pain* p121
13 ibid p120
14 ibid p124
16 *The Problem of Pain* p123
17 ibid p125
18 ibid p126
19 C Williams (Ed) *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green and Co 1943) p300
20 Ibid p303