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Playing Chicken: Theology, Economics, Politics and Ethics in the Campaign for Better Conditions for Poultry¹

David Clough²

Celebrity chefs are unlikely champions of the welfare of chickens, but in their televised campaigns beginning in January 2008 Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Jamie Oliver gave a high public profile to the conditions in which chickens are intensively farmed for meat and eggs in the UK. The campaign has met with some success: an RSPCA survey in February found that 73 per cent of consumers stated they had changed their buying habits after learning of the conditions in which chickens are farmed, and the demand for free-range chicken increased by 35 per cent,³ although February also saw Tesco reduce the price of intensively farmed birds to £1.99.⁴ The two campaigners used different methods and called for different outcomes: Fearnley-Whittingstall built and stocked an intensive broiler shed to show the conditions in which chickens are raised, and tried to make the town of Axminster use more than 50 per cent free-range chicken.⁵ Jamie Oliver gassed a day-old chick live in a TV studio to show the realities of egg production as well as cooking some invited guests a meal. He asked people to buy chicken reared in sheds but under the RSPCA 'Freedom Food' standard, seemingly preferring this over recommending free-range chicken because of a concern for affordability of chicken for the poor.⁶ *The Independent* reported that demand for intensively reared chicken could have dropped by 10 million birds in February – perhaps accounting for Tesco's discount policy – and claimed that the campaign had 'changed the eating habits of a nation'.⁷ Whatever the truth of this claim, there is much of interest here in the negotiation of ethical norms in the human treatment of non-human animals. For example, what ethical basis could undergird the nice ethical judgement that it is appropriate for human beings to kill chickens for food at eight weeks old, but only if they have access to open-air runs continuously during the daytime?⁸ Interestingly, Fearnley-Whittingstall provides a justification for his position with reference to theological argument, based on Stephen Budiansky's *The Covenant of the Wild: Why Animals Chose Domestication*, which in turn draws on Leopold's Land Ethic among other sources. There are some similarities between Fearnley-Whittingstall's position and that identified in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food report on the use of new breeding

technologies of farm animals, though their views of the theological contribution to the debate could not be more different. In what follows, I will reflect on the role theology plays in this public debate. I will also argue that theological accounts are promising in grounding different practices towards chickens and other non-human animals, although this promise is as yet for the most part unfulfilled.

The first chapter of *River Cottage Meat Book*⁹ raises unusual questions for a cookery book: ‘Why do we eat meat?’ and ‘is it right, morally, that we do?’¹⁰ In it, Fearnley-Whittingstall argues that we eat meat because it comes naturally to us, but he also believes that this is not a sufficient moral defence of the practice. The first potential arguments he considers to justify meat-eating are what he calls Christian ones, which he renders as ‘a fairly crude citing of the scriptures’, specifically that Genesis 1.28 gives human beings the right to exercise dominion, that the Old Testament accepts systemic animal sacrifice, and that Jesus did not question meat-eating. He suggests that together these are interpreted by Christians as approbation for slaughtering animals for food. He is not persuaded by these points on the very general ground that any religion’s argument for meat-eating is not a moral one because ‘The (mis)interpretation of scripture has been used as justification for some of the most appallingly cruel and immoral acts of history and continues to be to this day.’ In surveying other potential justifications, he judges that in a post-Darwinian framework, Kantian and Cartesian exclusion of animals from moral consideration are also implausible. The only people who would defend the Cartesian view of animals as merely machines against all the evidence of human/non-human continuity, he suggests, are those ‘regressing to some sort of theological justification’.¹¹ Fearnley-Whittingstall expresses sympathy with vegetarians who oppose the suffering caused to animals, but considers it inadequate because we cannot reach a position of moral purity in relation to other animals. Drawing on Budiansky, he sees the relationship between humans and the animals that they raise for meat as ‘symbiotic’. The relationship is therefore advantageous to the animals who would not otherwise gain from being fed, sheltered and protected from predators and disease:

They do not crave wilderness, or the freedom of their ancestors. They accept the way things are. And they thrive under these terms . . . I believe that, under the terms of this arrangement, farm animals can be healthy, contented, and even, at least in a sense that suits their species, fulfilled – for the duration of their short lives.

