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ARE ANIMALS "IT?" RESTORING ANIMALS IN OUR LANGUAGE[1]

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Abstract. This essay examines how language marginalizes animals by reducing them to "it"—a grammar convention that obscures the giftedness of animals (i.e., cognition, agency, communication, empathy). In this linguistic marginalization, there are metaphors and colloquial words that simultaneously violate women and animals. It is argued that the linguistic marginalization of animals is reinforced by anthropocentric philosophical and theological traditions. Thomistic philosophical and theological thought has influenced our view of animals, favoring human superiority. Despite Thomas Aquinas' shortcomings in his appraisal of animals, his affirmative teachings on animals can be retrieved. Animals, for him, are participants in God's community of creation who reveal God's goodness and glory. Moreover, this essay aims to uncover the greatness of animals by acknowledging their capacities through the lens of animal reciprocity. While it is critical to redress false claims about animals, this essay eschews reproducing anthropocentric practices by simply valuing animals using human standards. Thus, feminist animal care, particularly *entangled empathy*, will be explored as an ethic of care that is affirmative of the value of animals based on their wholeness and

[1] This essay was adapted from a chapter in the author's doctoral thesis. See Gaizel Arguelles Adan, "Woman-Animal Companionship: A Multispecies Home of Ministry," (DMin thesis, Catholic Theological Union, 2026), Research in Ministry (RIM), ATLA Religion Database, 72-107, https://rim.ir.atla.com/concern/etds/6504ac93-af8a-4858-af0e-79b5a626dffe?q=gaizel%20arguelles%20adan.

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uniqueness. Naming is proposed as a counter-cultural practice against demeaning descriptions for animals in our language.

Keywords: animal theology, feminist theology, feminist animal care, animal reciprocity

Introduction

Feminist theologians suggest that the anthropocentric dominating paradigm for reading of Scripture has created biases against animals and the whole creation. Building on this, I argue that aside from a biased interpretation of biblical texts on the relationship between animals and humans, the marginalization of animals also pervades everyday language. Our language unjustly marginalizes animals and considers them inferior beings or mere "it." But this phenomenon is merely a manifestation of a larger issue. Language biases against animals reflect and are reinforced by philosophical and theological traditions that espouse human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism.

One way of honoring animals is by decentering humans as the only beings thought to be endowed with divine giftedness. Affirmative theologies toward animals, for instance, deep incarnation,[2] recognize animals as co-sharers in God's creative and redemptive plan. Acknowledging the fullness of animals—including their gifts—is vital in creating a more affirming relationship with them. In the long

[2] Denis Edwards reviewed the development of the theology of deep incarnation, which was originally proposed by Niels Gregersen. Gregersen first attended to reconciling God's mercy with the existential question of suffering involved in evolutionary processes. His theology posits that the Incarnation is a materially binding reality that extends to all creation, both biologically and evolutionarily. Christ's becoming human was meant to offer life and provide care for the whole creation, even in its suffering and death. Deep incarnation conveys that creation is not alone in its suffering, deterioration, death, and extinction. Christ suffers with creation. Edwards then examined the contributions of Elizabeth Johnson, Celia Deane-Drummond, Christopher Southgate, and Richard Bauckham in constructing the theology. See Denis Edwards, *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering with Creatures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 1–20.

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history of the Christian tradition, while some theologians (e.g., Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure, John Duns Scotus, Karl Rahner, Elizabeth Johnson, Sallie McFague, Denis Edwards, Andrew Linzey, Clair Linzey, etc.) have spoken about the value of animals as co-sharers in divine goodness and God's redemptive plan, their voices have tended to be overshadowed by dominant anthropocentric theologies and philosophies.[3] Likewise, Carol Adams refers to Christian patriarchal theology that ranks God, humans, and animals in such a progression, beastly theology. In this theology, animals have been assigned the identity of beasts—a derogatory term that contrasts them with humans and conveys that they are of lesser value.[4] This work aims to facilitate a conversation that reaches public ministry and promotes dialogue on how to rectify this unjust supposition about animals through a feminist lens.

While it is necessary to redress false claims about animals that have been produced by hierarchical and anthropocentric philosophies and theologies, I argue that it is equally important to provide a corrective framework that moves beyond recognizing animals' worth solely based on their capabilities to a more just acknowledgment of their worth. This essay aims to recover animals in our negative linguistic practices by appreciating their intrinsic worth based on their full participation in God's creative life and being fellow members of the community of creation.

I approach this essay by first discussing how language has failed to give justice to animals and their gifts. I will sketch out examples of animal metaphors that are universally used across cultures and ones that are prominent in the Filipino language. Second, I will argue that biases against animals in our language are reinforced by

[3] Elizabeth Johnson acknowledges that Christian faith tradition is not inherently "anti-ecological faith," the voice of eco-theology, however, had not fully registered in institutions until the latter part of the twentieth century. Thus, it is of great importance that this essay reinforces that animals are co-sharers in divine goodness. See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask The Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: A&C Black, 2014), 3.

[4] Carol J. Adams, *Neither Man nor Beast: Feminism and the Defense of Animals* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 175-176.

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anthropocentric philosophical and theological traditions. A relevant philosophical and theological tradition that has shaped our view of animals is that of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas' theological tradition has its own hierarchical and anthropocentric limitations, but at the same time offers valuable insights into the divine goodness and worth of animals. This tension will be nuanced and weighed accordingly. Third, I will discuss the capacities of animals that have been denied or reduced by anthropocentric traditions through the lens of animal reciprocity. However, valuing animals for resembling human-centered abilities is still anthropocentric. Thus, feminist animal care, particularly *entangled empathy*, will be explored as an ethic of care that is affirmative of their value based on their wholeness and uniqueness. Lastly, I will propose naming as a counter-cultural practice against demeaning descriptions for animals in our language. Naming reverses the way we relate to animals by acknowledging their intrinsic worth and their relational capacities. Front and center of this essay is care as a co-constitutive act of humans and animals in recreating relationships within the community of creation.

Language Has Failed Animals

Speciesism is the unjust treatment of those who do not belong to a certain species.[5] It is the assumption that humans are superior to nonhuman creatures, a belief reproduced in language. Such can occur in the negative representation of animals in our everyday language. Robin Wall Kimmerer, an Indigenous botanist, notes, "In English, you are either a human or a thing."[6] This statement reveals the anthropocentric

[5] Oscar Horta, "What Is Speciesism?" *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 23, no. 3 (June 2010): 243–66, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10806-009-9205-2. Speciesism was coined by Richard Ryder in 1970 and popularized by Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation*. Singer believes that most humans are speciesists. He argues that "speciesists allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species." See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), 9.

[6] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, 1st ed. (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 56,

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nature of language. Joan Dunayer, philosopher and animal rights advocate, points out that the standard pronoun usage *thingifies* animals that "obscure[s] their sentience, individuality and right to autonomy."[7] The pronoun "it" is for animals, the same pronoun for lamps, apples, coins, blankets, and inanimate objects. In Sharisse Kanet's survey of literature, "it" obscures the sentience and moral status of animals while sustaining the human-animal binary.[8] Carol Adams posits that "it" "erases the living, breathing nature of the animals and reifies their object status."[9] The reduction of animals to inanimate objects, represented by "it," is often linked to René Descartes' conception of animals being *automata* or machine-like beings. People who have had companion animals[10] for a while would say otherwise. Many animals exhibit intelligence, emotional awareness, and the ability to learn and adapt. Their intellect may differ from human intelligence, but it has the potential to accomplish unbelievable things.

