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The Anxiety of the Human Animal: Martin Luther on Non-human Animals and Human Animality

‘But why should I speak at all of irrational animals?’ Luther asks after musing on why human beings alone are tormented by death in commenting on Psalm 90.¹ The rhetorical question presupposes no adequate response, but despite this Luther speaks of animals almost everywhere in his writings. He thanks God for providing them for human use, defines what it means to be human in relation to them, illustrates theological arguments using them, finds allegorical messages in biblical texts concerning them and very frequently insults his enemies with reference to them. Notwithstanding the frequency of their appearance, references of this kind have led commentators to judge that Luther has little interest in non-human animals: Colin Gunton, for instance, concludes ‘Luther is not very interested in the non-personal world for its own sake’.² At other points, however, Luther shows an anxious recognizes all that other animals have in common with human beings, proclaims the intimacy of God to them, holds them up as moral exemplars, is attentive to the detail of their lives, protests on their behalf against mistreatment and in one notable encounter takes the role of proto-hunt-saboteur in hiding a rabbit from hounds — although, to his regret, his attempt at protection is not finally successful. In this chapter, I will argue that Luther is both more various and less consistent in his consideration of animals than has previously been recognized, but that this inconsistency is a virtuous one. His vivid appreciation of the non-

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¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1958), vol. 13, p. 112. References to this English translation of his collected works are hereafter abbreviated in the form *LW* volume number.page number (e.g. for this case *LW* 13.112).

² Colin Gunton, *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 72n.

human animals he encounters means that in his account they break the fences within which he sometimes tries to restrain them and thereby indicate their need for a theological space more adequate to their place in God's purposes.

1. Human superiority and dominance over other animals

For the most part, Luther is resolutely anthropocentric in his view of God's purposes in creation. In his lectures on Genesis, he states that he focuses on God's solicitude and benevolence towards us 'because He provided such an attractive dwelling place for the future human being before the human being was created'.³ When human beings finally arrive on the scene they find 'a ready and equipped home' and they are commanded by God to 'enjoy all the riches of so splendid a home' progressively fitted out on each day of creation.⁴ Creation is a lesson in God's providence; it 'plainly teaches that God created all these things in order to prepare a house and an inn, as it were, for the future man'.⁵ When God rests from the work of creation, it is because the home is finished and the ruler installed.⁶ Luther's doctrine of the fall also indicates the human-centredness of creation: thorns, thistles, vermin, flies, toads and butterflies — butterflies? — and the savagery of wild animals were part of the punishment for human sin.⁷ In the flood, other animals and plants perished because of the sin of their ruler, just as human subjects often suffer on account of the errors of their leaders.⁸

³ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5*, LW 1.39.

⁴ LW 1.39. Luther follows a well-worn path at this point: Philo of Alexandria advances a very similar view in his commentary on Genesis (Philo, *De opificio mundi* in *Philo I*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker (London: Heinemann, 1929), §§ 25–28. This continuity is also evident at other points in Luther's doctrine of creation.

⁵ LW 1.47.

⁶ LW 1.73.

⁷ LW 1.38, 1.54, 1.73.

⁸ LW 1.183. The idea is repeated later in the Genesis commentary: the 'use and ministry of creatures' should not be despised because 'God has created them to serve us' (LW 6.24–5), and also features in other parts of Luther's writings, e.g. God created everything else before human beings so as to lay up for us 'at all times a sufficient store of food and clothing' (45.48); 'The Father gives himself to us, with heaven and earth and all the creatures, in order that they may serve us and benefit us' (37.366); John the evangelist 'dismisses all brute beasts, which did not fall and sin, and concentrates his attention on human nature, for the sake of which everything was made and created' (22.29). Luther repeatedly interprets the creedal affirmation of God as creator to mean God makes everything to provide human comforts and necessities (Luther, 'The Large Catechism', in Theodore G. Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 2.13–14. Cf. 'The Small Catechism', in Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, II.2; 'Ten Sermons on the Catechism', LW 51.163), although he follows this passage in the 'Large Catechism' with a protest against their misuse ('Large Catechism', 2.21). The harshness of the consequences of God's judgement

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Beyond this anthropocentric view of God's purpose in creating non-human animals, Luther also seeks to affirm the superior characteristics of humans in comparison to other animals. For him this was especially clear before the fall. While Adam still bore the image of God, which Luther believes was lost in the fall, he was 'something far more distinguished and excellent', in ways well beyond the moral and religious, surpassing all other creations in every respect:

I am fully convinced that before Adam's sin his eyes were so sharp and clear that they surpassed those of the lynx and eagle. He was stronger than the lions and the bears, whose strength is very great; and he handled them the way we handle puppies.⁹

Adam also had 'a perfect knowledge of the nature of the animals, the herbs, the fruits, the trees, and the remaining creatures'.¹⁰ After the fall all is changed. Death has 'crept like leprosy into all our perceptive powers, so that with our intellect we cannot even understand that image',¹¹ which has been 'almost completely lost'.¹² Whereas before the fall Adam had 'a greater strength and keener senses than the rest of the living beings, now human beings are greatly 'surpassed by the boars in their sense of hearing, by the eagles in their sense of sight, and by the lion in his strength'.¹³ Before the fall, the difference between humans and other animals was therefore 'far greater and more evident', but even in the post-fall state Luther argues that 'there is still a great difference between the human being and the rest of the animals'.¹⁴ He cites Lombard's *Sentences* as authority for the view that human beings are the image of God, whereas the rest of the animals are only 'footprints' and human beings are appropriately

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for non-human animals could be seen as linked to Luther's theology of the cross requiring the annihilation of the natural, but Gregersen makes a convincing argument that this annihilation should not be understood as going beyond human sin (Niels Hendrik Gregersen, 'The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World', *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40:3 (2001), 197).

