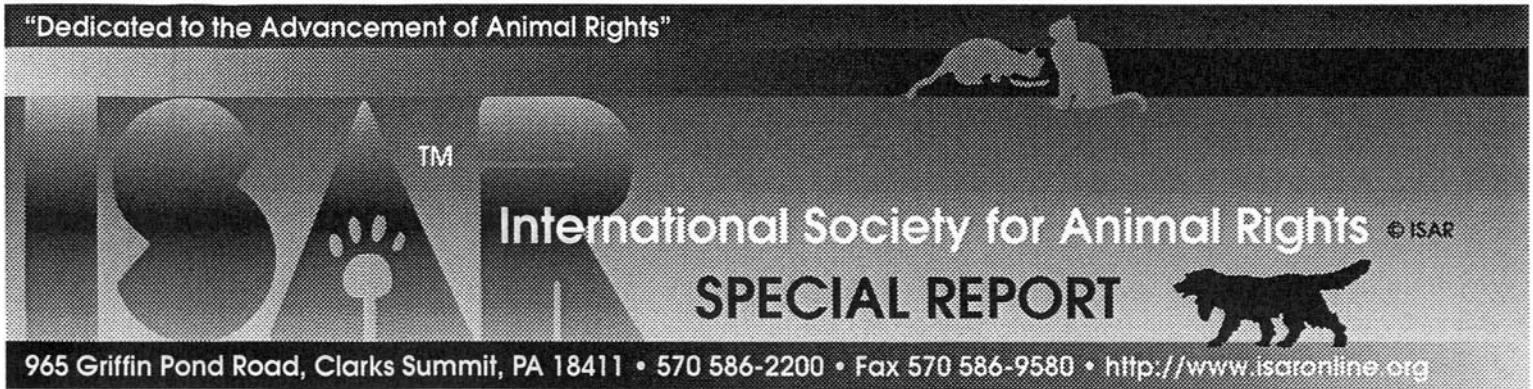


"Dedicated to the Advancement of Animal Rights"



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CONSERVATIVES AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

Introduction

Lamentably, many conservatives lack sympathy with the principle of Animal Rights. One explanation for this insensitivity, especially among religious conservatives, is rooted in biblical doctrine and its dogma regarding the relationship of God to man and man to animals. Yet, just as many conservatives in recent years have tempered their previous hard line on such important moral/cultural issues as homosexuality and drug use, it is possible that attitudinal change is coming regarding Animal Rights. A current example is an essay by Matthew Scully entitled "Animal Spirit" which appears in the November 9, 1998,

issue of NATIONAL REVIEW. NR is not only a-perhaps the-preeminent journal of conservative intellectual thought, but often the publication has been well ahead of the curve in opening and fomenting discussion of issues too long ignored, or summarily dismissed, by conservatives. Mr. Scully's essay is reprinted here (with the kind permission of NATIONAL REVIEW) in the hope that "Animal Spirit" will engage the thoughtful attention of many conservatives who until now have believed that biblical doctrine and concern for the well-being of animals were antithetical.

Animal Spirit

Respect for God's creatures should be a conservative impulse.

By: Matthew Scully

I recently came across an issue of *Outdoor Life*, the sportsman's Bible, and noticed an ad for something called "the Wayne Carlton bear call." The bear season finds hunters using an army of technology out in the field, and this little gadget makes the spot-on sound of "the frantic squalling of a terrified cub." The adult bear hears it and comes a-running-while the intrepid sportsman Watts.

The idea, in short, is to turn one of the bear's finer qualities, its fierce protectiveness of cubs, against him. The creature's very virtues--or strengths, or evolutionary survival skills, or whatever you want to call them--become his undoing. It seems a little unfair. What kind of man would use a thing like that?

