I think therefore I love

On being a human kind of animal

Margaret Atkins

HOW DO YOU DEFINE A HUMAN BEING? Let us imagine the entry in a Martian scientist's *Handbook of terrestrial animals:*

> *Homo Sapiens*
> **Identification** Hairless ape. Walks upright. Size variable. A variety of shades of skin colour, sometimes difficult to see because of the animal's unexplained habit of covering itself in brightly coloured materials.
> **Behaviour** Forms pairs, often but not always stable. Brood of one or more young, cared for by adults for unusually extended period. An extremely noisy animal, although many calls and songs appear to have no communicative value. Erratic, frequent, but apparently purposeless, migrations of individuals and small groups is a striking feature. Builds large and varied colonies.

The Martian handbook does not (so far as I know) actually exist. But serious biologists sometimes try to deflate our pretentiousness by arguing that there is nothing special about the human animal; after all, we share almost all of our genetic material with our cousin the chimpanzee. Since Darwin, we have learnt that we are no more 'unique' than are other species.[1] This point is aimed at an older tradition which sharply distinguishes human beings from other animals (and sometimes forgets the crucial word 'other'). Augustine and Aquinas, for example, accepted the common view that only human beings were rational. I want to argue that modern biological knowledge does indeed make it impossible to maintain a simple contrast between 'rational' humans and 'dumb' animals, and that our animal nature is crucial even for our own rationality. On the other hand, if we were only 'just another animal', we could not understand even that fact, let alone the world-view of a Darwinian. In fact, the biblical story that we share our nature as creatures with the amazing variety of other animals, and yet are uniquely equipped consciously to love and worship God, offers a fuller understanding of our nature and our relationship to other animals than either a narrowly 'Thomistic' or a narrowly 'biological' account.

Finally, I want to argue that Christian theology has nothing to fear from the compelling evidence of the sophisticated intelligence of creatures like wolves and dolphins; instead, we should celebrate with gratitude the astonishing richness of the created order.

Is 'reason' distinctively human?

We now know more about animals than Charles Darwin, let alone St Augustine, could have dreamed. Experts in ethology (that is, the study of animal behaviour in its natural context), men and women such as Jane Goodall, who has spent a life-time observing chimpanzees in the wild, can provide us with detailed accounts of the complex social lives of intelligent land animals.[2] We are even beginning to discover the mysterious family lives of whales and dolphins, much of which takes place in ocean depths inaccessible to the researchers.[3] If Augustine and Aquinas, who both had great respect for empirical evidence, were to return to earth today, they would be the first to agree that we can no longer distinguish rigidly between 'rational' and 'non-rational' animals, nor claim that while human beings 'act', other animals are 'acted upon'.[4]

To see this more clearly, we need to ask, 'What does "rational" mean?' Is it not the capacity for intelligent, purposive activity? Is it true, then, that while human beings may organize their lives around structured goals, animals merely respond blindly to whatever stimulus comes next? Anyone who has tried to protect a nutbag from a squirrel might doubt this. Ethologists can provide a wealth of carefully documented examples: the adult wolves who organized a mock hunt to introduce their young to their craft; the elephants who return months later to caress the skeleton of a dead parent (we do not have to understand exactly what they are thinking to see that their actions have a purpose); the meerkats who after months of being accompanied by a researcher decided that he was one of their troupe and tried to leave the panic-stricken 'expert' to babysit – returning rapidly when they realized that he was refusing to take his turn on the rota![5]

Aquinas thought that animals were acted upon by instinct, and that this made them rather like slaves. It is often argued that whereas human activity is freely chosen, animals are responding like automata to external stimuli. I am puzzled by the suggestion that the complex and flexible behaviour of, say, the squirrel or the meerkat could be entirely unfree; surely they are selecting intelligently from a range of actions open to them. The point becomes clearer when we see what automatic

responses actually look like. Konrad Lorenz describes his surprise when one day his normally friendly and sane jackdaws began attacking him. He quickly realized their target: the pair of black swimming trunks he was carrying. He discovered that picking up a black floppy object does indeed trigger automatic aggression in jackdaws. However, biologists can identify such reflex reactions precisely because most of the activity of the creatures they observe is, by contrast, flexibly and intelligently responsive to their environment.[6] In other words, they normally act with some freedom; specific stimuli, however, can trigger an automatic response (as indeed they can in human beings, a fact that advertisers well know). To act freely is not simply to choose, but to understand how your choice fits into your wider purposes. We do not have to posit a sharp contrast between free and unfree actions or agents; there is a spectrum ranging from the fully informed, carefully pondered choice from a range of actions to the jerking of a tapped knee. There is no reason to deny such freedom to many of the activities of the more intelligent mammals and birds.

