

I Animals and religion: towards a unifying theory

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Abstract

Religions serve a variety of functions for their adherents, including providing guidance on what constitutes appropriate moral relations between human and nonhuman animals. The peculiarly anthropocentric worldviews propounded by monotheistic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, tend to depict animals as secondary creations designed primarily to serve the interests of humans. Other belief systems offer radically different perspectives on the nature of animals, and on people's duties and responsibilities toward them. The present paper explores some of these other religious viewpoints in search of common themes, and concludes that the monotheistic perspective is simply one extreme expression of an ancient psychological struggle or conflict between the human need (or desire) to live at the expense of other animals, and our propensity to incorporate animals into our social, and hence moral, worlds. This conflict, it is argued, has existed in every human society and has played crucial formative roles in the development of religious beliefs and practices.

Key words: Animals, Anthropomorphism, Comparative Religion, Humane Ethics, Totalism.

Introduction

Humans are arguably unique in their tendency to feel and express sympathy, compassion and remorse for harms inflicted on others. Most observers of nonhuman primates report that these animals are largely insensitive to evidence of suffering in conspecifics, and that they are entirely callous towards members of other species. The ethologist, Frans de Waal, for instance, claims that human sympathy for other animals "is a concern without precedent in nature," and reinforces this view by pointing out that chimpanzees have no inhibitions about "tearing the limbs and meat from prey animals who are still very much alive, such as a screaming colobus monkey" (De Waal, 1996: p. 84). According to some evolutionary psychologists, interspecies moral scruples of the kind we see in humans are simply mistakes; just examples of particular circumstances in which the conscience can lead people to do things that aren't in their own self-interest (Wright, 1994). To others, such sensitivities are an

their interactions with each other. Except in exceptional cases, this has not prevented humans from exploiting animals for food or other purposes, but it has generated a profound moral conflict in our relations with other species that remains with us to this day (Serpell, 1996).

The purpose of this article is to explore the role that this inner conflict may have played in the evolution of our religious beliefs and practices.

The hunter's dilemma

Direct evidence that Upper Palaeolithic humans were morally ambivalent about hunting and killing animals is hard to come by for obvious reasons. Attitudes and beliefs leave few traces in the archaeological record, and even when evidence exists it is always subject to a variety of interpretations. The abundant cave and rock art that first emerges during this period preferentially depicts large mammals, especially those hunted for food, and certainly suggests that these animals were the subjects of intense ritual preoccupation. Among these animal images we also find a number of hybrid figures in which human and animal identities are clearly fused (Campbell, 1984; Mithen, 1996). In the absence of direct clues as to the meaning of this art, however, our only other source of inference derives from the belief systems of living or recent hunter-forager societies whose mode of economic subsistence lies closest to the ancestral human pattern. Such societies, it turns out, display a remarkable degree of consistency in their attitudes and beliefs concerning animals.

Briefly summarized, these beliefs are dominated by the notion that animals are fully rational, sentient, intelligent beings in no way inferior to humans, and that their bodies, like those of people, are animated by non-corporeal spirits or 'souls' that survive them after death. Fundamental similarity between humans and other animals is also commonly reinforced by origin or creation myths in which animal and human identities are fused or, at least, not clearly separable. While such societies recognize that hunting is a technical skill that is acquired through experience and practice, they also believe that no amount of skill or ingenuity will enable a hunter to be successful if the animals themselves are unwilling to submit to being killed. Important game animals must therefore be discussed and treated at all times with proper respect and consideration in order to retain their goodwill. Hunting and killing an animal without showing the appropriate degree of respect is to invite spiritual retribution. Either the offended animal's spirit, or that of its spiritual guardian, may seek some form of posthumous revenge, including the infliction of illness, injury, madness or death on the hunter or other members of his family or clan, or loss of success in future hunting. In some societies, the death of the animal, if properly executed, may also be regarded as a rite of renewal. By treating the animal deferentially, and returning its essence to the spirit world, the hunter may believe that it will be reborn again in the future in an eternal cycle of life, death, and reincarnation (Campbell, 1984; Guenther, 1988; Ingold, 1994; Martin, 1978; Nelson, 1986; Speck, 1977; Wenzel, 1991).

