

**Part 1:**

John Dickson:

Readers may remember the famous scene from the David Attenborough documentary series *Planet Earth II*; it has become iconic. It even won a BAFTA for 'Must See Moment'.

Of course, you can't see it ... but I know you can see it in your mind: a lonely little baby Iguana now running for its life, pursued by racer snakes piling out from holes in the nearby rocks.

Your natural instinct while watching is to either hide behind your hands or yell at the screen: "*Run iguana! Run!*"

It's what David Attenborough calls "A near-miraculous escape". Mercifully, this iguana gets away.

But of course, not all baby iguanas are so lucky. One study suggests that only 20-30% of hatchling iguanas (though in a different part of the world) survive their first month.

The baby Iguanas that don't make it experience life for just a few minutes. They get caught and they're gone.

The Bible tells us that God holds the life of every creature in his hand (Job 12:10). What does that mean for the baby marine iguana that lives for just a moment and dies a hideous death before it has a chance to do, well, anything? What is the point? Why would God make such a thing?

We're talking about all things animals in this episode, starting with why God would create a world that seems to embed animal suffering into the very surface of things.

And we'll get to some practical questions too: do animals go to heaven? Is it OK to keep pets? And, should we all, actually, be vegetarian? Man, I hope not!!

## Meet Dr Bethany Sollereeder

John Dickson:

I'm having a drink with Dr Bethany Sollereeder, a research fellow in science and religion at Campion Hall at the University of Oxford. Bethany's philosophical speciality is suffering, and we spoke to her in detail about how we can reconcile a good God with the suffering we experience in the world for an episode earlier this year called 'On Suffering'.

In this episode, we're talking to her again about suffering, but this time the suffering of animals. Bethany is particularly interested in how we deal with the suffering of animals that we see from the very beginning. That is, before humans come on the scene.

Bethany Sollereeder:

So I was interested in why would God allow such horrible things to happen. And so many people had said so much, but there was actually very little at the time I started looking at evolution, animal suffering and the goodness of God.

**JD:** *So for listeners who haven't really thought much about this, this problem of animal suffering and not even thought about the brutality of the evolutionary process, can you, you know, with your best sceptical muscles flexed, tell us how real a problem is this question of millions of years of animal suffering?*

**BS:** Yeah. So there have been about 540 million years of complex life. That's about how long predation has been around, for example, where creatures violently take life from each other. 99.8% of species that have

ever existed are already extinct. So the biodiversity we see now is a tiny sliver, of what has been available. We know that there have been five massive extinction events and many smaller ones with dramatic effects. And, you know, the majority of creatures that, that are sentient feel a whole lot of pain, they suffer, they die, you know, and the death rate is still what it's always been one for one.

And if you think about how could a good and loving God create such a world, it, really, I think causes questions because animals can't make use of the same world. What I think are the strongest arguments for humans, either that this happens to draw people closer to God, so, okay, suffering's bad, but it gives me this great opportunity to draw near to God or, you can't blame morally free will, well, it's due to sin.

And so without those two arguments, which I think are the strongest arguments for why God might allow horrific suffering in humans, what do you do? Why would God allow the suffering of so many millions of animals?

Animals are a tiny bit of life on earth, but because they are the ones who tend to have nervous systems that give sensations of pain and they have central nervous systems that can process that as suffering that's, that's what I'll stick to. There's actually interesting work on plants and whether they suffer in a, somewhat slower conscious way ... but we don't know that yet.

John Dickson:

This is where I want to shout out to my listeners who don't go along with evolution by natural selection.

You'll know from plenty of other episodes now that I take an old-earth view. But there are plenty of smart Christians who take a young earth view that isn't compatible with evolution. If that's you, there's no getting around that this will be a tricky episode. Bethany just assumes that evolution is a thing. If you don't think evolution is the way the world has come to be the way it

is, then the question of animals suffering before humans appeared may not be a question for you at all!

But for those who accept the evolutionary view of the world, the question of animal suffering can be flummoxing.

**JD:** *Already our talk together assumes evolution by natural selection. And I know that you know, there are parts of the world where that really isn't a given - here amongst Christians in Oxford and the UK generally it's not that big or crazy of an assumption, but why is evolution a given?*

**BS:** I think that it is by far the strongest explanation for the diversity and its design, if I can say that, of life on earth, as a biological explanation, it is consilient. It draws together all these different areas of explanation from distribution of species to physiological nearness of species that, you know ... why do some species look more like other species? Why do chimpanzees look more like us and less like dogs? And why do dogs look so different from worms, et cetera, et cetera?

But especially when genetics came out, the evolution is, and, and common ancestry along the way is by far the strongest explanation of the things we see in the similarities and dissimilarities of genetics.

John Dickson:

So, if God is good and loving, how can we account for the enormous amount of animal suffering that is caused by natural disasters, disease and predation? Just as there is the question of why God allows humans to suffer, there are a few different ways to go about tackling this problem.

The first way is this. We could say: God didn't create the world this way. Sin did. Our human sin affected the experience of animals.

**JD:** *Okay. Now, you're talking to a good reformed boy here Sitting opposite. And you, you're not very friendly with John Calvin.*

So Calvin wrote that the human defiance of the creator sin is what brought dire consequences to the physical cosmos creation of animals and all that. And that's a very widely believed perspective in contemporary Christianity. Why don't you go along with John Calvin, Bethany?

