

Complications in Theological Thinking about Other Species: A Reply to David Jones

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This discussion concerns some difficulties which occur when we try to think about other, non-human animals. It takes the form of a reply to an article which appeared in this journal in December of 1992. The article, written by David Jones and entitled “Do Whales Have Souls?”, was a free-ranging attempt to ask theologically and philosophically inspired questions about whales and other life. This reply points out difficulties inherent in any thinking about other animals, and in particular those risks which such thinking faces if it relies on primary categories of Catholic theology. Failure to see the limitations of such categories can perpetuate the dismissal of other animals’ possibilities which has been characteristic of the Christian tradition.

Jones’ article contains the first mention of whales’ appearing in this journal, and it aims to be speculative and provocative. While at first we may smile at the range of the questions and the tendency to poetic observation in the article, the general subject matter—the existence of another group of species characterized by large brains, the occurrence of complex inter-individual communication, and both family structure and enduring social networks of distinct individuals—invites speculation of a very pointed sort. This reply argues that two sets of complications arise when Jones tries to think about whales. The first concerns the inherent limitations of familiar theological categories if we use them when trying to assess the significance of other living creatures, and the second concerns the viability of the familiar category of “species” when seeking to understand other animals’ value.

The source of these complications sheds some light on their nature. Human life involves ways of acting, talking and thinking, what Wittgenstein referred to in the *Philosophical Investigations* as “forms of life”, which create and sustain a radical separation of humans from other animals. This central fact is thoroughly reflected in our everyday speaking and thinking; telling examples are phrases such as “he acted like an animal” and our tendency to group all other creatures together under the

name “animals” as if that was a natural category distinct from the category “human.” This radical separation is anchored in our daily acts towards other animals, particularly our instrumental use of them for food, clothes, fertilizer, and experiments. Consequently our thinking about them is characterized by an habitual, fundamental distance. The distance results in what is truly a dramatic ignorance about the real lives of other animals, a fact attested in contemporary ethological works by constant reiteration of phrases like “we just don’t know” or “we haven’t studied yet”. See, for example, Donald R. Griffin, *Animal Minds* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and Kenneth S. Norris, *Dolphin Days: The Life and Times of the Spinner Dolphin* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1991). The work of ethology begun in the middle of this century has shown that, despite the fact that we hold very pronounced attitudes of superiority to all other animals, our knowledge of the details of their lives has far too often been characterized by abject ignorance, false information, caricature, speculation and prejudice rather than factual information. This distance from other animals and the related ignorance of them are primary sources of difficulties in thinking about them.

In the face of this ignorance, our thinking about the relative importance of other animals has been so shot through with humanocentric notions of what is valuable in a living “thing” that it is impossible to think clearly about nonhumans unless we are willing to challenge the adequacy of the categories of thought we have to date been using. Jones’ attempt to ask about whales, though generous in intention, uses traditional theological categories and thereby risks reinforcing the exclusivist or humanocentric notions which have previously been used to justify a wholesale dismissal of other animals. His inquiry demonstrates the significant complications which arise when one relies heavily on certain Catholic theological categories to assess the possibilities of other animals.

Further, his implicit use of the category of “species” as the primary concept with which to organize an evaluation of other creatures risks another set of complications, namely those deriving from essentialist thinking. This reply argues that such generalized thinking ignores the individual reality of the very creatures being considered, and thus adds further complications to our attempt to see other creatures clearly.

A. Complications related to the Theological Categories.

The article begins with three apparently provocative questions:

Do whales have souls and if so what follows? How would Catholic theology have to change if it were discovered that whales were as rational as you or I? If whales have souls can they become Catholics? (598)²

The seemingly innovative quality of these questions is undermined by their reliance on traditional theological categories.

1. “Do whales have souls and if so what follows?” Jones’ choice of the traditional theological category “soul” as the pivot of his opening question entails very significant complications. No doubt the word was chosen to emphasize Jones’ concern to accord whales significance in and of themselves; “soul” is a word we use sparingly to signify importance of the first degree and Jones clearly wants this overtone. Although the word has been used variously—it is the claim of the Aristotelian/Thomist tradition that plants and other animals have, respectively, “nutritive” and “animal” souls—today the term is more typically reserved for the claim that humans as creatures have a special quality, something of which is captured in the phrase “rational souls” and something of which is also captured in the word “person.” The contemporary philosopher Raimond Gaita in *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London: Macmillan Press, 1991), page 119, describes the common practice of speaking about ourselves versus non-humans: “The difference between human beings and animals is sometimes expressed by saying that only human beings have souls.” It is this special quality which gives the word its great purchase in Jones’ question. Such an emphasis on human uniqueness is characteristic of much of human thinking, including the Protestant side of the Christian tradition, the rationalist tradition of Descartes and Kant, and, in general, all traditional ethics. See Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), page 4.