It is crucial for Fearnley-Whittingstall that this is a contractual relationship which imposes onerous responsibilities on human beings; it is also important to him that this contract be seen as 'not God-given, but man-made'.¹²

There is much that one could engage with here on the adequacy of the moral case that Fearnley-Whittingstall makes for meat-eating. He notes himself that the argument is 'fragile', although in his view this is mostly because of the systematic abuse of animals in industrial meat production in the UK.¹³ He is no philosopher, and it is not hard to find fault with arguments such as his: since animals will die anyway, we might as well kill them, especially after having made the case for continuity between the human and non-human moral spheres.¹⁴ Here, however, I am more interested in the function theology plays in his account. For Fearnley-Whittingstall, Christianity seems, in this context, to function as a potential prop for the assertion of an appropriate human dominance over non-human animals, and of an irrational qualitative separation between human and non-human animals. The case he makes for higher regard for other animals is explicitly anti-theological: it is only when we realize that our contract with other animals is something that we have created that we are able to recognize that the moral demand on us is not one that we can renege on.

Stephen Budiansky, on whom Fearnley-Whittingstall relies, shares his lack of sympathy for theological argumentation, though for a different reason. Budiansky's emphasis is different to Fearnley-Whittingstall's. Budiansky argues for the same evolutionary co-dependence between human beings and the animals that they domesticate that Fearnley-Whittingstall cites, but for him, this is a defence of farming, rather than an argument for farming in a particular way. Budiansky makes no mention of a contract or of moral duties to animals. He is most concerned to make the case that human beings are part of nature, rather than standing apart from it. He sees humans' relationships with other animals as part of a long and complex evolutionary development with mutual benefits, rather than as an example of unnatural and exploitative human activity. Budiansky is influenced by the canonical ecological text *A Sand County Almanac*, in which Aldo Leopold argues for a holistic 'land ethic' where respect is attributed to the complex and interdependent ecosystems supporting all life.¹⁵ In developing his case, some of his chief opponents are environmentalists and advocates of animal rights who are determined to 'romanticize the perfection of nature' and 'ignore its obvious cruelties'. In these arguments Budiansky discerns an unhappy echo of

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efforts made a century ago by Christian theologians to reconcile the difficult fact that (1) God created the earth and all life thereon; (2) God is perfect in his judgment and his mercy; and (3) diseases, as biologists had begun to demonstrate, are caused by other living beings, presumably just as much a part of God's creation – the only difference being that their sole purpose in life is to inflict suffering in exceptionally unpleasant ways.¹⁶

Budiansky enlists the support of Mark Twain to illuminate the naïveté he sees in such views, citing the care Twain imagines God taking to ensure the preservation of diseases during the great flood:

There were typhoid germs, and cholera germs, and hydrophobia germs, and lockjaw germs, and consumption germs, and black-plague germs, and some hundreds of other aristocrats, specially precious creations, golden bearers of God's love to man, blessed gifts of the infatuated Father to his children – all of which had to be sumptuously housed and richly entertained.¹⁷

Budiansky notes the difference that 'The nineteenth-century theologians were trying to find in nature a reflection of God's perfection, while today's nature-worshippers are seeking to show nature as perfect in its own right', but argues that these two positions have a common desire to 'steer clear of troubling complications'.¹⁸ Where Fearnley-Whittingstall saw theology as the prop for irrational views about the irrelevance of morality to non-human animals, Budiansky sees it as a basis for an unrealistic and misleadingly romantic view of what nature is like.

It is unsurprising that theology plays a different role in the very different context of the 1995 Report of the Committee to Consider the Ethical Implications of Emerging Technologies in the Breeding of Farm Animals, but it is only when one is aware that the committee producing the report was chaired by Michael Banner, Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge and previously Professor of Moral and Social Theology at King's College London, that one guesses at the more sympathetic treatment it receives there. Banner's vigorously Barthian approach to ethics is held in check for the most part, its mood surfacing only perhaps in the decisive dismissal of consequentialist moral theories as subject to such 'very severe and sustained philosophical criticism' that 'it can hardly be regarded as a sound or acceptable basis on which to advance recommendations of public policy'.¹⁹ The report eschews an attempt to engage in moral argument with the posi-

tion of those who think no use of animals is acceptable, or with those who consider that any use of animals can be justified, framing its reflections within the principles implicit in existing regulations that 'use of animals, for any purpose, agricultural or otherwise, is acceptable, provided the use is humane'.²⁰ The resistance to consequentialism is significant in the recommendation of the committee that there are some harms that should never be inflicted on any animal, no matter what the circumstances. The reason given for this is that animals cannot be seen merely as raw material for human projects: this is referred to as 'overweening human pride or hubris' sometimes characterized as an attempt to 'play God'. In a Christian context, the report notes that this position could be rooted in an appreciation of the world 'as a created order which has been shaped by God and as such is to be accepted by us as having a good or integrity of its own', and it observes that this position is also taken by other theistic religions.²¹ The report recognizes that theism is not the only basis for attributing respect to non-human animals, citing the palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould's view that the process of evolutionary change itself is deserving of respect.²²