**BS:** I think if I had been brought up in John Calvin's time, I absolutely would've if I would've had no reason not to, but the fact is we know now of a much longer earth history, which says that all those things were around far longer than humans were around. So you have, you know, a 5.3 billion year history of the planet earth, a 4 billion year history of life, as I said, 540 million years of complex life where we're getting multicellular organisms that are swimming around and eating one another. And then you have behaviorally modern humans for only about 50,000 years. So the earliest possible date you could put on that human rebellion in Eden is about 50,000 years, but we know that T-Rexs were eating other creatures and causing them great pain and distress. We know, you know, that dinosaurs had bone cancer.

Viruses have always been a problem for as long as life has been around in terms of causing disease so of bacteria. I just think chronologically, it raises really big problems, you know? now there are a few attempts like William Demsky to sort of say, oh, well, 'God instituted the effects of the fall into creation long before'. But then, then that raises its own questions. Like God punished all these creatures for a sin that had not happened yet. And then that also means that God made sin absolutely inevitable and that's problematic too.

So I just think it's a much simpler option to say that suffering for whatever reason came very early, you know, and then humans brought sin into the world, which was a new development. Yeah.

**JD:** *Am I right in saying that even Augustine, didn't go with this Calvin idea?*

**BS:** Augustine would've said 'of course, animals eat one another it's part of the divine design that orders their being that even when they pass into one another it's part of God's plan'. So he only thought that humans were immortal and felt that sin introduced death into the human species, but that every other creature would've quite naturally lived and died and passed away.

John Dickson:

St Augustine, an early Church Father who lived in the 4th and 5th centuries, was convinced that animals eating other animals are just a part of God's good creation. He argues it is part of the "temporal beauty" of God's creation. In answer to the question of why there are carnivores, Augustine writes;

***Excerpt - Temporal Beauty***

*For the simple reason, of course, that some are the proper diet of others. Nor can we have any right to say, "There shouldn't be some on which others feed." All things, you see, as long as they continue to be, have their own proper measures, numbers and destinies. So all things, properly considered, are worthy of acclaim; nor is it without some contribution in its own way to the temporal beauty of the world that they undergo change by passing from one thing into another. This may escape fools; those making progress have some glimmering of it; to the perfect, it is as clear as daylight."*

He goes on to say that animals provide a visible lesson to humans about all sorts of things, including how to guard one's body against dangers.

Animals are a picture of God's organisation of the cosmos, for Augustine. But he isn't sure why some animals exist.

*“I, however, must confess that I have not the slightest idea why mice and frogs were created, and flies and worms; yet I can still see that they are all beautiful in their own specific kind.”*

This is classic Augustine. He was adamant about some grounding principles and was quite relaxed about not knowing some details.

Bethany Sollereeder:

So (Augustine) didn't think that the whole creation was vegetarian before the fall, for example. So that's not actually a common reading until the reformation.

**JD:** *Is Calvin the source of the idea or is there some other thinker shortly before him?*

**BS:** From what I remember, there is a minority along the way who did read it the way that Calvin read it, but it was always a minority voice. But people like Calvin and Luther made it a majority view.

John Dickson:

Here's what John Calvin says in his commentary on the Book of Romans:

*“For in the sad disorder which followed the fall of Adam, the whole machinery of the world would have instantly become deranged, and all its parts would have failed had not some hidden strength supported them. It is appropriate then for us to consider what a dreadful curse we have deserved, since all created things, both on earth and in the invisible heavens, which are in themselves blameless, undergo punishment for our sins; for it has come about that they are liable to corruption not through their own fault. Thus the condemnation of mankind is imprinted on the heavens, and on the earth, and on all creatures.”*

The whole of nature - nonhuman organisms included - is thwarted from attaining its ends because of the effects of the Fall and the subsequent curse, argues Calvin.

There are a few Bible verses often picked out to support this argument.

I put these, in turn, to Bethany, starting with Genesis 3:17:

### **Excerpt - Genesis 3**

*To Adam he said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' 'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil, you will eat food from it all the days of your life.*

**JD:** *Doesn't the Bible say the ground was cursed?*

**BS:** Yes, it does. It talks about the ground being cursed in Genesis three, but that curse is actually raised in Genesis eight after the flood. God says "I will no longer curse the earth".

### **Excerpt - Genesis 8**

*"Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. 21 The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done".*

**BS:** There's some disagreement on how that should be read. But what I find interesting is those two words used for curse and ground are never actually used in conjunction again after that. So after chapter eight, there's a whole story I could tell about how Noah is named Noah as the one who will relieve us from the toil of the ground - well, what toil? the toil that was



laid down in Genesis three - and, and so then God smells, his sacrifice says I'll no longer curse the ground and what happens, Noah plants, a vineyard, and it's so fruitful He manages to get magnificently drunk. So there's, there's a sense of it, it being a new creation after the flood. And although there are bits of the land that are occasionally mentioned as cursed, you know, in Deuteronomy, if you do this, the land will be cursed. It's always a temporary local thing. There's no sense. For example, in the Psalms that the whole earth is cursed, right? The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. This is God's creation. It's very good so I don't think it's reasonable to read that part in Genesis three as a once for all time.

**JD:** *You're not even convinced that the creation at the beginning, whatever that means was perfect. I learned as a young Christian that all of creation was perfect until after the fall. You sort of say, well, there's an imperfection in a sense built into the fabric of all things from the beginning.*

**BS:** Yeah. I mean, I hesitate at both perfection and imperfection because those aren't biblical words. So I think if, if a Hebrew writer was trying to convey the notion of perfection, they would use Shalom, the idea of God's sort of perfect peace. instead what's used in Genesis one is *Tov Meod* meaning "very good".

