

BOOK REVIEWS

**David L. Clough, *Theological Ethics, vol. 2 of On Animals*  
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Alexander Massmann

University of Cambridge, Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge, UK ([AlexanderMassmann@gmail.com](mailto:AlexanderMassmann@gmail.com))

In Job 39 God is portrayed as challenging human presumption, pointing out that humans have no influence on the remote, often incomprehensible, lives of wild animals. Many centuries later, we have turned the tables. Each year, David Clough notes, the suffering and the lives of billions of fish and mammals are at stake in the food industry. Clough argues that Christians must not be complicit in such abuses: God created animals not for human purposes, but so that they flourish and thus honour God. Reconciled in Christ, they await eternal redemption – regardless of capabilities like feeling pain or thinking. The book applies the norm of respect for animals to various ways humans use animals.

The conditions in which animals are kept and killed are typically appalling. This includes the killing of billions of male chicks in the breeding of hens for eggs and separating calves prematurely from their mothers. Yet to rear animals for slaughter in radically improved conditions is still wrong. We can eat meat only in an emergency to maintain human life and should otherwise be vegans.

Following chapters explore the abuse of animals further. Draught animals are cruelly and unjustly exploited. In animal experiments for human medical benefit, the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. The keeping of companion animals is riddled with moral problems; most prominently, large numbers of unwanted pets are commonly killed. Another chapter explores the harm done to wild animals, and also argues that zoos can fulfil a meaningful function, but require reform. On the whole, the close connection between violence against non-human animals and against people, typically women and people from ethnic minorities, is a striking theme.

Clough does a very good job presenting relevant facts and considerations, writing in an engaging, often personal style. Implicitly he is close to Albert Schweitzer's classic position that refuses to privilege animals with more sophisticated cognition and respects animals, or, more precisely, shows reverence for life, wherever possible. Clough suggests, as Schweitzer affirmed, that if a vegan farmer needs to kill insects to protect crops, that does not defeat the meaningfulness of a non-violent life and is still clearly better than to rear chickens for slaughter.

I find Clough's affirmation of vegetarianism persuasive in crucial aspects, and many people do well without eating meat or fish. Yet does the simple norm of respect for animal life do justice to more complex ethical conflicts? Clough surveys the culling of invasive species like rodents on small islands, which can save many bird species from extinction. He suggests that we need to be more compassionate with individual animals like rats, but finds culling potentially legitimate. However, if the moral norm is simply

respect for life, the practice is speciesist and simply wrong. If just a few rats escape, the rat population bounces back and a lot of killing is required again – all in the name of species membership. However, the simple norm of respect for life is at odds with the ecological ethics of biodiversity, with its particular interest in species characteristics. Theological problems with less diverse, potentially unstable ecosystems do not come into view in the present book.

While there is no denying the gaping ‘abyss’ separating society from moral practice, the simplicity of Clough’s norm of respect is less suitable for discussing particular conflicts. For example, to what extent should ecological considerations constrain much-needed housing development in the UK, given that land used for animal farming will not be vacated in the near future? When moving into a new home, how do you solve a moth problem? As an intriguing effort in the fight against malaria, mosquitoes have been killed to help genetically modified mosquitoes, which produce sterile offspring, replace the wild type. Further, in breeding chickens for eggs, technologies that recognise male embryos early on inside the egg are emerging, so that the males would not be incubated, hatch and *then* killed by the billions. Not to incubate fertilised eggs is not ideal, but appears more realistic on a large scale than to raise roosters for their own sake or to forego eggs entirely.

These conflicts point to a deeper issue. In the first volume of *On Animals*, Clough argued that humans are different from other animals in the same way that certain other animals are as well. Animals were even called moral creatures. Here he suggests that in an immediate conflict between human and non-human life, human life takes precedence. Although intuitive, this assumption requires justification. Humanity is created in the image of God, but even in a ‘functional’ account of the *imago Dei*, characteristics and capabilities are the basis on which we exclude chimpanzees, for example, from the human genus.

Clough’s denial that characteristics are criteria of moral status results in further problems. Impressive animal characteristics and capabilities may relativise human exceptionalism. They also distinguish animals from plants, however. If capabilities are not ethically salient, we can no longer avoid Schweitzer’s conclusions and show reverence for animals more than for plants, perhaps even fungi and micro-organisms. Did God perhaps create plants so that they also may flourish, be reconciled and redeemed in Christ? A very large number of organisms lose their lives for a pound of meat, but the number of plants and live seeds (‘plant embryos’) killed for a loaf of bread is still high. While I share the practical goals of Clough’s important book to a significant extent, I suggest that organisms not feeling pain are not due the same degree of reverence as those that clearly do, and ecological function should be taken into consideration explicitly. God’s creation implies the *suffering* of animals in evolution and, contingently, in the human abuse of human and non-human animals. However, if animals that do not feel pain *and* plants matter to the same degree, life is inherently and thoroughly cruel, hardly part of good creation.

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