inevitable consequence of our ability to attribute feelings and mental states to others. The psychologist, Nicholas Humphrey, has argued that humans are 'natural psychologists', meaning that we have evolved the capacity to use introspection or "reflexive consciousness" - knowledge of what it is like to be a person - as a model for understanding and, in some cases, manipulating the minds of others (Humphrey, 1983). This skill is believed to have evolved in the context of human-to-human social relationships and interactions. But because we are animals and share many of our feelings, needs and motivations with other animals, it can also be applied to the task of penetrating and exploring the mental states of nonhumans (Serpell, 1996). In his book, *The Prehistory of the Mind*, Steven Mithen (1996) has labelled this specialized extension of reflexive consciousness "anthropomorphic thinking" and he argues on the basis of archaeological evidence that it emerged as a distinctive human trait during the Middle/Upper Palaeolithic transition some 40,000 years ago.

The development of anthropomorphic thinking is likely to have had dramatic consequences for our species. Prior to its emergence, humans would no doubt have viewed animals and the workings of nature as objects or phenomena of great practical interest. If Mithen is correct, however, they were incapable of using self-knowledge to infer comparable mental states in other species, or of interpreting the behaviour of other animals in the light of this inference. Modern humans, in contrast, seem to have great difficulty thinking about animals except in anthropomorphic terms. From earliest childhood, we appear to view other animals as social subjects, and imbue them with human-like intelligence, desires, beliefs, and intentions (Myers & Saunders, 2002). Indeed, most people require special training in order to observe and interpret animal behaviour objectively (Kennedy, 1992).

Although originally fortuitous, anthropomorphic thinking evolved and spread, according to Mithen, because individuals possessing this ability would have been more effective as hunters. The archaeological record seems to bear this assertion out. While the Neanderthals and their predecessors were reasonably accomplished hunters, the evidence suggests that they were largely opportunistic in their choice of prey, and very limited in their range of hunting techniques. Evidence from Upper Palaeolithic sites, in contrast, suggests that anatomically-modern humans engaged in more complex hunting strategies that required forward planning, far more elaborate technology, and the ability to make insightful predictions about the movements and behaviour of game animals (Mithen, 1996). Anthropomorphic thinking may also have had another far-reaching and, in some respects, paradoxical consequence. While it would have greatly improved our ability to hunt other species, it would also have given rise to simultaneous moral inhibitions about killing and eating them. Before the emergence of this ability, it seems reasonably safe to assume that humans felt no more qualms about killing and eating other animals than a cat does with a mouse, or a chimpanzee does with a colobus monkey. But as soon as people began to anthropomorphize animals and think about them in human terms, they became bound by essentially the same codes of morality that governed

As the anthropologist, Tim Ingold has observed, "The hunter hopes that by being good to animals, they in turn will be good to him. But by the same token, the animals have the power to withhold if any attempt is made to coerce what they are not, of their own volition, prepared to provide..... Animals thus maltreated will desert the hunter, or even cause him ill fortune" (Ingold, 1994: p. 15). This anxiety about the morally dubious origins of animal-derived food is well expressed in following statement made by an Iglulik Eskimo informant:

The greatest peril in life lies in the fact that human food consists entirely of souls. All the creatures that we have to kill and eat, all those that we have to strike down and destroy to make clothes for ourselves, have souls, like we have, souls that do not perish with the body, and which must therefore be propitiated lest they should avenge themselves on us for taking away their bodies (Rasmussen, 1929: p. 56).

