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David Clough

Interpreting human life by looking the other way: Bonhoeffer on human beings and other animals

1. Natural human uniqueness

When confronted with the question of the hermeneutics of human life, one of the most ancient and most common responses has been to look the other way. Instead of focussing on human beings, philosophers and theologians have commonly looked at other animals in order to give an account of human life.¹ Plato records a Socratic etymology of *anthrōpos* distinguishing between the other animals, who do not examine, or consider, or look up at any of the things they see: “of all the animals *anthrōpos* alone is rightly called *anthrōpos*, because he looks up at what he has seen”.² For Socrates, as for many who followed him, this observed difference functions as an interpretative insight for understanding how human beings should live well: human beings are the only rational animals and human lives are lived at their best when they are lived rationally.³ Others have judged different differences to be significant for interpreting human life: both Plato and Xenophon considered religion as a uniquely human attribute;⁴ elsewhere we find nakedness, laughter, promising, mourning, language, conscience, morality, clothing, tool use, immortality, freedom, violence, restraint from

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violence or symbol-making posited as unique human capabilities.⁵ There are several kinds of questions to be asked of such attempts to interpret the phenomenon of the human through

¹ I am grateful to Tom Greggs for comments on an earlier draft of this paper, as well as to participants in the colloquium for questions and comments.

² Plato, *Cratylus*, 399c in Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 12, trans. Harold N. Fowler. Harvard University Press; William Heinemann Ltd: Cambridge, MA and London 1921, cited in: Robert Renehan, ‘The Greek Anthropocentric View of Man’, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* (85) 1981, 239–259, 247.

³ See, for example, Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Hugh Tredennick, trans. J. A. K. Thompson. Penguin Revised edition: Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1976, 1.7, which specifies rationality as the function of human beings on the basis of it being their only unique characteristic.

⁴ Robert Renehan, ‘The Greek Anthropocentric View of Man’, in: *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* (85) 1981, 239–259, 250.

⁵ For one list, see Jacques Derrida and David Wills, ‘The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)’, in: *Critical Inquiry* (28:2) 2002, 369–418, 373.

differences with other animals. The first kind concerns their *accuracy*: Socrates is clearly wrong to deny that other animals examine, consider or look up at what they see, but recent studies in primates and other animals show we must reconsider other supposedly unique human characteristics too, such as rationality, language-use and morality.⁶ The second kind of question asks about the *adequacy* of the method of looking at human/non-human differences as a basis for a hermeneutic of human life: if we were able to locate a unique attribute of human beings — a median furrow in the upper lip is one possible candidate⁷ — why should that be considered any guide to interpreting how human life should be understood or conducted? In the light of the inaccuracy and dubious validity of such arguments, it seems more likely that presuppositions concerning what is most significant in human life are being pegged onto supposed human/non-human differences in order to give them authority. A third kind of question concerns the *consequence* of the deployment of the argument, both for the human beings to whom the characteristic is attributed, and for the non-human beings to whom the attribute is denied and who are therefore labelled irrational, stupid, immoral, slaves to instinct, and so on.

There are strong reasons to suppose that the theological ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer should be immune from any such concerns about deducing morality from human/non-human differences. If Christian ethics supersedes all other ethical reflection and functions as the critique of all

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ethics, in Bonhoeffer's famous words,⁸ if we must set aside all previous understandings of nature in order to recover the concept of the natural from the Gospel itself,⁹ then it seems that he should be first to object to doing ethics by looking about the world and commenting on the differences between humans and other animals. It is strange, therefore, to find Bonhoeffer adopting this methodology on several occasions. In his *Ethics* there are three examples of using a human/non-human difference as the introduction to an ethical position. First, early in his section on bodily life, he writes "Unlike an animal shelter, a human dwelling is not intended to be only a protection against bad weather and the night, as well as a place to raise offspring. It is

⁶ See, for example, Marc Bekoff, *Minding Animals: Awareness, Emotions, and Heart*. Oxford University Press: New York 2002; Marc Bekoff, *Animal Passions and Bestial Virtues: Reflections on Redecorating Nature*. Temple University Press: Philadelphia 2006; Frans de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA 1996.

⁷ This is a part of Charles Winick's definition of 'man' in Charles Winick, *The Dictionary of Anthropology*. Philosophical Library: New York 1956, 339, cited in: H. Peter Steeves, 'The Familiar Other and Feral Selves: Life At the Human/Animal Boundary', in: *The Animal-Human Boundary: Historical Perspectives*, Angela N. H. Creager and William Chester Jordan (eds.). University of Rochester Press: Rochester, NY 2002, 228–264, 232.

⁸ "The knowledge of good and evil appears to be the goal of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to supersede that knowledge. [...] Christian ethics claims to articulate the origin of the whole ethical enterprise and thus to be considered an ethic only as the critique of all ethics." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. DBWE 6. Fortress: Minneapolis 2005, 299–300 (301). Page numbers in parentheses in this reference and those that follow are to the German edition of Bonhoeffer's works: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, ed. Eberhard Bethge. Chr. Kaiser Verlag: Munich 1986.

