Reviews

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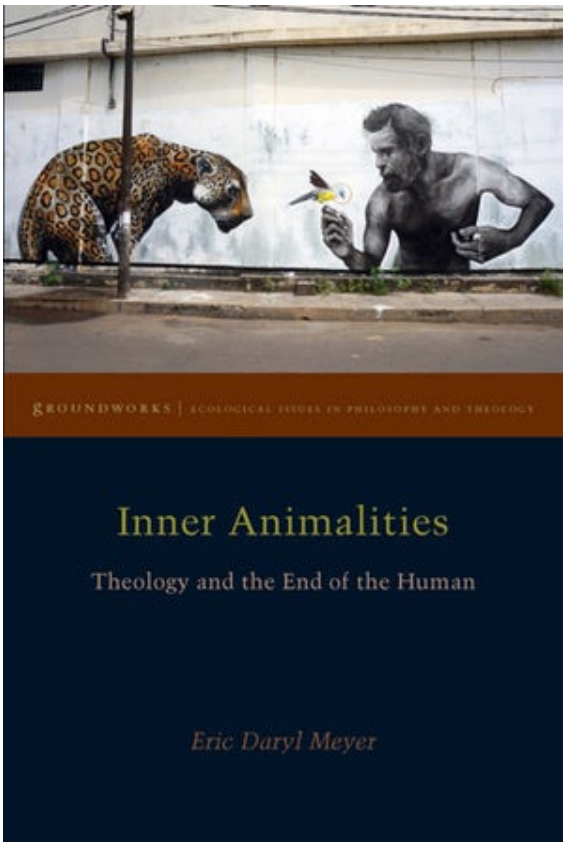
A Theology of Animality

Eric Daryl Meyer, *Inner Animalities: Theology and the End of the Human.* GROUNDWORKS: ECOLOGICAL ISSUES IN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. 224 pp. $115.00 hc; $32.00 pb; 31.99 e-book.



Eric Daryl Meyer's *Inner Animalities* is an excellent examination of and challenge to the traditional status of animality in Christian theological discourse, from early times to today. Drawing on a number of scholars, such as Derrida and Agamben, Meyer astutely unpacks the logical consequences of various theologies and engages his own theological imagination to better account for the animality of human beings. His book consists of an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion, and the endmatter includes acknowledgments, endnotes, a thorough bibliography, and a helpful index.

The introduction outlines the contours of the debates on theology and animality. One of the goals of much of Christian theology in the past two millennia is to distinguish "proper humanity" — the attributes of humans that normatively define humanity itself as an ideal along with the conditions that sustain it — from "human animality" — the attributes humans hold in common with other species (2–5). This distinction is important not only because it reinforces a divide between *Homo sapiens* and nonhuman animals but also because it draws a dividing line within humanity itself. Human animality thus poses a problem to Christian writers who advocate "anthropological exceptionalism" (3), as they can't deny the commonalities that humans and other animals share in reproduction, alimentation, elimination, etc. Because the construction of this chasm between humanity and animality results in ecological "irresponsibility," questioning the ontological status of this divide has profound ethical significance (7–8). Meyer's book provides analyses of how various theologians attempt to circumvent the problem of human animality and proposals for how theologians today might avoid such anthropological exceptionalism. The project proceeds in two parts: a historical part focusing mostly on figures from fourth-century Christianity (Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa) and a constructive part that creatively rethinks human animality.

Chapter 1 begins the historical portion of the book with a discussion of Gregory of Nazianzus. In Gregory's theological anthropology the mind (the properly human portion of the person) must tame and purify the flesh (the animal portion of the person); the possession and operation of such a mind institutes a division within the human itself but also between humans (who have a mind) and animals (who don't). This anthropology is laid bare in Gregory's reading of the Logos in John 1, which he associates with *gnōsis* ("knowledge," a faculty of the mind) rather than *zōē* ("life," which is far too close to *zōon*, "animal") — a move that enacts "a subtle erasure of animality" (24). Meyer, however, finds Gregory's excision of human animality incomplete, as, for Gregory, fleshly existence was necessary to fill the earthly realm with praise of God to mirror the heavens' praise. In addition, the animal part of the human is mutable, in contrast to the immaterial part, which is more stable; without this animal pliability, the purification of the human would not be possible. As a result, in spite of Gregory's disavowals, human animality is necessary for the provision of grace.

Chapter 2 turns to Gregory of Nyssa, whose "anagogical exegesis" of the Song of Songs directs the reader's attention upward from the fleshly eroticism of the poem toward the immaterial God (42). As with the previous Gregory, Meyer finds Gregory of Nyssa's attempts to excise animality from his anthropology to be ultimately unsuccessful. Whereas Gregory of Nazianzus's construction of humanity requires animal mutability,

Gregory of Nyssa's construction relies on desire, also found within the animal portion of the human. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Meyer shows that animality for Gregory not an omittable waste but rather a supplement that fulfills the originary lack in proper humanity itself, providing the very desire needed to draw the soul to God.

Chapter 3 moves beyond the two Gregories to show the diminution of human animality endemic in contemporary theological discourse. Meyer examines a number of theologians from the past century or so, demonstrating their common tendency of classifying "openness to God" (variously defined and described) as a uniquely human capacity (59). Meyer discusses Karl Rahner and Wolfhart Pannenberg in more detail in the second half of the chapter, drawing out Rahner's focus on "transcendentality" as the human/animal dividing line (70) and Pannenberg's argument for "exocentricity," i.e., the human ability to go beyond one's *Umwelt* (77–78). All of these theologies represent an anthropology of human exceptionalism that harms nonhuman animals as well as disadvantages those humans who are deemed more "animal."