⁹ LW 1.62.

¹⁰ LW 1.63.

¹¹ LW 1.62.

¹² LW 1.67.

¹³ LW 1.62.

¹⁴ LW 1.67.

called a ‘world in miniature’.¹⁵ Luther also cites arguments beyond the text indicating the difference between humans and other species. In commenting on the creation of the heavenly bodies, he observes that pigs, cows and dogs cannot even measure the water they drink, whereas human beings measure the heavens using the ‘divinely revealed’ mathematical disciplines showing their heavenly destiny.¹⁶ Luther also repeats the argument of classical authors that ‘[man’s] very posture and physique strongly indicate that he belongs to the heavenly things despite his wretched and humble origin’¹⁷ and notes that even after sin the Gentiles concluded that ‘[man] is a rather outstanding figure’ on the basis of ‘the fact that he alone walks upright and raises his eyes to heaven’.¹⁸

The authority human beings are given by God over the other animals is perhaps the clearest indicator of their unique position within creation. Luther comments that in the command to Adam and Eve to have dominion ‘the rule is assigned to the most beautiful creature, who knows God and is the image of God, in whom the similitude of the divine nature shines forth through his enlightened reason, through his justice and his wisdom’.¹⁹ He emphasizes that the exercise of this rule is command, rather than mere permission²⁰ and believes in his glorious unfallen state Adam could command lions ‘as we give a command to a trained dog’.²¹ If there had been no fall Adam and his family would have gathered to praise and laud God ‘for the dominion over all the creatures on the earth which had been given to mankind’²² and the restoration of God’s image in humanity will bring an enhanced dominion: ‘all the other creatures will be under our rule to a greater degree than they were in Adam’s Paradise’.²³

When we look at other statements Luther makes in relation to human dominion over other animals, it becomes evident that this is one area

¹⁵ *LW* 1.68. For a discussion of the origin of the idea of human beings as a microcosm, see Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 81–2. Elsewhere Luther notes that God only breathed a living soul into Adam (1.85–92), that only human beings will leave animal and enter spiritual life (1.65), that only human beings know their Creator (1.67), and that humans alone were created for eternal life (22.30).

¹⁶ *LW* 1.45–6.

¹⁷ *LW* 1.46.

¹⁸ *LW* 1.85. He is critical of this argument later in his Genesis commentary (*LW* 1.124–5), as discussed below.

¹⁹ *LW* 1.66.

²⁰ *LW* 1.66.

²¹ *LW* 1.64.

²² *LW* 1.105.

²³ *LW* 1.65.

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where there are difficulties in coherence and consistency in his account. The first question concerns the purpose of dominion. Luther frankly admits that this is unclear before the fall. Adam would not have used other animals for food, did not lack clothing or money, and neither he nor his descendents would have been greedy. Therefore they would have made use of the other creatures ‘only for the admiration of God and for a holy joy which is unknown to us in this corrupt state of nature’.²⁴ Here is an image of harmony between human and non-human animal life significantly at odds with the vivid language of authoritative rule — ‘Adam and Eve knew God and all the creatures and, as it were, were completely engulfed by the goodness and justice of God’²⁵ — the other animals enable human worship and joy in God’s creation, and the authority human beings have from God to order them about seems purposeless.

If before sin, the purpose of the dominion granted to Adam and Eve is unclear, after sin its existence is the question. Adam’s extraordinary capabilities making him superior in every respect are left behind in the garden. In commentary on Genesis 1:26, Luther observes that after sin, Adam can no longer command the other animals by his word, and what we achieve in life ‘is brought about not by the dominion which Adam had but through industry and skill’, leaving us only with a ‘bare title’ of dominion almost entirely without substance.²⁶ In discussing Genesis 6:17, God’s words ‘I will bring a flood’, Luther adds weight to this idea that dominion has been lost: the destruction of other animals might seem unfair to them, but it represents part of the punishment of humans to lose their dominion over other animals too.²⁷ In Luther’s commentary on Genesis chapter 7, however, it seems that he does not mean this punishment of loss of dominion to apply to the occupants of the ark: ‘Even though the greater part of the world perishes, man nevertheless remains lord of the creatures’ albeit over fewer creatures than there were previously.²⁸ And when he comes to treat Genesis 9:2 ‘the fear of you shall be upon every beast’ Luther suggests that human dominion has been increased and changed in character in comparison with that granted to Adam: ‘until now the animals did not have to die in order to provide

²⁴ *LW* 1.71.

²⁵ *LW* 1.67.

²⁶ *LW* 1.67.

²⁷ *LW* 2.70.

²⁸ *LW* 2.100.

food for man, but man was a gentle master of the beasts rather than their slayer or consumer' but now 'the animals are subjected to man as to a tyrant who has absolute power over life and

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death'.²⁹ Luther makes a point of noting that this was an unnecessary innovation on God's part: the permission to eat animals is given at a time when there were only a few human beings in the midst of the superabundance of the world — he does not reckon with a scarcity of vegetation after the flood. This is, then, a special indication from God of God's favorable inclination and friendliness towards humanity.³⁰ Luther goes further in seeing in this passage the origin and justification for the history of animal husbandry and consumption: the words 'establish the butcher shop' and 'God sets Himself up as a butcher'.³¹ For Adam 'it would have been an abomination to kill a little bird for food', under this new regime 'the dominion of man is increased, and the dumb animals are made subject to man for the purpose of serving him even to the extent of dying'.³² Luther judges that God did not lie in promising human beings dominion over the earth: 'In the Flood this is taken away, not forever but for a time; and even then it is not taken away entirely'.³³

This vision of God's blessing of enhanced dominion over other animals is hard to square with Luther's lament over the glories that were lost in the fall and his affirmation of a future restoration of the image of God when 'all the other creatures will be under our rule to a greater degree than they were in Adam's Paradise'.³⁴ This promised restoration seems preempted by God's response to Noah. This is the height of Luther's anthropocentrism, and Gunton's claim about Luther's lack of interest in the 'non-personal' world for its own sake is entirely apt here.³⁵ Luther is struck at one

²⁹ *LW* 2.132. Luther does not believe, however, that there are no limits to the exercise of this new dominion: animals can only be killed for sacrifice or food so 'wanton and irreverent killing is forbidden' (*LW* 2.139). He also suggests that human beings would be better off if consumption of meat had never been introduced (*LW* 1.36).