Despite the inclusive overtones of Jones’ use of “soul” in this question, his strategy is at best a very complicated way of asking about the reality of other animals; at worst, it is positively self-defeating, for it carries within it a suggestion that humans are the paradigm of importance. By using the traditional category of “soul”, Jones is asking if whales have an essence which is like the essence of humans. The underlying message is, since humans are distinctive because they have souls, we might also be able to say that whales are distinctive because they, too, like humans, have souls. The complication is this: if an inquiry about other animals’ significance and/or uniqueness begins by asking if they, like humans, possess that which makes humans distinctive, the likelihood of “seeing” any unique qualities in non-humans will be almost non-existent. Whales are not only being forced into a category which has been used to mark humans’ special status, they are not being viewed as having the possibility of a separate basis for importance. Thus, focusing on the traditional notion of soul does not go very far in according whales significance in and of themselves.

An alternative use of “soul” is expressed by the Anglican philosopher of religion and theologian Keith Ward in *Defending the Soul* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1992):

The whole point of talking of the soul is to remind ourselves constantly that we transcend all the conditions of our material existence; that we are always more than the sum of our chemicals, our electrons, our social roles or our genes. We do not transcend them by having an additional, spiritual bit that we can pin down and define. We transcend them precisely in being indefinable, always more than can be seen or described, subjects of experience and action, unique and irreplaceable. (Page 115)

This definition does not rely exclusively on a human model or even on a common type of soul in humans and non-humans. Instead, it emphasizes the indefinability of the creature and sees this as a criterion for possessing a “soul”. Thus a whale could have an “indefinability” which is different from the “indefinability” of a human, and still be understood to have a “soul”. Whales, and possibly other creatures, would then be accorded their own uniqueness and not one derived from or reliant upon a human paradigm. Jones’ thinking about whales’ souls, in its reliance on the categories of Catholic theology, risks the limitation of defining whales too much in terms of humans.

2. “How would Catholic theology have to change if it were discovered that whales were as rational as you or I?” This question introduces a second great category of Catholic theology, rationality. Jones seems to imply that rationality is a monolithic phenomenon which occurs in just one form. If whales are rational, they will be rational in the same way humans are, “as rational as you or I”. This attempt to squeeze whales into a second traditional category of Catholic theology and the related human paradigm again risks a failure to discover, because of a refusal to imagine the possibility of, qualities or traits possessed by whales which are not those of humans but which might be, nonetheless, valuable in and of themselves.

Thus, Jones’ attempt to understand whales in terms of the Catholic tradition’s commitment to “soulfulness” and “rationality” risks a prejudgment as to what we might find of importance in the animals which we are trying to understand. It is a complicating factor in Jones’ thinking that he never questions the adequacy of the categories which he uses to frame his questions. Use of these categories further risks unwitting advancement of Descartes’ agenda by which not only the possibility of intelligence and language in other animals was rejected, but even their sentience was denied. Human soulfulness and rationality are quite possibly not exhaustive of why whales or other animals might be

important or the subject of provocative questions.

3. "If whales have souls can they become Catholics?" This third question betrays the human model underlying Jones' questions. No doubt this question is meant to be inclusive and to imply important possibilities for whales, but it again reflects a limitation in the categories used to think about whales. "Catholic" as a form of life is an eminently human phenomenon, and to ask about whales as Catholics betrays a limit or narrowness in considering what it is or might be about the reality of non-humans that leads us to ask about their inherent value. Jones' questions sound in a conceptuality which shows no flexibility for considering the possibility that whales can have a non-derivative importance, that is, an importance which is not reliant on the very categories we use to highlight the value of humans and which we have historically argued are the essential traits of humans. Whales need not be quasi-human to be important.

Thus despite Jones' willingness to consider whales, the categories chosen to examine these complex non-humans suggests a closedmindedness to the range of possibilities of importance or inherent value in other animals. Those with personal experience with whales wouldn't think these questions generous but, rather, minimalistic, parochial, and humanocentric. Jones himself asks, "in our talk and our art, do we think too much of man alone . . .?" (604) His use of these theological categories as primary tools to seek the significance of whales certainly risks this complication, limiting non-humans to human analogues or similarities. Whales end up being seen as possible humans, or participants with humans in our schemes of importance. Any importance they might have which is truly unrelated to human values is left unsought.

B. Complications related to Use of an Essentialist Notion of Species.

Jones' implicit use of the category of "species" as the primary concept to evaluate other creatures suggests another set of complications, namely those deriving from essentialist thinking.³ By "essentialist thinking" I refer to a traditional mode of thinking which sees animals as grouped into fixed species which are characterized definitively by some privileged sameness of relation to each other, or, in other words, by a particular essence which the members of the species alone have and share.