⁹ "Thus, the concept of the natural must be recovered from the gospel itself. We speak of the natural as distinct from the sinful in order to include the created." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. DBWE 6, 173 (165).

the space in which human beings may enjoy the pleasures of personal life in the security of their loved ones and their possessions.”¹⁰ In the sentences that follow, Bonhoeffer identifies the joys of bodily life that go beyond mere necessities, in relation to eating and drinking, clothing, relaxation and sexuality. In doing so he seems to depend on the view that human beings are the only animals that experience joy. This opinion is easily invalidated by any dog owner, as well as by research studies,¹¹ thus raising the *accuracy* question identified above. While Bonhoeffer grounds his affirmation of human joy in an account of the Christian significance of the body,¹² introducing this human/non-human difference seems intended as a support to his theological case. It is not clear, however, how in his scheme this argument

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would work, thus raising questions of *adequacy*. Denying the possibility of joy to other animals would also have the *consequence* of reducing concern for this dimension of their well-being.¹³

The second example from the *Ethics* of Bonhoeffer using the identification of difference between human beings and other animals in relation to an ethical argument is in the context of his discussion of suicide, where he makes the following observation:

In contrast to animals, human beings have their lives not as an obligation that they cannot throw off, but in freedom to affirm or destroy them. Human beings can do what no animal can: they can voluntarily bring death on themselves. While animals are one with their bodily lives, human beings can distinguish themselves from their bodily lives. The freedom in which humans have their bodily life allows them freely to affirm this life and at the same time points them beyond bodily life; this freedom allows them to understand bodily life both as a gift to preserve and as a sacrifice to offer.¹⁴

Here Bonhoeffer attributes to human beings the unique capacities of distinguishing themselves from their bodily lives, acting freely in relation to life and therefore being able to commit suicide. As regards accuracy, it is unclear as to whether Bonhoeffer is right that suicidal acts are uniquely human as similar self-destructive behaviour has been observed in many other species.¹⁵ The questions concerning whether freedom and the ability to dis-

¹⁰ Ibid., 187 (181).

¹¹ For a review of relevant studies, see Franklin D. McMillan, ‘Do Animals Experience True Happiness?’, in: *Mental Health and Well-Being in Animals*, Franklin D. McMillan (ed.). Oxford: Blackwell 2005, 221–34 and Bernard E. Rollin, ‘Animal Happiness: A Philosophical View’, in *Mental Health and Well-Being in Animals*, Franklin D. McMillan (ed.). Oxford: Blackwell 2005. 235–241.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. DBWE 6, 186 (179f).

¹³ Considerable attention has been given to this issue in order to improve the welfare of non-human animals in captivity. In addition to the references given in note 10, see, for example James E. King, and Virginia I. Landau, ‘Can Chimpanzee (*Pan Troglodytes*) Happiness be Estimated By Human Raters?’, in: *Journal of Research in Personality* (37:1) 2003, 1–15.

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. DBWE 6, 196f (192).

¹⁵ See Antonio Preti, ‘Suicide Among Animals: A Review of Evidence’, in: *Psychological Reports* (101) 2007, 831–848; J. N. Crawley, M. E. Sutton, and D. Pickar, ‘Animal Models of Self-Destructive Behavior and Suicide’, *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 8:2 (1985), 299–310. It is certain, however, despite many stories and even a faked 1958 Disney nature film, that lemmings do not exhibit this behaviour: see Dennis Chitty, *Do Lemmings Commit Suicide? Beautiful Hypotheses and Ugly Facts*. Oxford University Press: New York 1996, 3–26. Chitty cites evidence that scenes in the Disney film *White Wilderness* (1958) apparently

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tinguish oneself from one's bodily life are uniquely human, are clearly even harder to resolve: the issue of whether human beings are free in this way is scientifically and theologically contentious, and it is hard to know what it might mean for humans to distinguish themselves from their bodily lives, let alone determine that this was a uniquely human capacity. Beyond this accuracy question, however, the suicide example is interesting in clarifying the adequacy issue. If it could be shown that suicide was a uniquely human act, it is not clear how this observation should function in Bonhoeffer's argument. If the supposed unique human ability to experience joy supports the case that joy in bodily life should be affirmed, why should not the supposed unique human ability to commit suicide support the case that suicide should be affirmed? A similar argument could be made in favour of sin given that it seems Bonhoeffer believes this also to be uniquely human.¹⁶ This example shows that something more than the identification of a unique human characteristic is required for an adequate argument: it must also be shown that this characteristic is deserving of affirmation. If this is the case, however, it is not clear why in addition to being deserving of affirmation it should also be necessary to show that a characteristic is unique to human beings. Parental care for young, for example, is not less deserving of affirmation because it is not unique to human beings. The designation of a characteristic as uniquely human is therefore shown to be beside the point whether the designation is accurate or not.

The third example of this form of argument in the *Ethics* occurs in introducing Bonhoeffer's ethics of reproduction. Here he states:

Human beings, in contrast to animals, are not controlled by a dark, unconscious drive to preserve the species in general; rather, this drive toward reproduction appears as the conscious will to have a child of one's own. Accordingly, human reproduction is not simply necessary for the sake of the species but is a personal decision. Be-

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cause of this, a human being as a person has the right to personal choice of a marriage partner.¹⁷

It is not hard to be sympathetic to Bonhoeffer's aim in opposing Nazi marriage laws here, but it is not at all clear that his argument is sound. Again, there is strong reliance on a supposed human/non-human distinction: non-human animals reproduce under compulsion from a "dark, unconscious drive to preserve the species" whereas human reproduction is motivated by conscious will. This observation is implausible both in denying other animals any conscious will in relation to reproduction, which relegates them to Cartesian instinct-machines,¹⁸ and also

showing lemming mass suicide were faked by the crew throwing lemmings from a cliff into a river (210, n. 17).