³⁰ *LW* 2.133.

³¹ *LW* 2.133.

³² *LW* 2.133.

³³ *LW* 2.100.

³⁴ *LW* 1.65.

³⁵ Scott Ickert agrees that Luther 'was not interested in animals per se as a theological topic' ('Luther and Animals: Subject to Adam's Fall?', in *Animals on the Agenda: Questions About Animals for Theology and Ethics*, Andrew Linzey, and Dorothy Yamamoto (eds.) (London: SCM Press, 1998), 90.

point by the pedagogical value of stressing the loss of dominion as part of the plight of being heirs to Adam's sin, and at another by the value of emphasizing God's graciousness in realizing the dominion promised despite human disobedience in Eden and before the flood. In both cases, there is no recognition that God's relationship with others of God's creatures could be of significant independent concern.

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Luther's uncertainty about the role of dominion is mirrored by instability in other parts of his account of human superiority over other animals. The role of reason and philosophy in providing either insight into human superiority or a differentiating feature between humans and other animals is a significant case in point here. While, as cited above, at times he seems impressed by the way the erect posture of human beings confirms their divinely ordained dominance,³⁶ elsewhere he criticizes the use philosophers make of this argument, and argues that only Scripture can show the superiority of the human.³⁷ Whereas philosophy defines a human being as a rational animal, 'a theologian discusses man as a sinner'.³⁸ A similar inconsistency pertains to his consideration of reason as a distinguishing mark between humans and other animals. He often depends on this in his discussion,³⁹ even construing reason as 'a kind of god' creating dominion and differentiating between humans and other animals.⁴⁰ Yet elsewhere, his critique of dependence on reason is famously strong: in his last sermon in Wittenberg in 1546 he instructs his congregation to 'hold reason in check and do not follow her beautiful cogitations. Throw dirt in her face and make her ugly. Reason is and should be drowned in baptism'.⁴¹ Luther therefore understands the philosophers he cites as valuing reason as a unique and supremely valuable human accomplishment, reliably distinguishing between humans and other animals, but in his own scheme this identification is ambivalent, claiming too much for itself in a

³⁶ *LW* 1.46, 1.85.

³⁷ *LW* 1.124–5.

³⁸ *LW* 12.310. Elsewhere he asks who dares argue that the philosophical definition is true in theology (*LW* 13.125).

³⁹ E.g. 'since man has understanding' even four-year-old boys can rule much stronger creatures (*LW* 12.209); 'a man by reason tames a wild horse and an enormous lion' (*LW* 15.125); the 'rational sacrifice' called for by Paul in Rom. 12.1 means one that is human, rather than animal (*LW* 36.145).

⁴⁰ *LW* 34.137.

⁴¹ *LW* 51.376–7.

prideful sense and often tending to lead the faithful astray.⁴² At the least, we should recognize that reason cannot function in his theological system in the same way as it does in the philosophical schemes to which he refers, thus opening up the question of the appropriate basis for distinguishing between humans and other animals in a theological framework.

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A further area of uncertainty in Luther concerning non-human animals is whether they have any part in the world to come. For the most part Luther seems clear that only human beings participate in eternity, judging through most of his commentary on Genesis that this is the chief difference between humans and other animals. At one point, he even pictures a rapture in which the saved are carried heavenward while everything on earth perishes in ashes.⁴³ On occasion, however, he seems to picture other aspects to eternal life: in his commentary on 1 Cor. 15 he envisions playing in our spiritual bodies with the sun, moon and ‘all the other creatures’⁴⁴ and looks forward to the time when a new essence comes into being ‘not only in us human beings but also in all other creatures’.⁴⁵ In commentary on Psalm 8 Luther asserts that there will be ‘a broad and beautiful heaven and a joyful earth, much more beautiful and joyful than Paradise was’⁴⁶ and a passage in the *Table Talk* affirms that in the future life the earth will be adorned with trees.⁴⁷ Elsewhere in the *Table Talk* Luther is reported to have answered in the affirmative when asked if his dog Tölpel would be in heaven: ‘Certainly...Peter said that the last day would be the restitution of all things. God will create a new heaven and a new earth and new Tölpels with hide of gold and silver’.⁴⁸ Again, here, Luther is clear at points that

⁴² Whether Luther is right to see in Plato or Aristotle a discontinuity between the human and non-human on the basis of reason is a different question. For an engaging exploration of this question, see Catherine Osborne, *Dumb Beasts and Dead Philosophers: Humanity and the Humane in Ancient Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007).

⁴³ LW 28.201.

⁴⁴ LW 28.194.

⁴⁵ LW 28.194.

⁴⁶ LW 12.121.

⁴⁷ LW 54.41, no. 305.