So the idea that it's very good means more in a Hebrew sense that it's functional, that it's fit for purpose, but even in the initial mandate, God leaves humans, something to do, right? It's multiply, fill the earth. If it were perfect, you would think that it would be unchanging, but it simply wouldn't have any place to go.

This has been critiqued, but we generally think of more of a sense of static perfection when we start thinking of heaven. But in Genesis one, there's no sense that this is the end. Colin Gunton says, you know, creation is a project. It has somewhere to go. And that sense of dynamism - that sense of change - I think opens the way to say we can actually accept an evolutionary narrative ... not saying Genesis one does, I don't think the authors knew anything about evolution or that they were secretly inserting

it. But I think we don't have to say that it was created in its final form. Otherwise, what would humans have done?

John Dickson:

This is worth pondering, whatever your view. The Bible doesn't say the world was 'perfect' in Genesis 1. It says it was 'good'. And the apostle Paul in the NT continues to call it 'good', even though Paul writes long after the fall, long after there is pain in the world. In 1 Tim 4:4, he says "Everything God created is good."

So calling things 'good' mustn't be the same as calling them perfect.

OK, what about this verse from Romans 8?

### **Excerpt - Romans 8**

***20** Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope **21** that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children. **22** We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labour pains up until now.*

This passage is often interpreted as meaning the fall of man brought also the fall of creation.

Bethany Sollereeder:

Yeah. I don't buy that.

**JD:** *But what is the subjugation to frustration?*

**BS:** Well, when it's using frustration in Greek, it's actually the same word that's used in Ecclesiastes. That word is often translated as 'meaningless', but it, I think, *Havel*, it's much better translated as a sort of fleeting feeling,

that there's a sense of things passing away, which stands against our longing for the eternal. So there is frustration in that and we feel it all the time. So I don't see it as a sense of utter despair or meaninglessness, but a sense that we're all caught up in a life where we're being called towards heaven, we're called towards the eternal, but we are in the transient, and we feel that in the death of loved ones, just as Paul says, you know, Christians shouldn't grieve like others as those who have no hope, but we still grieve and we still ought to grieve, you know, so there's that sort of tension. And I think he's drawing that out.

**JD:** *I should clarify, this is not to say you don't believe that humans are fallen.*

**BS:** Oh, humans are definitely fallen.

John Dickson:

As I said earlier, the creationist has no problem with any of this. The world was perfect. And animals didn't suffer before the sin of humanity. That's when everything fell into disarray and pain.

But for anyone who finds evolution convincing, the starting point has to be that God did make the world this way - with death and predation in the animal kingdom - and that this was nonetheless, somehow, in some way, ... good.

Perhaps it displays the interdependent organisation of the universe, as Augustine said.

Or maybe ... it's not right to think of animals suffering in the same way we think of human suffering.

**JD:** *Why is animal suffering through the evolutionary process morally problematic? I mean, Caterpillar's really fretting about what they go through.*

**BS:** Yeah. Well, and again, that's kind of why I try and say animals and at other points will say sentient animals because I think that a lot of the deaths that happen are not problematic. So I think that you know, Darwin had a real problem with wasps inserting their larvae into caterpillars who would then grow up and, eat their way out of caterpillars. And they've actually found that they target the least vital organs first. So the poor caterpillar lives, as long as caterpillarily possible, to provide a fresh meal for the young wasp. So he was pretty horrified by that and saw that as a real argument.

John Dickson

Darwin *really* had a problem with this.

In 1860, he wrote to botanist Asa Gray:

*"I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae [ich-neumon-EE-dye] with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars."*

Bethany Sollereeder:

But I sort of think, well, as far as we can tell caterpillars don't have this sort of ability to .... they do have the ability to feel pain, but not necessarily to understand suffering or that they are the ones who are suffering. So something like the argument that C.S. Lewis makes in *The Problem of Pain* probably applies to caterpillars. It doesn't apply to cats and dogs and birds, and, you know, so many other creatures like polar bears.

John Dickson:

In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis calls the problem of animal suffering "appalling" particularly because the Christian explanation of human pain cannot be extended to animal pain. "*So far as we know,*" Lewis

writes, *“beasts are incapable either of sin or virtue: therefore they can neither deserve pain nor be improved by it.”*

Lewis argues that many animals who appear to be suffering may not be suffering at all simply because they have no capacity to experience it as suffering, no capacity to distinguish a sensation as “experience”. He calls it ‘sentience without consciousness’.

But even Lewis says that, while this might apply to the lower forms of animals (Darwin’s caterpillars, perhaps), as we move up the scale of ability, it’s not as clear.

*“It is certainly difficult to suppose that the apes, the elephant, and the higher domestic animals have not, in some degree, a self or soul which connects experiences and gives rise to rudimentary individuality.”*

Of course, any suggestion that animals may not really suffer can become deeply problematic when it is used as justification to dismiss animal welfare completely.

So, what do we do with all this? Bethany has some thoughts.

Bethany Soldereder:

I think that again when we look through the majority of the Bible, what we find is even the really rough parts of creation being attributed to God, whether that's in the Psalm, this is my next question, whether that's ...