Not surprisingly, these beliefs about animals and the consequences of treating them improperly tend to generate considerable anxiety; anxiety that is expressed and relieved through the adoption of specialized exonerative beliefs, and the performance of strict and elaborate hunting rules and rituals designed to propitiate the animal spirits or atone for their deaths. In many cultures, for example, sexual abstinence and other forms of self-denial (or even self-mutilation) are commonly practiced prior to hunting in order to win the animals' respect and sympathy. The actual act of killing an animal is also performed in a prescribed way, often accompanied by spoken apologies or excuses, and in a manner that avoids unnecessary cruelty. A wounded animal must be tracked and pursued, for days if necessary, rather than being allowed to die in vain, and once dead, its carcass must be treated in a morally appropriate fashion: skinned and butchered appropriately, scrupulously shared with other members of the group, and consumed entirely so that no edible or usable remains are wasted. Any parts that cannot be used must also be disposed of in the correct ceremonial manner appropriate to the species.

Specific dietary taboos are also widespread in hunting societies. In general, these arise from the notion that each person has a special spiritual affinity with certain animal species, and is therefore forbidden to kill them or eat their flesh. Among so-called totemic societies, this sense of affinity may derive from elaborate kinship systems or accidents of birth. In others, it derives from the content of dreams or visions deliberately induced by fasting, dancing, sleep deprivation, and/or the consumption of psychoactive drugs. The object of these vision quests is to establish a personal relationship with, and gain the support of, particular animal 'guardian spirits' whose assistance is considered essential to good health and successful hunting. These animal guardian spirits are represented as spiritual patriarchs or matriarchs who preside over and regulate the activities of each animal species, and who send them out periodically into the world in order to be killed by favoured hunters. For this reason, hunters invariably perform deferential rituals on killing an animal so that its essence or spirit will return to the guardian spirit with a favourable account of how it has

been treated (Hallowell, 1926; Benedict's, 1929; Speck, 1977; Martin, 1978; Campbell, 1984; Nelson, 1986; Wenzel, 1991; Ingold, 1994).

Although, in theory, anybody is capable of gaining access to the spirit world by these means, certain individuals, usually known as shamans, are believed to possess a special talent for communicating with animal or guardian spirits. Depending on their particular talents, shamans are believed to be able to foretell the future, advise on the whereabouts of game animals or predict impending catastrophes. Their ability to control the forces of nature can also be employed to manipulate the weather, subdue animals or bring them close to the hunter. Above all, since all manifestations of ill health are thought to be caused by angry or malignant spirits, shamans possess a virtual monopoly on the treatment of sickness. In most hunter-gatherer societies, the shaman therefore fulfils the same sort of role as a medium or priest by interceding with the supernatural powers on behalf of the rest of the community (Eliade, 1965; Serpell, 2000).

In summary, then, it appears that most, if not all, known hunter-gatherer societies have evolved an ethic of respect for animals based on the belief that these creatures share many of the morally relevant characteristics of persons. As a result, killing animals needlessly, disrespectfully, or in a manner likely to cause unnecessary suffering is considered morally akin to homicide. This, in essence, is the central moral dilemma of hunter-gatherer existence: In order to become a successful hunter, a person must cultivate a well-developed understanding and knowledge of the animals he intends to kill. He must also use his knowledge of himself to think like the animal and see or sense the world from its point of view. In the process, however, he inevitably starts to identify and sympathize with his victim, and this, in turn, generates feelings of anxiety, guilt, and the fear of retribution when the animal is eventually killed. Hunter-gatherers appear to cope with this dilemma in one of three different ways: through the performance of ritual acts of propitiation and atonement (e.g. by acknowledging culpability and making amends in ritual ways); via division of responsibility or culpability (e.g. totemism, other hunting/dietary restrictions or taboos, and the use of specialist mediators or shamans) and by the adoption of exonerative belief systems (e.g. the belief that the animal 'needs' to be killed in order to be reborn).