⁴⁸ *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden*, 6 vols (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1912–21), no. 1150, translated by Roland Bainton in ‘Luther on Birds, Dogs and Babies: Gleanings From the “Table Talk”’ in *Luther Today*, Martin Luther Lectures, Vol. 1, Roland H. Bainton, Warren A. Quanbeck, and E. Gordon Rupp (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1957), 9.

human and non-human creatures belong in different categories in relation to eternal life, but also seems drawn to a vision of a renewed and restored earth with room for non-human creatures.

We cannot leave consideration of the aspects of Luther's thought where he stresses the superiority of the human without noting the many occasions where he uses animal characteristics as insults to his enemies. While his expostulation 'Listen now, you pig, dog, or fanatic, whatever kind of unreasonable ass you are...go back to your pigpen and your filth'⁴⁹ is particularly memorable, it is far from unique,⁵⁰ and in his commentary on

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Deuteronomy Luther refers extensively to the bestiary tradition associating particular animals with various vices.⁵¹ These are balanced by more favourable comparisons of humans with animals, as we shall see in the next section, but show that rhetorically Luther had no compunction about belittling comparisons with non-human animals in order to make vivid characterizations of those he criticized.

2. Human commonality with and compassion for other animals

In Luther's commentary on Genesis, alongside the radical anthropocentrism we have seen above, it is striking to find Luther repeatedly recognizing deep similarities between human beings and other animals. Human beings share the life of land animals: they were created on the same day and had a 'common table' in the herbs and fruit of trees.⁵² Adam's physical life was meant to be similar to 'that of the other beasts': 'Just as the beasts have need of food, drink, and rest to refresh their bodies, so Adam, even in his innocence, would make use of them.'⁵³ Human beings 'increased

Bainton notes several other passages in the *Tischreden* where Luther is admiring of dogs, including no. 869 and 2849a.

⁴⁹ Luther, 'That these words of Christ, "This is my body", etc., still stand firm against the fanatics' (*LW* 37.68).

⁵⁰ Of the many examples that could be chosen here, Luther claims that men become 'brutes and beasts' through their contempt of sound doctrine (*LW* 1.336), that antinomian opponents 'become apes' (*LW* 5.309), that Epicureans live the life of an animal (*LW* 7.117), that some people live like sows, others like wolves (*LW* 30.181) and that some parents are 'despicable hogs and venomous beasts, devouring their own young' (*LW* 46.210).

⁵¹ *LW* 9.136.

⁵² *LW* 1.36.

⁵³ *LW* 1.57.

and multiplied in the same manner as other beasts’ — Luther comments that the semen ‘congeals in the womb and is given form in an identical manner’ and concludes with no apparent concern for the impact of the comparison that ‘Here there is no difference between a pregnant cow and a woman with child’.⁵⁴ A little later he delves further into the common physiology humans share with other animals in commentary on God’s breathing life into Adam in Genesis 2:7:

If you consider the animal life about which Moses is speaking here, there is no difference between man and the donkey. Animal life has need of food and drink; it has need of sleep and rest; their bodies are fed in like manner by food and drink, and they grow; and through hunger they become faint and perish. The stomach receives the food, and when the food has been digested, passes it on to the liver, which produces

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blood, by which all the limbs are given fresh strength. In this regard there is no difference between man and beast.⁵⁵

The beasts ‘greatly resemble’ human beings: ‘They dwell together; they are fed together; they eat together; they receive their nourishment from the same materials; they sleep and rest among us. Therefore if you take into account their way of life, their food, and their support, the similarity is great.’⁵⁶ As regards our physical life ‘we drink, we eat, we procreate, and we are born just like the rest of the animals’⁵⁷ and after the expulsion from Eden we share the place of the other animals as well as their food.⁵⁸ At the flood, there was a common sorrow between Noah and the beasts and after the flood the covenant God makes is with Noah, his family, and all the other animals.⁵⁹ These texts provide strong evidence that Luther considered there to be much in common between human beings and other animals.

To say that Luther recognizes human-non-human continuity is not to say that he values it. It is striking that almost all of the passages cited above discussing this commonality do so with the rhetorical purpose of highlighting the distinctiveness of

⁵⁴ *LW* 1.83.

⁵⁵ *LW* 1.85.

⁵⁶ *LW* 1.56.

⁵⁷ *LW* 1.121.

⁵⁸ *LW* 1.230.

⁵⁹ *LW* 2.106; 2.143–4.

human beings despite these similarities, a distinctiveness often appreciable only through the revelation provided in Scripture. Luther's mode of reasoning is that the human experience of living alongside other creatures and comparing ourselves to them gives us a strong sense of our animality, but that this observation of what we have in common with other animals provokes the anxiety that we may be no more than cows, donkeys or other beasts. The structure of his depends on this negative interpretation of continuity: if intimations of our animality did not make us anxious, we would not be in need of the good news proclaimed in Genesis that we have a different status in the world from those other creatures to which we seem so similar.⁶⁰ Luther's con-

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cern about the distinctiveness of the human in the face of observations to the contrary arising from knowledge of the natural world shows that he had wrestled with the issue more than two centuries before the work of Darwin provoked further reflection on it and shows anxiety about continuity between human and non-human animals is not dependent on a belief in an evolutionary lineage of descent connecting them.

In other writings Luther seems to be much less anxious about affirmations concerning the commonality between human beings and others of God's creatures. The most obvious place in which this different attitude is evident is in his sacramental theology, where he develops an understanding of God's presence throughout creation. This is most poetically expressed in a 1527 tract where he insists that the power of God 'must be essentially present [*Wesentlich und gegenwertig*] at all places, even in the tiniest tree leaf'.⁶¹ Luther describes this essential presence in way that is at once lyrical and thoroughgoing:

[God] must be present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind, so that nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power. For it is him that makes the skin and it is he who makes

⁶⁰ Therefore Rasmussen is wrong to say that Luther's recognition of what humans have in common with other animals 'does not bother Luther one whit' (L. L. Rasmussen, 'Luther and a Gospel of Earth', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 51:1-2 (1997), 4). Luther is bothered by the thought that we might be no more than animals, and depends on his readers sharing this view in order to present them with the good news he finds in Genesis that humans have a different origin and destiny.

