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Noblesse Oblige: Theological Differences Between Humans and Animals and What They Imply Morally

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The author reviews the work of select theologians, ethicists, and biblical scholars who suggest that the difference between humans and animals should serve not solely as an ascription of a special status to humans but also as the foundation for a responsibility that humans bear toward animals. As an added reflection, the author explores common categorical differentiations in systematic theology: God and creation, human and nonhuman, elect and non-elect. In the first and last of these categorical differentiations, unique identity entails both a special status and a responsibility. The latter is normatively directed to those who are categorically different. As such, the categorical difference between humans and animals establishes a foundation for moral concern.

KEY WORDS: animal welfare/rights, image of god, Andrew Linzey, creation, ecology, theological anthropology, hierarchy, Christianity, theology

In a scene from the popular movie *Braveheart*, William Wallace addresses the Scottish nobles after a successful battle against the English. The nobles claim it is time to declare a king and begin to argue over which clan should provide an heir to the throne. Wallace reproaches the wealthy Scotsmen, saying, “There is a difference between us. You think the people of this country exist to provide you with position. I think your position exists to provide the people with freedom. And I go to make sure they have it” (Wallace, 1995). At its core, this scene represents a disparity in how to view hierarchical power and position. For the nobles, identity is primarily a status that is maintained at the expense of those with a lesser status. The lesser exist to provide position for the greater. For Wallace, any status derived from identity constitutes a responsibility to lead those without his power and position to their proper end. The greater exist to provide benefits for the lesser.

In this article, I attempt to contribute to a perspective—already delineated by careful

thinkers—that honors a traditional differentiation between humans and animals and at the same time avoids viewing the nonhuman creation strictly in terms of utility. In order to reach this goal, I argue that, theologically, unique identity entails two inseparable dimensions: status and responsibility. I begin with a brief historical consideration, showing how Christians have established human identity in contrast to that of nonhumans. After delineating this dominant historical view, I pose the pertinent questions about the path I hope to take regarding the meaning of our unique human identity. It is in this section that I engage others who have provided the foundation for this project. I then explore the theme of differentiation in systematic theology. From this exploration, I suggest that both the relationship between God and creation and the relationship between the elect and the non-elect establish a paradigm for how humans ought to relate to animals.

The position in this article is not new. My primary goal is to review select relevant material from theology, ethics, and biblical scholarship and present the various contributions as a coherent whole.

HISTORICAL HIERARCHY AND ECOLOGICAL CONSCIENTIOUSNESS

Throughout Christian history, many theologians and philosophers have attempted to draw a sharp boundary around humanity. Kant (1785/1998) predicated the category of “person” on what he believed were uniquely human qualities. Before Kant, Descartes (1637/1985) argued that humans have a rational mind that separates them by nature from the mechanistic bodies of nonhuman animals. Humans are capable of expressing thoughts through communication. For Descartes, “this shows not merely that the beasts have less reason than men, but that they have no reason at all” (p. v). Before Descartes, Aquinas (1265–1274/1946) stated, “The intellect or mind is that whereby the rational creature excels other creatures” (I.93.6). Before Aquinas, Augustine (trans. 1948) wrote, “God, then, made man in His own image. For He created for him a soul endowed with reason and intelligence so that he might excel all the creatures of the earth, air, and sea, which were not so gifted” (XII.23). Before Augustine, Jesus comforted his disciples in Luke 12:7 (New Revised Standard Version), saying, “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight . . . Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” Before Christ, the authors and redactors of Genesis 1 differentiated humanity from the rest of creation by ascribing the image of God to human beings alone (Genesis 1:26–28).

Although this desire to maintain a disparity between human and nonhuman creatures is more pronounced in the West, it is not wanting in the East. Irenaeus (182–188 CE/1868) stated that humanity, “being endowed with reason, and in this respect like to God, having been made free in his will, and with power over himself, is himself the cause to himself” (IV.4.3). Ephrem the Syrian (trans. 1990) wrote that animals were not permitted to approach the outer area of Paradise. Saint Ephrem also said,

Even though the beasts, the cattle, and the birds were equal [to Adam] in their ability to procreate and in that they had life, God still gave honor to Adam in many ways: first, in that it was said, God formed him with His own hands and breathed life into him; God then set him as ruler over Paradise and over all that is outside of Paradise; God clothed Adam in glory; and God gave him reason and thought so that he might perceive the majesty [of God]. (Ephrem, trans. 1994, II.4)

In a similar manner, Gregory of Nyssa (trans. 1988) claimed that human beings were unique among the physical creation in that they bore a similarity to the divine on account of their rationality and intelligence (16.9).

There are exceptions to this focus on the disparity between humans and nonhumans, especially in contemporary theology. However, believing that humans in some way transcend the merely physical creation is historically normative. How should Christianity deal with this issue in an age of heightened ecological awareness? Should we abandon the belief that humans differ from all nonhumans in essence? Should we strengthen our resolve and reassert a hierarchical view in which anyone who or anything that is less than human is at the complete service of a human overlord? Fortunately, these are not the only two options.