This process, represented diagrammatically in Figure 1, can be construed as the direct consequence of anthropomorphic thinking and the hunter's resulting need to absolve himself of the guilt arising from the slaughter of wild animals. It can also be plausibly regarded as a primary formative influence in the development of hunter-gatherer religious beliefs and practices.

Animal Domestication and the Concept of Sacrifice

Ironically, toward the end of the last Ice Age, anthropomorphic thinking eventually contributed to the demise of hunting and gathering by providing people with the ability and inclination to domesticate other animals (Mithen, 1996). Domestication, at least in its initial phase, involved the formation of complex social relationships between people and animals, and such relation-

The Hunter-gatherer's Dilemma

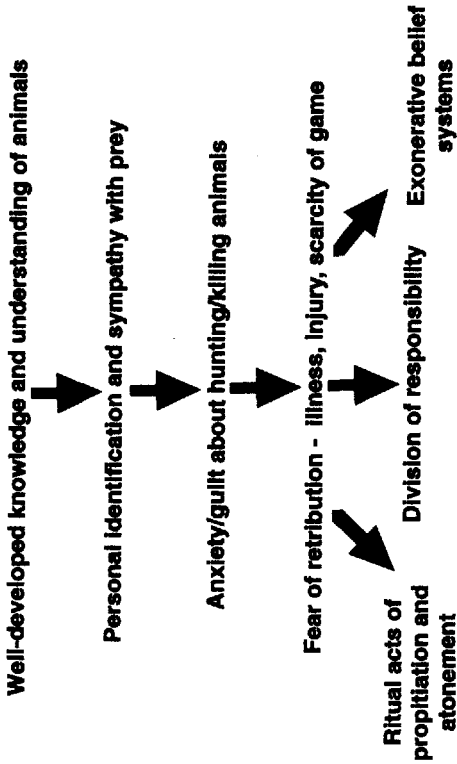


Figure 1 Diagrammatic representation of the central moral dilemma confronting hunter-gatherers, and its role in the development of their religious beliefs and practices

ships were only possible after humans had developed the ability to incorporate animals within their social world. Why domestication occurred when and where it did, and not before, is a question beyond the scope of this article, although most authorities seem to agree that it was forced on our ancestors by the massive ecological disruptions that accompanied this period of global climatic change (Serpell, 1996).

Although it ultimately replaced hunting and gathering throughout most of the world, farming and herding did nothing to ameliorate the guilt associated with animal exploitation. If anything, it tended to exaggerate the problem. As already emphasized, subsistence hunters need to understand and identify with the animals they depend on for food. They would simply fail as hunters, if they did not. On the other hand, a hunter doesn't interact with his prey socially and, except at the moment of the animal's death, he exercises no control over it. The animal remains an independent being with a mind of its own. Under these circumstances, it is possible for the hunter to convince himself that, if the animal placed itself in a position to be killed, it did so of its own free will.

It would require an extraordinary feat of self-deception for a farmer or a herdsman to reach a similar conclusion. Most domestic animals are utterly dependent for survival on their human owners or custodians. They have no free will as such. Furthermore, because they live together in what is, to some extent, a combined social group, it is not unusual for farmers and herdsman to establish social bonds with their animals and vice versa. The moral dilemma is therefore far more acute for the farmer than the hunter, since killing or harming

the animal in this context effectively amounts to a betrayal of the animal's trust. As Ingold observes:

In the world of the hunter, animals, too, are supposed to care, to the extent of laying down their lives for humans by allowing themselves to be taken. They retain, however, full control over their own destiny. Under pastoralism, that control has been relinquished to humans. It is the herdsman who takes life-or-death decisions concerning what are now 'his' animals.....He sacrifices them; they do not sacrifice themselves to him. They are cared for but they are not themselves empowered to care. Like dependents in the household of a patriarch, their status is that of jural minors, subject to the authority of their human master. In short, the relationship of pastoral care, quite unlike that of the hunter towards animals, is founded on a principle not of trust but of domination (Ingold, 1994: p. 16).