It is not true, then, that all other animals lack either intelligence or freedom. Some people have responded to this discovery by searching desperately for another definition of 'reason' that will do the job of separating us clearly from the rest. Perhaps we are the only animal that is self-aware? But that will not do; chimpanzees understand (and make jokes with) mirrors. Are we, then, the only tool-users? Wild chimps not only use plant stems to fish ants out of anthills, but carefully select and prepare their tools; their young learn from the adults how to do this.[7] Luckily, there is no need to search fruitlessly for a definition of 'reason' that separates us from the rest. Our own intelligence is not threatened by being shared.

On thinking like an animal[8]

Question: Which is the odd one out? A: Human being; wolf; dolphin; millipede. B: Chameleon; human being; jackdaw; dog.
Answer: It depends which qualities strike you as relevant: social organization; ability to swim; understanding of mathematics; visual awareness; keenness of scent; speed of reaction, and so on. We share many important characteristics with a range of other animals. Just as importantly, other animals cannot be lumped together as 'like' each other. Each is a unique complex of potentials and abilities, which it can develop and exercise more or less freely.

It is not surprising that we share many of the features of our rationality with other creatures, since our rationality is closely tied to the pre-rational elements of our own natures. All highly intelligent animals and birds – so far as we know – live complex, co-operative lives that depend on identifying each other as individuals; these include geese, jackdaws, wolves, wild dogs, elephants, many apes and monkeys, and, apparently, whales and dolphins. Mary Midgley comments:

> It is really remarkable that these very diverse species should have so similar a structure to their social life – *that there should be no equally intelligent species with quite a different one*, for instance something much less emotional, more egalitarian, efficient and impersonal, on the model of the social insects. Those who think of *intelligence* as a property on its own, the sole hallmark of a higher development, ought to be puzzled by this.[9]

We are rational in the way that we are as a result of the emotional structure needed for our sort of animal life. Our young are born vulnerable, and need looking after for an unusually long time. This is an extremely difficult task, which we achieve because we have the settled desires that enable us to stick to the task, to co-operate with one another in negotiating a complex environment in order to find food and shelter, to band together against attackers, and so on. Our co-operative life requires us to identify and understand each other as individuals, so that we know who we can rely upon, and how. The basic glue of our social life is our enjoyment of each other's company – something as true of a goose or a monkey as of a human being. Our intelligence is not a sophisticated accessory to the system of our humanity. Nor, on the other hand, is it to be identified with our humanity, as if our emotions could be treated as optional extras. We can think at a sophisticated level because first we could love, in a way shared in their different styles by the other social animals.

Apes do not read Darwin, nor pray

Did the Martian scientist, then, get it right? Not entirely. He, she or it was hampered in observing us (just as many human observers of other animals have been hampered) by the inability to understand our communication. It could only make sense of signs that referred directly to biological goods such as breeding and feeding. It failed to understand, therefore, our languages, our art, our music, our sport, our mathematics, our philosophy, our history, and even our science. (Consequently it

could not see the point of most of our travelling.) These are things we could not possess if our gift for symbolic communication were less highly developed. No other ape, of course, could describe itself as 'just another ape', because no other ape could understand Darwin. Perhaps we can reinstate our conviction of our own superiority after all.

Perhaps. But we cannot stop there. The search for beauty and order that underpins art, science and philosophy alike depends upon a recognition that there is something greater than human intelligence, which human beings must respect and obey if they are to discover the truth. Religious people believe that the source of that order, and the source of our capacity to understand it, is God. Like all other animals, as Psalm 104 so eloquently reminds us, we are dependent on the Creator for our existence:

> Thou makest springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, they give drink to every beast of the field; the wild asses quench their thirst.
> By them the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches . . .
> Thou dost cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread to strengthen man's heart.
> The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon which he planted.
> In them the birds build their nests; the stork has her home in the fir trees.
> The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the badgers . . .
> The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.
> When the sun rises, they get them away and lie down in their dens.
> Man goes forth to his work and to his labour until the evening.
> O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom thou hast made them all.

According to this biblical perspective we share the most fundamental religious truth about ourselves with all other created things. Unlike them, we alone can know this and consciously respond in love to our Creator. That is why our rationality matters, as Aquinas himself understood well. When he discussed humanity as being in the image of God, he made it quite clear what our 'intellectual nature' is for:

> Since human beings are said to be in the image of God according to their intellectual nature, they are most in the image of God in so far as

> their intellectual nature most imitates God. But our intellectual nature imitates God most in this, that God understands and loves Godself.[10]

Aquinas goes on to say that we are in the image of God to different degrees in so far as we have the potential for, or the imperfect or perfect practice of, knowing and loving God. On Thomas' own account, then, the traditional formula, 'Man is a rational animal', seems rather thin. Perhaps we could improve upon the definition ourselves: '*Homo sapiens*: an intelligent mammal that prays.'