**JD:** *So can you expound because I, I find this one of the most compelling, disturbing, and yet comforting insights in your book.*

**BS:** Yeah. I mean, God, takes chapters saying, ‘Hey Job, have you seen my creation? Have you seen how I’m the one creating the blizzards? Have you seen that? I’m the one creating the great storms. Have you seen that? I’m the one who created the great Leviathan of the deep, who so terrifies

you and causes chaos and destruction, you know, and I, I'm the one who feeds the vultures and you know, where their babies are covered in blood from eating the carcasses of creatures they've caught'. Same in Psalm - I think in 104, where the lions seek their prey from God. And you have God providing for the ravenous beasts as well as for the more peaceable ones. And so I think it's a lot more coherent with scripture to say the Bible presents a carnivorous creation as God's creation.

**JD:** *I mean, here is the point where your argument is mind-bending, because you're not so much trying to say, 'oh, no, here's three reasons why that's not so bad', or why we can defend God in the light of the badness. You're saying, 'well, actually there's a goodness of God in predation and so on'. So I want you to really help me here. I have a lot of sceptical listeners to Undeceptions. Instantly they'll be thinking, 'okay, at least, this accords with science. Yeah. Yeah. But does it accord with Christianity, although Christianity was into that God of love and goodness and so on? So how do you see the evolutionary process, with all its predation ... as good?'*

**BS:** I think that it has to do with the nature of God's love when it comes right down to it. So the heart of my argument is that love is not primarily interested in avoiding suffering, in avoiding death, but in seeing redemption and fullness of being in and through those things.

I'm not saying that every aspect of creation perfectly reveals or reflects God's character. I think parasitism is a good example of animals basically cheating. But, what I think is revealed in the evolutionary process is God so loved creatures that God let them be themselves. Let them have freedom of agency. Now in some creatures, the worm, that might be a very small agency, you know, 'do I tunnel left or tunnel, right?' It's not a very important choice. With the ancestor of a tiger, at some point, some creature thought 'that fluffy thing looks like something I might be able to eat.' And it made a decision that forever changed that chain of descendants.

And of course, the most freedom - moral free will - is inscribed in humans. And, so I think for much the same reasons as God allows moral free will in

humans, I'm going to say, God allows freedom of agency to creatures who then get to figure out their own ways of living in the world. And that does, I think end up with consequences that God is not necessarily a fan of. So I don't think that God is a fan of every strategy of survival that's out there, but they are there because God's love allows creatures that tremendously risky freedom.

John Dickson:

Some theologians have argued that the world is the way it is because it's the *only way* to have the type of intricate and interesting creation God had in mind. We take the world that God has given us as a sort of 'package deal'. Without things like earthquakes, for example, the world would be lifeless.

Professor Christopher Southgate from the University of Exeter has offered this explanation for evolutionary suffering, and it was the subject of his 2022 Boyle Lecture for the International Society for Science and Religion:

***Excerpt - Boyle Lecture, Chris Southgate (2022)***

*"I've been one of the thinkers who have postulated what has come to be known as the 'only way argument'.*

*Essentially it goes like this ... there is no reason to suppose that there was any way open to God by which God could have created a world with its richness, beauty, complexity, ingenuity, and intricate independence of creatures with a better balance between values and the disvalues of struggles, competition and suffering. So, yes, creaturely suffering is intrinsic to the world God has made, yes it has been instrumental in realising God's purposes but there was no better, less suffering-filled way available to God."*

Bethany's not so sure.



Bethany Solldereder:

I think that this isn't necessarily the only way that existence can happen. But what I've tried to argue is that this may be the only way to produce the individuals who people have whether animal or non-animals. So imagine if you have all the possible varieties in your mind of genetic, you know, arrangement, you'd have no way to sort of pick out an individual, right? My body is made up of the whole history of life from the first cell till now, and 10 billion chances per day have shaped what I am and who I am. So I think what this earth does is solve the problem of particularity. Why am I me? And I don't know that God could have just arrived at me because God would've arrived at every other version of me that wasn't me as well. So unless God made heaven that had every possible, you know, thing - and then, and then who am I in that?

John Dickson:

Then there's another thought, a strange thought, a thought I find intriguing: "God did make the world this way, suffering and all, but ... but suffering and death bring about new life".

The whole of nature, in other words, looks like Jesus' life and death on the cross. The whole of creation is *cruciform*.

Bethany Solldereder:

Robert Ferrer Capon talks about how the cross far, far from being an aberrant occurrence in creation is actually revealing what creation has meant all along. So he talks really movingly about how that is, in every animal who dies as sort of a sacrifice to the life of others, we see, we see a mini cross of Christ. In every victim of the evolutions process, we see unveiled the idea that death leads to new life just as we see it epitomized in the cross where Jesus dies and gives life to all of creation, not just human, but to all of creation to be, to be redeemed, restored, renewed in the new



creation. So I'm very sceptical of saying that the cross is some sort of interruption rather than a revelation of what creation meant all along.

**JD:** *All of this has implications for what redemption means.... but I really wanna, you know, sort of, return to animals. You're saying there'll be animals in the kingdom of heaven.*

**BS:** Yeah. Everything that God loves. So I think that that includes all animals. The reason that much of the Christian tradition has not affirmed it - and there have been people like John Wesley's notable example of somebody who really said that animals will be part of the general resurrection -

**JD:** *In fact, elevated to an almost human appreciation.*

**BS:** So (Wesley) sort of says as humans will become like the angels in power and glory and knowledge, animals will be elevated to the point of humans. And basically, his point was that many animals who don't have sentience couldn't properly enjoy heaven. So God would have to give them an upgrade so that they could properly enjoy what they had been given. Rather than just having sort of a passive or unknowing sense of God's grace and provision. So I like that.