The earliest farmers and herdsman who began to exploit domestic livestock seem to have dealt with this new ethical challenge by adapting or modifying hunter-gatherer coping strategies, as well as by inventing some new ones of their own. Perhaps the most pervasive and durable of these new ideas was the notion that humans were morally separate from, and superior to, all or most other animals.

It isn't hard to understand why this concept replaced the more egalitarian hunter-gatherer perspective. The advent of domestic livestock herding and husbandry some 11,000 years ago produced a profound shift in the balance of power between humans and the animals they depended on for food. From being independent coequals or even superiors, animals became servants and subordinates, increasingly dependent on people for care and protection. This abrupt shift in power relations was soon reflected in religious belief systems that became progressively more and more hierarchical throughout the ancient world. Just as humans became dominant over their domestic animals, the original animal guardian spirits were elevated to the status of zoomorphic gods with increasingly awesome powers over human lives and livelihoods. Initially, the jurisdiction of these godlike entities seems to have been confined to the species they represented: bull and cow gods to regulate the husbandry and slaughter of cattle; ram gods presiding over sheep, and so on (Schwabe, 1994). Over time, however, the connections between these gods and their animal progenitors became increasingly tenuous, and the gods themselves became correspondingly anthropomorphic in appearance and behaviour. During this metamorphosis, many acquired human heads or torsos before eventually becoming fully humanoid. Long after this, however, some retained the ability to transform themselves into animals when occasion demanded. The 'major' gods also became fewer in number and associated in more general ways with natural or cosmic forces and aspects of the agricultural cycle: the sun, rain, soil fertility, seasonal changes, alluvial floods, and so on (Serpell, 1999).

The concept of animal sacrifice, which appeared in a vestigial form among some hunter-gatherer groups, also acquired particular significance among farmers and herders. Anthropological accounts of traditional pastoral societies report that these peoples are in general extremely reluctant to slaughter animals

simply to satisfy the desire for meat. Indeed, it is often believed that the animals spirit will curse the perpetrator if they do so. Animals that die of natural causes may be eaten, but otherwise, livestock are only slaughtered at special ceremonies, ostensibly to honour or propitiate the spirit world, after which their meat may be eaten with safety (Ingold, 1986; Cartmill, 1993; Serpell, 1996). Although both types of sacrifice – the hunter-gatherer and pastoral – seem to be based on exonerative beliefs that deflect guilt away from the killer, the latter is very different in tone, from the kind practiced by hunters. Hunters regard themselves as the means by which the animal's spirit is able to return to the supernatural realm from whence it came, and from which it will one day be reborn. The herdsman, in contrast, kills the animal because, as he sees it, the spirits demand a sacrificial gift as a placatory token of good faith. It is almost as if the lack of trust that characterizes the herdsman's relationship with his animals is now reflected in his own lack of faith in the benevolence of the supernatural powers.

With the development of agrarian city-states about 6,000 years ago, this loss of trust in the powers-that-be became further accentuated, and resulted not unexpectedly in a virtual epidemic of organized animal sacrifice. Perhaps reflecting the potentially devastating ecological uncertainties of rising populations and seasonal agricultural production, the deities who presided over these civilizations were viewed as particularly capricious and insatiable, ready to dole out drought, famine and pestilence on a seemingly arbitrary basis. Sacrificing animals became the standard way of nourishing the gods and atoning for any grievances they may have had (Girard, 1977; Harris, 1978; Burkert, 1983; Jacobsen, 1994).

In all of these ancient civilizations – Egypt, Mesopotamia, Assyria, the Indus Valley, Greece – the killing of food animals in a non-sacrificial manner was considered a crime, morally equivalent to manslaughter. Only those properly versed in the sacred mysteries were allowed to sacrifice animals, and only the blood or small portions of the animals were typically reserved for the gods. The rest of the meat was either returned to the animal's owner or redistributed to the populace at large. Since the consumption of unsacrificed meat was also proscribed, the priests who performed these sacrifices tended to exercise relatively exclusive control over meat production, slaughter and distribution; clearly an extension of the original hunter-gatherer practice of allocating responsibility or guilt to specialist mediators; in this case, to the priesthood (Burkert, 1983; Sorabji, 1993).