FOUNDATIONAL QUESTIONS AND A THIRD OPTION

To explore a third possibility, we must consider the following questions: What is the purpose of the disparity in greatness within the created order? If humans are different—even if in essence—from the rest of creation, why are we different? The capacities that many Christians believe distinguish humans from animals, such as a rational soul and freedom of will, along with the religious claim that humans alone bear the image of God, serve to constitute a uniquely human identity. Even if we accept this distinction, we must ask, What does a uniquely human identity mean for human beings living in the context of creation? Of particular import for this article is this question: If humans are so much greater than animals, how should humanity exercise this greatness in relationship to animals?

Given the growing ecological sensitivity of our contemporary context, these questions have received more attention. This attention has given rise to a third option regarding the ethical significance of the difference between humans and animals. Here, I limit my engagement to works with a theological foundation. First, I consider modern interpretations of the *imago Dei* (image of God). Second, I turn to the work of Andrew Linzey, who has explored the questions posed here under the subdiscipline “animal theology.” Last, I provide a very brief overview of other scholars who have contributed to construction of the third option.

Image of God

The historically dominant interpretation of the image of God (especially in Christian theology) views the concept as a metaphysical affirmation about humanity. That human

beings bear the divine image means that we bear some substantive similarity to God. As I have already alluded to, theologians such as Augustine and Irenaeus posited rationality and freedom of will as constitutive of the *imago*. Contemporary scholars refer to this interpretation as the “substantive interpretation,” given that it focuses on the essential differences between humanity and the rest of creation.

Stanley Grenz (2001) provides a good overview of the rise and perpetuation of the substantive view in Christian history. Grenz begins by stating, “Although most Christians today would be likely to assume that this view arises directly out of the Bible, the idea was actually introduced into Christian thought by those church fathers who were influenced by and grappled with the Greek philosophical tradition” (p. 143). He notes the propensity toward the substantive view in Irenaeus. Grenz claims Irenaeus establishes the path for his successors. In the East, these successors include Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and finally John of Damascus. In the West, Augustine set a firm groundwork for a substantive view of the *imago*. He argued that the *imago* includes rationality and sets humans over nonhuman creation. Grenz traces Augustine’s influence through Aquinas, who ascribed at least an aspect of the *imago* to all humans on account of the mind. After a lull in the substantive interpretation among early Reformers such as Luther and Calvin, subsequent Protestants returned to this view. As this overview suggests, the substantive view is historically normative (Grenz, 2001).

However, modern biblical scholars have questioned the exegetical basis of this view. J. R. Middleton (2005) states, “Most patristic, medieval, and modern interpreters typically asked not an exegetical, but a speculative, question: In what way are humans *like* God and *unlike* animals?” (pp. 18–19). Likewise, D. J. Hall (1986) states, “It can readily appear—if one follows the history of the interpretation of this symbol closely—that the whole enterprise of defining the *imago Dei* in our Christian conventions centers on the apparent need to show that human beings are different from all other creatures” (p. 90).

In this sense, the *imago* has served as a tool to maintain borders. Moreover, these borders operate primarily for the purpose of exclusion. Humans are different from animals. And as Hall (1986) states, “‘different’ almost invariably implies ‘higher,’ ‘nobler,’ ‘loftier,’ ‘better’” (p. 90). This comment is quite warranted, given that substantive (and uniquely human) qualities of the *imago Dei* are what constitute human dignity for the documents of the Vatican II and the Catholic Catechism (e.g., *Gaudium et Spes*, p. 29; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, p. 8; *Nostra Aetate*, p. 5; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1995 version, p. 1700). Furthermore, bioethicists such as B. M. Ashley use the *imago* to exclude animals from ethical concern in the medical field: “The Christian view of the worth of persons who share with Jesus a human nature is based on the biblical teaching that God creates each person in his own image and likeness, different from lesser creatures in the possession of a spiritual intelligence and freewill” (Ashley, deBlois, & O’Rourke, 2006, p. 40). Hence, in the substantive view, the *imago* constitutes an identity that fundamentally ascribes a status to those within the boundaries of that identity.

It is precisely this “erring on the side of status” that modern biblical scholars are questioning. Based on Genesis 1, they claim that the image of God is inseparably united

to the command to rule over the creatures and the earth. The exegetical arguments are complex. Here I provide an extremely truncated version of one of them.

As both Middleton (2005) and W. S. Towner (2005) note, the structure of Genesis 1 consistently links the act of creation to the purpose of that act. That is, the object created (e.g., a dome in the water, lights in the sky, humanity in the image of God) is syntactically connected to the purpose for its creation (e.g., to separate water from water, to mark seasons and give light to the earth, to have dominion). So strong is the syntax of the narrative that Towner states the Hebrew can justifiably be translated “God created X (the object created) *so that* Y (the purpose for its creation).” Hence, God creates humans in God’s image *so that* they might have dominion over all nonhuman life on the earth. Middleton notes, “The syntax . . . points to ‘rule’ as the *purpose*, not simply the consequence or result, of the *imago Dei*” (p. 53, emphasis original). In this sense, Middleton writes, dominion is “a necessary and inseparable purpose and hence virtually constitutive of the image” (p. 55).

Aside from the arguments from within the text of Genesis 1, scholars also turn to other biblical texts such as Psalm 8 (Middleton, 2005). In addition, they examine the cultural milieu of the ancient Near East in which the authors and redactors completed Genesis 1. In other texts from that sociohistorical context, an image of a god served as the mediator through which that god accomplished his or her work on earth (Middleton, 2005; Towner, 2005).