Somehow, when we were given dominion over the earth and its creatures, I don't think this is quite what He had in mind. Conservatives are wary of modern environmentalism with its strain

of nature worship. But there's a smug insensibility in this other attitude that is every bit as bad. It is the Imperial Self, armed and dangerous, a fundamentally vulgar vision of man as special pleader, man the all-conquering consumer facing the universe with limitless entitlements and appetites to be met no matter what the costs. Want a bearskin rug for the living room? Go forth then to bait and slay the beast-bring along the Wayne Carlton, and don't forget the keg. Wildlife hindering new development? Bring dominion to field and forest, exterminate the creatures, and raise up thy new strip mall.

Paul Johnson in his 1996 book *The Quest for God* devotes a few pages to a quite sympathetic view of animals-adding, however, that the Bible affords them little comfort. True enough, but what's there is worth recalling. The animals, at creation, were sent forth with a "blessing" of their own. Though after Genesis

they appear mostly as property, they're also accorded a certain amount of solicitude, as in Proverbs 12: 10: "The righteous man regardeth the life of his beast, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel" A handful of other admonitions enjoin kindness, and in the Commandments it turns out even the cattle are to be given rest on the Sabbath.

Hunters in the Bible are folks like Nimrod and Esau, who tend to have trouble living peaceably among their fellow human beings, too. Indeed, if we take Genesis at its word, among the first instructions to man in the Garden were to keep his mitts of the critters (and vice versa) and be content with the herbs and the trees. And this comes just after we've been given dominion. The Catholic "meatless Friday" as a sign of penance, purity, and peace came to us (via a papal boost to the fishing industry, with the Friday, of course symbolizing something else) from this view of predation as a consequence of the Fall. Certain Jewish dietary laws carry a similar sense of meat as bearing the stain of violence and needing sanctification.

Dominion, Wayne Carlton style, doesn't get the go-ahead until the Covenant with Noah, even as the dove debuts as symbol of peace and then only as concession to our incorrigible weakness. When He says, "The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth," it's not exactly our proudest moment, and He is not bidding us to pursue that vision. Echoing throughout is the call to rapprochement at least in our hearts, as when Isaiah, hardly the maudlin type, describes predator and prey dwelling together, with a little child to lead them.

The New Testament is silent on the animals beyond the theme of gentleness, the assurance that not a sparrow falls without His knowing, the ass bearing Jesus into Jerusalem, and the lamb as a symbol of guiltless suffering—fairly high honors for all three creatures. True, the Gadarene swine don't fare so well. But the idea in Scripture seems to be that the animals have a beauty and dignity of their own, they also bear the Master's touch, and (never mind the whole business of "animal rights") practicing kindness toward them is part of our own glory.

"Dominion" today is a bit like the Constitution, stretched to cover all sorts of abuses committed in its good name. Though he makes no mention of animals, Pope John Paul II captured the bigger point here in a 1991 encyclical describing a disordered relationship with the natural world: "Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint at his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray. Instead of carrying out his role as cooperator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him."

Johnson, a conservative Catholic, actually rises in defense of farm animals, arguing that "God allowed us to live off the beasts of the fields and the forest because there was no other way," but that technology now provides an abundance of perfectly good substitutes. "Gradually this realization will take hold of us. The rise of factory farming, whereby food producers cannot remain competitive except by subjecting animals to life-cycles of unspeakable deprivation, has hastened this process. The human spirit revolts at what we have been doing."

Pretty radical, but I'll second that. After all, we're the only carnivore with a choice in the matter. Only I'm not so sure about the "revolt" part. Few adults have any illusions about our farm factories or the tender mercies accorded each creature that creepeth therein—the bright sensitive pig dangling by a rear hoof as it's processed along, squealing in horror; the veal calf taken from its mother, tethered, and locked away in a tiny stall for all of its brief wretched existence. It would make us sick to watch, and yet our demand for the resulting products only gets more furious. With that distinctively modern mix of sentimentality and ruthlessness, we get all weepy over *Babe*, while the sheer momentum of consumer demand leaves no time for the least modicum of mercy.

What a terrifying thought that His care might actually extend to those creatures too, and that in our treatment of them we bear not only the powers of dominion but also the possibilities of grace.