⁶¹ *LW* 37.57.

the bones; it is he who makes the hair on the skin and it is he who makes the marrow in the bones; it is he who makes every bit of the hair, it is he who makes every bit of the marrow. Indeed, he must make everything, both the parts and the whole.⁶²

Luther confesses that holding together the idea that God is present everywhere in creation but not circumscribed by it is ‘infinitely incomprehensible’, but multiplies images of the intimacy of God’s relationship to creation: ‘the Divine Majesty is so small as to be present in essence in a kernel, on a kernel, above a kernel, throughout a kernel, inside and outside — and, even though it is one single Majesty, can nevertheless by completely and entirely present in every individual thing, countless in number though they be’.⁶³ Luther is then faced with the question of how to speak of God’s unique presence in Christ. His answer is that in relation to all creatures, we can

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say “There is God, or God is in it” whereas only in relation to Christ can we say “This is God himself”.⁶⁴ This fundamental contrast between Christ and creatures is reiterated in Luther’s 1528 ‘Confession concerning Christ’s supper’: Christ is ‘beyond and above all creatures’; ‘Beyond the creatures there is only God’.⁶⁵ Elsewhere he repeats the assertion that all animals, including human beings, derive their life from God, and recognizes that Hebrew word for soul denotes all animal life that lives and breathes.⁶⁶ He also maintains that even the mouse is a ‘divine creature’, beautiful in form, with ‘such pretty feet and such delicate hair’ that it must have been created with

⁶² *LW* 37.58.

⁶³ *LW* 37.59.

⁶⁴ *LW* 37.59. In the lectures on Genesis Luther states that ‘the face of God shines forth in all His creatures’ (*LW* 6.173) and in commentary on Psalm 78 he portrays every creature as an utterance of God (*LW* 11.39). The theme of all creatures having their life in God is also present in Luther’s Christmas sermon on John 1.4: ‘everything that lives has life of him and through him and in him’ (*LW* 52.53). In a passage in the *Table Talk* Luther laments that this would have been a more common recognition before the fall: ‘Oh, what thoughts man might have had about the fact that God is in all creatures, and so might have reflected on the power and the wisdom of God in even the smallest flowers!’ (*LW* 54.327).

⁶⁵ *LW* 37.229.

⁶⁶ *LW* 22.30, 22.37, 28.191. This broad vision of creatureliness also seems operative when Luther is discussing Romans 8: criticizing philosophical accounts that are inattentive to the final end of creation he comments ‘whoever searches into the essences and actions of creation rather than its groanings and expectations is without doubt a fool and a blind man, for he does not know that creatures are also a creation of God’ (*LW* 25.362). Andrew Linzey comments that this text seems to indicate a ‘non-humanocentric’ perspective in Luther (*Animal Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 189).

some plan in view.⁶⁷ It seems, then, that when Luther is preoccupied with creaturely realities, he is inclined to see a significant division between human beings and other animals, whereas at those times when he enlarges his vision to creation in the context of its Creator, it is obvious to him that the fundamental categories are Creator and creatures.⁶⁸

The intimacy of God's relationship with all creation is also evident in God's care for non-human animals. In commenting on the Genesis flood narrative, Luther notes that God remembers not just Noah, but the beasts too,⁶⁹ when preaching on the opening of John's Gospel, he notes the

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importance of affirming that God is still working to sustain the whole of creation⁷⁰ and when lecturing on 1 Timothy he cites Psalm 36.6 'Man and beast Thou savest, O Lord' and affirms that God is rightly called the 'Saviour of all beasts'.⁷¹ When he comes to consider a later passage (1 Tim. 5.18) concerning not muzzling an ox when treading grain, he first calls the text 'pure allegory', citing Paul's dismissive comment 'Is it for oxen that God is concerned?', but he cannot quite rest with this conclusion, noting the Psalm 36 text again and insisting that God is concerned for all things.⁷²

God's concern for all creatures is reflected in Luther's own views and practice. He pities the plight of oxen and flocks without pasture pictured by Joel,⁷³ and stories from the *Table Talk* depict him playing with his puppy, Tölpel, using dogs as examples of concentration and faithfulness, remarking on the beautiful eyes of small birds, and wishing that they were aware of his good intentions towards them so that

⁶⁷ LW 1.52.

⁶⁸ Rasmussen thinks Luther has gone too far in his admiration for mice (*Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 275 n.). Rasmussen also seems to overstate the significance of the passage cited concerning the kernel, arguing that it shows Luther to be engaged in 'earth-bound theology' that is 'boldly pan-en-theistic' (*Earth Community*, 273), and that Luther believes that 'Trying to rise above nature is, for earthbound creatures like us, the essence of sin' ('Luther and a Gospel of Earth', 3). It is clear even from the survey presented here that Luther often endorsed such an attempt to rise above nature on biblical grounds on terms very distant from panentheism.

⁶⁹ LW 2.106.

⁷⁰ LW 22.28–9.

⁷¹ LW 28.326.

⁷² LW 28.348.

