Michael Gilmour, *Animals in the Writings of C.S. Lewis*

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Animals are everywhere in C. S. Lewis's writings, but have rarely been taken seriously. They are everywhere in the Narnia stories, of course, but are also prominent in his science-fiction trilogy, his poetry, and feature more frequently than one might expect in his religious writings. In this book, Michael Gilmour provides a valuable service in gathering them up, presenting them for our attention, and reflecting on their significance.

Perhaps the animals in the Narnia story have been overlooked because animals are ubiquitous in literature written for children — though the reasons for that merit further attention, too. Perhaps the animals in Lewis's religious writings has been overlooked because they were thought to be an eccentric topic for a theologian. Neither is a sufficient cause for the neglect, however, and Gilmour's book makes a strong argument that paying attention to animals is important both because Lewis contributes to the work of understanding the place of animals in a Christian thought-world and because it helps inform an understanding of Lewis's writings and person.

One welcome element of the book is Gilmour's inclusion of the real animals in Lewis's life alongside his textual ones. Lewis's journals show that he was fascinated by the animals he encountered and distressed when he witnessed their suffering. We meet his childhood pets Peter the canary and Tim the Irish terrier, the deer in the gardens of Magdalene College, and Lewis's formidable Aunt Lily who was a staunch opponent of vivisection. Lewis's home in Headington Quarry was an 'eccentric Noah's ark' according to guests, occupied by dogs, cats, chickens, badgers, foxes, rabbits, birds, snakes and frogs. Their presence seems likely to be thanks to the affections of Janie Moore, with whom Lewis shared the house and who may have been the inspiration for the 'Great Lady' in *The Great Divorce*, of

whom he wrote 'Every beast and bird that came near her hand had its place in her love. In her they became themselves.'

It turns out that there is a biographical link between Lewis's Christian faith and love for animals: Gilmour notes that Lewis became a Christian at Whipsnade Zoo, where he was overwhelmed with the sense of 'almost Eden come again'. Mice, we learn, were a particular favourite of Lewis. When an eleven year old girl sent him a picture of the heroic mouse Reepicheep from the Narnia stories, Lewis replies to her that he loves real mice and refuses to set a trap for the many who live in his rooms in Magdalene College. In another letter, Lewis boasts of saving an exhausted fox from hunting hounds by sending them the wrong way.

The book makes a convincing case that Lewis's writings about animals demonstrate his appreciation and respect for animals and cultivate such sensibilities in his readers. The talking animals in the Narnia stories have independent agency and are often intelligent, responsible, and faithful. This perspective is evident strikingly in the title *The Horse and His Boy*. In Lewis's science-fiction trilogy clear links are made with cruelties towards animals, with hunting the target of critique in *Out of the Silent Planet*, and vivisection associated with satanic influence in *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. Animals also feature frequently in Lewis's poetry. In 'Impenitence', Lewis even reflects on his rationale for including animals in his stories, on the basis that they gently reveal us to ourselves and also incline us to love of actual animals. When writing about Christian faith, Lewis also includes animals, considering the problem of animal suffering in *The Problem of Pain* and arguing that companion animals could gain immortality through their relationships to their human masters.

This last point brings us to consideration of the weaknesses in Lewis's thinking about animals, from which Gilmour does not shy away. There is a fundamental anthropocentrism in Lewis's view of conditional immortality for companion animals, which he states explicitly in *The Problem of Pain*: 'The beasts are to be understood only in their relation to man.' Lewis was criticized by Evelyn Underhill for the 'intolerable doctrine' that animals

found their God-given selves only as they became tame in relationship with humans. There is no recognition here for God's affirmation in Genesis 1 of the goodness of the creatures of each day without reference to humans or other creatures, nor of the frequent biblical affirmation of God's direct love and care for other-than-human creatures (e.g. Pss. 104, 145 and Job 38–41). Lewis ignores these biblical themes and remains confined by a conventional view in which more-than-human creatures only have value in relation to humans. Gilmour also notes that Lewis seems to give no attention at all to the question of the ethics of eating animals, despite giving a positive appraisal of Ransom's decision to become vegetarian on his return from Perelandra. At a time when the biomass of the birds and mammals we raise for food has become 24 times greater than the biomass of all wild land mammals, and growing livestock numbers are a chief cause of the ongoing anthropogenic mass extinction of wild animals, it is clear that we need both to attend to dietary ethics and learn quickly to value the existence of wild animals as such.

Gilmour does not attempt to defend Lewis against these points of critique, but argues nonetheless that he makes a great contribution to the project of animal theology through 'the permission he gives us to think theologically about animals, and to do so creatively'. Gilmour summarizes Lewis's position as declaring that animals are among the 'good things' of our world, which means that there is no justification for cruelty towards them and they must be part of the theological task. Gilmour identifies Lewis as one of the few Christian writers 'who attempt to imagine the place of the nonhuman within Christian ethics and eschatology, and to imagine what it might be like to experience the kingdom of God in their company' (p. 202).

It is most clear that more theological thinking about animals is required beyond the position Lewis reaches in his work, particularly with respect to the anthropocentrism of his account and the need to consider the ethics of our consumption of animals in a Christian context. It is equally clear, however, that Gilmour is right to celebrate the contribution Lewis makes to the project of animal theology. This book is an invaluable aid in attending to, appreciating, and learning from the many animals that appear in Lewis's writings.