¹⁶ This is suggested by his fictional passage about the innocence of a mother bird pushing a chick from the nest (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Fiction From Tegel Prison*. DBWE 7. Fortress: Minneapolis 2000, 93-96 (97-99)).

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. DBWE 6, 203 (199f).

¹⁸ See René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Other Writings*. Trans. Frank Edmund Sutcliffe. Penguin: Harmondsworth 1968, 74f.

in idealizing human decisions concerning reproduction as rational and conscious, which brings to mind Augustine's unfortunate ideal of entirely rational sexual intercourse.¹⁹ Beyond this question of *accuracy*, the question of argumentative *adequacy* remains: it is unclear why identifying a conscious will to reproduce uniquely with human beings should support Bonhoeffer's case here. If some element of a conscious will to reproduce were demonstrable in dolphins, for example, it is hard to see how this would weaken the case for opposing Nazi racism in relation to marriage law. The question of *consequence* is also important here given the unhappy history of experiments conducted on other animals in the belief that they were machines incapable of feeling pain.²⁰

While the *Ethics* is the only work in which Bonhoeffer deploys observations about supposedly unique human characteristics in support of ethical

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arguments, he often uses such observations elsewhere in discussing other aspects of human life. In *Sanctorum Communio* he sees more in common between humans and other animals than he did later in the *Ethics*, stating that they share "the drives of imitation, subordination, sociability, and especially of hunger and sexuality".²¹ However, his concession of this commonality is in the context of his rejection of the view that it is instincts that lead to human social formation: in similar terms to those used in the *Ethics* in relation to reproduction, he claims that "Human community per se is only present where conscious human spirit is at work, that is, where community rests upon purposeful acts of will".²² In making this argument, Bonhoeffer seems to be opposing the position of Albert Espinas, who argued in his 1878 work *Des sociétés animales* for a unified sociology applicable both to humans and other animals.²³ A passage in the dissertation omitted from the published version references the 1879 German translation of Espinas's work and recognizes the highly developed sociality of other animals.²⁴ While human uniqueness is not used in support of an ethical argument here, Bonhoeffer seems to believe it

¹⁹ Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*. Trans. R. W. Dyson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, 14.19. Gilbert Meilander argues that Augustine is more subtle than this text suggests: see Gilbert Meilander, 'Sweet Necessities: Food, Sex, and Saint Augustine', 1 *Journal of Religious Ethics* (29:1) 2001, 3–18.

²⁰ Leonora Cohen Rosenfield documents the way Cartesian vivisectionists mocked those who pitied the animals subject to their cruel experiments: Leonora Cohen Rosenfield, *From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine*. Oxford University Press: New York 1941, 54. Descartes himself probably did not take the extreme view of some of his followers that other animals do not feel pain, however: see John Cottingham, 'A Brute to the Brutes?' Descartes' Treatment of Animals', in: *Philosophy* (53) 1978, 551–561 and Peter Harrison, 'Descartes on Animals', in: *The Philosophical Quarterly* (42:167) 1992, 219–227.

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. DBWE 1. Fortress: Minneapolis 1998, 81 (51).

²² *Ibid.*, 81 (51).

²³ Alfred Espinas, *Des Sociétés Animales*. Librairie Germer Ballière: Paris 1878. For a discussion of Espinas's work, see John I. Brooks, *The Eclectic Legacy: Academic Philosophy and the Human Science*. Associated University Presses: Cranbury, NJ 1998, 97–133.

²⁴ The passage is included by the editors of the collected works in a footnote: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*. DBWE 1, 80f (51), n. 63.

significant for his argument about human society that humans are unique in being capable of conscious acts of will.²⁵

Elsewhere Bonhoeffer hints at other unique human features. In a 1928 sermon he quotes Augustine's observation of our hearts being restless until they find their rest in God, and states that "Restlessness is the characteristic feature distinguishing human beings from animals" pointing them towards the eternal.²⁶ Other than human animals also feature frequently in his fic-

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tion: in the opening scene of a play written in Tegel Prison a grandmother tells "Little Brother" a story of a deer being shot by a hunter, and speculates that unlike humans animals may not fear death.²⁷ In a similar scene from a novel a grandmother tells "Little Brother" that he should not judge a mother bird for pushing a weak baby bird from the nest, because in the animal world, unlike the human, only the strong can survive and animals are innocent, knowing no other way to live.²⁸

2. Incarnate human uniqueness

There is one doctrinal theme Bonhoeffer takes up in the *Ethics* and beyond²⁹ that appears to have much better theological grounding than these diverse observations about human/non-human differences:

Only because God became human it is possible to know and not despise real human beings. Real human beings may live before God, and we may let these real people live beside us and before God without either despising or idolizing them. This is not because of the real human being's inherent value, but because God has loved and taken on the real human being. The reason for God's love for human beings does not reside in them, but only in God. Our living as real human beings, and loving the real people next to us is, again, grounded only in God's becoming human, in the unfathomable love of God for us human beings.³⁰

Here Bonhoeffer provides a justification for human uniqueness based in nothing less than the incarnation of God in Christ. The appeal has become a popular theological commonplace: in becoming human, it is often said,

²⁵ Obviously, Bonhoeffer is far from unique among sociologists in not seeing beyond the disciplinary boundary, which has only recently being challenged (see, for example, David Nibert, 'Humans and Other Animals: Sociology's Moral and Intellectual Challenge', in: *3 International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* (23:3) 2003, 4–25.

²⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika, 1928–1931*. DBWE 10. Fortress: Minneapolis 2008, 481 (456).

²⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Fiction From Tegel Prison*. DBWE 7, 27 (22).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 95 (98).

²⁹ In addition to the passage cited, see, for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*. DBWE 1, 225 (224), 262–3 (262); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, trans. John Bowden. Collins: London 1966, 50.

³⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. DBWE 6, 87 (74).

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God established the unique value of human life and therefore grounds for respect for human persons. This mode of argument has a key difficulty, however, because it depends on identifying the significance of God's incarnation in Christ in a very particular way. This can be seen at its clearest in relation to this altered version of the passage, in which all references to human beings are restricted to males:

Only because God became a male human being it is possible to know and not despise male human beings. Male human beings may live before God, and we may let these real males live beside us and before God without either despising or idolizing them. This is not because of the male's inherent value, but because God has loved and taken on the male human being. The reason for God's love for male human beings does not reside in them, but only in God. Our living as male human beings, and loving the male people next to us is, again, grounded only in God's becoming male, in the unfathomable love of God for us males.

Obviously, this altered version presents a very different interpretation of the incarnation, an interpretation highly objectionable in its gender-exclusivity. Unfortunately the force of the position expressed here is not wholly unfamiliar in the Christian tradition, but it has been unmasked and challenged successfully by feminist critiques of Christian doctrine.³¹ The theological mistake here concerns the specificity with which the significance of the incarnation is specified. It is not false to say that God became in Christ a male human being, just as it is not false to say that God became a Jewish human being, or a 1st century AD human being, or a Palestinian human being: the error is to think that the significance of the incarnation of God in Christ should be limited by particularities of gender, religion, time or geography. The problem with the appeal by Bonhoeffer and countless others to ground appeals to human uniqueness in the incarnation is that appeals of this kind could just as well be deployed to ground a unique and privileged status

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before God of male, Jewish, Palestinian, or 1st century human beings.³² In fact, biblical texts give us good reason to think that the significance of the incarnation is cosmic in scope, rather than merely human: Paul's letters, for example, claim that all things are reconciled in Christ through the cross (Col, 1.13–20), that all things are gathered up by God in Christ (Eph. 1,9–10) and that through the Spirit the whole creation will be released from bondage to enjoy the freedom of God's children (Rom. 8,21). In the light of these texts the fullest expression of God's incarnation in Christ is to say that God became a creature or that God took on creation.

³¹ See, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether's chapter 'Christology: Can a Male Savior Save Women?', in: Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*. SCM: London 2002, 116–138.

³² This is not to deny that Christians should recognize Jewish human beings to enjoy a particular status before God, but this status is based in their election by God, rather than the religious particularity of the incarnation. Neither is it to deny that the Palestinian people have a particular status before God, but this status is similarly not dependent on the geographical particularity of the incarnation.

To consider the incarnation a basis for the valuation of human beings uniquely among God's creatures is therefore to make the same mistake evident in the altered version of the Bonhoeffer passage above: it errs by interpreting the particularity of the incarnation as the limits of its significance.³³

A surprising passage in Bonhoeffer's *Christology* suggests that he might not object to such an extension of the doctrine of the incarnation. After considering the role of Christ as the "Centre of Human Existence" and the "Centre of History" he considers "Christ as the Mediator between God and Nature",³⁴ noting that little attention has previously been paid by Protes-

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tant theologians to this question. He continues by picturing Christ as not taking on humanness, but creatureliness:

Christ is the new creature. He thus shows all other creatures to be old creatures. Nature stands under the curse which God has laid on Adam's ground. It was originally the created Word of God, proclaiming the Word freely. As fallen creation, however, it is now dumb, in thrall under the guilt of men. Like history, nature suffers from the loss of its meaning and freedom. It longs for a new freedom. Nature is not reconciled, like man and history, but it is redeemed for a new freedom. Its catastrophes are the dull will to make itself free, to prove its power over men and to be a new creature in its own right, to create itself anew.³⁵

Nature finds redemption in Christ, signified in the sacraments, where elements of the old creation become elements of the new. In the sacrament, "Christ is the mediator between nature and God, and stands for all creatures before God".³⁶

3. Created human uniqueness

In *Creation and Fall*, Bonhoeffer offers a different theological basis for the uniqueness of humanity. After noting the fundamental distinction between creator and creature,³⁷ a central focus is on the distinctiveness of the human creature. In his commentary on the creation of human beings in Genesis 1,26–7 he first notes the discontinuity with the creation of other creatures: the Hebrew plural ('Let us make') shows the significance of the new creation of

³³ Stephen Webb puts the same point this way: 'The crucial difference that needs to be made is between the form (which is necessarily limited) and the range of efficacy (which is unlimited) of the incarnation' and also points to the comparison with the position of women and Gentiles: Stephen H. Webb, *On God and Dogs: A Christian Theology of Compassion for Animals*. Oxford University Press: New York and Oxford 1998, 170. See also my discussion of this in David Clough, 'All God's Creatures: Reading Genesis on Human and Non-Human Animals', in: *Reading Genesis After Darwin*, Stephen Barton, and David Wilkinson (eds.). Oxford University Press: Oxford (forthcoming). Andrew Linzey criticizes Karl Barth for a human-exclusivist interpretation of the incarnation: see Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology*. SCM Press: London 1994, 9–12; Andrew Linzey, 'Introduction: Is Christianity Irredeemably Speciesist?', in: *Animals on the Agenda: Questions About Animals for Theology and Ethics*, Andrew Linzey, and Dorothy Yamamoto (eds.). SCM Press: London 1998, xv–xvi.

³⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, trans. John Bowden. Collins: London 1966, 61–67.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 66f.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*. DBWE 3. Fortress: Minneapolis 1997, 32 (31).

human beings. This special dignity accorded to humankind is confirmed in that they are not called forth from the earth like other creatures, but instead “taken up into God’s own planning”, signifying that “something

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altogether original is about to happen” in the event of their creation.³⁸ The creation of human beings is God’s ultimate, new work imaging Godself: “There is no transition from somewhere else here; here there is new creation.”³⁹ Bonhoeffer comments that this has nothing to do with Darwin, and states “We in no way wish to deny humankind’s connection with the animal world — on the contrary.” He is anxious, however, to “not lose sight of the peculiar relation between humankind and God above and beyond this” and be tempted into dangerous speculations about human origins instead of recognizing our identity “as those who live from Christ”.⁴⁰

When Bonhoeffer turns to the question of what the image of God consists in, his answer is plain and direct: it “means that humankind is like the Creator in that it is free”.⁴¹ Freedom, then, is the respect in which human beings image God in the world. For Bonhoeffer it is important, however, to state immediately that the freedom human beings possess is “not a quality a human being has; it is not an ability, a capacity”.⁴² Freedom “is a relation between two persons” so being “free means ‘being-free-for-the-other’, because I am bound to the other. Only by being in relation with the other am I free”.⁴³ Bonhoeffer sees this as the crucial distinction between human beings and other creatures: “Humankind differs from the other creatures in that God is in humankind as the very image of God”.⁴⁴ He comments that this is what the “older dogmatic theologians” meant when they spoke of the Trinity inhering in Adam. Therefore the image of God does not establish a similarity of being between humanity and God: the image is no *analogia entis* but an *analogia relationis* and freedom is given in this relationship.⁴⁵ There is, therefore, a marked difference between how this gift of freedom is exercised in relation to other human beings and in relation to the rest of the world: “whereas the freedom of human beings over against one another consisted in being free *for* one another, humankind’s freedom over against

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the rest of the created world is to be free *from* it. That means that humankind is its lord; humankind has command over it, rules it.”⁴⁶ Again, Bonhoeffer notes that this does not mean we are not tied to the rest of the world: “On the contrary, in my whole being, in my creatureliness, I belong wholly to this world; it bears me, nurtures me, holds me.” But we are

³⁸ Ibid., 61 (57).

³⁹ Ibid., 62 (57).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 62 (58).

⁴¹ Ibid., 62 (58).

⁴² Ibid., 62f (58).

⁴³ Ibid., 63 (59).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 63f (59).

⁴⁵ Ibid., 64f (60f).

⁴⁶ Ibid., 66 (61).

bound to it as a lord is bound to his servant: “I am to *rule*, and the more I master it, the more it is *my earth*”.⁴⁷ In the following paragraph Bonhoeffer concedes that we do not experience our existence as this kind of ruling: instead “the world rules humankind” and “humankind is a prisoner, a slave, of the world, and its dominion is an illusion”. But the cause of this lack of rule is because we fail to acknowledge the world as God’s: if we recognized the demand on us to serve God, and stopped our sentimental “shying away from exercising dominion over the earth” we would enjoy our dominion as God intended.⁴⁸

Bonhoeffer’s commentary on Genesis chapter two develops his view of the distinctiveness of beings further. He notes that the story of God forming human beings from the earth speaks more directly of the earthly origins of humankind than Darwin or Feuerbach: “Humankind is derived from a piece of earth. [...] The ‘earth is its mother’; it comes out of her womb.”⁴⁹ But what makes human beings distinctive in the second creation narrative is God’s enlivening breath, which Bonhoeffer identifies with the Holy Spirit: “The human body differs from all non-human bodies in that it is the form in which the spirit of God exists on earth, just as it is altogether identical with all other life in being earth-like.”⁵⁰ While the other animals have the same kind of bodies as Adam and are siblings to Adam, Adam is alone because “What has come out of the ground remains alien to human kind.”⁵¹ After the fateful choice of Eve and Adam to disobey God, Bonhoeffer notes the consequence of “the destruction and dividedness of the original relation between humankind and *nature*”.⁵² The other creatures rise up against the one who has become ‘*sicut deus*’ (like God): they exclude and withdraw from

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human beings, growing “mute, enigmatic and unfruitful”.⁵³ But they also share in the evil consequences of the human decision:

With the fall of humankind [...] they themselves, as creatures made subject to humankind, fall into dividedness as well; they become nature without a master and thus in rebellion and despair, nature under the curse, accursed ground. That is our earth. Cursed, it is cast out of the glory of its created state, out of the unambiguous immediacy of its speech and praise of the Creator into the ambiguity of utter strangeness and enigma. The trees and the animals, which once immediately represented God’s word as the Creator, now in often grotesque ways point instead as though to the incomprehensibility and arbitrariness of a despot who is hidden in darkness.⁵⁴

After the Fall, human beings remain lord of the world, but now their rule is solitary and despotic, and they reign over the “mute, violated, silenced, dead” world of their own egos.⁵⁵ Alongside this dark vision, however, Bonhoeffer also offers a sign of hope for the future of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 66 (62).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 67 (62f).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 76 (71).