But the main reason people didn't think animals were part of the general resurrection was that they thought that animals didn't have a rational souls. And that rational souls were the only part of the creature that survived death. So in Aristotle's version, you have like the vegetative soul, the animal soul, and the rational soul in humans. But I don't actually follow Aristotle. I don't think he's great ... he has certainly contributed a lot to theology, but I don't follow him in this. I prefer the Hebraic view where animals are living souls, their bodies are the true embodiment of what they are. And so I think when we die, we pass away and God resurrects us as bodies. And therefore there's no need to exclude any creature from that.

John Dickson:

Not all of this will be satisfying to everyone. Perhaps none of it is satisfying to anyone.

Charles Darwin wrote another letter, to his friend Hooker in 1856, saying;

*“What a book a Devil’s Chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horridly cruel works of nature.”*

Famed sceptic Richard Dawkins named one of his books *A Devil’s Chaplain*, jumping on this issue as one that Christians have often struggled to explain.

Part of me is content to let God be God. Even if all the problems were unresolved, I’d still hold that the evidence of God’s existence is overwhelming. The First Cause argument we’ve discussed before is compelling to me. And even the Teleological argument about the rational orderliness of the creation can’t be undone by this stuff, for the simple reason that we can only recognise the harshness and disorder because we recognise and expect a more fundamental beauty and order in creation. Yes, the tap (or forcett) is dripping, and we notice it, but we mustn’t miss the more basic reality that there is a working tap in the first place. The problem of the working tap is more mysterious than the problem of the dripping tap.

For what it’s worth, my view of animal suffering, Genesis, and the Fall are that there was decay and death built into the fabric of creation from the beginning. I think Genesis itself hints at that. There is a deceiving ‘snake’ there in the garden. There were trees with fruit that grew, ripened, and then died. And, of course, Adam and Eve are eating the fruit. So certainly the fruit dies! More than that: it seems clear to me that Adam and Eve would themselves die, by natural condition, if it weren’t for the fact that they were allowed to eat from the so-called ‘tree of life’ in the garden (just not from the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil). This proves to me that humans themselves were innately mortal, prone to decay and death from at

the beginning. The only thing that saved them was the sustaining life of God—the tree of life. Getting kicked out of the garden, away from the tree of life, didn't introduce decay and death into the creation for the first time. It left humanity to their natural mortal realities, separated from the sustaining life of God.

In this view, creation, including animals, was always mortal, subject to decay and death. And this was all part of God's good creation. I guess I'm with Augustine on this (I'm with him on a lot of things!).

But after the break, we've got more challenges.

What's our relationship with animals? What are our responsibilities toward their care? And if we value animals, is it wrong to eat them?

**\*SPONSOR BREAK\***

### **Part 2:**

"To end tyranny we must first understand it." That's the first line of Chapter 5 of Peter Singer's seminal work *Animal Liberation*, published in 1975. The tyranny he is talking about is Christianity, and its pervasive "speciesism".

Singer defines 'speciesism' as; *"prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species"*.

*"There have been religions, especially in the East,"* writes Singer, *"which have taught that all life is sacred; and there have been many others that have held it gravely wrong to kill members of one's own social, religious, or ethnic group, but Christianity spread the idea that every human life - and only human life - is sacred"*.

This is the teaching that downgraded animals to 'things' that humans could use and abuse as they wish, says Singer. The belief that humans have

unique status in the world, alone made in the image of God, is the belief that has doomed the animals.

Animal suffering today is, according to Singer, (mostly) the fault of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Our next guest is Catholic ethicist Charles Camosy. He's a fan of Singer. But he also disagrees with him.

Charles Camosy:

I've tried to show that that's just a fundamental mistake

In fact, there are deep profound resources for thinking about creation more broadly, but especially about non-human animals in these traditions, which are just dynamite for thinking about what animal liberation would look like.

John Dickson:

Charles Camosy is associate professor of theological and social ethics at Fordham University, with a focus on moral theology and bioethics. We talked to him last season about Euthanasia. He's written several books including *For Love of Animals: Christian ethics, consistent action*.

**JD:** *So I need to ask you, what are those pieces of dynamite in the Christian tradition?*

**CC:** Yeah, well, I don't hope it's too condescending to say, 'read Genesis one and two', but just read Genesis one and two and just look what's there. There's just so much there. So just to pick out a few things, animals are created 'good' in Genesis one period without reference to human beings. So animals are not tools. They're not like hammers or pencils for us to use. However, we wish they have their own dignity. They have their own value. Again, they're good, full stop, or at least period. Also at the end of Genesis one is ideal, right? This is not a history text. It's a theological text. It's a text

that tries to explain theological truths through a story. The story is very clear.

The ideal that God set up in the garden of Eden was one in which we were eating fruits and plants. It isn't until Genesis nine after sin has screwed things up that God kind of grudgingly gives freedom to eat meat in the fallen world, which was not the ideal. And even then there are very, significant structures associated with it. Many of you probably know about Jewish kosher laws. If you're gonna eat meat, there are lots and lots of rules about how that works. You're in particular, you're not supposed to eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. So even having that kind of respect for the lifeblood of the animal is at the heart of even the fallen world.