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[7] Joan Dunayer, "On Speciesist Language," *On The Issues Magazine*, February 28, 1990. Dunayer's specific assignment of the term "*thingifies*" makes it evocative and powerful. It illustrates how animals have been subjugated in our language system, implying their subordinate position in our consciousness and the construction of knowledge.

[8] Sharisse Kanet, "Animal Pronouns Matter: The Importance of Language for Activism and Education," *Journal of Animal Ethics* 15, no. 2 (2025): 138-150, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/397312939_Animal_Pronouns_Matter_The_Importance_of_Language_for_Activism_and_Education.

[9] Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory (20th Anniversary Edition)* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 93.

[10] The term "companion animals" refers to domesticated animals, whether domestically bred or taken from the wild, that closely live with humans for psychological support, company, enjoyment, or work. See Maaten der Sterneberg-Van, T. D. Turner, J. Van Tilburg, and J. Vaarten, "Benefits and risks for people and livestock of keeping companion animals: searching for a healthy balance," *Journal of Comparative Pathology* 155, no. 1 (2016): S8-S17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcpa.2015.06.007

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Speciesism in language uses animal metaphors to inflict insult or shame on others.[11] Filipino idiomatic expressions like *asal hayop* (acting like an animal/beast) and *masahol pa sa hayop* (worse than an animal) demonstrate this reality. Similarly, speciesism is also evident in the use of animal behaviors or qualities that intend to shame or insult a person: *utak-biya* (brain of a fish), *balat kalabaw* (buffalo skin), and *bahag ang buntot* (tucked tail). Animal qualities are used to degrade the target individual or group by denying them human characteristics. In Sergei Klimenko's inventory of Tagalog animal metaphors, it is concluded that most of these words have negative connotations, estimated at 81%. The meanings attached to them reflect negative traits associated with humans.[12] Nick Haslam proposed that one way of dehumanizing a target individual or group is by likening them to animals and denying the target uniquely human qualities, which is called *animalistic dehumanization*.[13] Dehumanization that employs animal qualities or compares humans to animals is not only harmful to the human victim but also to the animals involved. Animals become linguistic instruments for projecting

[11] While some animal metaphors convey positive portrayals of animals and may cultivate emotional proximity with them, we are still challenged to move beyond treating animals primarily as metaphors. Simply regarding animals as metaphors can have ethical implications for how they are perceived and treated. This is further substantiated by Carol Adams' concept of the *absent referent*, discussed in the later section of this essay. Biblical animal imagery, for instance, often serves as a powerful theological device that conveys moral insight. However, we observe in the parabolic teaching of Jesus that animals are not only depicted as imagery but encountered as living beings worthy of care, concern, and moral consideration (e.g., the lost sheep).

[12] Sergei Klimenko, "Speaking about Humans in Animal Terms: Animal Metaphors in Tagalog" (unpublished manuscript, Department of Linguistics, University of the Philippines Diliman, 2009), 8-13, https://www.academia.edu/1872761/Speaking_About_Humans_in_Animal_Terms_Animal_Metaphors_in_Tagalog.

[13] Nick Haslam, "Dehumanization: An Integrative Review," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10, no. 3 (July 22, 2006): 252–64, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr1003_4. The characteristics that Haslam believes are uniquely human are refinement, civility, morality, and higher cognition. I presume that these descriptors or standards originate from Aquinas' five criteria for humanity.

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undesirable behaviors or qualities of humans. Another way animals are marginalized in language is by describing our relationship with them with hierarchical connotations. Humans who care for companion animals are called *pet owners*. Calling oneself "owner" implies hierarchy. Ownership, as a basis for the relationship between animals and humans, signifies that humans have a higher stature and animals are viewed as objects that are kept or collected. Animals are subjected to human supremacy and subordination.

The derogation of animals often intersects with gendered oppression. In some situations, animal metaphors contain sexism and speciesism that degrade women. Almudena Fernández-Fontecha and Rosa Jimenez-Catalan observed that in both English and Spanish, animal metaphors carry a more punctuated derogation toward women than men.[14] Zoubida Madani and colleagues found that animal metaphors in Algerian and Jordanian proverbs associate more negative connotations with women than with men, highlighting the prominence of men over women.[15]

In the Philippine context, in the survey of Francine Yvonne Dela Cruz of gender biases in Filipino gendered idiomatic expressions and slang, many of these rely on animal portrayals (e.g., *hipon, kulasisi, barako,* etc.). The expressions either glorify masculinity or reduce women to property and objects of sexualization.[16] Similarly, the word *kasta* (mating) in Filipino is a sexual expression for both genders; however,

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[14] Almudena Fernández-Fontecha and Rosa M. Jimenez-Catalan, "Semantic Derogation in Animal Metaphor: A Contrastive-cognitive Analysis of Two Male/Female Examples in English and Spanish," *Journal of Pragmatics* 35, no. 5 (March 25, 2003): 771–97, https://doi.org/10.1016/s0378-2166(02)00127-3.

[15] Zoubida Madani, Nimer Abusalim, and Mohammad Rayyan, "Gender representation in animal-related proverbs: Algerian vs. Jordanian Arabic," *Frontiers in Sociology* 8 (June 8, 2023): 1-15. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1145200.

[16] Francine Yvonne B. Dela Cruz, "*Siya nga ba'y* Gender Neutral?: A Preliminary Linguistic Analysis of the Genderedness of Filipino," *UP Working Papers in Linguistics* 2, no. 1 (2023): 107-108, https://linguistics.upd.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/13-Siya-nga-ba_y-Gender-Neutral.pdf.

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women are called *pakasta*, which is a colloquial adjective synonymous with being sexually promiscuous. When *kasta* is associated with men, it is a compliment to their virility. Men in their inner circles would remark, *"marami na 'yang kinasta"* (he has slept around) to mean that the man is well-experienced in sex. There are animal metaphors that illustrate the roles of women, but have no counterparts for the roles of men. *Inahin [na baboy]* (hen pig) is used to stress motherhood or pregnancy, specifically women who have several children and can hardly prioritize themselves. Another one is the word *ahas* (snake) or *inahas* (the act) to describe a woman having an affair with a committed man. I cannot think of equivalent animal metaphors that depict men in a similar fashion. In Filipino fables, animals represent women's everyday domestic struggles amid men's more comfortable lives.[17]

Animal metaphors tend to have more weight when they are directed at women, reflecting forms of "benign sexism"[18] that sound complimentary but reinforce women's subordinate status. For instance, men in the Philippines describe physically attractive women as chicks (a young bird) or *chickababes* to connote desirability, but it simultaneously objectifies and sexualizes the receiver. These animal metaphors not only function as harmful descriptors for the identities and qualities of women, but they also aggravate the socially constructed roles and subordination of women.[19] They reflect how society expects women to

[17] Genevieve Jorolan Quintero and Connie Makgabo, "Animals as Representations of Female Domestic Roles in Selected Fables From the Philippines and South Africa," *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the South* 4, no. 1 (April 28, 2020): 42-47, https://doi.org/10.36615/sotls.v4i1.121.

