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## On David Bentley Hart and the Peaceable Kingdom

MARY TAYLOR

*In the end, it comes down to metaphysics (as all things do).[i]*

*~David Bentley Hart*

### Introduction

There was quite a kerfuffle a couple of years ago over whether or not Pope Francis said that animals went to heaven, a rumor that went viral following a *New York Times* story headlined “Dogs in Heaven? Pope Francis Leaves Pearly Gates Open.” That story revived an earlier one, in which St. John Paul II was thought to have said that “the animals possess a soul...man, created by the hand of God, is identical with all other living creatures.” [ii] The two points—animals in heaven and animal souls—are clearly related, for what David Bentley Hart calls the “argument against puppies in paradise” follows from premises he rejects: that “the final vision of God must be entirely an experience of the rational intellect, and that animals entirely lack a rational soul.” [iii]

We will return to those premises. First, though, we must note that both popes were wildly misrepresented. An Italian newspaper had claimed that it was Paul VI who said, “One day we will see again our animals in the eternity of Christ,” [iv] not Pope Francis, and the *Times* retracted their story, though by then it was too late. And John Paul II did not say that man was “identical with” but rather “appears in solidarity with” other living beings. Psalm 104, he noted, “poses no distinction between men and animals,” but that was in regard to their creation, the “breath of life,” which all creatures receive from God, and without which they die; it does not follow that they have souls that are “identical” to human souls. [v] Both popes have taken great pains to insist on Catholic teaching that the human person is unique in all creation, made, like nothing else, in both the image and likeness of God.

## The Question Remains

Still, questions about the nature and destiny of animals persist. An example drawn from my own experience as a very young child might give a hint as to why. I had a very happy childhood—God’s in His heaven and all’s right with the world, as Browning said. My nightly prayers were an Our Father or a “Now I lay me down to sleep” followed by “God bless mommy, God bless daddy,” and perhaps a request for a specific birthday or Christmas present. That is, until the day I lost my cats. We had too many pets in the house, and so my beloved Demon and her three gray kittens, Dusty, Misty, and Smoky, had to go.

I was overwhelmed by loss and grief, two things I had never known before. Some would see this as childish sentimentalism, but no mere sentimentalism could have had such profound effects. The formerly opaque Garden of Eden story suddenly split wide open and the light of meaning poured out: all was *not* right with the world; the world was somehow bent, broken in some mysterious way. At that moment, my prayer life radically changed; I intuited that God was neither a magician nor a cosmic vending machine dispensing impossible wishes, so I did not pray for my cats’ return. Instead, I understood suddenly that prayer was for others’ *best good*, and I poured out my heart (for years!) that my cats would be warm, safe, fed, loved by their new families, whoever they might be.

I also understood, with innumerable others who have loved their cats or dogs or other animals, that the bonds I had with my pets were special. I did not know the terms, but I knew that the relationships were not merely utilitarian; they were forms of giving that were mutual and reciprocal, flowing from an excess of love rather than simply a need or lack. Of course this was at the time very simple and inchoate, but it was my first intuition of the Theology of Gift, that every good gift reflected the abundance of God’s self-giving love.

There were losses that followed, greater by many orders of magnitude, but this was the first, as it is for many children. Adults might be tempted to say, “Pets die. Get over it,” but children find it hard to believe that the destiny of their cats or dogs or horses is simply decay, and that their purpose is little more than an instrumentalist means of teaching responsibility. Reality intrudes: the grief is very real, the love of an animal may be a child’s first real love outside of himself and his parents, and the thought of heaven without the beloved companion prompts many to say, “Then I don’t want to go there!” (One thinks of the parable of the father who, when asked for bread, does not give his child a stone.) None of this constitutes an argument, of course, but it does give a glimpse as to why the question won’t go away.