Here, then, theological considerations are playing precisely the opposite role to that in Fearnley-Whittingstall's cookbook. Fearnley-Whittingstall saw theology as providing a regressive justification for a Cartesian moral disregard of non-human animals, but Banner's committee considers that Christianity is an important potential grounding of the opposite view that other animals are worthy of moral regard. Despite this difference in perspective, it is striking that the ethical implications of the two accounts are broadly similar. Both accounts argue that it is legitimate for human beings to make use of non-human animals provided they are treated well, which, both accounts agree, does not rule out rearing them for slaughter.

The comparison of the role of theology in these accounts prompts a range of questions, of which I will reflect briefly on two. First, given the disagreement about the implications of a theological approach to the ethics of human practices in relation to non-human animals, what are we to make of the role theology does, or should, play in discussion of these issues? There is no doubt that the identification of theology as an enemy by Fearnley-Whittingstall and an ally by the Banner report can be explained in part in relation to a difference in initial sympathy to, and knowledge about, the theological project. It would be too simplistic, however, to conclude that Fearnley-Whittingstall is merely misinformed. Christians were prominent in the defence of Cartesian views of non-human animals. For some Christians, this was the only way to defend the goodness of God in the face of the innocent suffering of non-human animals. Luther's commentary on

Genesis celebrates the gospel good news of God's promise that, despite all appearances, human beings are different in origin and destiny from all God's other creatures. This is close to Fearnley-Whittingstall's contention that theology serves to demarcate a qualitative distinction that flies in the face of biological evidence. Within the Christian tradition, ideas that seem to weaken the difference between human and non-human creatures have repeatedly been linked to atheism. It is a commonplace in modern theological discourse to ground ethical regard for human beings in the doctrine that all human beings are made in the 'image of God': alongside the problematic exegesis involved in this invocation, we should also note that this is the theological assertion of moral status independent of the characteristics of creatures in a parallel mode to both Fearnley-Whittingstall and Luther. Moreover, modern Christians often do defend meat-eating with the sort of crude exegetical appeals Fearnley-Whittingstall describes. It is true that such arguments need not be exegetically crude: there are resources in the tradition for a careful and sustained defence of meat-eating. It is also true that asserting a theologically based qualitative moral distinction between human and non-human creatures need not result in the Cartesian excesses where non-human animals were vivisected in the confidence that they are machines incapable of experiencing suffering: instead, we could recognize a different order of moral duties to non-human animals, or base norms against cruelty towards them on the potential impact to human beings, following Aquinas.²³ But it is hard to deny Fearnley-Whittingstall's point that theology can be used to maintain a qualitative distinction between humans and other animals that is hard to sustain on other grounds in a post-Darwinian context.

If Fearnley-Whittingstall is right on this, does this mean that Banner *et al* are wrong in seeing theology as a potential source of moral regard for non-human animals? The most significant theological argument cited in their report is that appreciating that the world has been created by God means recognizing that it has a goodness and integrity of its own, rather than merely being 'raw material' for our ends.²⁴ While this argument is used to establish the opposite of the point Fearnley-Whittingstall seeks to make, it does not contradict his position. Recognizing the goodness of creation does not, of itself, establish in what this goodness consists, or what kind of actions might be considered to be consonant with respecting or disrespecting its goodness. If, as Calvin seems to think, the primary reason the universe is good is as an environment providentially provided by God for the benefit of human beings, then it is not clear that we should not use other animals as we like.²⁵ Perhaps in reply we might say that

referring the good of creation to ourselves in this way would be to fail to recognize that creation has a good 'of its own'. In the context of the report, this would be to say that there is value in the way creation is structured that should not be ignored in reshaping it according to human interest. Once we recognize that human beings must be understood as part of the order of creation, however, it is not quite clear how this argument will play out. Is it fitting for human beings to prey on other animals, just as it is fitting for lions to prey on gazelles, as part of this 'good' creation? Budiansky's citing of Twain's scepticism about the ways in which God's goodness is manifest in the universe should alert us to the danger of loose claims in this area. A great deal more would need to be said to enable this argument to generate morally substantive conclusions. Certainly, not enough is said in the report in order to link this point to the ethical conclusion that there are some things one should never do to a non-human animal.