⁷³ LW 18.86.

they would not fly away.⁷⁴ A few remarkable texts supplement these brief indications. The first is a jocular letter to he wrote to himself in 1534 on behalf of the birds in the Wittenberg Wood complaining at the traps his servant Wolfgang Sieberger has set for them, which begins

To our good and kind Dr. Martin Luther, preacher in Wittenberg. We thrushes, blackbirds, linnets, goldfinches, along with other well-disposed birds who are spending their summer at Wittenberg, desire to let you know that we are told on good authority that your servant, Wolfgang Sieberger, out of the great hatred he bears to us, has brought some old rotten nets to set up a fowling-ground for finches, and not only for our dear friends and finches, but in order to deprive us of the liberty of flying in the air and picking up grains of corn, and also to make an attempt upon our lives, although we have not deserved such a punishment at his hands.⁷⁵

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While the letter is tongue-in-cheek and does not represent a considered position against the trapping of birds,⁷⁶ it does show at the least attentiveness to them and empathy for their position. This attention to birds is also evident in a 1530 letter to George Spalatin, in which he is struck by the jackdaws at Coburg, and the similarity of their gathering to the diet he is on his way to attend:

We sit here with great pleasure in [this] diet, as idle spectators and listeners. For in addition to the fact that that uniform and beautiful black color wonderfully refreshes us, seeing that these heroes are so magnificently dressed, the unanimity of all their voices, which are saturated with beautiful melodies, also delights us beyond measure...[Consequently] if something could be accomplished by wishing it, we would wish that they might be free of that defamatory name *monedula* [Latin for 'jackdaw'] or rather from the accusation

⁷⁴ *LW* 54.37 (no. 274); 54.175 (no. 2849b); 54.192 (no. 3223a). Luther also comments on the faithfulness of dogs in his lectures on Isaiah (*LW* 17.265). The *Table Talk* includes Luther's reported approval of rather different behaviour of dogs: one who is accused by a priest of being a Lutheran after urinating in the holy water and another who defecated into the grave of the bishop of Halle (*LW* 54.421 (no. 5418)).

⁷⁵ Luther, *The Letters of Martin Luther*, ed. Margaret A. Currie (London: Macmillan & Co, 1908), 300 (Letter no. 312). For information on Wolfgang Sieberger and his trapping, see *LW* 49.158 n.

⁷⁶ See, for example, an equally jovial letter to Justus Jonas asking him to buy 'whatever in that airy kingdom of our feathered friends is subject to the dominion of man' (*LW* 50.94–5).

that they are thievish, and that they might be praised with names worthy of their dignity—that is, that they all together might be called ‘lancers’ or ‘spearmen’.⁷⁷

Luther was involved in a more immediate encounter with non-human animals when he tried hunting for two days in Wartburg in 1521. In another letter to Spalatin, he describes his ambivalence about his participation: ‘However great the pleasure may be from these things, the mystery, of pity and pain mixed into it is equally great’. He allegorizes the experience in seeing hunting as the work of the devil, ‘who hunts innocent little creatures with his ambushes and his dogs’. Yet this allegorizing does not make him disregard the actuality of the event: ‘By my efforts we had saved a little live rabbit. I had rolled it up into the sleeve of my cloak and left it alone for a little while. In the meantime the dogs found the poor rabbit and, biting through the cloak, broke its right hind leg and killed it by choking it.’⁷⁸

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In the letter Luther goes on to reflect on this as an illustration of the way ‘pope and Satan rage to destroy even the souls that have been saved’ but also confesses ‘I am sick of this kind of hunting’, stating a preference for a hunting creatures that could be allegorized as ‘wicked teachers’, such as bears, wolves, boars and foxes.⁷⁹ Again, this text does not represent a considered judgement against hunting, but the allegorizing, as well as his sabotage of the hunt in attempting to save the rabbit, show his innate sympathy for the plight of the creatures being pursued and his inclination to protect them.

It is notable that even at the end of the hunting letter, Luther describes his comments as joking, making this a common thread in each of these letters in which he identifies and empathizes with the situation of non-human animals. The obvious way

⁷⁷ *LW* 49.292–5 (no. 207, April 24, 1530). Bainton notes that some doubt the authenticity of this letter because the original has been lost and there is a problem with the date, but judges that ‘the style is certainly *echt*’ (‘Luther on Birds’, 5). This attentiveness to animals is also evident in correspondence about his translation of the Old Testament: in 1522 he wrote to Spalatin for descriptions and classifications by species for various birds of prey, game animals and reptiles (*LW* 49.19).

⁷⁸ *LW* 48.295.

⁷⁹ Luther’s ambivalence about hunting is reflected in other writings: in his lectures on Genesis he is critical of the damage done by princes during hunts (*LW* 4.382), insists that the sole legitimate purpose for hunting is to provide food (*LW* 7.267) and uses the image of a hunted hind or stag for the tribe of Naphtali, escaping the hunters through the protection of God. The editors of Luther’s *Works* note that his commentary on Psalm 147 was a present for Hans Löser in gratitude for his hospitality during a hunting trip in which Luther expounded the psalm in preference to hunting.

of reading this self-confessed lack of seriousness when attending to birds and animals is that Luther was not seriously interested or concerned for them, instead using them as merely occasions for humour, or as sources for theological allegory. Against this interpretation, however, we must count the real sympathy evident in Luther's concern for the other innocent creatures hunted, and the attentiveness with which he observes and empathizes with them.⁸⁰ This points to another explanation of his dismissal of his writings on animals as jovial: that he is aware that this is an eccentric interest which may not be well understood by Spalatin or other friends with whom he corresponds. If so, it may not be over-stating the case to suggest that the humour in these letters serves as a signal of a tension Luther experiences between his sympathy for the animals he observes and general societal attitudes to them, or even that the humour is an indicator of an unresolved tension between his own relationships with animals and his theological positioning of them. Given that he is elsewhere committed to the view that animals are provided by God merely for human use, it must seem odd to him to care that Wittenberg birds are being trapped in nets, or

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majestic jackdaws are disrespected as thieves, or that a rabbit is caught by hounds.⁸¹

One final aspect indication of Luther's good opinion of animals is the many other examples in his writing where he holds them up as good examples to be emulated by people. In commentary on Luke 1.49 — where there is no obvious animal referent — Luther is moved to comment

A bird pipes its lay and is happy in the gifts it has; nor does it murmur because it lacks the gift of speech. A dog frisks gayly about and is content, even though he is without the gift of reason. All animals live in contentment and serve God, loving and praising Him. Only the evil, villainous eye of man is never

⁸⁰ This is further supported by Bainton's observation that in his struggles with depression, Luther found it helpful to watch birds and babies who took life blithely ('Luther's Struggle for Faith', *Church History* 17:3 (1948), 201).