For the purpose of this project, the importance of the functional interpretation of the *imago* is that it balances the focus on the term as an ascription of a unique status (“let us make humankind in our image”) and as an ascription of a unique calling (so that they may “have dominion” over all creatures). In the words of E. Wolde (1995), “the human being is created to make God present in his creation” (p. 28). Hence, the *imago* is both status (uniquely human) and responsibility (making God present to the nonhuman creation). As T. Fretheim (2005) states, “human beings are not only created *in* the image of God (this is who they are); they are also created *to be* the image of God (this is their role in the world)” (p. 52; see also Towner, 2005, p. 352). The ethical import of this view arises with a consideration of the God whose image humanity bears (see Fretheim, 2005, p. 48), which I explore as this article continues. For now, it will suffice to consider Towner’s poignant question: “When the other creatures look upon *adam* as a royal or even god-like figure, what will they see? A tyrant, an exterminator, a satanic figure? Or will they experience the ruling hand of *adam* as something as tender and gentle as that of their Creator?” (Towner, 2005, p. 348). Humans bear the image of a particular God, the God who, in the words of C. M. LaCugna (1993), is “God for us,” even to the point of self-sacrifice. Likewise, our unique identity of “humans in the image of God” demands that we act as “humans for creation,” even to the point of self-sacrifice.

The functional interpretation of the *imago*, though not as historically normative as the substantive view, is not without representation outside of biblical scholarship. Even in early Christianity, the view is evident (though admittedly, less evident are the ethical implications one might draw). For instance, in *Demonstration* 11, Irenaeus states that

humanity is “free and self-controlled, being made by God for this end, that he might rule all those things that were upon the earth” (Mackenzie, 2002). Likewise, Gregory of Nyssa (trans. 1988), in his work *On the Making of Man*, frequently attaches the royal function of humanity to his substantive understanding of the *imago*.

Moreover, many Orthodox theologians recognize the functional dimension of the *imago* and even draw out ethical implications of this view. For instance, N. V. Harrison (2008) claims that the image of God constitutes a “responsibility to care for animals and for the natural world” (p. 86). The *imago* “enables the human person to become a *mediator*” (p. 86) between God and animals. Similarly, K. Ware (1999) claims that, based on the *imago*, Greek Christians “believe in a hierarchal universe, in which humans—by virtue of their creation in the divine image—have ‘dominion’ over the animals (Gen. 1:27–18)” (p. 64). Ware immediately qualifies this view by stating that dominion does not sanction exploitation, but on the contrary demands that humans “reflect the loving kindness and compassion of God” (p. 64). Importantly, both Harrison and Ware draw upon Maximus the Confessor for their conclusions.

By way of summation, the *imago* is more than an ascription of status. It is a unique calling for humans to bear the responsibility of representing a loving God in the created order. Hence, the difference between humans and animals constituted by the image of God establishes a responsibility of the former toward the latter. Another Christian thinker to take this view of the *imago*—and further develop its ethical consequences—is Andrew Linzey (2009). It is to his work that I now turn.

Andrew Linzey’s Animal Theology

Andrew Linzey is a Christian advocate for animal rights and the director of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics. His works are extensive and his approaches broad. Here, I focus mainly on his theological and philosophical foundations for animal rights as developed in *Animal Theology* (1994) and *Why Animal Suffering Matters* (2009). In particular, I am interested in his affirmation of the difference between humans and animals as a positive argument for animal rights.

The first chapter of Linzey’s *Why Animal Suffering Matters* (2009) explores the common arguments used to exclude animals from moral concern. These arguments all use the same foundational approach: establish a boundary that both constitutes moral concern and is uniquely human. In this approach, the difference between humans and animals ascribes ethical concern to the prior and denies it to the latter. Linzey’s approach is not to deny that there are differences between humans and animals. In fact, he accepts the commonly proposed differences for the sake of argument. His goal is to show that “the moral conclusions drawn from these differences are almost entirely mistaken and that another, completely opposed, conclusion follows” (Linzey, 2009, p. 12).

The six differences Linzey explores are interrelated. Theologically, they all fall under the general category of the image of God, which is the final difference Linzey considers. The first five differences are as follows: animals are natural slaves via a cosmic hierarchy; animals lack rationality; animals lack the communicative abilities proper to humans;

animals are not moral agents; and animals do not have immortal (rational) souls (Linzey, 2009, pp. 11–29). As I have already established, advocates of the substantive interpretation of the *imago* frequently posit rationality and freedom of will as constitutive elements of the image of God. These formal features establish how the human creature is *like* God and *unlike* other creatures. Linzey notes that what follows from this distinction—which is the fundamental theological distinction—is that animals, for their lack of these elements, are naturally slaves. Their lack of reason (or, theologically, a rational soul) makes them both unable to communicate and amoral agents. These differences may be theologically summarized as follows: Because animals lack substantive elements indicative of the *imago Dei*, they are excluded from the category of moral concern, which is predicated on those elements.

