

The Importance of Talking Animals in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Space Trilogy* with Respect to C.S. Lewis's Views on Animals

By: Eva Stolz



Animals had a great importance in C.S. Lewis' life. His love and interest in animals is apparent when examining personal anecdotes, his letters, essays, fictional works and Christian apologetics. Lewis was even known to prefer feeding the mice found in his house or office. Lewis most famously demonstrated his love of animals in his children's fantasy series, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and his adult science-fiction series, *The Space Trilogy*. Animals feature as key characters, demonstrate agency, and are portrayed in an egalitarian light. However, in both series, the conceptualized division between talking and non-talking non-human animals recurs. In *Narnia*, there are strict differences between "Talking Beasts" and "Dumb Beasts." In *The Space Trilogy*, the equivalent appears in the form of the "hnau" or the sentient and rational beings of the solar system. Consequently, how does Lewis's use of talking animals and non-talking animals reflect his views towards animal theology and perception? Through an examination of the characterizations in both series, the larger theological theories, and Lewis'

academic essays on vivisection, it can be argued that Lewis was indeed an ardent advocate of animals.

Talking Beasts of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the hnau of *The Space Trilogy* are distinguished from other creatures of their respective worlds. In the creation of Narnia in *The Magician's Nephew*, Aslan breathes life into the Talking Beasts and proclaims: "Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak" (Lewis, MG, 126). After having been gifted with speech and love, the new Talking Beasts are given the Dumb Beasts and told to "treat them gently and cherish them" (Lewis, MG, 128). Moreover, by Narnian values, only Dumb Beasts may be hunted and eaten, which is best demonstrated in *The Silver Chair*, when Puddleglum is horrified after having eaten a Talking Stag. Talking Animals also play key roles in the development of the plot. Therefore, in *The Chronicles of Narnia* Lewis both creates a universe with clear rules regarding talking versus non-talking animals and attributes character importance to numerous Narnian talking animals. In *The Space Trilogy*, the hnau are defined as the "species that had reached rationality" (Lewis, OSP, 70). Like in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the hnau are talking creatures and show *noblesse oblige*, in that they take charge of caring for the lesser creatures. The relation between hnau and humans is considerably highlighted in how Lewis portrays evil in characters. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, several hrossa are viciously killed by Weston and Devine, including Ransom's friend Hyoi, highlighting how the humans of earth are "bent." In both *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Space Trilogy*, the talking animal construction points to the importance of hierarchy, which becomes more apparent when examining Lewis's focus on tameness and resurrection with regards to talking animals.

The Talking Beasts and hnau exemplify Lewis's theory on animal theology in that they are tame and can be resurrected. According to Lewis, "the tame animal is in the deepest sense the

only ‘natural’ animal” (Lewis, PP, 138). The Narnian Talking Beasts are distinguished from the Dumb Beasts primarily in that they are tame animals. They can be petted by the human children, enjoy many forms of merriment, conduct themselves appropriately in court, and adhere to moral codes. The hnau in Malacandra and Perelandra are not only rational but also quite docile. In *Perelandra*, the dragon that Ransom encounters sleeping underneath a tree is illustrated much like a pet. This tameness is therefore attached to their relation to humans, whether that be tameness as characterized as human-like behavior or pet-like behavior. Lewis states in *The Problem of Pain* that animals owe their tameness “almost entirely to its master” (139). The connection between tame animals and pets ties into Lewis’s theory on animal resurrection.

Animal resurrection in *The Chronicles of Narnia* is particularly important in *The Last Battle*, in which Aslan only allows the Talking Beasts who had remained faithful to him enter His Country, i.e. Heaven. This has elicited criticism, arguing that Lewis’s view of animal resurrection was not favorable towards all animals (Linzey, Bassham). Moreover, Lewis believed tame animals could ascend to Heaven with their masters, and achieve immortality through the love shown by their human owners. Lewis’s restrictive view on animal resurrection and belief that animal salvation was tied to human agency, lend to the idea that humans place above animals. This suggests that Lewis was not so much of an animal advocate as the importance of animals with respect to plot and background would suggest.

Lewis illustrates his strong views against animal cruelty both in his fiction, and his essay on vivisection. In *The Magician’s Nephew*, Uncle Andrew is characterized as an evil figure through his experiments on guinea pigs. The Calormens in *The Horse and His Boy* are similarly painted through their mistreatment of horses. The nature of Evil is developed in *Perelandra* when Weston, when possessed by Satan, ruthlessly and needlessly mutilates frogs. Lewis thereby

equates animal cruelty as an evil act, part of the “Satanic corruption” of Man. Furthermore, Lewis passionately denounced vivisection throughout his academic life, often using the term “vivisectionist” as an insult. Lewis’s argued that “once the old Christian idea of a total difference in kind between man and beast has been abandoned, then no argument for experiments on animals can be found which is not also an argument for experiments on inferior men” (Lewis, 114). Vivisection for Lewis was part of his greater concern towards modern secular science and the rise of “scientism” in which “non-moral utilitarianism” justifies cruelty to both animals and other humans (Lewis, 115). Therefore, unlike in the fictional distinction between talking and non-talking animals, Lewis does not differentiate between classes of animals when he discusses animal cruelty.

It is important to note Lewis’s academic context when attempting to understand his views on animals. Animal consciousness and pain were largely assumed to be either of little import or inexistent (Rollin, 117-118). Moreover, in the 1950s, the ideas of animal welfare and salvation were relatively new. In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis underlines that animal consciousness and suffering remains “outside the range of knowledge”(129). Thus, considering both his emphasis on the “speculative” nature of animal theology and his avant-garde attitude towards animal welfare, the distinctions Lewis makes between talking versus non-talking animals versus humans in his fiction is understandable.

Personal accounts of Lewis as an animal lover, his frequent reference to animals in his letters and fictional works, and Lewis’s views against vivisection and animal cruelty, do indeed point to his support of more inclusive animal theology. Despite the distinction and adherence to the superior nature of tame animals, Lewis was a pioneer in the field of animal theology and welfare.

He attempted to open the door for a more expanded view of animal theology during a time in which ideas of animal resurrection and pain were considered to be eccentric and outrageous.

Bibliography

- Bassham, Gregory. "Some Dogs Go to Heaven: Lewis on Animal Salvation." *The Chronicles of Narnia and Philosophy: The Lion, the Witch, and the Worldview*. Edited by Gregory Bassham, Jerry Walls, William Irwin. Open Court, 2005.
- Lewis, C.S. "Vivisection." *God in the Dock*. London, United Kingdom: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970.
- Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*. New York, New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1977.
- Lewis C.S. *The Magician's Nephew*. New York, New York: HarperCollins, 1998.
- Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*. New York, New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Lewis, C.S. *Out of the Silent Planet*. New York, New York: Scribner, 2003.
- Lewis, C.S. *Perelandra*. New York, New York: Scribner, 2003.
- Linzey, Andrew. "C.S. Lewis's theology of animals." *Anglican Theological Review*, 80 no. 1 (1998).
- Rollin, Bernard. *The Unheeded Cry: Animal Consciousness, Animal Pain, and Science*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.