⁵⁰ Ibid., 78f (73).

⁵¹ Ibid., 97 (90).

⁵² Ibid., 133 (125).

⁵³ Ibid., 134 (125f).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 134 (125–6).

⁵⁵ Ibid., 142 (132).

creation beyond what is visible to Adam: “How could Adam hear announced already in the peace of death, and returning to mother earth, the peace that God wishes once more to conclude with the earth, the peace that God wishes to establish over a new and blessed earth in the world of the resurrection?”⁵⁶

Bonhoeffer’s initial emphasis in *Creation and Fall* on the absolute distinction between creator and creature seems to promise much in the appreciation of the solidarity between humans and other animals he affirms: once we appreciate the incomparable difference between God and God’s creation, recognizing the commonality of all things created is inescapable. Bonhoeffer is also concerned, however, to retain an adequate appreciation of the unique relationship between God and human beings, and identifies freedom in relationship as what is particular to humanity in imaging God on earth. The choice of freedom as the distinguishing feature between human beings and other creatures returns us to his discussion of suicide in the

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Ethics and provokes the same question of whether Bonhoeffer is accurate in his apparent belief that human beings are the only creatures that enjoy freedom in relationship. This question can be pressed in at least three areas. Exegetically, there is no evidence in the Genesis chapters that freedom is what characterizes the image of God, and so we must add this to the long list of favourite capacities and attributes that theologians have posited to fill out the biblical silence on the issue.⁵⁷ Theologically, if freedom is an attribute of relationships, it is not immediately clear why God could not grace other creatures with such a relationship too, especially as Paul in Romans 8,21 anticipates the whole of creation enjoying the freedom of the children of God. If one objects to this that other creatures do not have the capacity for this kind of relationship, we will need to refer to debates about intelligence, rationality and language, in relation to each of which it is hard to argue a clear discontinuity between human abilities and the abilities of other intelligent creatures.⁵⁸ Empirically, of course, it is not possible to prove either that human actions are free or that the actions of non-human creatures are not. Clearly, Bonhoeffer prizes freedom highly and sees an analogy between the human exercise of freedom and the emphasis he places on God’s free actions, but his argument that this is how we should understand the image of God is unpersuasive. His suggestion that the image of God in creation might be relational is much more interesting: it has exegetical foundation in the corporate invitation of human beings into the life of God he notes, and fits well with the trinitarian aspects of God’s indwelling of human beings to which he draws attention. It also does not depend on

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 136 (127).

⁵⁷ In commenting on the many glosses on the content of the divine image offered by theologians, Gordon Wenham observes ‘In every case there is the suspicion that the commentator may be reading his own values into the text as to what is most significant about man.’: Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis*. Word Bible Commentary. Word: Waco 1994, 30.

⁵⁸ For discussion of the issues at stake here, see John Dupré, *Humans and Other Animals*. Clarendon: Oxford 2002, 217–235; Donald R. Griffin, *Animal Minds*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1992; Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY 1993; Carolyn A. Ristau (ed.), *Cognitive Ethology: The Minds of Other Animals*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: Hillsdale, NJ 1991; Marc Bekoff, *Minding Animals: Awareness, Emotions, and Heart*. Oxford University Press: New York 2002.

establishing a discontinuity between God's relationships with different creatures: relationality between creatures and their God might receive particular

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expression in human beings, but we could say that God's relationships with other creatures also represent an imaging of the divine within creation.⁵⁹

In a 1928 letter to Walter Dreß, Bonhoeffer recounts an episode suggesting that under pressure he might be prepared to countenance this kind of extension to the *analogia relationis* beyond the boundaries of the human. He confesses that he was at a loss to know how to reply to a tearful boy whose dog had died and who asked Bonhoeffer if he would see his dog again in heaven. Bonhoeffer decides to respond: "Look, God created human beings and also animals, and I'm sure he also loves animals. And I believe that with God it is such that all who loved each other on earth — genuinely loved each other — will remain together with God, for to love is part of God. Just how that happens, though, we admittedly don't know."⁶⁰

The interpretation Bonhoeffer makes of the different way human freedom plays out in relation to other human beings and non-human creatures is a second and more problematic element in his interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis. We are to be free *for* relationships with other human beings, but free *from* the rest of the creaturely realm.⁶¹ This arises from God giving human beings dominion over other creatures, which for Bonhoeffer separates and distinguishes humanity from all other parts of creation. As we have seen, Bonhoeffer has a strong sense of our earthly origins and dependence on the rest of the creaturely world, but his high — almost feudal — view of the task of ruling that God has given humanity means that relationships with other creatures belong in a fundamentally distinct category from relationships with other human beings. Again, this requires interrogation. In the first place, the kind of ruling Bonhoeffer describes when he reaches the human/non-human categories are a marked departure from the kind of authority he attributes to God in relation to creation. In the act of creation "the Creator denies [the Creator's own self]" (square brackets part of the quotation) in granting "form to what is created and [...] exist-

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ence before the Creator".⁶² Bonhoeffer's account of how God's sovereignty works emphasizes its gracious, enabling and self-giving character. He also repeatedly draws attention to the need to interpret Genesis christologically. If human beings are to image God in the exercise of their God-given authority, it would seem that the mode of this authority should be analogous to that self-giving mode shown by God in Christ, especially since they are creatures in authority over

⁵⁹ Aquinas suggests different parts of creation could image God in different degrees (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Blackfriars: London 1963, I, 93, 2).