The notion of a fixed species characterized by an unvarying essence is a pre-Darwinian notion which was dominant at the time most theological notions, including the Catholic categories of soulfulness and rationality, were being formulated. While it may a simple way of viewing classes of animals, it is no longer dominant in biological thinking because evolution

has undermined the belief in the fixity of species. Rather, biologists proceed now on the assumption that the primary unit of significance in ecology is not the species but the population of individuals. "Populationist", as opposed to essentialist, thinking in biology stresses the uniqueness of everything in the organic world. Individuals form populations, which can be analyzed for an arithmetic mean or statistical variation, but only the individuals of which the population is composed have reality. See E. Mayr, *Evolution and the Diversity of Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1976), pages 28–9.

Note that to view such populationist thinking as accurate and essentialist thinking in biology as inaccurate is not to claim that species are not "real" in some important sense, for the existence of species is one of the most striking realities when one examines the world of living things. For example, if we examine the animals or plants in a particular area, it will be readily apparent that they can be grouped into classes that differ from one another in numerous respects. It does not follow from the existence of species as an indisputable biological datum, however, that one can draw an essentialist conclusion. Careful study of the animals grouped into different classes will reveal that the distinguishing characteristics are by no means constant within the classes. If we extend our investigation of any group of animals, including humans, in both space and time, the limitations of both the similarities inside a particular species and the differences between separate species become increasingly apparent. See John Dupre, "Natural Kinds and Biological Taxa" in *The Philosophical Review*, Volume XC, No. 1 (January 1981), pages 66–90.

There are several complications and risks which are directly related to any reliance on an essentialist use of the notion species. These are significant when formulating questions about other creatures in contexts not concerned with explicitly biological issues but, instead, with non-biological issues such as theological significance or moral considerability.

First, the vagueness of essence thinking is a complicating factor. The concept of "essence" is very imprecise and hard to use, and thus lends itself to obscurantism and abuse, particularly when it is not defined precisely by something which is observable. One significant risk is the possibility of getting the essence wrong, and another is the potential for stating it in a prejudiced or ideological way which can't be corrected by reference to facts. Misplaced essentialism is a common basis for unjustifiable exclusivism, such as occurs in racism (one race seen as having the essence of what it means to be human, while another is seen as lacking it). A very complex problem occurs when the essence is not based on an observable physical reality but rather on something less verifiable. Whether it then "truly exists" can seem more a matter of how we agree to

talk about ourselves or other animals than of the actual reality of the creature whose essence is being debated.

Consider the claim that rationality is part of the human essence. The notion of rationality is a particularly difficult idea to explicate. There has been no general agreement in the history of ideas regarding what is meant by “rational”.⁴ This is a term which, rather than bringing clarity to a description, always begs explanation, and it is crucial to acknowledge how complicated it is to use the notion of rationality when speaking in essentialist language about the nature and value of any animal. Further, there has been no consensus that rationality is what really constitutes the essence of humans despite the fact that prominent arguments for human superiority feature rationality as a distinctive human trait (Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, and Kant). Rationality is so vague a notion that its employment in the service of an essentialist understanding of a group of animals is like blowing smoke into fog—the result is not likely to be clarity. While these possibilities of mistake or abuse do not provide a conclusive argument against essentialism, they certainly are complicating factors.

Second, the generality of essence thinking involves other complications. If we claim that a non-physical trait, such as intelligence or rationality, is part of the essence of a species, our essentialist claim must account for marginal cases in which members of the species lack the trait. If we say that humans are creatures with intelligence or rationality, what do we do with the many humans who are not intelligent or rational? We risk talking nonsense if we claim that an individual who is admittedly a member of the biological class “human” does not possess the “essence” of being human. If the only criterion we have for “humanness”, though, is biological, then we are stuck with the problem that biologists themselves don’t talk of humans in essentialist terms any longer but, instead, in terms of individuals within a class (population) which, though in a class, do not share any “essence”.