## The Minor Premise

We now return to Hart’s rejected premises, beginning with the minor premise. The classical/medieval picture of living things is that of the vegetal, animal, and rational souls.<sup>[vi]</sup> Hart says if one affirms “a particularly crude version of the...picture of animate life,” holding that the only way to guarantee human uniqueness is to segregate the three into “strictly impermeable compartments,” with an “impenetrable partition” between rational and animal soul, then it follows that

*one cannot regard the hierarchy of the nutritive, sensitive, and intellectual capacities of a rational being as anything but a composite series of suppositions and superpositions; then the rational soul is simply “something other” than all other aspects of natural life, inhabiting the physical world like a Cartesian ghost or angelic metempsychosis (an unsettlingly gnostic picture). (VME)*

Poisoned by centuries of dualism, some people can imagine nothing other than this “gnostic picture.” The soul seems to be something extra, something “added on,” and there is no intrinsic relationship between physical nature and rational nature, with animals excluded from the latter. It is understandable, Hart thinks, that some Christians adopt this view; they fear that by allowing animals even the most elementary participation in rationality, or perhaps any consciousness at all, we make humans indistinguishable from animals.

So, “in order to affirm the uniqueness of humanity within organic nature, as well as the unique moral obligations it entails, we... reject all evidence of intentionality, reason, or affection in animals as something only apparently purposive” (VME). That is, we make animals at worst into mechanisms, or at best into creatures that operate only by “instinct,” which Hart calls “the most egregiously vapid of philosophical naturalism’s mystifications” (VME). However, trying to avoid the reduction of persons, we open the door to that very reduction: “Concede that a dog’s love is really only ‘instinct’ masquerading as love and, surprisingly, you will find you cannot prevent others from concluding that human love is just a more elaborate variation of the same phenomenon” (VME).

This is, of course, precisely what happened: an “incessant torrent of biological and bioethical theory [has been] extended to human behavior as well” (VME), with reductive explanations of all human acts, including love, to “selfish genes” or the release of oxytocin in the brain, or some other evolution-generated reductive obfuscation. In the end, dualism does not protect the person, but soon collapses into the identity it was meant to avoid.

For John Paul II, animals are like humans in some ways (metaphysically in the participation in the gift of *esse*, being, and theologically in the shared love God has for all His creation) and unlike them in others (such as the gift of the Holy Spirit, breathed into the Apostles after the Resurrection). Hence there is, as we quoted above, a “solidarity,” not absolute difference or absolute identity, between them.<sup>[vii]</sup> For those Catholics worried about this dilemma of identity and difference, an elucidation of the issue comes down to three words: Fourth Lateran Council. That Council famously said, “Between creator and creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them.”<sup>[viii]</sup> This is the heart of analogical thinking (in the ontological, not rhetorical, sense) rather than univocity or equivocity.<sup>[ix]</sup> Can this *analogy*—applied originally to the relation between persons and God—be applied to the one between persons and animals, so as to preserve both the unique status of persons and their deep and intrinsic relationship to animals?

Our analogical similarity with animals, says Hart, is readily apparent:

*Our experience of the animals with whom we live is that they exhibit behaviors similar to many of our own; that those behaviors clearly seem to be signs of emotional and mental qualities familiar to us from our own knowledge of ourselves; that animals possess distinctive individual traits, characteristics that are irreducibly personal (even if we feel obliged to recoil from that word on metaphysical principle), their own peculiar affections and aversions, expectations and fears; that many beasts command certain rational skills; and that all of this makes some kind of natural appeal to our moral sense... It seems a cruel impoverishment of our speculative and moral imaginations to dismiss it all as a process of biomechanical stimulus and response, only accidentally resembling the workings of human consciousness.[x]*

At the same time, Hart acknowledges the “vast gulf—cognitive, moral, creative, imaginative” that separates humans from animals, “the (unmistakably) exceptional nature of human beings” (VME). And yet, acknowledgement of animal consciousness (nearly impossible to deny) does not threaten that gulf, any more than the acknowledgement of human love, justice, mercy, freedom and reason threaten the ever-greater, infinitely greater, nature of God’s.

### **The Major Premise**

We return now to the major premise. From the observation that animals are indeed conscious, and that we can understand their consciousness analogously with ours (never forgetting the “greater distance”), it still does not follow that animals “go to heaven,” if heaven is defined as a vision of God which is “essentially ratiocinative,” with God as the “Ultimate Concept... indissolubly bound to a capacity for abstraction” (*Romans*).