⁶⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika, 1928–1931*. DBWE 10, 137 (17:83).

⁶¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*. DBWE 3, 66 (61).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 39 (37).

other creatures.⁶³ If Bonhoeffer was right that a relationship of authority mandated a discontinuity between rulers and subjects, it would seem that human political institutions would require similar categorizations of the basic differences between rulers and subjects, which he might accept but we should not. Perhaps we should see human authority over other creatures as being given responsibility by God to play a particular role for which human beings are best suited. Thinking in this direction would be a long way, however, from Bonhoeffer's anxiety about whether we are sufficiently dominant over the world in obedience to God's command, and might well prompt concern from the opposite direction.

4. Beyond human uniqueness

While most of the material in the preceding sections has exhibited Bonhoeffer's attempts to render human uniqueness, other elements in his thought emphasize solidarity between humans and other animals. We have already noted the drives he claims human and non-human animals share in *Sanctorum Communio*,⁶⁴ the commonality between all creatures established by the doctrine of creation in *Creation and Fall*,⁶⁵ the account of Christ taking on creatureliness in *Christology*⁶⁶ and the possibility of non-human participation in the *analogia relationis*.⁶⁷ The commonality Bonhoeffer re-

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cognizes between humans and other animals is also evident when he comments on Jesus' teaching on emulating birds and lilies: they are examples for disciples who do not collect the goods of the world but "praise their creator, not by their industry, their work, their worry, but by receiving daily and simply the gifts God gives".⁶⁸ Bonhoeffer saw death as part of the shared lot of all God's creatures, using this observation to open children's homilies on Remembrance Day in two successive years.⁶⁹

In addition to his theological and philosophical thought concerning the boundary between human and non-human animals, it is also instructive to consider Bonhoeffer's attitude towards the other animals he encountered. Gerhard Leibholz's "Memoir" recalls that Bonhoeffer "was as open as any man can be to all the things which make life beautiful [...] He loved the mountains, the flowers, the animals — the greatest and simplest things in life".⁷⁰ This is echoed in Bonhoeffer's attitude to hunting, reported to Maria von Wedemeyer in 1943: "I much enjoy sitting in a blind or on the edge of a forest at dusk, waiting to watch — with a pounding heart — for the animals to emerge. But I've never felt the slightest inclination to

⁶³ Andrew Linzey has argued for describing the uniqueness of human beings as the capacity to serve other species: see Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology*. SCM Press: London 1994, 45–61.

⁶⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*. DBWE 1, 81 (51).

⁶⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*. DBWE 3, 32 (31).

⁶⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, trans. John Bowden. Collins: London 1966, 66f.

⁶⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika, 1928–1931*. DBWE 10, 137 (17:83).

⁶⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, DBWE 4. Fortress: Minneapolis 2001, 166 (172f).

⁶⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika, 1928–1931*. DBWE 10, 538–9 (525), 555–6 (545).

⁷⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller. SCM: London 2001, xiii.

shoot them. Why should I, when it's not necessary?"⁷¹ It is also clear in a 1943 letter from Tegel prison to his parents:

A little while ago a tomtit had its nest with its ten little ones in a recess in the yard here. I enjoyed going to look at it every day until some cruel fellow went and destroyed the lot and left some of the tomtits lying on the ground, dead; I can't understand it. When I walk in the yard I get a great deal of pleasure from a small ant-hill and from the bees in the lime-trees. I sometimes think of the story of Peter Bamm, who was on a lovely island where he met all kinds of people, good and bad. He dreamt in a nightmare that a bomb might come and destroy everything, and the first thing that occurred to him was what a pity it would be for the butterflies! Prison life brings

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home to one how nature carries on uninterruptibly in its quiet, open life, and it gives one quite a special — perhaps a sentimental — attitude towards animals and plant life, except that my attitude towards the flies in my cell remains very unsentimental.⁷²

His poem "Who Am I" expresses a similar empathy in picturing himself

restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds⁷³

Beyond these recognitions of what human and non-human animals share, it is significant to note a point in his work when Bonhoeffer leaves space open for the inclusion of creation beyond the human. In his discussion of eschatology in *Sanctorum Communio* he states that while Christian eschatology "is essentially *eschatology of the church-community*" there is also a problem of "the eschatology of culture and nature" that he leaves unaddressed.⁷⁴

5. Rethinking human uniqueness

The preceding sections have assessed trajectories in Bonhoeffer's thought where he seeks to provide a hermeneutic human life by looking the other way — reflecting on the boundary between human and non-human life through observing differences between human beings and other animals, considering the doctrine of the incarnation and interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis — as well as surveying elements in his thought that

⁷¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Fiction From Tegel Prison*. DBWE 7, 180 (190), n. 13.