Linzey effectively takes each differentiation and reverses the conclusion regarding moral concern. Concerning the position that animals are natural slaves, he states, “Behaving morally sometimes involves acting contrary to what we perceive in nature” (Linzey, 2009, p. 15). Herein is a critique Linzey highlighted in his earlier work, *Animal Theology*, in which he notes that too often the appeal to natural law becomes nothing short of an appeal to naturalism (Linzey, 1995, p. 82). That is, we justify our utilitarian view of nature with a religious foundation that derives from the “red in tooth and claw” of nature. Of course, we are careful to avoid such applications to God’s relationship to humans. But one can fairly ask, if the hierarchy in creation establishes that animals are naturally the slaves of humans, why are humans not—as they are portrayed in Mesopotamian myths—slaves of God?

Concerning the rationality of animals, Linzey (2009) notes, “If it is true that animals are non-rational, then it follows that they have no means of rationalising their deprivation, boredom, and frustration” (p. 17). Hence, the lack of rationality may actually *increase* animal suffering in some cases, not diminish it. Concerning the claim that animals lack the ability to communicate as humans do, Linzey responds that this “deficiency” renders animals powerless to give consent to the suffering that humans cause them. For this reason, “our responsibility [to animals] increases as we recognise” their inability to communicate to us. Concerning the claim that animals are not moral agents, Linzey states, “If humans are morally superior (in the sense that we are moral agents), it more reasonably follows that our superiority should, in part at least, consist in acknowledging duties to animals that they cannot acknowledge to us” (p. 23). Furthermore, if animals are amoral, they cannot do anything to deserve suffering and cannot be morally corrected by suffering. Hence, “it is the unmerited and undeserved nature of their [amoral animals] suffering, and our ability to justify it by most traditional reasoning, that strengthens the case for animals” (p. 24). Concerning the position that animals lack a rational and eternal soul, Linzey replies, “If animals are not going to be recompensed in some future life for the suffering that they have had to undergo in the present, it follows that their current suffering acquires even greater significance” (p. 27). Finally, concerning the position that animals lack the image of God—which is the umbrella position, theologically—Linzey casts his lot with the functional interpretation I delineated previously.

The significance of Linzey's argument is that it maintains the distinction between humans and animals but uses these very distinctions to dismantle the justification of human exploitation of animals. He delineates this view also in his earlier work, *Animal Theology*. Here, Linzey (1995) argues that the kenotic love of God establishes a "generosity paradigm" in which "the obligation is always and everywhere on the 'higher' to sacrifice for the 'lower'; for the strong, powerful and rich to give to those who are vulnerable, poor and powerless" (p. 32). Hence, Linzey opposes the "difference-finding tendency" of the West, which serves to maintain the border between humanity and animals in order to justify exploitation of the latter by the former (p. 47). As a corrective question, Linzey asks, "If the omnipotence and power of God is properly expressed in the form of *katabasis*, humility and self-sacrifice, why should this model not properly extend to our relations with creation as a whole and animals in particular?" (p. 71). In this model,

the uniqueness of humanity consists in its ability to become the servant species. To exercise its full humanity as co-participants and co-workers with God in the redemption of the world. This view challenges the traditional notions that the world was made simply for human use or pleasure, that its purpose consists in serving the human species, or that the world exists largely in an instrumentalist relationship to human beings. (p. 57)

Linzey's view constitutes the heart of the "third position." In a manner similar to Linzey and the advocates of the functional reading of the *imago*, we can maintain that humans bear a special status in the created order—theologically signified by the image of God—and simultaneously maintain that God grants this status *for the welfare of those without that status*. The unique status of humans theologically leads to the ascription of status for nonhumans, for human beings are special (or separate) in the same way that priests are special (or separate): to mediate the blessings of God to those outside of our status (see Linzey, 1995).

Other Scholars and the Third Option

Although Linzey provides one of the clearest delineations of the third position and consistently draws out the ethical implications of that view, many others have similar views. Space does not permit a lengthy engagement, but I would be remiss not to mention a few of these others. My concern here is not specific ethical praxis, but theological foundation.

As I have already mentioned, LaCugna (1993) argues that God is "God for us" even to the point of self-sacrifice. It is, in a sense, God's very nature to engage in kenosis (self-emptying) for the sake of the created order. Maintaining this view of the trinitarian God (as opposed to the view of God the Father as a monarchial and unitarian despot), Christians can avoid "deeply harmful attitudes," which, LaCugna states, "include the ruination of the earth and the destruction of 'lesser' creatures that the human being presumes to be subordinate to itself" (p. 396). The redeemed person, in LaCugna's framework, "is free for hospitality to the stranger, nonviolence toward the oppressor, and benevolent regard for every single creature that exists" (p. 290). In short, becoming like God means becoming loving and other-affirming, even when (perhaps especially when) that "other" is perceived as "lesser."

In her book *The Ethics of Animal Experimentation*, D. Yarri (2005) suggests a simple theological progression for ethical practice. She states, “If dominion means that God’s exercise of power and influence toward all creation is mediated through human beings, then this dominion must be a reflection of the character of God” (p. 115). Furthermore, “if, as in Christian theology, God is conceived of as loving and compassionate, then the view of dominion as benevolent stewardship seems a better understanding of the term than despotism” (p. 116). The syllogism runs as follows: (1) Humans ought to exercise dominion in light of God’s exercise of dominion. (2) God’s exercise of dominion is loving and compassionate. (3) Therefore, “at the very least, humans should attempt to demonstrate the care and concern toward God’s creatures that God has toward them” (p. 116).