[18] Nick Haslam, Steve Loughnan, and Pamela Sun, "Beastly: What Makes Animal Metaphors Offensive?" *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 30, no. 3 (September 2011): 313, 320.

[19] Nasambu M. Barasa and Isaac N. Opande, "The Use of Animal Metaphors in the Representation of Women in Bukusu and Gusii Proverbs of Kenya," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 10, no. 2 (2017): 91-105, https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/84671634/10.2-7-Barasa_201-libre.pdf?1650623902=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DThe_Use_of_Animal_Metaphors_in_the_Repre.pdf&Expires=1785196457&

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perform domestic work, bear a child, and provide sexual satisfaction to men.

Language constructs power asymmetries.[20] The animal metaphors delineated earlier have layers of marginalization toward women and animals. Both women and animals are oppressed by patriarchy in language, among others. Words that mortify animals or caricature them as inferior to humans conveniently marginalize them. Vilifying language toward animals depicts them as monstrous and beastly. Biased and inaccurate media portrayals of animals have instilled fear and distrust in our minds. For instance, the American film Jaws has affected the public perception of sharks as marine "villains." Mary Midgley critiques society's antagonization of animals as vicious. Referring to the portrayal of sharks in Jaws, Midgley opposes their depiction as "conscious criminals," as if these creatures intend to harm people rather than simply acting according to their nature.[21]

Across cultures, animal metaphors convey hostile meanings that pertain to human deficits. Such words, references, idioms, and metaphors exacerbate the otherness of animals. Although we do not contemplate animal metaphors when we utter them, they deliver a message that animals and their qualities are not desirable, and conveniently use them to describe the worst in humans. We turn to animals as a vocabulary for incompetence, aggressiveness, promiscuity, abuse, and the list goes on. Sexist remarks with animal metaphors

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[20] Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (New York: Longman Inc., 1989), 3-4.

[21] David Midgley, ed., *The Essential Mary Midgley* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 45.

towards women amplify the entanglements between humans and animals, with women and animals instrumentalized by men to assert illusory power over both classifications. However, when we use this type of language, we overlook that animals become victims in the process. Joan Dunayer writes that animals are oppressed by speciesism in language, as women are by sexist language:

> Speciesist language has far from trivial consequences. Although nonhuman animals cannot discern the contempt in the words that disparage them, this contempt legitimates their oppression. Like sexist language, speciesist language fosters exploitation and abuse. As feminist philosopher Stephanie Ross (1981) has stated with regard to women, 'oppression does not require the awareness or co-operation of its victims.'[22]

Dunayer adds that the pejorative images we attach to animals do not accurately represent who they are.[23] She reasons that they are a projection of our bad traits onto innocent subjects, which widens the divide between animals and humans, further encouraging humans to perpetuate it without scrutiny.

> Every negative image of another species helps keep that species oppressed. Most such images are gross distortions. Nonhuman animals rarely possess the character traits that pejoratives assign to them. In reality the imputed traits are negative human traits between humans and animals that explicitly shape how we view and relate to animals… Why the lies, then? Why the contempt? With contemptuous words, humans establish and maintain emotional

[22] Joan Dunayer, "Sexist Words, Speciesist Roots," in *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*, ed. Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 17, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1198x6d.5.

[23] Dunayer, "Sexist Words," 17-18. Dunayer provides examples of how specific animals are not what humans have imagined them to be. Pigs are not as dirty as they are culturally portrayed. They keep their living space neat. Rats do not betray their kind, which is the opposite of the "ratting" description associated with people who are not trustworthy. Rats attend to the vulnerable members of their community. The defensive traits of chickens are to protect their young, which negates the cultural association of fierceness with young women.

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> distance from other animals. This distance permits abuse without commensurate guilt. Humans blame their nonhuman victims. [24]

When animal metaphors are deliberately spoken to inflict pain or dehumanize others, it is assumed that they only harm human relationships. In reality, it also injures animals and humans' shared relationships with them. It reinforces their oppression and denies their dignity—leading to the aggravation of the distance between animals and us. This phenomenon is a serious threat to the harmony of all relationships within the ecological family. We should inquire why we exploit animals for the fractures in our humanity instead of confronting those fractures directly. Doing so exposes two limits: the limits of human language and human intellect. We have long claimed that these faculties set us apart from animals, yet they cannot function without drawing meanings from animals. Tragically, the meanings we choose are the cruel ones—those that turn animals into instruments of human insult and injury.

Anthropocentric Philosophical and Theological Traditions: Thomistic Scholarship

Many of the animal metaphors mentioned earlier most likely predate medieval anthropocentric philosophies and theologies. However, these metaphors are buttressed by those traditions. Anthropocentric philosophical and theological traditions, as a modality of discourse, have influenced our language. These traditions do not fully recognize the capabilities of animals proposed by contemporary animal studies. As a caveat, I want to emphasize that these anthropocentric philosophies and theologies were pre-modern scientific inventions, which is why they run contrary to the recent findings about animals. However, it is necessary to note that despite this, these traditions have shaped the different disciplines that inform our animal rhetoric. Thus, we still carry them in our consciousness, which flows into our linguistic orientation and moral agency. Andrew Linzey posits that Thomas Aquinas' theology, particularly his teachings on animals,

[24] Dunayer, "Sexist Words," 17-18.

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remains influential in the Catholic tradition.[25] This section examines Aquinas' claims regarding animals centered on their lack of rationality, agency, fellowship, and moral standing. These have implications for the current moral valuation we associate with animals—visible in our linguistic violence toward them. Particularly, his assertion on animal instrumentalization is still intact in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Simultaneously, this section seeks to recover Aquinas' theological affirmation of animals as sacramental and participants in the community of creation to challenge anthropocentrism.

Rationality

Thomas Aquinas' medieval thinking about animals was highly influenced by Aristotelian thought. Aristotle predominantly endorsed the hierarchical ordering of creatures, with humans occupying a higher rank than animals. He believed that every creature has a soul or form and characteristics that allow the body to function. The soul of plants makes them achieve nutritive function; the soul of animals enables them to perceive, move, and sense.[26] On the other hand, he justifies that only the soul of humans can think or reason.[27]

Aquinas' works *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles* reveal his stance on human-animal relations. Aquinas believes that the primary distinction between humans and animals is humans' possession of an intellectual soul, "for an animal is such by its sensitive soul, while a man is a man by the intellectual soul," highlighting that rationality is not a feature of animals.[28]

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[25] Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (University of Illinois Press, 1995), 12.

[26] Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. J. A. Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), 414a30–414b15.

[27] Aristotle, *De Anima*, 414b15–414b20.