Surviving accounts of these sacrificial rituals also contain familiar echoes of hunter-gatherer rites of propitiation and atonement. The priests who performed the slaughter were expected to engage in fasting and sexual abstinence before doing so. Ideally the animal was supposed to approach the sacrificial altar willingly without coercion, and was often encouraged to nod its head as if assenting to its own execution. Following the sacrifice, the priests responsible for the act sometimes whispered apologies in the animal's ear, and it was not uncommon for the sacrificial knife to be 'punished' by being destroyed. In many

cases, the sacrificial animal was also pampered and nurtured for a period of time before being killed, as if to compensate it for its untimely demise (Burkert, 1983). Again, as with the hunter-gatherer policy of diluting responsibility through division of roles, some of these features of animal sacrifice were apparently designed to dilute individual responsibility for the animal's death so that its meat could be eaten with a clear conscience. First, the animal bore some responsibility for appearing to give its assent, then the knife was blamed as the instrument of slaughter, the priests then acknowledged culpability as the actual agents of death, but ultimately the Gods were held responsible for 'demanding' the sacrifice in the first place (Serpell, 1996).

Once it reaches this level of intensity, however, animal sacrifice carries with it an inherent drawback. When a culture starts to believe that the only way it can win the favour of the Gods is by sacrificing of animals, it is left with few options when the Gods fail to respond favourably to these efforts. Either even greater numbers of animals must be slaughtered or, as happened in some ancient civilizations, it becomes necessary to resort to the ultimate sacrifice of human victims (Harris, 1978). Sadly, there is abundant archaeological evidence from the ancient world of disastrous agricultural failures and famines (Cohen, 1989; Carlson, 1982; Yates, 1990), and indications that the ruling establishment and the priesthood responded to these catastrophes by ordering the sacrifice of animals on a scale that must have been detrimental to the economic welfare of the community (Burkert, 1983). According to one authority, for example, a typical city of ancient Greece "resounded with the shrieks of dying animals; its air reeking with the stench of blood and burning sacrifices" (Zuntz, 1971: p.183).

From about this period in human history we also begin to see evidence in ancient literature of a sort of moral backlash against the practice of animal sacrifice, and its underlying carnivorous motives. In the earliest religious text from India, the *Rig Veda*, the oldest sections are primarily devoted to describing how, when and where sacrifices should be performed. During this period, religious slaughter was a ubiquitous and extremely frequent occurrence that preceded almost any endeavour for which the outcome was uncertain. Later sections, however, thought to date from around 1000 BCE, categorically reject sacrifice and advocate the practice of *ahimsa* (non-injury) toward all animals; an idea that subsequently became integral to the philosophies of three major, contemporary Indian religions: Buddhism, Jainism and the yogic branches of Hinduism. It seems that the civilization of India underwent some sort of revolution in attitudes to the treatment of animals at about this time in its history, and some authorities have suggested that this may have been a moral reaction to the excessive use of sacrifice in the earlier period (Dasgupta, 1975; Jacobsen, 1994; Schmidt, 1960; Spenser, 1993).

Evidence of similar concerns is also apparent in classical Greek literature from sixth century BCE. Although it is not known whether these ideas were locally generated or the result of cultural transmission from the East, it is clear that the Pythagorean and Orphic schools of Greek philosophy believed in the

characteristically eastern concept of metempsychosis or reincarnation – the idea that the soul or spirit is eternally reborn after death in different bodies, including those of animals. According to most accounts, Pythagoras and his followers were not only opposed to animal sacrifice for this reason, but also advocated a vegetarian diet (Spenser, 1993; Sorabji, 1993).