What symbols are for

I have been surprised more than once by the reactions of even educated Christians to the suggestion that we are not the only intelligent animals. Many seem afraid that once we admit that, the whole edifice of Christian theology will collapse around us. Perhaps we need to look more closely at what the old contrast was used for, what parts of the theological building it did in fact support. The point of saying that we are unlike other animals has normally been moral, not biological; in other words, the claim has not been focused on animals, but on us. Animals have functioned as symbols for 'what-we-ought-not-to-be-like'. We declare that human beings are not like, say, lions because we want to remind ourselves not to rage and roar and kill. (We do not mean human beings should not care for their young affectionately.) It is just as poetic, and no more scientific, to state that we are rational 'unlike other animals' as it is to urge one another to imitate the industriousness of an ant or the gentleness of a dove. We used to use other human beings in the same symbolic fashion. The point of saying, 'We are not savages' was not careful anthropological observation, but moral exhortation: here, at least, let us behave in a civilized way!

The danger of this method is that we are likely to mistake our symbols for reality, and close our eyes to the evidence that many 'primitive' peoples lead well ordered, peaceable and cultured lives, or that many other animals behave intelligently. But we do not need the contrast to make the point; if it turned out (improbably) that bottlenose dolphins are capable of differential calculus, that fact would not make human mathematicians innumerate. If nightingales could be taught to sing Schubert, that would make human beings no less musical. We are rational animals, with our own distinctive intelligence whether or not, and however far, we share our characteristics with others. If God, in his goodness, has chosen to bestow his gifts widely, we have no more cause

than the labourers in the vineyard to be fearful or resentful. As the householder replied to their grumbles, 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' (Luke 20:15).

The only area of traditional theology that might need a radical overhaul on account of our new understanding of animals concerns the treatment of animals themselves. (This should come as no surprise to traditionalists; kindness to animals has been a mark of sanctity from the earliest times.) Perhaps we will discover that we need to repent of carelessly destroying the habitats of wild animals, or of treating farm animals as if they were inanimate pawns in the game of commerce, or of imprisoning and isolating sensitive and social animals to use in medical experiments, or of the wasteful and unnecessary killing of animals for food. If so, why should this threaten the structures of Christian theology any more than our realization that slavery is unacceptable? Instead, perhaps, like the abolition of slavery, it could enrich our lives.

Fellow-worshippers are no threat

Suppose, however, it turns out that whales or elephants or gorillas could knowingly worship God. I myself think this unlikely; it is worth discussing, though, because some people seem genuinely frightened by the idea. If human beings are not so special after all, then is not the biblical story of God's care for humanity undermined? (I am not sure why this seems plausible; we do not assume that parents think each child less special because they have several children.) So let us take the idea seriously for a moment: suppose that experts on elephants have discovered that their burial rituals include something that can only be explained as prayer.

It is not the first time that the question of other worshipping animals has been raised. It used to be discussed in the context of space exploration. If there turned out to be intelligent living creatures on Mars or Alpha Centauri, it was asked, would that invalidate the claims of Christianity? How could Christ's incarnation as man be for their sake as well, if they were not human? Or if it was not for them, how could the Gospel be universal? The answer that C.S. Lewis explored in his science fiction stories *Out of the silent planet* and *Perelandra* was that only this world had fallen, and therefore the incarnation was needed only here; from the perspective of the unfallen worlds in what we call 'outer space', our earth is the 'silent planet', the only one where the 'Bent One' is in

partial control. As we have no need to believe that other intelligent terrestrial animals are fallen, the same answer might be appropriate in their case: they would not need God to take flesh in their form. Other writers have imagined that Christ could in any case have become incarnate for other creatures in a form appropriate to their needs and understanding; perhaps the Word of God is such that it can be fully expressed in a variety of bodily forms. (Our sacramental understanding of the Eucharist might be developed as an analogy here.) If our fellow-creatures were to develop so that one day they too could consciously know and love God, it would not be our business to limit in advance the possible ways that God might speak to them.

There is no need to fear our potential fellow-worshippers. Rather, we might rejoice, with the poet Alice Meynell, in the possibility of one day discovering richer understandings still of God's dealings with his creatures.

> Nor, in our little day,
> May His devices with the heavens be guessed,
> His pilgrimage to thread the Milky Way
> Or His bestowals there be manifest.
>
> But in the eternities,
> Doubtless we shall compare together, hear
> A million alien Gospels, in what guise
> He trod the Pleiades, the Lyre, the Bear.
>
> O, be prepared, my soul!
> To read the inconceivable, to scan
> The million forms of God those stars unroll
> When, in our turn, we show to them a Man.[11]

If a religious dolphin could talk, perhaps we would share enough experience and practice with him to be able to understand him, if not now, then in the world to come.