In Genesis two, which is a different creation story, older creation story the animals are brought to Adam, not to eat, not to ride, not to use for clothing, but because it is not good, man should be alone. A lot of people think that that's when Eve shows up, and Eve does show up as the suitable partner, of course, but animals are brought to Adam first. So the image that Genesis two has, again, in the peaceable kingdom before sin enters the world is one of animal companionship with animals.

John Dickson:

Evolution would suggest that there was hardly a peaceable relationship in the animal kingdom prior to humans. But Charles is talking about the ideal that Genesis portrays of peace between humans and animals.

The Bible has a high view of animals from its very beginning, says Charles. So I asked him where things went off the rails - where Christians started to think of animals as mere products and tools.

Charles Camosy:

“The main thing that we see in the church fathers is a real sense that animals, again, are not mere things. They're not mere tools for us to use.

However we want. In fact, they can be very much used by God, to reveal God's will to us. And even they're these amazing stories of the church fathers explaining that animals can actually sense goodness, and virtue and evil and vice in ways that we don't have access to.

John Dickson:

Yes, there's a second-century Christian text called the *Acts of Paul*. But it's also partly about the acts of a certain woman named Thecla, a missionary colleague of Paul. We discussed it before, way back in season something or other when we talked with Prof Lynn Cohick about women in the early church.

The story is at least partly legendary but it gives insight into what some second century Christian leaders thought about women missionaries. Thecla preached all around the Mediterranean and converted whole towns to Christ. But there are also some hints - that Prof Camosy is alluding to - of what these early Christians thought of animals.

On one occasion Thecla is thrown into the arena to be executed by wild beasts. She's tied to a ravenous lioness. But the lioness can sense Thecla's goodness as an emissary of the Creator, and we're told that the lioness lay down and licked Thecla's feet.

I doubt any of this happened but it says something about Christian attitudes toward animals - as having their own spiritual awareness.

Charles Camosy:

So there's this whole other sense that animals know these things even better than us. And that sense is even, I think, kind of permeated into our own time, right? We even have a sense that maybe our dog has a sense of people love me, love my dog or something like that. I don't know if you have that in Australia, but we have that here for sure that our animal

companions, like, have this sense about others that maybe we don't have access to. So that's definitely present in the church fathers.

In the middle ages, especially Thomas Aquinas, they have their problems. And this is where Peter Singer really hammers home his critique on the Christian tradition. But even with someone like Thomas Aquinas, I still haven't figured this out. His mentor was Albert The Great who's the, maybe the most important zoologist in all of the middle ages, you know, over 600 years and he cared so deeply about animals. Thomas though, he was so influential, got so much wrong about animals. He really did say that though animals have emotions and animals demand serious consideration from us - again, not things they're not treated like we do in factory farms in our own, in our own time - that is what's really wrong with treating animals poorly is that it reflects badly on us. There isn't something about the animal itself that is harmed.

John Dickson:

In his *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*, Thomas Aquinas wrote:

***Excerpt: Summa Theologiae***

*"According to the Divine ordinance the life of animals and plants is preserved not for themselves but for man.*

*"Speechless animals and plants are devoid of the life of reason whereby to set themselves in motion; they are moved, as it were by another, by a kind of natural impulse, a sign of which is that they are naturally enslaved and accommodated to the uses of others.*

*"He that kills another's ox, sins, not through killing the ox, but through injuring another man in his property."*

There is, of course, truth in this. Animals do not have the order of reason of human beings. But it's easy to see how a statement like this from Aquinas



can be read as a justification for the worst kind of, say, factory farming. It's unlikely a theological statement actually influenced factory farming - the forces of the market produced that - but theology can make Christians lazy in their response to animal cruelty.

Charles Camosy:

Now, I will say, when capitalism comes on the scene, you know, in the modern period that really kicks things into a whole nother level of, of how we treated animals that was way worse than anything that appeared in the middle ages or the early church.

The real enemy here is consumerism and tr and treating animals as pencils and hammers, and not this idea, these ideas that were problematic, but at least understood that these were gifts from God, and had their own dignity and way of being in the world. But when our consumerist capitalist culture took over, that all went out the window.

John Dickson:

The Christian Church has an imperfect tradition with respect to animals, swinging often too far in its emphasis on humanity as the pinnacle of creation and its dominion over all else.

But as with so much of human history, even when the Church was getting it wrong, there were individual followers of Christ who often had very loud voices. And they advocated for a better way. They are the prophets calling God's people back to their own ideals.

William Wilberforce is a good example. He's best known, of course, for his fight against human slavery in the late 18th / early 19th century. But he was also concerned for animals.

He was a founding member of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (the RSPCA - which is still super active in the UK and



Australia). Wilberforce led the fight to outlaw bullbaiting in Britain. For 200 years it was a spectator sport to watch a pack of dogs fight a bull. People also thought it made the bull meat more tender when eaten. Wilberforce and his friends got it banned, eventually!!! Though he died two years before the full scale Cruelty to Animals Act was passed in 1835. Actually, he died just a month or so before the Slavery Abolition Act became law, as well.

There is a link between the Christian care for humans and the Christian care for animals. It's exemplified in the work of someone like Wilberforce, but he's not the only one, of course.

Writing in *Time Magazine* back in 2014, influential American writer Mary Eberstadt said religious concern for animals comes as a surprise only to those unacquainted with religion.