Opposition to religious slaughter and vegetarian advocacy continued to recur as themes in classical philosophical literature until at least the third century AD (Sorabji, 1993). However, in contrast to what happened in India, their influence was counterbalanced and ultimately overwhelmed by Aristotle's (384-322 BCE) anthropocentric idea of a "Scala Naturae" upon which living organisms were arranged hierarchically according to their powers of reason, each one purposely designed to serve as food, labour of raw material for those higher up the intellectual scale (Clutton-Brock, 1995; Harwood, 1928; Serpell, 1996; Sorabji, 1993; Thomas, 1983)

"plants exist for the sake of animals, and the other animals for the benefit of men, the tame ones for service and for food, and the wild ones, if not all at least most, for the sake of food and other needs, so that clothes and tools may be made from them. If then nature makes nothing incomplete or pointless, it must have made all of them for the sake of men" (Aristotle, *Politics*, cited in Sorabji, 1993).

The appeal of the Aristotelian construct was that it provided the ultimate exonerative framework for those seeking a workable alternative to the sacrificial system that did not also entail abstinence from animal foods. By suggesting that the natural purpose of nonhuman animals was to be eaten or otherwise used by humans, it eliminated at a single stroke the need for any additional justification, as well as making most of the ritual paraphernalia associated with animal slaughter more or less redundant. Monotheistic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, that incorporated this Aristotelian framework within their ideologies, either abandoned or never adopted animal sacrifice, at least in the classical sense of the word, although Jews and Moslems still practice ritual slaughter, and Christians have retained the metaphorical image of Christ, the Lamb of God, meekly offering himself as a sacrifice in order to atone for the sins of the world – an event which some Christians commemorate by engaging in a sacramental meal in which the body and blood of the Saviour are symbolically devoured.

Christian anthropocentrism

By fusing together a mixture of Aristotelian teleology and biblical ideas of dominion, medieval and early modern Christian theologians and scholars, ultimately gave birth to the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen. In a defence of the biblical commandment, "Thou shalt not kill", for example, St. Augustine (AD 354-430) stated that people should not make the mistake of applying this rule to 'irrational living things, whether flying,

swimming, walking or crawling, because they are not associated in a community with us by *reason*, since it is not given to them to have *reason* in common with us. Hence it is by a very just ordinance of the Creator that their life and death is subordinated to our use' (*City of God*, 1.20). During the 7th century AD, Isidore of Seville proclaimed that every animal species was designed by the creator for no other purpose than to serve specific human interests. Even noxious creatures such as vermin and ravening wild beasts existed to provide people with salutary reminders of the Earthly Paradise, where humans and animals had once lived together in prelapsarian harmony (Salisbury, 1994). In the 13th century, the medieval Dominican scholar, Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225-1274) not only denied rationality to animals but also immortality. Aquinas argued that only the reasoning part of the soul survived the body after death. Since, in his view, animals lacked the power of reason, their souls therefore perished along with their bodies (Sorabji, 1993). Whether or not Aquinas intended it so, such ideas helped to reinforce the notion that humans had little reason to feel morally concerned about the treatment of other species. To emphasize this point, Aquinas also reinterpreted Old Testament passages that seemed to advocate direct moral duties to animals:

If in Holy Scripture there are found some injunctions forbidding the infliction of some cruelty towards brute animals . . . this is either for removing a man's mind from exercising cruelty towards other men, lest anyone, from exercising cruelty upon brutes, should go on hence to human beings; or because the injury inflicted on animals turns to a temporal loss for some man (*Summa contra Gentiles*, II, 112).

The clear implication was that people had no direct moral responsibilities toward animals at all. Wanton cruelty should be avoided, but only for economic reasons or because it might encourage cruelty to fellow humans; not because of the suffering inflicted on the animals themselves. Animals had no moral standing because 'only a person, that is, a being possessed of reason and self-control, can be the subject of rights and duties (*Summa Theologiae*, q. 102, a. 6.)'