⁸¹ Paul Santmire and John Cobb argue that a key problematic in Luther's theology of nature is the need he saw to shut his eyes to the world around in order to listen to God (H. Paul Santmire, and John B. Cobb Jr., 'The World of Nature According to the Protestant Tradition', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, Roger S. Gottlieb (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 116–8). The attention to animals detailed here shows clearly that Luther was not consistent in this methodology, which perhaps is another reason for his lack of ease with the affection for nature he reports.

satisfied.⁸²

This theme of animals praising God is repeated in signing off one of his letters from Coburg ‘In the land of the birds that sing sweetly in the branches and praise God with all their power night and day’.⁸³ Elsewhere he compares the sexual restraint of non-human animals favourably with human traits,⁸⁴ considers it shameful that some parents do not care adequately for their children when animals do this by nature⁸⁵ and — in his earliest sermon — that animals keep the law of loving their neighbour while human beings do not.⁸⁶ In the ‘The Bondage of the Will’ he cites Psalm 73.22 ‘I am become a beast before thee’ as a positive image of the human will living in faithfulness to God, in contrast with being ridden by Satan.⁸⁷

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The most striking positive image of a non-human animal in Luther’s writings, however, is a Christological one. In a sermon on Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem (Mt. 23.34–9), he explores in detail the comparison with a hen:

Let us observe how a natural mother-hen acts. There is hardly an animal that takes care of its offspring so meticulously. It changes its natural voice turning it into a lamenting, mourning one; it searches, scratches for food and lures the chick to eat. When the mother-hen finds something, she does not eat it, but leaves it for the chicks; she fights seriously and calls her chicks away from the hawk; she spreads out her wings willingly and lets the chicks climb under her and all over her, for she is truly fond of them—it is, indeed, an excellent, lovely symbol. Similarly, Christ has taken unto himself a pitiful voice, has lamented for us and has preached repentance, has indicated from his heart to everyone his sin and misery. He scratches in the Scripture, lures us into it, and permits us to eat; he spreads his wings with his righteousness, merit, and grace over us and

⁸² *LW* 21.320.

⁸³ *LW* 48.236.

⁸⁴ *LW* 1.116, 5.289.

⁸⁵ *LW* 6.17, 45.353.

⁸⁶ *LW* 51.10–11.

⁸⁷ *LW* 33.65–6. For further discussion of this image, see Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle, ‘Luther’s Rider-Gods: From the Steppe to the Tower’, *Journal of Religious History* 13:3 (1985), 260–82. Luther also pictures small flowers, leaves or birds as preaching God’s forgiveness, but this tends towards reading creation as a message from God for human beings, rather than seeing creation in its own right (*LW* 21.126). Bainton notes that, unlike Melancthon, Luther ‘restricted himself to the animals before his eyes’ for such illustrations (‘Luther on Birds’, 4).

takes us under himself in a friendly manner, warms us with his natural heat, i.e., with his Holy Ghost who comes solely through him, and in the air fights for us against the devil.⁸⁸

This comparison is more than allegorical: the passage speaks of careful observation of hens with their chicks, and Luther sees in their attentive maternal care nothing short of an image of Christ, rooted in Christ's self-identification with a mother hen.⁸⁹

3. Fences under strain: tensions in Luther's account of animals

In the survey I have provided of Luther's discussion of animals, I have pointed to several points at which his discussion seems under strain. In his commentary on Genesis, he repeatedly emphasizes that observation of the world shows us how much humans are like other animals, but that Scripture reveals that humans have a different origin and destiny. This is not consistently rendered, however, with occasional references to

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natural signs of the superiority of humans despite critique elsewhere of philosophical affirmations of human dignity. Luther's discussion of reason is particularly fraught: he sometimes accepts the philosophical definition of human beings as rational animals, but his emphasis on sinfulness as the fundamental element in a theological anthropology challenges this, and his tirades against reason make him an unlikely advocate for rationality as a marker of unique human superiority. Dominion seems a more straightforward category for Luther to distinguish human and non-human theologically, but he is unclear about its purpose before the fall, and about whether to emphasize the loss of dominion as punishment for sin or God's graceful extension of it after the flood. Luther makes clear and uncompromising anthropocentric statements affirming that God made creation to provide for human beings, but his attentiveness and concern for the animals with which he came into contact speak of a concern for them for their own sake, in line with the affirmation in his sacramental theology of the intimacy of God's presence in all creatures. Luther is self-contradictory about the role

⁸⁸ *LW* 52.97–8.