[28] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, Ltd., 1913) I.76.3, https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1225-1274,_Thomas_Aquinas,_Summa_Theologiae_%5B1%5D,_EN.pdf#:~:text=Translated%20by%20Fathers%20of%20the,%E2%96%A0%20FIRST%20

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This distinction Aquinas makes has implications for the relational and ontological belonging of creatures. Among all mortals, humans hold the highest position of governance over everything on earth, which gives humans the authority to utilize everything else below them. He expounds on Genesis 1:26 as the basis for human hierarchy. The hierarchy of cosmologies implied by Aquinas in his writing pertains to the designation of "mastership" or power to govern the *inferior*[29] one. Moreover, he also categorizes creatures as "perfect" and "imperfect". Those that are imperfect are for the use of the perfect. It is assumed that the consumption or utilization of the perfect or the imperfect is dictated by the same hierarchy associated with Aristotle. He articulates that humans, being endowed with God's image, should be masters over animals. Such a hierarchical stance rationalizes the subordination of animals, referring to them as *property*. Further, he says that this mastership is natural.[30] Daniel Horan remarks that the primacy of rationality as a defining attribute that distinguishes humans from animals has perpetuated superiority.[31]

Agency

In Aquinas' framework, rationality is a crucial aspect of the agency of animals, which for him they do not possess. Aquinas suggests that animals act out of instinct that is indicative of limited reason, which enables them to respond in obedience to humans. This is an important detail about his perspectives on animals. It delineates human intellect

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[29] Aquinas uses the term "inferior" to highlight the hierarchical relationships of creatures with one another. He argues that this system of order is divinely ordained. The one inferior is subject to the ruling of the one at a higher rank.

[30] Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), I, q. 96, a. 1, ad 4. https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1225-1274,_Thomas_Aquinas,*Summa_Theologiae*%5B1%5D,_EN.pdf

[31] Daniel P. Horan, *All God's Creatures: A Theology of Creation* (Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2018), 6.

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from the instinctive responses of animals when they interact with fellow animals and humans alike.

> All animals by their natural instinct have a certain participation of prudence and reason: which accounts for the fact that cranes follow their leader, and bees obey their queen. So all animals would have obeyed man of their own accord, as in the present state some domestic animals obey him.[32]

It implies that animal instincts underpin the relationship between animals and humans, characterized by a command-obedience dynamic. For Aquinas, animals are capable of obeying their master, but not to the extent of exhibiting agency that equates with human rationality. Celia Deane-Drummond posits that Aquinas does not fully deny that animals possess some form of intelligence through sensory and impulse-oriented capacities. However, he does not render them the type of intelligence that enables them to internalize abstract truths and discern God. This makes them share likeness with God but not bear the "image" of God.[33] Horan, on the other hand, estimates that Aquinas has rendered animals a certain level of divine image through their possession of the goodness of God,34 which I am elaborating on in my retrieval of Aquinas' affirmation of animals.

Moral Standing and Fellowship

Due to Aquinas' belief that animals are not rational, humans are not morally culpable for killing them. His only concern about killing animals is that it might evoke violence toward humans.[35] Therefore,

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[32] Aquinas, *Summa Theologic*a, I, q. 96, a.1, ad 4.

[33] Celia Deane-Drummond, "God's Image And Likeness In Humans And Other Animals: Performative Soul-Making And Graced Nature," *Zygon*® 47, no. 4 (2012): 936-937, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2012.01308.x.

[34] Horan, *All God's Creatures*, 116.

[35] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles: Book Three – Providence, Part II*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, online edition at Isidore, III.II.112, 113, https://isidore.co/aquinas/ContraGentiles3b.htm#112.

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animals are not part of Aquinas' imagined moral vocation of humans, as they do not have moral standing.[36] With this notion that animals are not moral subjects, he recognizes them as instruments for humans to attain their perfection. This means that they are to play a role in human subsistence, intellectual progress, and spiritual perfecting. Aquinas maintains that humans have the authority to utilize animals for food, clothing, and other material needs. The Catechism of the Catholic Church upholds this position on the use of animals for material needs.[37] Aquinas writes in *Summa Contra Gentiles*:

> In fact, man uses all kinds of things for his own advantage: some for food, others for clothing…because he can obtain food for himself from a variety of things. Other things he uses for transportation, since we find man the inferior of many animals in quickness of movement, and in the strength to do work; other animals being

[36] It is intriguing for many people when we associate moral standing with animals. Such an assertion may raise questions about whose life is more important, between a human being and an animal, in a scenario where only one can be saved. If we were to follow the traditional Western dualist ethical principle, human life would merit deliverance over animal life. Lois K. Daly takes on an ecofeminist stance and turns to the ethics of "reverence for life," articulated by Albert Schweitzer. The principle contends that there must be no dichotomy between the life of humans and that of other species: "The ethics of reverence for life makes no distinction between higher and lower, more precious and less precious lives." Schweitzer presumes that all living beings have the "will-to-live," or the drive to exist, which we must respect. However, Schweitzer acknowledges that in real life, one being may need to perish while another survives. To address this dilemma, we are left to our subjective discernment, guided by our conscience, and by "bear[ing] the responsibility for the life which is sacrificed." Lois K. Daly, "Feminism, Reverence for Life, and Feminist Theological Ethics," in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches in Ecological Theology*, ed. Charles Birch, William Eaken, and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 86–110. The ethics of "reverence for life" cited here can be found in Albert Schweitzer, *The Teaching of Reverence for Life*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965); Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography*, trans. C. T. Campion (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949).

[37] John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), sec. 2418, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

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> provided, as it were, for his assistance. And, in addition to this, man uses all sense objects for the perfection of intellectual knowledge. Hence it is said of man in the Psalms (8:8) in a statement directed to God: 'You have subjected all things under his feet.'[38]

This stance offers a moral dilemma in our relationship with animals. It presupposes that animals are simply to fulfill our temporal needs. This ultimately raises questions about our consumption and utilization of animals for our ends. Andrew Linzey and Clair Linzey view the teaching of Aquinas on animals as anthropocentric, which culminates in the killing of animals for human use.[39] David Clough disputes the stance of Aquinas on nonhuman animals being "naturally enslaved" to humans, which leads to the killing of animals. Clough asserts that animals must be appreciated for their goodness as they participate in the Triune life.[40]

As illustrated, the relationship animals share with humans is instrumentality, not relationality. It implies that even if animals have a relationship with humans, it is not a profound communion that enriches both ends. On the question of whether we should extend charity to animals, Aquinas responds that "the love of charity extends to none but God and our neighbor. But the word neighbor cannot be extended to irrational creatures, since they have no fellowship with man in the rational life. Therefore, charity does not extend to irrational creatures."[41] This statement not only withholds charity for animals but also eliminates any form of fellowship or communion between animals

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[38] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles: Book Three – Providence,* trans. Vernon J. Bourke, online edition at Isidore, III.XXII.8, https://isidore.co/aquinas/ContraGentiles3a.htm#22.

[39] Andrew Linzey and Clair Linzey, "Introduction: Before Animal Theology," in *Animal Theologians*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Clair Linzey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023; online ed., Oxford Academic, April 20, 2023), 5, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197655542.003.0001

[40] David L. Clough, *On Animals, vol. 2, Theological Ethics* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 19.

[41] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II. q 25. a 3.

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and humans. Anatoly Angelo Aseneta expounds on Aquinas' position, stating that "charity" here refers to friendship. It is contended that animals cannot be in a state of friendship due to their irrationality.[42] Later, I will respond to this with empirical data on animal reciprocity and the framework of entangled empathy.