⁷² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *LPP*. SCM: London 1953, 71. In the sentences that follow Bonhoeffer seems to suspect himself of "an exaggerated sentimentality" caused by imprisonment, in need of correction by "a cold shower of common sense and humour" which Christianity can help with. In both this sensitivity to the lives of other animals, and apparent discomfort with this sensitivity, his view shows strong similarities with Luther's (see David Clough, 'The Anxiety of the Human Animal: Martin Luther on Non-Human Animals and Human Animality', in: *Creaturely Theology: On God, Humans and Other Animals*, Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough (eds.). SCM: London 2009, 41–60.

⁷³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *LPP*, 348.

⁷⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*. DBWE 1, 283 (193f).

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present openings to other ways of thinking about human and non-human animals. Approaching Bonhoeffer's thought from this angle leads to two concluding points, one negative and one positive.

The negative point is that it is clear that Bonhoeffer's use of observations concerning supposedly unique human characteristics to support ethical arguments is misguided and unfruitful. The first difficulty with this mode of argument is that it fails to respect the constraints Bonhoeffer sets himself of grounding Christian ethics in the Gospel rather than in philosophical speculation or non-theological accounts of the natural. The second difficulty concerns the accuracy of Bonhoeffer's observations of differences in characteristics between human beings and other animals, which can be seen to be dubious at every point. Even if these objections could be overcome, however, the arguments would fail at the third and much broader hurdle that whether or not a characteristic is uniquely human is irrelevant to ethics. The uniqueness of human possession of a capacity is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for ethical commendation: the example of parental care shown by many kinds of animals shows that it is not *necessary* to show a capacity to be unique to human beings to commend it; Bonhoeffer's view of suicide as uniquely human makes clear that the supposed uniqueness of a capacity is not *sufficient* grounds to recommend it.⁷⁵ Despite the long pedigree in philosophical and theological ethics of ethical argument based on supposed human/non-human differences we must therefore recognize that such differences are irrelevant to questions concerning how human beings should behave, and reject the arguments of this kind offered by Bonhoeffer in common with many others.⁷⁶

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The rejection of ethical argument based on supposed unique human characteristics should alert us to the danger of similarly problematic argumentation concerning human/non-human difference in other areas of theology. Consideration of Bonhoeffer's doctrine of the

⁷⁵ Karl Barth recognizes this problem in his discussion of attempts to find in uniquely human phenomena a reason to think human beings higher than other animals: "There can be no doubt at any rate that the value of the distinct phenomena is not itself a phenomenon but the subject of a judgment which has not the slightest connexion with the observation of facts" (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III/2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. T. & T. Clark: Edinburgh 1960, 89).

⁷⁶ In passing, we should note the difficulty of construing the boundary between human beings and other animals and deciding on its significance should also alert us to the need for a view of bioethics true to its name. The term *bioethics* suggests the coincidence of biology and ethics, but one of the first to use it saw it as a contribution to the survival of the human species (see Van Rensselaer Potter, *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future*. Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs 1971, and Albert R. Jonsen, *The Birth of Bioethics*. OUP: New York 1998, 26–8). Since then it has usually been used in relation to ethical questions concerning the use of medical technology on human subjects: but this area surely requires a narrower identification than the *ethics of life* which *bioethics* indicates. The title "Bioethics" points the discipline beyond its current usage to the need for an ethics of life that resists arbitrary halts at species boundaries.

incarnation indicated that restricting the significance of the incarnation to the single species of *homo sapiens* was structurally similar to restricting its significance to male human beings, and no more defensible. Similarly, Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the *imago Dei* in terms of the *analogia relationis* cannot be coherently rendered so as to include only human beings. Attending with rigour to the human/non-human boundary in a theological context, in Bonhoeffer's work as elsewhere, reveals deficiencies in arguments that exclude non-human creatures from consideration.

It is important to note that as well as leading to bad ethics and bad theology, inadequate reasoning about the differences between humans and other animals has bad consequences for other animals. Judging on inadequate evidence that *homo sapiens* is the only species that thinks, uses language, enjoys freedom, rises above instinct, and so on, means all other animals are classified as unthinking and uncommunicative slaves to their instinctual drives. Such attribution is grossly inaccurate according to modern research on animal capabilities and also leads to inadequate respect for the welfare of other animals, providing a third reason to improve theological thinking in this area.

The requirement to improve theological thinking in this area leads to the positive conclusion arising from this consideration of Bonhoeffer's thought: in the project of developing theological thinking that attends adequately to commonality and difference between humans and other animals, Bonhoeffer's thought offers considerable resources. His relational interpretation of the image of God suggests the possibility of recognizing God's image in the world as more than merely human. Similarly, his depiction of Christ as first creature and mediator between God and nature is a significant indication towards a way of avoiding interpretations of the doctrine of the

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incarnation that restrict its significance to the human. Taken together with his speculation about the place of dogs in the life beyond, Bonhoeffer's thought therefore suggests ways of overcoming inappropriate differentiation between human and non-human creatures in each of the spheres of creation, reconciliation and redemption. While other than human animals were rarely the focus of Bonhoeffer's thought, he was sufficiently attentive to the lives of the creatures about him that the trajectory of his thought is not closed to interpreting human life in solidarity with as well as distinction from other animals.

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