Norm Phelps (2002) takes a similar position when he considers the image and likeness of God. Phelps aims to avoid the “aristocracy theory” in which humans are “the aristocrats of the universe whose privileged position in the divine scheme entitles us to reduce the rest of the earth’s population to serfdom” (p. 45). As a corrective, Phelps follows those such as Linzey who argue that dominion is most properly understood as the catalyst for service. In particular, Phelps draws an example from government, highlighting the point of my introductory quote from *Braveheart*, writing, “We expect government officials to use their authority for the benefit of the people, not to satisfy their own lust for wealth or power” (p. 51). Hence, the God-given status of humanity—a heightened status—does not justify harming those without that status in order to maintain it. In fact, status demands just the opposite: mediating well-being for those without it.

Another extremely important theologian I would like briefly to consider is Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann (1993) clearly challenges the impassibility of God (i.e., the idea that God is unable to suffer) in favor of a God who—as three persons in eternal perichoretic communion—is willing to experience death for the sake of a cosmic redemption (Moltmann, 1993). This cosmic redemption is nothing short of the entire creation (including animals!) restored and transformed (Moltmann, 1996). Given these views, in conjunction with Moltmann’s political theology in which hope draws the eschaton into the present, he claims the human response is a deep “reverence for life” (a phrase drawn from Albert Schweitzer). Concerning this ethic, Moltmann (1992) states,

Reverence for life always begins with respect for weaker life, vulnerable life. In the world of human beings this means the poor, the sick, and the defenseless. The same is true for the world of nature. The weaker plant and animal species are the first creatures to be threatened by extinction. Reverence for life must apply to them first of all, since they require protection. (p. 172)

Hence, the act of protection reflects the eschatological hope of God’s movement toward creation in a cosmically redemptive act.

I could consider numerous other scholars. For example, although Schweitzer (2002) proposed his ethic of “reverence for life” as a means of bridging the distance between human life and all other life forms (pp. 67–68), he also considered human beings unique

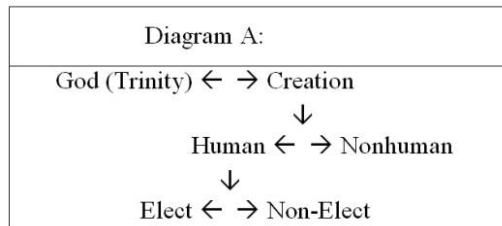
in their capacity to extend reverence for their own lives to all life (Schweitzer, 1946; see also Barsam, 2008). Likewise, in a well-reasoned article, S. Hauerwas and J. Berkman (1992) argue that “the only significant theological difference between humans and animals lies in God’s giving humans a unique *purpose*” (p. 199). The brilliance of the argument is similar to all the aforementioned positions: humanity’s unique status (what makes us different from animals) is inseparably connected to humanity’s unique function, which is to draw “all flesh” toward a common *telos* in God. In short, the difference (status and function) is ultimately given by God for the sake of commonality (*telos*).

All of these positions, including that of advocates for a functional reading of the *imago Dei* and Linzey, are nuanced. My inclusion of these names is simply to note the theological foundation for a third position regarding status and responsibility, not to suggest all of these thinkers agree on the ethical implications of this foundation. With a cursory introduction to the foundation for the third position in place, I would like to contribute to it a humble reflection.

EXPLORING DIFFERENTIATION IN THEOLOGY

Having delineated the third view, I now seek to develop further the theological case that supports it. To accomplish this development, I explore the theme of differentiation in systematic theology in order to establish a paradigm of how we ought to view “greater-than-ness.” My approach here is not novel. I merely expand on what thinkers such as Linzey have already argued.

The issue of differentiation is not unique to the border between human and animals. Both in scripture and in systematic theology, the theme of differentiation arises. Unless they are pantheists, theologians posit some categorical differentiation between God and creation. Likewise, the concepts of covenant and election create categories of “us” and “them,” in and out, elect and non-elect. Given these points, one way to think of systematic theology is as a categorization of reality and an exploration of the exchanges between those categories. Moving from broad to narrow, the categories would be as follows: overall, God and creation; within creation, human and nonhuman; within humanity, elect and non-elect.¹ Diagram A helps to clarify my point. I have separated the differentiated categories by arrows, indicating an interaction between the categories. I would like to consider two of these examples of differentiation.



God and Creation

First, what is the meaning of the differentiation between God and creation? The triune God is certainly categorically greater than anything in the created order. But when we consider the revelation of God in scripture, how is God's "greater-than-ness" expressed?

Unlike the gods of certain Mesopotamian narratives, God does not create humanity to be slaves in order to ensure divine ease (Fretheim, 2005; Middleton, 2005). For instance, in the Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk creates human beings after a war among the gods. The purpose of humanity's creation is explicit in the words of Marduk: "He shall be charged with the service of the gods that they may be at ease!" (Wolde, 1995, p. 193). Unlike Genesis, the language to describe the relationship between the gods and humanity is that of a master and slaves. The God of Genesis 1 is not the utilitarian enslaver of the *Enuma Elish*. On the contrary, God is self-sacrificing and loving. Elohim (God) does not enslave; Elohim empowers.