Retrieval of Thomistic Affirmation of Animals

Despite Aquinas' hierarchical valuation of animals, we find theological affirmations about them that can be retrieved. Elizabeth Johnson emphasizes Aquinas' view of creatures as participants in God's community of creation. In her analysis, God is alive "in all things" through God's dwelling in all things.[43] But the dwelling of God is magnified by the creaturely participation of all beings, including animals.[44] This gestures to the sacramental attribute of creation. This denotes the importance of animals in the theological imagination of Aquinas. It highlights the divine goodness that animals partake in as "every created good is good by participation in the One who is good by nature."[45]

Supporting the participation of animals in the community of creation as sacramental, Aseneta argues that this view of Aquinas must also be a strong reason for humans not to subject animals to cruelty.46 It also informs us of our divine duty to care for them and honor their intrinsic worth, regardless of whether or not they possess advanced levels of cognition. This theological affirmation of Aquinas—obscured by his Aristotelean pronouncements about animals—must take precedence over his hierarchical assertions. This theological thought can construct a promising moral posture for how

[42] Anatoly Angelo R. Aseneta, "*Laudato Si*' on Non-Human Animals," *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, no. 2 (2017): 232.

[43] Johnson, *Ask The Beasts*, 147.

[44] Johnson, *Ask The Beasts*, 147.

[45] Johnson, *Ask The Beasts*, 149.

[46] Aseneta, *"Laudato Si,"* 231.

we should use language to describe animals and humans. Animals are co-participants, fellow members, and collectively a divine reflection of God's gratuitous love in God's community of creation.

Concluding Notes on Aquinas

Aquinas' perception of animals has placed them in a subordinating position and designated them an ancillary role. These explicitly outlined qualities within Aristotelian hierarchical ordering of beings have supported linguistic expressions that minimize or completely deny animals their true capacities. They insist on the superiority of humans and downplay the abilities of animals. The human-animal divide has widened by anthropocentric and hierarchical traditions like that of Aquinas. However, despite the shortcomings of his philosophical thought, we must retrieve the affirmative teachings of Aquinas about animals. These are instructive in reformulating how we perceive, interact with, and protect animals. Such a renewed understanding should flow into our linguistic practices.

Animal Relationality and Feminist Animal Care

Threads of hierarchical and dualistic Western thought, like that of Thomas Aquinas, have long denied or minimized the abilities of animals. This reality is evident in our linguistic practices. Contemporary animal studies challenge these assumptions. Thus, for this section, my task is to counter them and reclaim the capabilities of animals. I will draw on scholarship on animal reciprocity through the lens of feminist animal care that prioritizes embodied knowing and affective reciprocity with animals over a hierarchical and abstract manner of encountering them. This section argues that animal reciprocity[47] is

[47] Animal reciprocity or reciprocal altruism refers to the behavior of animals extending help to their fellow species or another with the expectation that it will be returned in the future. The concept was introduced by evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers in his 1971 paper, "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism." See Robert L. Trivers, "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism," *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 46, no. 1 (1971): 35-57, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2822435. Not all animals are preconditioned to perform reciprocal altruism due to the complex

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an inherent capacity in animals that demonstrates cognition, agency, communication, and empathy.

This section requires a deep and relational understanding of animals, one that extends beyond a behaviorist analysis of their existence. Thus, I will incorporate my personal observations of Pancake,[48] my dog, and other animals to establish that animals are indeed capable of being in communion with humans. Their capacity to be in fellowship with us is not simply a product of instincts but of their multiple gifts.

Animal Reciprocity

While my dog Pancake and I were walking, I noticed a white bird with a seemingly injured wing. It attempted to flap its wings but struggled to lift itself off due to the left wing being stuck. Moments later, a black bird approached the wounded bird. I was scared that it might prey on the wounded one. It appeared that the injured bird was being pursued. However, the wounded one was being guided to find the momentum to fly. Soon, another bird landed, then two more. They began to circle the wounded bird, providing it with assistance. This moment showcased how animals can cooperate and work together

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cognitive abilities it requires. Species observed exhibiting it include primates, vampire bats, vervet monkeys, and various bird species. While pets or companion animals may not necessarily display an evolutionary form of reciprocal altruism in a strict sense due to their domestication, it is undeniable that they are capable of being altruistic through their emotional attunement and mutual care.

[48] In line with the theoretical shift in feminist animal care toward embodied and relational care for animals, close observations of animals are an important source of knowledge about human-animal relations. Thus, honoring autoethnography as a method for building knowledge about animals must be positively constructed in research. This, however, must be in conversation with scientific findings to validate, analyze, or challenge our observations. I illustrate this dialogical approach by supporting my personal observations of Pancake with empirical data on the abilities of animals to demonstrate reciprocity, emotional attument, and cognitive aptitude.

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to survive and navigate their environment. It was a beautiful sight to behold that both Pancake and I witnessed.

Reciprocal altruism refers to evolutionary behavioral responses between non-kin beings that involve beneficial acts toward one another, with the expectation of future reciprocation.[49] This behavior is a fundamental aspect of animal cooperation. Reciprocity is argued to be uncommon among animals as it requires sophisticated cognitive abilities, and yet it can occur in long-term social bonds.[50] Furthermore, research indicates that while reciprocity demands advanced cognitive skills, it is not a single strategy; other strategies can also be explored.[51]

It is improbable for animals to engage in reciprocal relationships without some form of agency, communication, and cognition. Thus, animal reciprocity demonstrates their unique ability to interact with purpose and intention. Critics may contend that such behavior is merely a conditioned behavior or a product of evolutionary instinct. Frans de Waal has argued that primates and other species can exhibit empathy and that their actions are more than mechanical responses.[52] In a similar vein, Mark Rowlands posits that some animals may act out of moral consideration.[53] These behaviors imply intentionality, which cannot be reduced to instinct alone. In this context, intentionality is

[49] Trivers, "The Evolution," 35.

[50] Esteban Freidin, Fabricio Carballo, and Mariana Bentosela, "Direct Reciprocity in Animals: The Roles of Bonding and Affective Processes," *International Journal of Psychology* 52, no. 2 (April 1, 2017) 163–70. doi:10.1002/ijop.12215.

[51] Manon K. Schweinfurth and Josep Call, "Reciprocity: Different behavioural strategies, cognitive mechanisms and psychological processes," *Learning & Behavior* 47, no. 4 (2019) 284-301, https://doi.org/10.3758/s13420-019-00394-5.

[52] Frans B.M. De Waal, "Putting the altruism back into altruism: the evolution of empathy," *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* 59, no. 1 (2008) 279-300, https://science.umd.edu/faculty/wilkinson/BIOL608W/deWaalAnnRevPsych2008.pdf.

[53] Mark Rowlands, *Can Animals Be Moral?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7–14.

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defined as a planned response to the situation that may or may not require complex problem solving. Simply put, it is when animals attain a goal. Intentionality is evident when animals solve problems, express their desires, and respond to changes in their environment. This form of intentionality is observable in Pancake. I am amazed at Pancake when she plans to retrieve her ball underneath the sofa or when she prefers sardines to meat. When she knows that our walk is about to end, she pulls me the other way so we can continue walking, or sits on the ground to prevent going home. I have seen videos of dogs and cats protecting babies or saving them from a sudden fall. These acts suggest that they are not just sensation-driven responses. They require a multi-step process of thinking. Animals can perform more than rudimentary tasks with self-awareness or intentional action. Donald Griffin, a zoologist, argues that animals are conscious and, as such, they experience mental images and are self-aware.[54] When I cry, Pancake approaches me and leans in. Although she does not fully understand my feelings, she seems aware that something is amiss. I find weight in my anecdotal observations of Pancake, but I wish to stress with caution that animal intentionality or even moral consideration (with emphasis on relationality with other species including humans) can be usurped by domestication. On the other hand, Donna Haraway observes that dog training can be a "positive bondage" in which dogs and humans develop a form of communication, and the former are trained to be in communi z on with humans in different settings.[55] Moreover, while training has gained various opinions, for Haraway, it is a complex and situated intervention that can enrich cohabitation between dogs and humans in the more-than-human world.