But is that definition adequate? Surely not, says Hart. Again, Christians are not gnostics. If we truly believe in the resurrection of the body—the glorified bodies of the new creation—rather than the continued existence of disembodied souls, the beatific vision “must be at once rational, sensible, social, imaginative, creative, and cosmic.” Referencing Nicholas of Cusa, Hart says that creatures see God

*precisely by seeing God’s act of seeing all things, and so by participation in God’s knowledge of himself in his Logos....and this must entail, for embodied finite creatures, seeing everything that lives and dwells and is*

*held together in the Logos in its final glory, the whole fabric of creation transfigured and finally made complete. (Romans)*

According to Revelation, the *whole fabric of creation will be transfigured*. In the fullness of time, all things on heaven *and on earth* will be united in Christ (Ephesians 1:10). Did God simply create rational human souls, with the rest of creation as an inert and temporary backdrop? Does the creation simply melt away into nothingness, like a Maya-like illusion or dream from which we must awaken? If God did not create a world that has a “dependent but real liberty of its own,” says Hart, then He is simply “the totality of all that is and all that happens; there is no creation but only an oddly pantheistic expression of God’s unadulterated power.” [xi] According to what is “literally the only eschatology” to be found in Scripture,

*reiterated again and again, from the prophets, through the Gospels, right to the end of Revelation, salvation is cosmic in scope and includes all creation; ... the promised Kingdom of God will be nothing but this world restored and transfigured by the glory of God, in its every dimension, vegetal, animal, rational, and social; and ... a deified humanity will serve therein as a cosmic priesthood, receiving that glory from Christ and mediating it to the natural world. (Romans)*

Revelation points to a “new heaven and new earth,” and the vision Hart describes was known to patristic and medieval theology. For Maximus the Confessor, “the human being is the great ‘methorios’ (both boundary and medium) between the material and spiritual orders, the priest of creation and so the microcosm in whom created nature is summed up and joined to the spiritual realm” (VME); for Aquinas the human soul is the horizon between eternity and time, the corporeal and incorporeal. [xii]

Without denying that both the human person’s relation to, and vision of, God is truly unique, Hart does not allow that vision to be reduced to a purely rational contemplation, but broadens it to include animals and all creation, in keeping with the Orthodox “motif of the redeemed cosmos as the burning bush: pervaded by the divine glory, but unconsumed—an infinitely realized theophany” (*Romans*).

## Conclusion

I do not know what heaven is like (and I am in good company with Isaiah, and later St. Paul, who said “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” [xiii]). What I do know is that while all of creation reveals traces of the Trinity, [xiv] only human persons are made in both the image and likeness of God. [xv] Whether animals “go to heaven”—that is, participate in “seeing God”

in some analogous sense (qualitatively different from the human person's beatific vision, yet proportional to their own being), or whether they merely "go to heaven" simply as part of the restoration of creation, I do not know. And so I end as Hart does in *Vinculum Magnum Entis*:

*I would rather defer the question to the end of days, when creation will be restored in the Kingdom, shadows in mirrors will yield to the light of clear knowledge, and (so I am reliably informed) the lion will lie down with the lamb.*

Mary Taylor, Ph.D., is a Consulting Editor for *Communio* and is on the board of directors of *Pax in Terra*, a non-profit dedicated to the promotion of human dignity through the development of sustainable communities. She has spoken and published on these topics all over the world, including the United Nations and two World Youth Days.

[i] David Bentley Hart, "Vinculum Magnum Entis" (hereafter VME), *First Things* (April 2015).

[ii] John Paul II, *General Audience*, 10 January 1990. This translation ("identical") appears in numerous places on the Internet, although the speech itself is not translated into English on the Vatican website.

[iii] David Bentley Hart, "Romans 8:19–22" (hereafter Romans), *First Things* (June 2015).