All that, of course, as far as the present state of evolution and our present biological knowledge goes, is fantasy. Yet, leaving science fiction aside, there is a solid tradition in the Bible that each creature worships the Creator in its own way. 'O all you works of the Lord, O bless the Lord!', runs the refrain of the *Benedicite* (Daniel 3:57-92), the song of the three young men in the fiery furnace, which is used in Morning Office every feast-day. Gerard Manley Hopkins reflected on this theme:

> The sun and the stars shining glorify God. They stand where he placed them, they move where he bid them. The heavens declare the glory of God. They glorify God, *but they do not know it*. The birds sing to him, the thunder speaks of his terror, the lion is like his strength, the sea is like his greatness, the honey is like his sweetness; they are something like him, they make him known, they tell of him, they give him glory, but they do not know they do, they do not know him, they are brute things that only think of food or think of nothing.[12] This then is poor praise, faint reverence, slight service, dull glory. Nevertheless, what they can do *they always do*.
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> But AMIDST THEM ALL IS MAN, man and the angels. We will speak of man. Man was created. Like the rest of them to praise, reverence, and serve God; to give him glory. He does so, even by his being, beyond all visible creatures . . . But man can know God, *can mean to give him glory*. This then was why he was made, to give God glory and to mean to give it; to praise God freely, willingly, to reverence him, gladly to serve him.[13]

Whether or not they know it, other creatures share with us in praising him: 'each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness'.[14] If our own type of rational animality allows us to be conscious of doing this, that gift, as Hopkins clearly saw, is a responsibility as much as it is a privilege. At the present time, we are far more likely to abuse that responsibility by forgetting that we are created than by forgetting that we are rational. It is just as important, therefore, to remember what we share with our fellow-creatures, as what distinguishes us from them.

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NOTES

1 There are now many excellent studies available of the implications of our new knowledge of animals for our understanding of human beings. Mary Midgley's *Beast and man* (Methuen, 1980) has become a classic and this article is heavily indebted to it. See also her book *The ethical primate* (Routledge, 1994); Stephen R. L. Clark, *The political animal* (Routledge, 1999); and Frans de Waal, *Good natured* (Harvard University Press, 1996), which is richly informed by his expert knowledge of primate behaviour.

2 See, for example, her book *In the shadow of man* (Collins, 1971).

3 See David W. MacDonald, 'Why do dolphins sponge?', *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 April 2001.

4 For Augustine's and Aquinas' understandings of the place of human beings within the animal hierarchy see the following descriptions:

> 'For among those things which have some measure of existence, and which are distinct from the God by Whom they were made, those which have life are placed above those which do not have life; and those that have the power of generation, or even of desiring it, are placed above those which lack this capacity. And, among living things, the sentient are placed above those which do not have sensation: animals above trees for instance. And, among the sentient, the intelligent are placed above those which do not have intelligence: men, for example, are above cattle.' Augustine, *City of God* XI.16, translated by R. W. Dyson (Cambridge University Press, 1998).
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> 'We must say that speechless animals and plants do not have rational life which allows them to lead themselves. Rather, they are always led by a certain natural instinct, as if by someone else. This is a sign that they are by nature slaves, adapted for the uses of other beings.' Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2a 2ae, Question 64, Article 1 ad 2. Aquinas himself, unlike some of his followers, was too intelligent to be consistent here: elsewhere he recognizes that other animals need imagination and intention. *Summa theologiae*, 1a 78.4, Response.

5 For wolves see Midgley, *Beast and man*, pp 278-279; for elephants see de Waal, *Good natured*, pp 53-54, and picture before p 26. I read about the meerkats in a *Radio Times* article about a programme on this naturalist's work, but I do not know the reference.

6 Konrad Lorenz, *Studies in human and animal behaviour* (Methuen, 1970), p 8.

7 Jane Goodall, *The chimpanzees of Gombe* (Harvard University Press, 1986), ch 18.

8 For a full and brilliant exposition of the argument of this section see Mary Midgley, *Beast and man*, ch 10 and 11.

9 *Beast and man*, p 338.

10 *Summa theologiae*, 1a, Question 93, Article 4, Response.

11 From 'Christ in the universe', *The poems of Alice Meynell* (Oxford University Press, 1940), pp 126-127.

12 I suspect that Hopkins too would have been fascinated by our new understanding of quite how complex are the thoughts of some of our fellow-creatures.

13 Christopher Devlin (ed), *The sermons and devotional writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford University Press, 1959), p 239.

14 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 339.