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[54] Donald Redfield Griffin, *The Question of Animal Awareness: Evolutionary Continuity of Mental Experience* (New York: The Rockefeller University Press, 1981), 21–32.

[55] Donna J. Haraway and Cary Wolfe, "The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness," in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Scholarship Online, 2017), 137-145, https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816650477.003.0002.

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Relational reciprocity between companion animals and humans is well-established. Research shows that puppies develop attachment patterns toward their humans and respond differently to strangers.[56] Gazing is a powerful form of communication that conveys messages even without verbal cues. Dogs are also capable of this interaction. As dogs engage in mutual gaze with humans, it increases oxytocin levels in both, forming a strong interspecies bond.[57] This gaze is particularly observable when dogs maintain eye contact with their companions. Gregory Berns, a neuroscientist, explains the distinctiveness of dogs' social intelligence that presumes their empathy:

> The defining trait of dogs, therefore, is their interspecies social intelligence, an ability to intuit what humans and other animals are thinking. Wolves do this to hunt prey. But dogs evolved their social intelligence into living with other species instead of eating them. Dogs' great social intelligence means that they probably also have a high capacity for empathy.[58]

As suggested, the intelligence of dogs surpasses Western thought about animals with their ability to express empathy towards others. Moreover, it repudiates that they cannot be in fellowship and build a reciprocal relationship with humans.

Although more literature illustrates attachment patterns among dogs, some research supports that socio-cognitive abilities are also observable in cats as they interact with their caregivers.[59] Moreover,

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[56] József Topál et al., "Attachment to Humans: A Comparative Study on Hand-reared Wolves and Differently Socialized Dog Puppies," *Animal Behaviour* 70, no. 6 (November 8, 2005): 1367–75, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2005.03.025.

[57] Miho Nagasawa et al., "Oxytocin-gaze Positive Loop and the Coevolution of Human-dog Bonds," *Science* 348, no. 6232 (April 16, 2015): 333–36, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1261022.

[58] Gregory Berns, *How Dogs Love Us: A Neuroscientist and His Adopted Dog Decode the Canine Brain* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 229.

[59] Kristyn R. Vitale, Alexandra C. Behnke, and Monique A.R. Udell, "Attachment Bonds Between Domestic Cats and Humans," *Current Biology* 29, no. 18 (September 1, 2019) R864–65, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2019.08.036.

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research shows that cats have a functional understanding of human emotions,[60] which assists them in forming bonds with humans. Despite these examples being primarily about companion animals, wild animals also exhibit great abilities. Scientific studies prove that other animals like dolphins, elephants, and pigs are smart. For instance, chimpanzees are capable of communicating through sign language.[61] A study suggests that there is no difference in intelligence between wild and domestic animals of the same species.[62]

These empirical findings on animal capacities suggest that animals are gifted with a spectrum[63] of cognitive, emotional, and relational capacities. In the same vein, it is also noteworthy to acknowledge how these animal behaviors and abilities are in dialogue with our existential realities. It denotes that human-animal relations extend beyond a capacity-based relationship—one that honors fellowship and mutuality.

Jacques Derrida offers a deeply personal reflection that sheds light on this dynamic. Recounting an experience of being naked before his cat, he questions the strict and normative divide between humans and animals.[64] He states that the animal gaze motivates humans to introspect

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[60] Angelo Quaranta, Serenella d'Ingeo, Rosaria Amoruso, and Marcello Siniscalchi, "Emotion Recognition in Cats," *Animals*, 10, no. 7 (June 28, 2020): 6-10, https://doi.org/10.3390/ani10071107

[61] Mary Lee Abshire Jensvold, Kailie Dombrausky, and Emily Collins, "Sign Language Studies with Chimpanzees in Sanctuary," *Animals* 13, no. 22 (2023): 1-20, https://doi.org/10.3390/ani13223486.

[62] Vitor Hugo Bessa Ferreira et al., "Are Domesticated Animals Dumber than their Wild Relatives? A Comprehensive Review on the Domestication Effects on Animal Cognitive Performance," *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 154 (2023): 1-14, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2023.105407.

[63] I emphasize the term "spectrum" as animals' abilities are not homogeneous. There are animals whose abilities are more complex, while others lean more on simpler abilities. This is the reason why respect for animals must not rely on capacities; their worth is not determined by what they can do.

[64] Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Fordham Univ Press, 2008), 5.

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and acknowledge the subjectivity of animals. Derrida's compelling experience of being gazed at by his cat disrupts Jacques Lacan's theory of reaction and response. Lacan argues that animals can only react through their instincts and are incapable of responding due to the lack of a language system and symbolic order. Derrida rejects complicity in philosophical ideas that maintain animal passivity, as animals are more than mechanically configured beings. Animals can make one aware of their vulnerabilities and truths. Derrida invites us to attune to animal responses and discern how these might involve signals expressing that they see us from their own world. Perhaps, they, too, have something to tell us if we learn to practice intimate observation, listening, and openness. Furthermore, reciprocity with animals does not always mean interpreting how they respond to us but examining how we respond to their presence.

Animal reciprocity provides us with a lens into the wide spectrum of animal capabilities. It challenges the anthropocentric assumptions of Western philosophical and theological traditions that deny them these capacities. Grounding their worth in human-like qualities reproduces anthropocentrism. Lori Gruen argues that simply depending on human-like qualities of animals for us to respect them is anthropocentric (arrogant anthropocentricism).[65] While it is vital to redress our reduction of animals into passive and unintelligible beings, it is equally important to respect them in their fullness as co-participants in God's creative life. By embracing them as our fellow members in God's community of creation, we are drawn into a deeper and more authentic communion with them.

Feminist Animal Care and Entagled Empathy

Medieval theologians like Aquinas consider intellect and morality as the defining traits that distinguish humans from animals. Thus,

[65] Arrogant anthropocentrism is the belief that glorifies humans as the center and basis of worth because of their superior traits. Lori Gruen, *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for Our Relationships with Animals* (Woodstock, NY: Lantern Books, 2015), 24.