During the 17th century, the brilliant French philosopher, René Descartes, produced his famous dualist view of human nature that further reinforced the Thomist doctrine by imposing an absolute distinction between humans and other animals. Descartes, a profoundly religious man, was disturbed by the sceptic critiques of philosophers, such as Montaigne, who openly attacked the notion of excluding animals from moral consideration. Descartes countered by arguing that only humans are conscious of themselves, and that this characteristic not only endows us with immortal souls but also makes us fundamentally different from other animals which were, in his view, essentially no different from complex machines (Maehle, 1994).

All of these early efforts to excavate an unbridgeable chasm between man and beast were reinforced by rigid ecclesiastical proscriptions against activities or behaviour that tended to cross the divide. The occasional practice of keeping animals as pets, for example, was widely condemned by medieval and

early modern moralists and religious authorities because it tended to elevate animals to the level of human companions (Serpell, 1996; Serpell & Paul, 1994). Similarly, the crime of bestiality, or sexual relations between people and animals, was considered particularly heinous because it degraded the human perpetrator to the level of his animal paramour (Serpell, 1996). Even eating an animal that had been killed by another animal was strictly forbidden by the Church, not because the meat was thereby rendered unclean, but because only a bestial person would eat food that had already been partially eaten by beasts (Salisbury, 1994). Indeed, the whole concept of what it meant to be human came to be defined in terms of the absence of animal attributes and behaviour. If animals were supposedly impulsive or governed by brute instincts, then the ideal Christian should be ruled by reason and self-control. If animals were promiscuous, Christians should be chaste; if they ate their food raw and with their teeth, good Christians should eat theirs cooked and with cutlery. Those humans who were perceived to have succumbed to the growling of "the beast within", including the lower social orders of society, were often considered little better than animals (Salisbury, 1994; Thomas, 1983).

Political efforts to eliminate non-conforming religious beliefs and practices during the late medieval and early modern periods also drew considerable attention to supposedly zoophilic or zoocentric behaviour. Between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries, nearly all the major heretical sects, including the Templars, the Waldensians, and the Cathars, were accused of worshipping, and having carnal relations with, the Devil in the form of an animal of some kind, often a large black cat or dog (Serpell, 1996). During the so-called European witch-craze from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, successive demonologists described witches as consorting with the Devil and his minions in animal form; as being capable of shape-shifting – i.e. transforming both themselves and others into animals – and of employing the services of demonic animal 'familiar' or 'imps' to carry out their evil designs (Serpell, 2002).

According to the historian, Keith Thomas, the "breath-takingly anthropocentric" worldview that emerged in Europe during this period was essentially self-serving. It promoted the wholesale exploitation of animals and the natural world at a time of unprecedented economic and agricultural expansion. And since more zoocentric or ecocentric moral perspectives might have obstructed or hindered these expansionist efforts, individuals and groups expounding such views were also actively suppressed or denied (Thomas, 1983).

Conclusion

This article has attempted to demonstrate the extent to which moral anxieties about the exploitation of animals have been a primary driving force in the evolution of religious ideologies and practices throughout human history.

Although they serve many functions for their adherents, one of the most ubiquitous roles that religions play are as sources of guidance on how people ought to behave. Every religious group or sect has its own unique position

on what constitutes good (moral) and bad (immoral) behaviour, and its own set of guidelines, rules, commandments or laws that serve to regulate or restrict its followers to prescribed codes of conduct. The longstanding anthropocentric bias imposed by Judeo-Christian theology, has created the impression that religious codes of conduct are intended solely for the purpose of telling people how they ought behave in relation to each other. However, even this cursory examination of the importance of animal-related religious prescriptions and proscriptions in other cultures and ideologies suggests that western anthropocentrism represents an unusual and extreme position that is itself only an extension of precisely the same techniques of moral absolutism employed by our hunting and gathering ancestors.

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