Having argued that Fearnley-Whittingstall's conclusions about the role theology plays are better founded than those of the Banner Report, I should make clear that I share Banner's belief that theology should be understood as grounding a profound moral regard for non-human animals. There is a wealth of evidence in the Bible for this position, and it is arguable that it is only in the modern period that theology has been systematically co-opted to make human beings the primary locus of moral value. In my view, the plausibility of Fearnley-Whittingstall's position on theology in this discussion is a symptom of the underdevelopment of Christian thinking about non-human animals: deploying Scripture and the Christian tradition to undergird grand claims for a qualitative moral distinction between human and non-human animals seems to me to look possible as a Christian position in the same way as it looked possible to defend slavery on the basis of Christian teaching in the nineteenth century. Therefore, those like Fearnley-Whittingstall who are critical of the theological legacy in this regard cannot be blamed for their interpretation until much more work has been done to establish a solid case for setting aside the lines of argument in the tradition to which he refers.

If this is a call to set the theological house in order in relation to the theology of non-human animals, my second point in conclusion is that there is also some disorder in the atheistic arguments in relation to non-human animals I have surveyed. Fearnley-Whittingstall argues that there is moral continuity across the human/non-human borderline, but he also defends the routine slaughter of farm animals. If we are to give up on the qualitative distinction between human and non-human animals – which I agree we should – what is the morally relevant feature of domesticated

animals that means it is legitimate to raise them, but not human beings, for meat? The closest Fearnley-Whittingstall comes to an answer is to lean on Budiansky's case that domesticated animals have evolved to be dependent on human beings for care. Filling in gaps in his argument, we might reason that, given that they are particularly well-suited to being dependent on human beings for their well-being, to continue this natural relationship, including their slaughter, is appropriate. It is not clear that this point can survive the strong case he wishes to make against a qualitative moral distinction between human and non-human animals, however. Human babies have evolved to be heavily dependent on their mothers in their early life, and there is widespread evidence of infanticide as a human practice in particular circumstances, but I take it that Fearnley-Whittingstall would not condone its continuance. Without a qualitative distinction between the human and non-human and in the absence of other arguments it is hard to see what would morally justify using a non-human animal for food which would reliably prohibit the farming of human beings.

There are similar difficulties with the non-theological argument given in the Banner Report for resisting the idea that animals are merely raw materials. The report cites Stephen Jay Gould's request for respect for the 'integrity of nature' based on respect for the chance evolutionary process that brought it into being. This is close to the non-theological case Aldo Leopold makes for respect for the entirety of nature in his 'Land Ethic', a fundamental text for the ecological movement. Yet while we might have sympathy with the conclusion that all living things are deserving of regard, and might even agree that ecosystems as a whole have some kind of moral claim on us for their preservation, it is hard to establish a clear basis for this in the absence of a doctrine of creation. What is it about the outcome of a random process that is worthy of respect? Why should we give more moral regard to a mouse on this basis than we would to the event of rolling a six a hundred times in a row? If it is the complexity of that which is the result of this process, why are certain types of complexity, such as those we call living things, more worthy of regard than others, such as mountains, or stars? Responses could be made to these points, but it is not clear that they would be any more obviously rational or based in a post-Darwinian understanding of evolution than the theological ones that Fearnley-Whittingstall cites. In fact, it seems to me that theology offers the best route to escape an anthropocentric moral system, though, as I have noted above, there is significant work to do to realize its potential in this regard.