⁸⁹ We should also note in this context Luther's reported appreciation of Aesop: two comments in his *Table Talk*, recorded by different visitors to his table, record his appreciation of Aesop's Fables as superior to Jerome (*LW* 54.72) and alongside Cato second only to the Bible (*LW* 54.210).

of non-human creatures in eternal life, and I have suggested that his identification of reports of his observation and care of animals as humorous, may in itself indicate his own difficulty in seeing how to fit his obvious empathy with non-human animals with his broader theological commitments.⁹⁰

At one key point the tension I have argued is implicit in Luther thinking about the relationship between humans and other animals becomes explicit. In commentary on Genesis 2.7, he delivers his judgement that to say that human beings are both the image of God and have a life in common with the animals is nonsensical: ‘The statement that though man is created according to the similitude of God, he does not differ from cattle in his animal life is clearly contradictory, or, as they call it in the schools, “a contradiction in the predicate”.’⁹¹ Luther is not clear about the nature of the contradiction here, but presumably his concern is that if we believe that human beings are both like God and like cattle, this suggests the unacceptable conclusion that God is like cattle. As we have seen, in the passage discussed at the

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end of the previous section, Luther had no reservation in accepting the conclusion that Jesus is like a mother hen, but here he is not prepared to countenance a divine-animal resemblance. Nor, unsurprisingly, is he content to rest with the judgement that Scripture is contradictory. Instead, he sees this apparent contradiction between human as both animal and imaging God as pointing beyond itself: ‘by a very beautiful allegory, or rather by an anagoge, Moses wanted to intimate dimly that God was to become incarnate’.⁹² Luther is saying that the text here is anagogical — containing a spiritual truth anticipating the future revelation of Christ. Within the interpretative frame of the Genesis, it does not make sense to say both that humans are animals and that they are images of God: the assertions are contradictory. The tension caused by the contradiction can only be resolved by recognizing it to be an intimation of

⁹⁰ The lack of fit between different elements has been noted by Santmire, who contrasts the ‘anthropocentric-soteriological’ centre to Luther and Calvin’s thought with a ‘theocentric-ecological’ circumference and maintains that the tension between the two was never resolved (*Travail of Nature*, 131–2). Rasmussen cites Santmire’s view in his critique of Luther (‘Luther and a Gospel of Earth, 22–5). My account here develops this tension and adds the further complexity of Luther’s interest and self-conscious affection for the birds and animals with whom he found himself in relationship, as well as proposing a resolution based on a hermeneutical method Luther himself employs.

⁹¹ *LW* 1.87.

⁹² *LW* 1.87.

something beyond itself, signifying the need for resolution in a different context, in this case the context of the entire Christian canon.

My proposal for what we should make of Luther's discussion of non-animals takes his recommendation here as a model. As I have noted, when we survey the whole of Luther's thinking about animals, we encounter a broad range of perspectives, from those that are straightforwardly anthropocentric, in continuity with the mainstream of the tradition he inherited, to those that verge on pantheistic as he meditates on God's intimate presence in creation. This may be in part because non-human animals are rarely the focus of his discussion, and when they are, he apparently feels the need to excuse his idiosyncrasy as a joke. To resolve the tension created by taking stock of the multiplicity of Luther's perspectives on animals I have collected in this chapter, we could consider arguments to accept one trajectory or another from it as normative: we could judge that his anthropocentric statements should be used to interpret all other aspects of his thought, or that it is appropriate to begin with his minute exploration of God's presence in a tiny seed and to interpret all else taking this as the norm.⁹³ To proceed in this way would be, in terms of the contradiction we have just considered, to opt for the view either that human beings are the image of God, or that they are animals, and reject the alternative. This would no doubt have the virtue of clarity and simplicity, but it would miss half of what the text was telling us about the relationships between God, humanity and other animals, which — apart from fidelity to Scripture — was

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presumably what held Luther back from doing so. I suggest that we will be better interpreters of Luther in relation to animals if we resist the desire to resolve the tensions evident in the many ways in which he talks about animals, and instead interpret these tensions anagogically: as pointing beyond themselves, as intimating the need for resolution in a different context than the one in which he was working, and as showing that the animals who appear so frequently in his writing cannot be contained behind the fences he sometimes held them behind.

⁹³ Ickert seems close to this latter track in concluding that for Luther God-given dominion means 'human beings are given an unequivocal responsibility to care for and protect the non-human creation' ('Luther and Animals', 98).

What then would be the context in which Luther's insights could find a resolution beyond themselves? My favourite illustration of the change of perspective required is from a parable from the Jewish philosopher and theologian Moses Maimonides. He pictures an individual in a city who believes that the final end of the ruler of the city is to keep the individual's house safe from robbers. Maimonides comments that this is true from a certain point of view, since the house is kept safe because of the ruler's action.⁹⁴ Whenever Luther speaks of God's provision of other creatures for the benefit of human beings, he is always seeking to assure his audience of God's grace towards humanity: to set out the good news that, despite appearances at times, in God's ongoing activity of creation God is concerned to establish a place for human beings to live and thrive.⁹⁵ Within the terms of Maimonides's parable, Luther is providing assurance that the ruler is indeed ensuring the safety of the house. If we accept the insight of the parable that this may not be a complete account of the purposes of the ruler — that the ruler might also be concerned with the safety of the other houses in the city — we can ask whether within the generous economy of God's creative grace, God might be concerned in a similar way for parts of creation other than the human. Within this broader context, we could do justice both to Luther's bold pronouncements of God's graciousness towards humanity, and to his intimations that other forms of creaturely life, such as birds and rabbits and dogs, might also have their own place in God's purposes. Just as Luther interprets Genesis anagogically, as containing a tension that points beyond itself to the incarnation, this is a proposal to interpret Luther's thought on animals as an anagoge, intimating the need for a wider perspective as to God's dealings with human and non-human animals.

⁹⁴ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 3:13.

⁹⁵ Walter Brueggemann argues that the dating of Genesis to the exilic period means that the creation narratives themselves were attempting a similar task of reassuring the Israelites that despite appearances they had place in God's purposes (Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation); Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 14).