In Part 2 (chapters 4–6), Meyer turns from a historical analysis to a constructive argument, finding sites in biblical texts and theological traditions where the human/animal boundary can be blurred and challenged. He begins chapter 4 with an introduction to the work on animality by Agamben, Derrida, and Deleuze and Guattari and then proceeds with his argument that "human beings enjoy the greatest proximity to God in moments of commonality and connection with nonhuman creatures" (93). Traditional theology has relied on Genesis 1's notion of the *imago Dei* to imbue humanity with sovereign authority over animality, but Meyer instead finds an alternative view of sovereignty in Daniel 4. There, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has to reckon with his mistaken and arrogant assertion of sovereignty as a human by being transformed into an animal by Yahweh — a transformation that in Meyer's view "seems to function rehabilitatively" as he sees from an animal perspective (102). To further explore this animal perspective, Meyer argues that in the "kingdom of God" that Jesus announces the identity of a person is "determined from the perspective of the dispossessed" (106). Drawing again from Derrida and his discussion of his cat's gaze, Meyer imagines how various "dispossessed" nonhuman animals might view humans from their own perspectives.

Chapter 5 turns to the origins of human sin in the Fall. In contrast to many traditional theologies that associate sinfulness with animality, Meyer instead reads the Fall in Genesis 3 alongside Agamben, viewing it as not an embrace of animality but rather a

disavowal of it, so that the fall *of* humanity is simultaneously the fall *into* humanity (128). The characteristics that come to mark human exceptionalism, such as the knowledge of good and evil, are in truth pretenses that separate the Edenic humans from the animal community meant for their companionship. The first sin is thus an arrogant claim to a sovereignty that harms all animals — human and nonhuman. Christianity's solution to this dilemma, in Meyer's reading, is the "life" that the "Logos" brings in John 1. In this view, Jesus's eternal life (*zōē aiōnios*) can be regarded as "animality without end" (144). Jesus becomes human in order to show to humans their own animality.

Chapter 6 deals with the exclusion of animality in traditional Christian eschatological imagination. For Meyer's purposes, because digestion and sexuality are biological processes associated with animals, theologians have imagined the resurrected human body with no need for food or sex and thus absent of these signs of human animality. Meyer argues instead that eating and digestion are not dirty processes to be thrown out in the eschaton but rather are consistent with the practice of the Eucharist. In the "eternal animality" of the eschaton (159) the sharing and consuming of flesh will occur freely among God's creatures, including humans, but just as the partaking of bread and wine does not destroy Christ, neither will this eschatological consumption destroy the resurrected creation. Similarly, while sexuality is typically excised from the Christian vision of heaven, Meyer highlights the frequent use of marital metaphors in biblical texts used to portray union with the deity. As a result, Meyer presents a resurrection in which animality is embraced and transformed rather than ignored or excluded.

Meyer's conclusion returns to the "problem of human animality." The destruction of the environment and the suffering of nonhuman animals are consequences of a construction of the self built on the rejection of one's own animality. In order to rectify these issues, Christian theology must turn away from its emphasis on human exceptionalism and learn to accept the animality of the human.

My few critiques of this book stem more from desire for expansion than disagreement. For instance, as Meyer introduces Jesus's criterion for judgment in chapter 4 as "solidarity with the dispossessed" (104), he repeats Matthew 25's distinction between the faithful "sheep" and the unfaithful "goats" but does not dwell on this animalizing figuration. How successful can Jesus's message of solidarity be if goats get the short shrift here? Could this rhetorical use of caprine imagery affect the lives of real flesh-and-blood goats? In addition, I find Meyer's case in chapter 5 for the Fall as humans' separation from animals persuasive, and I would be interested to see what he would make of a reference to the Epic of Gilgamesh, a possible parallel text in which the wild

man Enkidu gains humanity but loses his connection to animality; could this strengthen Meyer's argument? Finally, chapter 6's discussion of eschatological sexual expression brings to mind many questions that could be explored further. Considering the fact that the human guardians of companion animals often modify their sexual organs (through spaying or neutering), I wonder if these surgical procedures proceed as such into the afterlife or if the animal body reverts to a more original form. And what might this say about the relationship between humans and their pets, either way? Perhaps a dialogue with theologies of trans and intersex perspectives might add to this discussion of eschatological sexual anatomy. Furthermore, if the digestive function of humans and other animals in the resurrection means that "creatures consume one another" in eucharistic fellowship with one another and the divine (159), to what degree does this sharing occur sexually as well? Is a human's resurrected sexuality directed only to other humans and God, or to the rest of creation also? In the same vein, I wonder, how literally might one take the church's marriage to the lamb (163)?

These possibilities for further exploration aside, Meyer's book is a coherent and thought-provoking treatment of Christian theology's relationship to nonhuman animals and animality. His treatment of historical views and their connections to more recent theologies is informative, and he deftly shows how these theologies can be undone or imagined differently. I strongly recommend this book to theologians and biblical scholars looking for creative explorations of animals and animality in sacred traditions; additionally, animal studies scholars and environmentalists who may be unsure of the utility of Christian traditions for the fostering of ecological justice will certainly find helpful resources here. This is a welcome contribution to the study of theology and animals alike.