Nor is God unmoved by the plight of the created order. In the flood narrative, God is "grieved" by the state of creation (Genesis 6:6). The Hebrew word for "grieved" in this verse is *'âtsab*, which is the root for the word used to describe Eve's pain in childbirth and Adam's struggle to work the earth in Genesis 3:16–17 (*'itstsâbôn*). This etymological connection yields a theological significance: God experiences the suffering of the created order (Brueggemann, 1982). In Exodus, God tells Moses that he has "known" Israel's suffering. Here, the Hebrew word is *yada'*, which in this context seems to denote a knowledge through experience or acquaintance (Fretheim, 1991).

Similarly, the prophet Hosea offers a startlingly anthropomorphic image of God. The book bearing his name records a message God gave to Hosea:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them . . . How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. (Hosea 11:1–4, 8–9)

Hosea portrays God as one who does not destroy those beneath God. How does God deal with those categorically lesser than God is? God leads them "with cords of human kindness." God bends down to care for them.

These passages portray a God who is affected by the sufferings of the created order. Furthermore, God is interested in caring for those of lower status. God knows the suffering of creation and acts on its behalf. One is reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1967): "Only the suffering God can help" (p. 361).

This portrait of God only intensifies with the New Testament. Christ weeps over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–44) and at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:32–36). Christ reveals

the glory of God by dying on the cross in order to draw all things to him (John 12:20–36). Considering the previously quoted passages from the Old Testament, Christ’s experience of grief and his drive to engage in self-sacrifice on behalf of those of lesser status do not stand in contrast to his divinity. As Moltmann (1993) states,

when the crucified Jesus is called the “image of the invisible God,” the meaning is that *this* is God, and God is like *this*. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity. (p. 205)

Here, we ought to make a brief note about the famous “Christ Hymn” from Philippians 2:6–11. Paul exhorts the church at Philippi to follow the example of Christ, “who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:6–7; New International Version).² Concerning this passage, Gordon D. Fee (1995) states that “God-likeness, contrary to common understanding, did *not* mean for Christ to be a ‘grasping, seizing’ being, as it would for the ‘gods’ and ‘lords’ whom the Philippians had previously known” (p. 208). Jesus does not consider his divine status as something to be exploited, and this view of status reveals his divine identity. As Markus Bockmuehl (1998) states, “Christ’s incarnation and voluntary death on the cross . . . were the way in which he showed that ‘being equal to God’ was for him not a possession to be exploited for selfish ends; instead, it led him to deprive himself and serve others” (p. 133). For Christ, identity was not a status to be maintained at the expense of others with a lesser status. On the contrary, the identity of Christ moved him to sacrifice his status on behalf of others. In short, for Christ, identity meant both status and responsibility, and the former constituted the latter.

These passages reveal that, in both the Old and New Testaments, God appears as one who does not hoard status at the expense of the cosmos. Instead, God repeatedly exercises status entailed by identity—God’s categorical “greater-than-ness”—as a means to take responsibility for those excluded from God’s identity. As Linzey (2009) states, “the God who is (in Thomist terms) the ‘highest’ and most ‘perfect’ of all expresses divine power not in lording over ‘inferior’ creatures, but in taking human form and suffering and dying for their sakes” (p. 15). This view of status is also evident in Christ’s teaching: “The greatest among you will be your servant” (Matthew 23:11). In this sense, God sets the following example concerning identity: any special status understood as categorical “greater-than-ness” entailed by identity ought to serve as a catalyst for care and self-sacrifice, not as a justification for exploitation.

Elect and Non-Elect

For a second consideration, what is the meaning of the differentiation between elect and non-elect? At the outset of the Abrahamic narrative, God states to Abram, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing . . . in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2–3).

The promise God makes to Abram is not simply for the ascription of a special status. It includes such an ascription (Abram will become a great nation), but status is not simply an end. Under the umbrella of identity, status is married to function—to responsibility (as a great nation, Abram's descendents will be a blessing to all families on the earth). Abraham's status of "greater-than-ness," which constitutes his unique identity, also constitutes a unique responsibility—a specific calling. As Terrance Fretheim (2006) states, the "divine purpose for Israel is not simply for the sake of the chosen; God has God's world in focus. God's exclusive move in choosing Abraham/Israel is not an end in itself, but a divine strategy for the sake of a maximally inclusive end" (p.103). In this sense, the connection between identity and responsibility continues with the theme of covenant. The call to be God's holy people is not a call to be different strictly for the sake of a status derived from identity; rather, it is the call to be different in order to make a difference for those without that status.

Numerous narratives in scripture evince God's displeasure when someone attempts to grasp or exploit an identity to the exclusion of responsibility. For instance, in the book of Jonah, God calls the Israelite prophet to a ministry in the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. God calls Jonah, a member of the people of God, to be an instrument of salvation for those who are not the people of God. Jonah refuses. He is not interested in including those outside his border—that is, those who are not the elect—in the benefits that are indicative of his own identity.³ He would rather be an instrument of destruction for Nineveh. For Jonah, the inhabitants of that foreign city do not deserve the mercy of God. His actions are in stark contrast to the Abrahamic promise of Genesis 12. Jonah refuses to mediate God's blessing to Nineveh. He clings to the status entailed by his unique identity while simultaneously denying the responsibility entailed by it. That is, he patrols the border around his identity only to maintain his special status.