Third, the inability of essence thinking to account for individual variation is a complicating factor, particularly if we want to use essentialist thinking in assessing moral aspects of decisions. When we assess the inevitable conflicts between individuals, be they human or non-human, we cannot avoid assessing actual historical situations; conflicts, by definition, always involve specific facts and specific individuals. Importation of the notion of species to resolve which of two conflicting individuals, if each is from a different species, should prevail in a particular conflict situation ignores the need to address actual situations of real, historically unique conflict, because it allows prejudice and ideology to operate without regard for the merits of the actual situation being addressed. For example,

consider the following: a situation arises in which the major interests (such as continued life and freedom from suffering) of an individual from Species 1 are in conflict with those of an individual from Species 2. The first individual has an intelligence, consciousness, rationality, language ability, sentience, and sense of honesty/deception which is superior in every way to those of the second individual. Comparison of these two individuals for purposes of resolving the conflict over whose interests should prevail would, without essentialist considerations tied to the species level, be resolved in favour of the first individual. But an essentialist understanding of species and their individual members could prevent this, and possibly reverse the result. Think of the case in which an intelligent chimpanzee with greater intelligence, consciousness, rationality, language ability, sentience, and sense of honesty/deception is experimented upon for the purpose of discovering a drug which will prolong the life of irrevocably comatose humans. A value system which favoured one species (the human) over another (the chimp) solely because of species essence would entail the enormous risk of ignoring the individuals involved. When we decide which creatures are of significance based on their species membership rather than their individual traits, we have exposed ourselves to a decision making mechanism which is blind to the very traits which we value, and we risk anomalous results. This example shows that an essentialist notion of species can be particularly ill-suited to moral judgments. A preoccupation with essences can obscure our inquiry because we no longer look at the individual actually in front of us but instead at pre-established categories of thought about the “kind” of individual in front of us.

Conclusion.

Even while critiquing fundamental features of Jones’ efforts, it is important to applaud questions about other animals. Thinking about the status of individuals from other species is a difficult task given the humanocentricity of our traditional thinking about value in any living thing. Theology doesn’t often take up this challenge.⁵ The number of listings in *Religion Index One: Periodicals* dealing with the subject of whales totals 2 for the four and half year period from 1989 through mid-1993. There are no articles listed under the related subjects of dolphins, porpoises or cetaceans. The number of entries under “angels” for the same period is more than 35. Relatedly, one can contrast the focus of the questions in David Jones’ article with the exclusive focus of two important late twentieth century works regarding ethics, *Veritatis Splendor* and *The Declaration of the World Parliament of Religions* signed recently in Chicago (the texts of which can be found, respectively, in *Veritatis Splendor* (London: Incorporated Catholic Truth Society, 1993) and *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of World’s*

Religions, ed. by Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel (London: SCM Press, 1993)). If one reviews each of these with an eye for specific references to other species, *none* will be found. It remains, however, of the utmost importance to note that imaginative efforts like those of Jones will be burdened with extreme complications unless they openly challenge the adequacy of the categories which we have used to separate ourselves from the rest of creation.

In this century theology has had new eyes and moved to new places. We have black theologies, feminist or womanist theologies, liberation theologies, urban theologies, pluralist theologies, ecological theologies, and now even animal theology (see Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (London: SCM Press and Chicago: University of Illinois, 1994)). A fascination with whales or other animals may be a window to unsuspected realities, connections, and community in the world we share with those other animals. It is, hopefully, a window toward which theology will glance more frequently in the future.

- 1 I use the term “whales” in the most inclusive sense, such that it includes the many, many varieties of dolphins and porpoises, as well as the so-called great whales. The scientific name for this group of animals is “cetacea” and thus the term “cetacean” is commonly used. There are just under one hundred known species in this group, and others continue to be identified.
- 2 The numbers in the parentheses are references to the page numbers of the article in Volume 73, No. 866, of this journal (December 1992).
- 3 Jones’ thinking about “whales” includes a level of generality in the conceptualization which risks a betrayal of the enterprise itself. Jones uses the extremely general concept of “whales”, rather than refer to a particular species of whale or dolphin; this ordinary language term is itself a coarse level of discrimination, making reference to a large group of species which has immense internal variation. Such a high level of generalization, itself heavily reliant on an essentialist notion of the animals within the category, cannot help but miss some of the finer points of each member’s significance.
- 4 Some of the complications in using rationality as part of essentialist thinking can be seen in the following: Richard Sorabji’s argument that the concept of reason itself has varied (*Animals Minds and Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate* (London: Duckworth, 1993); Genevieve Lloyd’s account of how it has been subject to genderized differences (*The Man of Reason: ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Western Philosophy*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1993); and reformed epistemology’s challenge to classical foundationalism as a theory of rationality (see Plantinga, Alvin, and Wolterstorff, Nicholas (editors), *Reason and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (London and Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).
- 5 Interestingly, some modern philosophers have recently picked up the challenge. One groundbreaking advance in ethical awareness based on decades of ethological studies on primates appears in what is known as the “Great Ape Project” whereby philosophers and scientists are working on bringing a group of non-human species including chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans into the circle of recognized legal and ethical rights. See *The Great Ape Protect: Equality Beyond Humanity*, ed. by Paola Cavalieri and Peter Singer (London: Fourth Estate, 1993).