We have come a long way from the celebrity chefs and chickens with which we started this paper. What has this theological debate to say to

them? First, on the theological grounds I have sketched above, it seems to me obvious that Christians should agree with Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Jamie Oliver in not consuming battery-farmed poultry. In fact, the theological case I would put forward would reject killing any animals for food in most circumstances, but that argument will have to await another day.²⁶ Second, it is clear that the arguments I have surveyed from Fearnley-Whittingstall are both unsympathetic to a constructive Christian contribution to this question and are also problematic in their foundations. This is inaccurate in relation to the potential theological contribution, but this mistake is understandable given the state of the theological discussion of these issues. Third, this does not make it inappropriate for Christians to make a strategic alliance with those who oppose this cruelty to non-human animals for whatever reason, and the Banner Report is one example of this common cause. Finally, theologians should note the shaky foundations of the secular arguments in favour of better standards of non-human animal welfare, and work on developing a better theological account of non-human animals in order to ground a new theological ethical approach to their treatment by human beings.

NOTES

- 1 This paper was first presented to the Society for the Study of Theology at St. John's College, Durham, April 2008.
- 2 David Clough is Senior Lecturer in theology at the University of Chester.
- 3 Rebecca Smithers, 'Shoppers turn to better-reared poultry', *The Guardian*, 1 March, 2008. This change in attitude is predicted by research showing that at least some consumers are concerned about the welfare of livestock but have little knowledge about how meat is produced: see C. Hall and V. Sandilands, 'Public Attitudes to the Welfare of Broiler Chickens', *Animal Welfare* 16 (2007), pp. 499–512.
- 4 Rebecca Smithers, 'Animal welfare groups protest as Tesco delivers riposte to celebrity chefs – the £1.99 chicken', *The Guardian*, 6 February 2008.
- 5 Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, 'Poultry is not a class issue', *The Guardian*, 19 January 2008.
- 6 Caroline Gammell, 'Jamie Oliver campaigns for chicken welfare', *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 January, 2008.
- 7 Martin Hickman, 'The campaign that changed the eating habits of a nation', *The Independent*, 28 February, 2008.
- 8 UK standards for the rearing of free-range poultry can be found on the Department for Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) website. URL: <<http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodrin/poultry/faq/marketing.htm#freerang>>, accessed 17 March 2008.
- 9 Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, *The River Cottage Meat Book* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004)
- 10 Fearnley-Whittingstall, *The River Cottage Meat Book*, 12. Joanne Hollows situates Fearnley-Whittingstall's television programmes and cook books in a narrative of a wider movement to reinvent the housewife (Joanne Hollows, 'Can I Go Home Yet?

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- Feminism, Post-Feminism and Domesticity', in *Feminism in Popular Culture*, Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley (eds.), pp. 97–118 (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2006).
- 11 Fearnley-Whittingstall, *River Cottage Meat Book*, p. 14.
 - 12 Fearnley-Whittingstall, *River Cottage Meat Book*, p. 23.
 - 13 Fearnley-Whittingstall, *River Cottage Meat Book*, p. 24.
 - 14 For a further exploration of these issues see 'Why Do Some People Eat Meat?', *Epworth Review* 32:2 (2005), p. 32–40.
 - 15 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949). For a useful collection of essays reflecting on Leopold's legacy, see J. Baird Callicott (ed.), *Companion to a Sand County Almanac* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1987).
 - 16 Stephen Budiansky, *The Covenant of the Wild: Why Animals Chose Domestication* (London: Phoenix, 1992), p. 137.
 - 17 Mark Twain, cited in Budiansky, *The Covenant of the Wild*, p. 137–8.
 - 18 Budiansky, *The Covenant of the Wild*, p. 138.
 - 19 Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (hereafter 'MAFF'), *Report of the Committee to Consider the Ethical Implications of Emerging Technologies in the Breeding of Farm Animals* (London: HMSO, 1995), 3.13.
 - 20 MAFF, *Implications of Emerging Technologies*, 2.3.
 - 21 MAFF, *Implications of Emerging Technologies*, 3.6.
 - 22 MAFF, *Implications of Emerging Technologies*, 3.7.
 - 23 Note the difference between Cartesian positions and Descartes himself.
 - 24 MAFF, *Implications of Emerging Technologies*, 3.6.
 - 25 In his commentary on Genesis, Calvin summarized the second point of his argument as 'all things were ordained for the use of man, that he, being under deeper obligation, might devote and dedicate himself entirely to obedience towards God' (Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. and ed. John King (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), pp. 64–5).
 - 26 For a summary case against meat eating from a Christian perspective, see my article, 'Why Do Some People Eat Meat?', *Epworth Review* 32:2 (2005), p. 32–40.