After Nineveh repents and God spares the entire city, Jonah becomes angry with God. The book ends with God's question to Jonah: "Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" God's question is nothing short of a reprimand for hoarding identity to the exclusion of responsibility. Jesus provides a similar reprimand in the gospel according to John: "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did" (John 8:39b). I would like to offer the following paraphrase of this passage: "If you want to participate in the status entailed by Abraham's identity, then take up Abraham's responsibility." In short, for the elect, "greater-than-ness" is both blessing and burden.

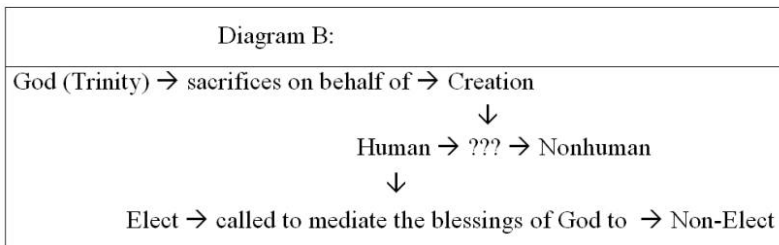
These considerations reveal that God calls the elect to follow the example God provides in the differentiation between God and creation. God provides the elect with a special status and calls them not to hoard that status at the expense of the non-elect. Any categorical "greater-than-ness" entailed by the Abrahamic promise is inseparable from the responsibility entailed by it. Thus, Jonah's failure was fundamentally a failure to mediate the status benefits (God's mercy) entailed by the identity of the elect (Israel) to the non-elect (Nineveh).

THE THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM OF DIFFERENTIATION AS A FOUNDATION FOR MORAL CONCERN

How do these findings affirm the third option in addressing the difference between humans and nonhumans in an age of ecological awareness? I made three major differentiations earlier in this article: God and creation, human and nonhuman, elect and non-elect. In the first division, the party endowed with an identity of “greater-than-ness” takes up a responsibility to care for those without that identity.⁴ God experienced grief and ultimately death for the sake of the creation. In the third division, God calls the party endowed with an identity of “greater-than-ness” to follow God’s example. That is, God calls the elect to mediate blessing to the non-elect—even when this calling entails self-sacrifice. Diagram B bears a similar structure to diagram A, provided earlier. Note the parallelism in the interaction between the categories.

This parallelism establishes a theological paradigm of differentiation (very similar to Linzey’s generosity paradigm) that ought to apply also to the division between humans and nonhumans.⁵ Too often, humans seek to maintain the distinction between humans and animals strictly for the sake of human benefit. The disparity becomes an excuse for exploitive domination. It provides rights to humans but precludes providing them for animals. This approach commits the error of Jonah in that it divorces status from responsibility. If humans bear a categorical “greater-than-ness” that separates us from the rest of the created order, that status ought to serve as a catalyst for care and self-sacrifice on behalf of the rest of creation, not as a justification for utilitarian mistreatment. As Linzey (2009) states, “St. Thomas was not entirely wrong in seeing a kind of implicit moral hierarchy in the world—except that he misunderstood it at its most important and relevant point, namely, that the ‘higher’ should serve the ‘lower,’ rather than the reverse” (p. 29).

This theological paradigm of differentiation contributes to the Christian foundation for a discussion of how humans ought to ethically engage animals. Much of the discussion concerning the extension of ethical concern to animals has focused on whether animals can be included in a category that predicates a status worthy of certain benefits. This approach begins with a view in which identity is fundamentally about status. The only way animals can receive a moral status akin to humans is if they fall within the boundaries of identity that predicate moral concern. Can they reason? Are they self-aware? Can they communicate? Can they suffer?⁶ Do they bear the image of God? It is not that these



questions are unimportant. But they do not, based on the theological paradigm of differentiation, address the fundamental Christian issue of moral concern.

For Christian theology, the important question is not whether humans differ from animals in degree or essence. The important question is, *why* are humans different than animals? Based on the theological paradigm of differentiation, the justification for an attitude of love and self-sacrifice toward animals is not dependent on their inclusion in a common category with humans. In fact, it is the difference between humans and animals that provides the foundation for moral concern for animals. For humans, the foundation to care about other creatures is not based on whether *they* bear the image of God; it is based on the fact that *we* bear the image of God. The call to sacrifice on behalf of other creatures is not predicated on whether they can understand that call; it is predicated on the fact that we understand that call. In short, it is the status entailed by our uniquely human identity that awakens the responsibility entailed by that identity.

CONCLUSION

If we patrol the borders between humans and animals strictly for the sake of maintaining the status benefits of a uniquely human identity, we desecrate the example of God and fail to do justice to God's image, which we bear. We grasp status to the exclusion of responsibility. We bear the image of God and regard that status as something to be exploited. To avoid this failure, the desire to keep animals "in their place" must simultaneously be a calling for humans to take *our place*—not simply for the sake of perpetuating the benefits of a special identity, but also for the sake of caring for those with a "lesser status" and mediating the blessings of God to them. Perhaps we ought to consider a cosmically oriented Golden Rule: Do unto those who are "lesser" than you as you would have those who are "greater" than you do unto you. Even more to the point: Treat animals as you would have God treat you. This axiom provides the proper outlook for a consideration of our uniquely human identity.