Animal welfare is a lively topic among Christians - and not just lefty types.

One of the most influential Christian takes on animal welfare came from Matthew Scully, a prominent speechwriter to Republican President George W. Bush.

Scully's book, *Dominion* made a splash in the early 2000s - his conservative Catholic background seemed to clash with his call for humans to be defenders of animals.

Some see advocacy for animals as a distraction from our advocacy for human life. It's a waste of resources, say some, when the true fight should be against abortion.

But Charles Camosy says it's all about a consistent life ethic - one that resists a "throwaway culture".

Being 'pro-life' is entirely consistent with caring for animal life.

We see this in our culture, like in the charming, and hugely popular, 2000's claymation film, *Chicken Run*. It's about an American rooster who falls in love with a hen on a British farm, and their attempt to escape the farm and its evil farmer before they're turned into a chicken pot pie.

More than 20 years after the first movie, Producer Kaley tells me that Netflix has announced a sequel for *Chicken Run*. It'll come out in 2023, and is to be called ... *Chicken Run: Dawn of the Nugget*. Not much is known so far about the new movie, except this synopsis:

*"The chickens escaped from the farm and made it to a peaceful island sanctuary, far from the dangers of the human world. But back on the mainland, the whole of chicken-kind faces a new and terrible threat."*

Presumably, that threat is chicken nuggets. I'm wondering how Mcdonald's will respond. Probably not with a 'happy meal' film deal!

Anyway, chickens bring us to the real, practical outworkings of what we've been talking about in this episode. How are we to deal with animals in our everyday lives? Is it ok to have pets? And can I eat meat? Even just one measly nugget?

**JD:** So is it wrong to eat meat?

**CC:** I don't know if this makes me an annoying academic ethicist, but I'll say it depends. Even someone like Peter singer will say, if it's you and the pig starving in the forest, you get to kill the pig. He uses utilitarian reasoning for that. You have more sophistication, despite the sophistication of pigs who are quite sophisticated, you can play video games, open doors, et cetera. He would say that you know, the kinds of preferences, that you have are more sophisticated and therefore you can do that. The teaching of my own church is that you can use Catholic church catechism from Catholic churches, you can use animals for food and clothing, but you also have to treat animals with kindness. It's interesting, both those things appear in the catechism of the Catholic church.

John Dickson:

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is the official document of Catholic teaching. It's hundreds of pages long and it combines some Bible, some tradition, and some philosophising to produce a pretty comprehensive account of what Catholics are meant to believe.

As a proud Protestant, there's quite a bit I can't accept (stuff about Mary, stuff about the pope, stuff about grace and good deeds) ... but, I have to say, some of it is utterly brilliant – I wish there were a protestant version of it!! And on animals, it makes a bunch of this clear. I hope my hardcore Protestant mates don't get upset with me here, but I have to read the section on animals. I agree with every line:

### **EXCERPT - Catechism of the Catholic Church on animals**

*2415 The seventh commandment enjoins respect for the integrity of creation. Animals, like plants and inanimate beings, are by nature destined for the common good of past, present, and future humanity.<sup>194</sup> Use of the mineral, vegetable, and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives. Man's dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbour, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation.<sup>195</sup>*

*2416 Animals are God's creatures. He surrounds them with his providential care. By their mere existence, they bless him and give him glory. [Matt 6:26] <sup>196</sup> Thus men owe them kindness. We should recall the gentleness with which saints like St. Francis of Assisi or St. Philip Neri treated animals. [okay, maybe I'm not a big fan of saints ...]*

*2417 God entrusted animals to the stewardship of those whom he created in his own image. [Gen 2:19-20; 9:1-4] <sup>197</sup> Hence it is legitimate to use*

*animals for food and clothing. They may be domesticated to help man in his work and leisure. Medical and scientific experimentation on animals is a morally acceptable practice if it remains within reasonable limits and contributes to caring for or saving human lives.*

*2418 It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly. It is likewise unworthy to spend money on them that should as a priority go to the relief of human misery. One can love animals; one should not direct to them the affection due only to persons.*

Humans are our first moral priority, in other words, but animals are still to be loved. They are creatures with a measure of dignity. They have claims on us. I like it!!

Charles Camosy:

(The Chateascism) also very much emphasizes that (animals) aren't things for us to use however we wish. So holding these things in balance tension I think is interesting. I don't eat meat. I eat fish. I try to avoid most dairy but I don't always succeed. So I'm maybe the least of the hardcore, there are a lot of people way, way more hardcore than I am about this, but I do think it matters. For instance, in the United States, given our radical inequality here, there are food deserts where it's very difficult for especially vulnerable, economically vulnerable populations to get protein. I think somebody in that those circumstances is quite different from somebody who is just feasting on factory farm meat, day in and day out and who would have the resources to get protein and good tasting food.

John Dickson:

In 2004, the organisation called PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) launched a new campaign called 'Holocaust On Your Plate'. Advertising displays juxtaposed images of humans in Nazi concentration camps and animals in slaughterhouses and factory farms. The slogan read: "For animals, all people are Nazis."

In Germany, the campaign was banned. Germany's highest court stated that the displays would have made "the fate of the victims of the Holocaust appear banal and trivial."

PETA argued that the ban showed that it is the animals' suffering that is considered banal and trivial.

I'm with Germany here.