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regarding animals as moral subjects disturbs the long-held position on hierarchy and primacy of humans over animals and other species. Feminist animal care theory[66] directly responds to theological and rationalist traditions that do not fully recognize our fellowship with animals as an ethic of care, particularly our emotional fellowship with them. Josephine Donovan argues that the agenda of utilitarian animal rights scholars (e.g., Peter Singer) fighting for animal rights has its own merit, and yet she urges that "it is also possible indeed, necessary to ground that ethic in an emotional and spiritual conversation with nonhuman life-form"67 to underscore that relationality on the basis of affective domains can also be a valuable point for departure. Donovan calls for forging a relationship with animals that is founded in empathy and care as a basis for protecting them, not one based only on abstraction and calculation. Sentimentalism and emotionalism are attachments that are not fully acknowledged in the male-dominant animal rights strand. However, feminist theorists of animal ethics argue that forming emotional bonds with animals through care and fellowship can be more impactful and beneficial for them. Mary Midgley remarks that animals show "social and emotional complexity of the kind which is expressed by the formation of deep, subtle and lasting relationships."[68] Feminist animal care shifts the focus from rights to relationships, which is more lasting and capable of fostering genuine care from humans. Donovan also reimagines animals as interlocutors within feminist standpoint theory, implying that, like women, they embody situated knowledge of oppression and marginalization. To defend their incapacity to articulate their oppression due to the absence

[66] Feminist animal care contrasts with utilitarian animal rights theory by advocating for animal ethics grounded in emotional fellowship, relational care, and the intricate interconnections between humans and animals. Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan are the prominent proponents of this theory. See Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams, *Beyond Animal Rights: A Feminist Caring Ethic for the Treatment of Animals* (London: Burns & Oates, 1996).

[67] Josephine Donovan, "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory," *Signs* 15, no. 2 (January 1, 1990): 375, https://doi.org/10.1086/494588.

[68] Donovan, "Animal Rights," 351.

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of language as posited by earlier philosophical trends, Donovan opines that humans should learn to understand animal language.[69] Carol Adams pushes the boundaries of reimagining animals within our linguistic and moral particularities, suggesting: "What if trying to have a conversation with an animal is like trying to have a conversation with God? Would we then bring a discipline of attending to our relationships with animals?"[70] These questions are cogent, asking whether animals are any less worthy of receiving moral consideration than God or our fellow humans. Further, within this theological paradigm, animals must necessarily be conceived in association with God as a means of grounding such respect.

One specific framework within the feminist animal care theory is entangled empathy, developed by feminist ethicist Lori Gruen. Entangled empathy is a strand of care that integrates affect and cognition, in which humans understand the diverse needs, feelings, desires, and circumstances of particular animals. It fosters a sense of empathic awareness and reflection of the other while recognizing the existing ethical and experiential differences between humans

[69] Josephine Donovan suggests understanding animals through "analogy based on homology" by reading the body responses of animals and imagining how they would feel being in the same situation. For instance, she explains, "If that dog is yelping, whining, leaping about, licking an open cut, and since if I had an open wound I know I would similarly be (or feeling like) crying and moving about anxiously because of the pain, I therefore conclude that the animal is experiencing the same kind of pain as I would and is expressing distress about it. One imagines, in short, how the animal is feeling based on how one would feel in a similar situation." See Josephine Donovan, "Feminism and the Treatment of Animals: From Care to Dialogue," *Signs* 31, no. 2 (January 1, 2006): 321-322, https://doi.org/10.1086/491750.

[70] Carol Adams redresses "beastly theologies" through "second-person theologies," which shift the position of animals in theological discourse from objects to subjects, from metaphors (of what human beings are not) to embodied beings, and from the "absent referent"—the linguistic and material displacement of animals that obscures their suffering (e.g., the transformation of cows into beef and pigs into pork)—to a recognition of their real, fleshly existence. See Adams, *Neither Man nor Beast*, 192.

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and animals.[71] Entangled empathy is not simply imagining ourselves in the position of specific animals but realizing that we have been in relationships with animals through our shared lives, motivating us to respond to them according to their specific design.[72] As we attune to the complex behaviors of companion animals or animals in general, we may notice habits or expressions that our limited minds cannot easily grasp. Gruen acknowledges this challenge of not fully comprehending every act they perform, and perhaps they experience the same uncertainty about us. This gap is a great opportunity to be in the liminality of not knowing while still being respectful of them. The lack of understanding on our part should not discourage us from caring for them and creating moments of continuing to learn about them, always in the context of respect for differences and a desire to relate empathetically. Gruen advises that we may not fully access the mystery of their being, but we can somehow be in the space of embracing their nature as they are.[73]

For feminist animal scholars, our relationship with animals is always situated and complex. For instance, Carol Adams observes that personhood and special care are easily extended to companion animals but not to farm animals.74 Currently, there is a pronounced disparity in the care given to traditional pet animals and non-traditional pet animals. Based on a study on Chinese pet owners, traditional pets (i.e., dogs and cats) are perceived to have higher moral standing than non-traditional

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[71] Lori Gruen, "*Animal Ethics: Figuring Out What Is Right and Wrong*," *Brooks Institute for Animal Rights,* https://thebrooksinstitute.org/sites/default/files/article/2023-09/Animal%20Ethics%20-%20Figuring%20Out%20What%20Is%20Right%20and%20Wrong%20by%20Lori%20Gruen.pdf (accessed February 1, 2026) 39–40.

[72] Myisha Cherry, "What an [En]Tangled Web We Weave: Emotions, Motivation, and Rethinking Us and the 'Other,'" *Hypatia* 32, no. 2 (March 2019, 2017): 440, https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12325.

[73] Gruen, *Animal Ethics*, 40-41.

[74] Adams, *Neither Man nor Beast*, 39.

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pets.[75] This has serious implications for how animals continue to be exploited in capitalist industries (e.g., meat industry, pharmaceuticals, fashion industry, sports, etc.). Their suffering is often shrouded by the phenomenon of absent referent or the systemic obscuring of animal pain by transforming animals into consumable products.[76] Entangled empathy is instructive because it places care within the framework of relationality and stimulates awareness of animal suffering obscured by oppresive systems.[77] In this framework, compassion for animals is an integral ethical concern for all types of animals that may begin with the animals near us, then broaden subsequently. Drawn from Gruen's friendship with Emma, a chimpanzee, it is shown that providing care to the animals in our proximity can unlock empathy for other animals:

> Once one's perception is altered, other relations move to the foreground. Entangled empathy can occur with those who are more distant. We are in relationships of all kinds with many, many animals and we may never have the opportunity to meet them or look them into their eyes. But once we are attuned to some of them, as

[75] Kepeng Xu et al., "Traditional Pettism: The Influence of Pet Ownership Status, Pet Type, and Pet Properties on Pet Moral Standing," *Acta Psychologica Sinica* 55, no. 10 (January 1, 2023): 9-10, https://doi.org/10.3724/sp.j.1041.2023.01662.

[76] As mentioned in footnote n.70, the absent referent hides the immense suffering of animals. For instance, the meat industry deliberately conceals their suffering as animals as they are transformed into linguistic metaphors (e.g., beef, pork, steak, sausage) to obscure the horrendous pains they undergo. They are served to us as meat, but we fail to acknowledge that we consume real animals—flesh and blood—who once lived with us and were overwhelmed by fear as they faced their death. This systemic obscuring of animals and their suffering buries the reality that the satiation of the palate is at the expense of animals. Adams writes, "The absent referent permits us to forget about the animal as an independent entity; it also enables us to resist efforts to make animals present." Adams, *Neither Man nor Beast*, 192.

[77] Animal exploitation is a vast and complex ethical issue. As an ethical framework, entangled empathy may be criticized for its seemingly localized approach. However, I contend that this ethics of care can be transformative when adopted as a paradigm for moral consideration and lifestyle choices.