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Notes

1. I could also make a division within creation between spiritual and physical beings. Traditionally, humans inhabit both categories. Angels completely inhabit the former, and animals completely inhabit the latter. I forgo this level of distinction in this paper. However, as I subsequently point out, the presence of angelic beings in the created order only strengthens the point I hope to make.

2. The reason I use the New International Version for this quotation is that I believe it more accurately reflects the Greek text. The New Revised Standard Version, for instance, adds the word "though" to this verse, suggesting that *although* Jesus "was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." But there is no word for "though" in the Greek. The addition of the word might seem implicit, as the verse appears to be contrast-

ing who or what Jesus was (the form of God) and how Jesus viewed what or who he was (not exploitatively). But the addition of “though” suggests that Jesus’s kenotic action is in contrast to God, and the syntax in Greek (*hos en morphe*) permits a strong possibility for reading the text as thus: *Because* “Jesus was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.” This translation suggests that kenosis is constitutive of divinity. That is, because Jesus was God, he engaged in kenotic love. The translation depends on how one translates the participle at the beginning of verse 6.

3. The interpretation I offer of the book of Jonah is well-represented in biblical scholarship. However, it is also contested as to whether or not the issue of inclusion of the non-elect is the central didactic emphasis of the narrative. For counterexamples to my interpretation, see Simon 1999, Bolin 1997. Though I do believe Jonah presents an anti-exclusivist view, I want to emphasize that my reading is not intended in any sense to carry an anti-Semitic connotation (see Bolin 1997, 28–29, 58).

4. I offer this brief consideration in the case of angels. The distinction and interaction between God and angels may or may not support my argument. However, since this exchange is not clearly delineated in scripture or theology, I move instead to the distinction and exchange between humans and angels. Psalm 8 states that God created humanity “a little lower than *elohim*” (Psalm 8:5). The NRSV translates *elohim* as “God,” which is consistent with the use of the word in Genesis 1: “In the beginning . . . *elohim* created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). The Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, however, renders *elohim* not as *theos* but rather as *angelous*. The author of Hebrews quotes the Psalm using *angelous* as well: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels” (Hebrews 2:7). If *angelous* is accepted as a viable reading of the Psalm, then angels are above humans (at least temporarily) in the hierarchy of creation. Yet angels frequently serve as aids to humanity, not as exploitative agents. In fact, when spiritual beings exploit humans for their own benefit, we refer to such activity as demonic. Interestingly, Linzey (2009) finds just such a reading in a sermon from J. H. Newman, who refers to harming harmless animals as “satanic” (see Linzey, 2009, p. 39). Likewise, Towner (2005) asks whether, when nonhuman creatures experience the dominion of humanity, they experience it as that of God or something satanic (p. 348). Finally, Phelps (2002) states, “Suppose for a moment that the angels adopted the aristocracy theory and treated us the way we treat animals. Would we believe that they were reflecting the image of a loving, compassionate God? Would we believe that they were angels or demons? Would they, in fact, be angels or demons?” (p. 49). The question is certainly rhetorical, and I think the clear answer adds another dimension to the paradigm of differentiation; namely, angels do not lord a higher hierarchal position over humanity as a means of exploitation. When they do, we traditionally view that activity as demonic.

5. I employ a hermeneutical key to establish this paradigm. I am aware that the biblical witness is not without ambiguity in the categorical relationships I have explored. According to the scriptures, God floods the created order, commands the elect to slaughter the non-elect in holy war, and proscribes the slaughter of animals in sacrifice. What I attempt to retrieve in this section is redemptive direction of the drama of salvation.

6. For many scholars, the question of sentience provides the proper border for moral concern. This border leaves ambiguous the ethical engagement of other creatures, such as insects, and other forms of life, such as plants. For instance, Linzey (1995) addresses mainly the ethical concern for sentient beings. He states, “Lettuce do not possess responding capacities for self-awareness and are therefore not capable of being injured as we know to be true in the case of

mammals and humans to say the least” (p. 74; cf. Linzey, 2009, p. 137). Concerning the “grey areas,” for instance, “slugs, snails, earthworms and the like,” Linzey (1995) states, “I would oppose the gratuitous slaughter of any of them” (p. 74), but he leaves the question of their sentience unanswered. Similarly, Phelps (2002) states, “It is the sentience of the living soul that dictates how we ought to treat our fellow creatures. *All who share with us the divine spark of conscious life, given by God at creation, are our neighbors*” (p. 42; emphasis original). Although I am concerned about drawing such borders as a way of marking where ethical concern for the well-being of life ends, I fully appreciate the position of Linzey and Phelps as a means of limiting our focus. Such concentrated focus is certainly necessary. Perhaps another approach might be to use the line of sentience as a border for a *particular kind* of concern for well-being. That is, the way we care about the well-being of nonsentient life is different than the way we care about sentient life because such care is need-based. But this position does not mean—nor do I think Linzey or Phelps would make this claim—that we do not care about nonsentient forms of life (or those grey areas about which we are not certain) for their own sake. In this sense, the theological paradigm of differentiation would still apply, but its specific application would be contingent on factors such as sentience.

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