There is a problem that emerges in a merely evolutionary - godless - view of creation: if all living things are accidental products of time and space, there can be no argument for the intrinsic worth of one living being over another. So this naturalistic atheistic viewpoint allows two completely contradictory approaches, both of which are logical outworkings. One is to see animals as equally valuable to humans and therefore killing a chicken is like killing a human (there's no value difference!). The other sees no real intrinsic value in animals beyond my needs and the needs of society. So I can treat them how I like since I'm the one with the decision-making power.

Christianity's view rules out both. Christianity does teach a hierarchy. Only humans are made in the image of God. Only humans bear the responsibility to tend the earth on behalf of the Creator. Humans are more valuable than animals for this reason. However, this view rules out treating animals as mere commodities - as one version of the atheistic account would allow - for the simple reason that creation has been entrusted to us by the Creator. Animals have intrinsic value as creatures beloved of the creator and granted to our stewardship.

And this has real-world implications ...

**JD:** *Are you saying, so at a minimum, we should only eat the meat that we are confident has come from places that care for the animals and kill them humanely, that avoiding factory farms is, you know, an absolute, even though you don't like absolutes?*

**CC:** So I do think for the vulnerable person who has very little, other way to get protein, I think maybe not. I think if they can find access for protein that would be better, but many at least in this country do not. But that doesn't describe the vast majority of people in the developed west. The vast majority of people in the developed west do have access to alternatives, do have access to substitutes, to animals that they can research and see how they were treated. And I was about to say something about factory farming. That is where I put my focus. Not only when it comes to, you know, animal liberation or justice for animals, or however we wanna talk about a peaceful kingdom in animals, but also it's just interconnected with a host of other issues. I probably don't need to tell you that one of the most serious sources of carbon emissions for global climate change is factory farms.

In fact, if one is, you know, driving around an electric car, but feasting on the flesh of animals from factory farms, I just don't know what's going on with that person. Something has gone wrong. Also, at least in my country, a lot of the workers who are hired to work, on these farms are treated incredibly poorly, and certainly not paid a living wage often manipulated via human trafficking and certainly related to the complex issues we have with immigration in this country. So worker justice is a major, major, part of the concern as well. And then just straight up, no chase or economics, right? If you just do an analysis of how to get the most calories out of an acre of land, it isn't growing crops, feeding them to an animal and spending energy resources, growing the animal, and then eating part of the animal - that is just in fact, a really, really inefficient way to get calories out of an acre. So even if one is just taking the hardest of the hardcore economic kind of approaches here, there's really nothing about this that makes sense from these kinds of perspectives.

John Dickson:

So even if you wanted to take an attitude more akin to Aquinas, and focus on what our treatment of animals in factory farms says about *humans*, instead of considering the animals for their own sake, factory farming is still

just out and out harmful. It's a symptom of an all-consuming, consumer culture.

I admit I've had a growing sense that the meat I buy in the supermarket (and I love eating meat) matters to God. Especially in inflationary times, it's so tempting to go for the cheaper cut of steak, the cheapest chicken. But over the last few years, and especially since being introduced to thinkers like Charles, I feel I can't purchase the cheapest meat and poultry because it almost certainly comes from farms where animals were treated as having no value, where there was no human stewardship of creation, just a 'use' and 'abuse' of creation for our gain.

I don't feel I can be preachy about this, because it's not a conviction I have lived by for very long at all. But this thought has got hold of me (and my darling Buff before me). God loves animals. And, as a steward of his creation, as his image-bearer, I owe animals kindness.

**JD:** *So, are you ok with owning pets?*

**CC:** I mean, I would need to know more about how you treat your pets. I imagine so, but I really think this gets to the Genesis 2 thing I was talking about earlier, right? This idea is that God brought the animals to Adam because it is not good that he should be alone. And, so to the extent that we are fostering relationships along these lines, I think that's a good thing. (But) I don't think it should replace human relationships. I'm with Pope Francis on that, he came out with something that really made headlines a few weeks ago by saying, you know, too many people are replacing human relationships with their pets, which may or may not be true depending on where you live in the world, I guess, but it certainly may be true in Manhattan. But relationships with animals are good, and especially if one is taking a biblical perspective, those kinds of relationships are really good.

John Dickson:



Charles writes in his book that there is a culture war going on around animal rights.

“Many traditional Christians,” he writes “associate animal rights activism with a challenge to their fundamental beliefs about God and about the value of human life; their rejection of animal concerns becomes a way to defend their faith. Some in the secular community, by contrast, see Christian inconsistency with regard to animals as just another part of a religion they find primitive and foolish. The result? Traditional Christians cannot see any good coming from standing up for the dignity of animals, and atheists promoting animal rights see Christianity as a source of the problem rather than part of the solution.”

Man! that is so typical of the bifurcation going on in our culture!! We break into our tribal groups and don't concede anything to the other side.

But my progressive atheist friends have more than a point when they say Christians have sometimes been careless when it comes to animal rights. In trying to preserve the dignity of the human person, Christians have sometimes avoided the call to care for animals. On the other hand, I don't think a naturalistic, atheistic view of the universe can logically ground care for animals. Like I said earlier, if everything is an accident, sure, humans can't really claim to have greater intrinsic worth, but nor can we claim any intrinsic worth for anything—not for ourselves, not for the environment, nor for animals. Christianity provides a logical and ethical framework for the care of humans as made in the image of God and care for animals as creatures committed to our care on behalf of our shared Maker.

I thank God there are people like Charles Camosy trying to point the way.