[iv] "Il Paradiso è aperto a tutte le creature," *Corriere della Sera* 27 November 2014. The newspaper does not give a source for Paul VI's quote.

[v] "Altri testi, tuttavia, ammettono che anche gli animali hanno un alito o soffio vitale e che l'hanno ricevuto da Dio. Sotto questo aspetto l'uomo, uscito dalle mani di Dio, **appare solidale con tutti gli esseri viventi. Così il Salmo 104 non pone distinzione tra gli uomini e gli animali quando dice, rivolgendosi a Dio creatore.**"

[vi] The "three souls" comes from Aristotle, through Aquinas. In the person, the lower souls are caught up in the higher rational soul, but for animals the reverse is not true. There are different interpretations of what this means. Is the barrier an absolute dualism, so that animals have NO rationality whatsoever, or is there a broader meaning of "reason" that makes possible a non-dual, distinct yet connected, *polar* relationship? No one argues that animals engage in third-order logic, or think metaphysically. There is voluminous scientific literature on the nature of animal intelligence; in addition, no one who has lived with a beloved pet would call the ascription of some form of intentional or rational behavior mere wish-fulfilling projection, let alone dismiss it as Pavlovian salivating. The sheer number of these stories of animal decision-making—as well as affection, loyalty, heroic acts, and even sacrifice—means the possibility has crossed line from anecdotal to plausible. What Hart rejects is not the metaphysics of Aquinas, but rather a specific form of post-Enlightenment Thomism he saw as creating an absolute distinction between a "pure nature" and grace. He does not think that these "Thomists believe



in a mechanistic view of animal life, or Cartesianism” but rather that their views of both of eschatology and of animal intelligence are “at best incomplete, at worst aberrant” (*Romans*).

[vii] See aforementioned “[Dogs in Heaven? Pope Francis Leaves Pearly Gates Open.](#)” We can enter into solidarity with animals because solidarity means linking up two things that are distinct and different, but at the same time have commonalities that enable them to come together. Like covenantal relations, solidarity is a unity that depends on difference.

[viii] *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Nicaea I to Lateran V*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington: Georgetown University Press 1990), 232.

[ix] Hart’s fullest discussion of analogy is in his book, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), especially chapter 4, section iii, “The Analogia Entis,” which is highly recommended. A succinct description occurs in Steve McGrath’s *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy: Phenomenology for the God-Forsaken* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 223: “The revelation of a God who is wholly discontinuous with ontology is... a ‘no’ to human knowledge and culture. Aquinas’ *analogia entis*” is intended to avoid this one-sided position by affirming a basic if ineffable continuity between the being of creation and the being of the Creator. At the same time the analogy maintains the infinite difference between the created and the uncreated, and thus also avoids the pitfalls of the opposite extreme, the rationalism that makes God continuous with created ontology and transparent to human reason.”

[x] **VME.** Hart does not think it necessary to defend “the (unmistakably) exceptional nature of human beings” by disabusing children of the notion that that animals experience anything analogous to human emotions, motives, or needs.” As Robert Spaemann says, when we predicate words like “suffering” or “joy” of animals, “these are not bare equivocations. They give a firmer purchase to our understanding of those creatures’ situations than any other words could” (*Persons: The Difference Between “Someone” and “Something”* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 125).

[xi] David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 91.

[xii] See *Summa Contra Gentiles* Book II, Ch. 68 par. 6 and Ch. 81 par. 12.

[xiii] Isaiah 64:4; 1 Corinthians 2:9.

[xiv] Aquinas, *ST I*, Q.45, Art.7; Augustine, *De Trin.* vi, 10.

[xv] “Every created thing is made in the ‘image’ of God, in the sense that it forms an analogy. But a true ‘likeness’ is something more than analogy. To be in the likeness of God something must participate in the dynamic relationship of Son to Father and Father to Son in the Holy Spirit. The realization of this likeness to God, which is the final perfection of our nature, depends on the use we make of our freedom with the help of grace,” Stratford Caldecott, “Creation as a Call to Holiness,” *Communio* 30, no. 1 (2003): 161–67; here at 166.

