C.S. Lewis on Animals

Although C.S. Lewis is perhaps best known for his works of fantasy, he penned several nonfiction works, which provide readers with fascinating explorations on moral and religious issues and serve as a lens into his soul. One of these works, *The Problem of Pain*, discusses the implications of suffering in a Christian context, and a later chapter examines pain experienced by animals. Throughout this chapter, Lewis makes several claims regarding animal suffering that reveal his feelings towards non-human animals, and as such one would expect these beliefs to pervade through all of his other works. This is in fact the case, and Lewis' novels are rife with animal characters, both non-human and anthropomorphized, that are described and treated in a manner which corresponds to his writings on non-human suffering.

Lewis frames the chapter with three questions, the first one being whether animals suffer at all. To answer this question, Lewis first distinguished between animals which can reasonably be considered sentient, such as apes, and those which lack a nervous system, such as oysters. However, even if higher-functioning animals are sentient, Lewis is hesitant to call them conscious, explaining that although they may experience the same stimuli as humans, it is entirely unclear whether they recognize the temporal relationship between sensations or if they are unable to comprehend when one event has stopped and when another begins. If the latter is true, then they cannot be "timeful," an ability endowed to humans by their souls, and as a result they cannot truly experience pain. Lewis repeatedly reaffirms that these ideas are simply conjectures, but if animals do not have consciousness then he seems to imply that their pain has no moral significance.

Another of these questions asks what possible justification there could be for an omnipotent god to allow animals to suffer when they are incapable of deserving pain. As Lewis

thinks animals are not conscious beings, he concurrently believes that they cannot experience immortality, as organisms that cannot perceive time would not be able to truly fathom and embrace the afterlife. Therefore, Lewis explains, it is erroneous to think of animals as individually responsible and they should instead be viewed in the context of their masters. In this sense, animals can be considered almost as "a part" of their owners to the point where the fates of a human and his pet are intertwined. This view removes the problematic implications of having animals be individuals with unique experiences, so instead their pain can be viewed through how successful their owners are in domesticating these creatures. One obvious flaw in this line of reasoning is that it does not apply to wild animals and those that never come into contact with humankind. In response, Lewis first cites the anthropocentric nature of Christian theology and therefore reasons that all life on Earth is connected to and meant to serve man. However, Lewis does note that there are certain animals to which humans have attributed personality traits (such as the lion and its regality), and if these anthropomorphizations are indeed correct, then these beings would be granted a rudimentary immortality that would preserve their "self" entirely in these humanistic traits.

Lewis tends to treat animals less as individuals capable of truly experiencing pain and more as objects whose existence is only relevant in the context of humanity. This does not mean that Lewis actively endorses causing animals pain, but at the same time he remains unconvinced that they can experience pain at all. Further, he believes that animals do not have souls and are unable to exist in the afterlife as humans can. In his other works, it is clear that Lewis approaches animals who are depicted as having no consciousness with the same mentality that he lays out in this chapter. However, the issue is complicated by characters that are either only part-animal (and part-human) or are clearly conscious by Lewis' standards.

The Silver Chair, the fourth novel in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, has a handful of references to more commonplace animals, such as the dogs that chase after the main characters as the latter escape from the Autumn Feast, and as such these dogs are only mentioned through their capacity to aid the giants in capturing the protagonists. However, this work complicates the paradigm due to the introduction of intelligent and conscious animal characters that have no equal in the real world. For instance, the Lady of the Green Kirtle (or the Green Lady) has the capacity to morph into a serpent, meaning that as she is still a human she would not be expected to instantly become subservient upon transforming. However, it seems that when she becomes an animal, her personality is reduced to a single character trait, evil, as she does not speak and only attempts to murder the protagonists while in this form. This seems to recall Lewis' views on wild animals; as the serpent is known for its malice, Lewis believes that its entire existence is defined by that characteristic, so it follows that a human who became a snake would lose all other aspects of his/her personality, and only his/her maliciousness would remain. Another character in the book, Puddleglum, is of the Marsh-wiggle race, and while Marsh-wiggles have an amphibious appearance, these humanoids seem to be far closer to humans than to non-human animals. In fact, Puddleglum is shown to be able to perceive pain exactly as humans do when he burns himself and can comprehend that this pain provides him with a moment of clarity. Even so, Puddleglum's only function in the novel is to guide Jill and Eustace and serve as the voice of reason. Rarely (if ever) is Puddleglum given the opportunity to have his own ambitions, and all of his actions are judged by how useful they are in helping the human protagonists complete their quest.

C.S. Lewis' other prominent fantasy series, *The Space Trilogy*, exemplifies his thoughts on animals. In the trilogy's first novel, *Out of the Silent Planet*, the planet of Mars (Malacandra)

features three distinct intelligent races, the hrossa, the seroni, and the pfifltriggi. Interestingly enough, all three races exist in harmony and unlike man, no one race believes that it is superior. In this sense, it would seem that none of these species are corrupted, which corroborates Lewis' belief in the original beast. In this world there was no early ancestor of these races that attempted to challenge the creator, and therefore they are unfamiliar with the concepts of sin and suffering. In *Perelandra*, the second novel in the trilogy, the setting (the planet of Venus or Perelandra) is ruled by one race of what are essentially humans. The novel goes on to explain how Ransom enables these beings to avoid reenacting the story of Adam and Eve, but the fact that the animals of this planet are entirely subservient means that the planet must have also already avoided the story of the original beast. Lewis hypothesized that evil was introduced to animals on Earth through this rebellious beast, so in an ideal world, animals would not suffer as this story of rebellion never took place.

Lewis' Christian beliefs have a profound impact on all of his works, and these beliefs affect how he portrays non-human characters, be they non-conscious, conscious, or even humanoid. It seems that Lewis' belief in human exceptionalism makes him no better than Weston in *Out of the Silent Planet*, who fights for the continued existence of man even when he cannot deny that man is an inferior being. Fascinatingly, when Lewis introduces himself as a character in this novel, he is depicted as an ally of Ransom even though one could argue that his religion might incline him to side with the novel's villain. It is not hard to imagine that Lewis' views on the inferiority of other species would seem as illogical to the Oyeresu as Weston's views on the existence of man, yet in writing the novel Lewis never actively draws a connection between the two. This is not to say that C.S. Lewis would unambiguously be a villain in his own novel, but from a certain perspective it can be argued that this may in fact be the case.