

The Tree Chopped Down

"Do animals think? Do they have feelings? To many the answer may seem obvious. Man is the only creature that consumes without producing. Cursed are we above all the livestock and all the wild animals. We crawl on our bellies and eat dust all the days of your lives. Should we, then, destroy all humans and keep the earth?"

In my day, if the animal was hired, the money paid for the hire covered the loss. Anyone who had sexual relations with an animal was put to death. Of all the animals that walk on all fours, those that walked on their paws were unclean for us; whoever touched their carcasses was considered to be unclean till evening. The relations between humans and other animals, and between humans themselves, were radically transformed by the development of agriculture.

But not everyone agrees with this. 'Sell the live one and divide both the money and the dead animal equally,' argues my aerobics instructor. My good friend Sebastian Coe is pessimistic: 'Some ferocious animal will devour man. Festering boils will break out on men and animals. Not a dog will bark at any man or animal. Whether man or animal, he will not be permitted to live.' Descartes, one of the most influential modern philosophers, claimed that animals were automata, mere machines. Many modern scientists also have denied that animals exist. This is perhaps why we do not eat the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts; we throw it to the dogs.

The more I try to get into the meaning my relationship with creation the more uncomfortable I feel about killing flies. The more I think of the animals that move about on the ground, the more I think these are unclean for me: the weasel, the rat, any kind of great lizard. And of course these are convenient views for scientists and the rest of us. There are now countless ways in which animals can be used to benefit humans, in which they protect us, sustain and redeem the world.

Vets, for example, and many people who work with and care for animals on a daily basis, on farms, in zoos, or in research, tell us that we may eat any animal that has a split hoof completely divided and that chews the cud. And that, wherever you live, you must not eat the blood of any bird or animal. Now some people, of course, are very good at knowing that a righteous man has regard for the life of his animal. The one who takes the life of an animal makes it good, life for life. But even though people may be very rich, they don't live on and on. They are like the animals. They die.

But these are words that we need to hear afresh. Until recently human actions have been trivial by comparison with the forces of nature. That has now changed. The human race now has the power to affect the world in ways hitherto unimaginable. This is why I will kill people and animals alike. They will die of a terrible plague. I will kill the finest animals, but I will also use the earth's wild animals to kill.

We should be prepared to give animals less of the benefit of the doubt, and above all to imagine how they are plotting against us in their own language, which we begin to understand only when we try to see the world and ourselves through their eyes. Perhaps our outing of animals as genocidal criminals is also a parable of sorts. Like so many creatures, we do not communicate in a human language we readily understand.

Can anyone who takes this sermonising seriously and as authoritative in matters of conduct deny that the role of man is to set the animals to work, to give back to them

the bare minimum that will prevent them from starving, and the rest keep for himself? I demand an accounting from every animal. If they are driven hard just one day, all the animals will die. Only then will we be finally driven from human society, to eat grass like oxen, our bodies becoming damp with the dew of the sky, until our hair becomes long like an eagle's feathers, and our nails like a bird's claws."

Nebuchadnezzar II

***Nebuchadnezzar II** is Emperor of Babylon. Having recently completed the subjugation of Phoenicia, and the chastisement of Egypt, he is spending his retirement rebuilding and adorning his hometown of Babylon, constructing canals, aqueducts, temples, reservoirs and a hanging garden. Happily married to the Mitford Sisters, he has two children called Ruby and Molly.*