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> I became attuned to chimpanzees, we can begin to understand our relationships with and responsibilities to many others differently.[78]

Feminist animal care reorients our perspectives on why we must care for animals. It does not ask if animals are as intelligent as humans. It urges us to value animals because they are part of our community, existence, and belonging. Donna Haraway discusses the relationship between companion animals and humans, referring to it as "co-constitutive" and "co-evolution," gesturing to the fact that animals and humans have historically shaped each other's lives.[79] In the same light, companion animals shape our lifestyles, emotions, ways of thinking, and other facets of our being, just as we also participate in their lives.

Naming: Restoring Animals in our Anthropocentric Language

To mitigate our systemic subjugation of animals in our language, reinforced by hierarchical and anthropocentric philosophies and theologies, we should recognize their fullness and participation in God's creative life. For this reason, I aim to offer a pastoral intervention to restore the image and dignity of animals in our linguistic meaning-making. I propose the concept of naming as an intervention that resonates with the vision of Laudato Si' toward universal communion and in alignment with feminist animal care.

While watching a TikTok video, a woman addressed her dog, "Jefferson." I could not help but burst into laughter. In the Filipino context, Jefferson is undeniably a human name that no one would

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[78] Gruen, *Entangled Empathy*, 79. Caring for companion animals can be an impetus for greater empathy for all animals, which may lead to a lifestyle change and animal welfare activism. See, for example, Catherine E. Amiot, Christophe Gagné, and Brock Bastian, "Exploring the Role of Our Contacts with Pets in Broadening Concerns for Animals, Nature, and Fellow Humans: A Representative Study," *Scientific Reports* 13, no. 1 (October 10, 2023): 1-11, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-43680-z.

[79] Donna Jeanne Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto : Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 32.

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give their companion animal. It was indeed amusing, but it provided me with insights into the significance of naming in human-animal companionship. Naming companion animals with human-associated names impresses upon the fact that the companion animal is considered a living being, with personality and unique attributes. It removes the category of the animal from being treated as an object to being seen as a being with dignity and life. This resonates with Joan Dunayer's claim that "every sentient being is a someone, not a something."[80] Similarly, when Jane Goodall observed chimpanzees in Gombe, she named them David Greybeard, Flo, Goliath, and Frodo, believing that they were not simply data for her research but individuals. In an event, she shared the importance of naming in acknowledging animal individualities, "Every animal has an individuality just like every human being, and without a name the individuality kind of fizzles away."[81] Her bold move was not the norm in the academy at that time, as research subjects, such as animals, had to be assigned numbers to maintain objectivity and impartiality. And yet, she paved the way for a more relational research approach with animals that ethologists practice today. Naming is imperative; it recognizes the life within the animal. Calling them by name somehow animates relationality with them, grounded in respect and care for their existence beyond our anthropocentric assumptions. In line with the reframing of animals, Martha Nussbaum asserts that animals possess intrinsic worth that merits them justice.[82] This

[80] Joan Dunayer, "On Speciesist Language," 2.

[81] College Tour, "Jane Goodall on naming animals during her research," YouTube video, February 5, 2016, 1:30 to 1:37, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Td-a7FcCfm4.

[82] Martha Nussbaum's *Capabilities Approach* is an extension of Amartya Sen's theory of development. Nussbaum posits that each person, endowed with dignity, must flourish in society according to their capabilities. She expands this theory by including animals in her framework. She notes that animals have species-specific capabilities. Her framework demands protecting the dignity of animals as moral subjects. See Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Moral Status of Animals," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 22 (February 3, 2006): B6-B-8. Lori Gruen expounded on the list of capabilities of animals that Martha Nussbaum developed with the following: 1) Life – animals are entitled to life even without a "conscious interest."

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proposition is an invitation to consider animals as subjects of moral concern whose existence provides us with illuminating insights.

In Genesis 2, the first man was granted the privilege of naming all the animals in the Garden of Eden: "The man gave names to all the tame animals, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals" (Gn 2:20). Departing from the traditional illustration of naming as an exercise of power and authority, Arthur Walker-Jones takes on a more relational perspective. Walker-Jones claims that naming implies a kinship between animals and humans in which animals "share practical wisdom and knowledge that is essential to humans in maturing and fulfilling their purpose."[83] This may seem to suggest that animals are portrayed as instruments of human vocation, but it implies a balance between pragmatism and reciprocity. It suggests that animals possess wisdom and knowledge that are vital to human flourishing and growth. Animals, therefore, are not alienated from knowledge production and world-making. They are not mere motivators for humans to perfect their morality based on pain or brutality, but animals extend their charity by allowing humans to gain insights from their presence. In this light, animals are transformed as co-sharers in divine wisdom and design. This also reflects in God's vision of salvation. In the

2) Bodily Health – animals need to receive proper nutrition and hydration suited to their bodily needs, and to be defended from any threats of abandonment or cruelty. 3) Bodily Integrity – animals must live a life free from abuse, violence, threats to their safety, or any form of suffering. 4) Senses, Imagination, and Thought – animals are entitled to be provided an environment where they can freely tap into their capacity to make choices, communicate, and be themselves, without constricting their natural abilities. 5) Emotions – animals must first and foremost be acknowledged as sentient beings and thus have freedom to form bonds with other beings through love and care. 6) Practical Reason – animals must be given opportunities to apply their cognition to activities they deem appropriate for their enrichment. 7) Play – animals are entitled to evolve in an environment where they can be with their fellow species while enjoying freedom. See Gruen, *Animal Ethics*, 36–37.

[83] Arthur Walker-Jones, "Naming the Human Animal: Genesis 1–3 and Other Animals in Human Becoming," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 52, no. 4 (2017): 1005–28, https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12375.

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account of the Great Flood, God included all creatures in the saving plan: "I will remember my covenant between me and you and every living creature—every mortal being—so that the waters will never again become a flood to destroy every mortal being" (Gn 9:15). Being incorporated into the community of God, they, too, are promised God's protection and love. Christopher Steck argues that nonhuman creatures participate in the Trinitarian life and are promised redemption by virtue of their relationality with God and their fellow creatures and the goodness they possess; God embraces nonhuman creatures in their unique identity and finitude; and God plays a principal role in the completion and fulfillment of their life.[84]

Shannon Craigo-Snell explains that from a feminist theological perspective, naming is an important act of liberation for women who have been "restricted from the powerful place of naming and subjugated into the space of either being named or living in a reality that has been named by others."[85] Although women have participated in naming, for instance, naming their children, the authority of naming has been dominated by men. Even in contemporary contexts, women are excluded from being acknowledged for their inventions and discoveries. Extending this to human-animal relationships, naming affirms the dignity of animals while simultaneously enabling women to exercise their agency in initiating a reciprocal relationship. The feminist reframing of naming, however, does not condone possessive

[84] Although Steck is convinced that nonhuman creatures are part of God's redemptive plan, he objects to the claim that nonhuman creatures will have the same experience of resurrection, given the differing capacities of nonhuman creatures (e.g., consciousness, sensation, and affect). He posits: "[Due to the] variety of creaturely capacities, it is hard to imagine the eschatological life of all animals simply in terms of the resurrection of each and every one of them… My argument is not that all creatures will share in a resurrection similar to ours (though I am not excluding the possibility), but only that we can hope that at least some of them will." See Christopher Steck, *All God's Animals: A Catholic Theological Framework for Animal Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 124.

[85] Shannon Craigo-Snell, "Feminist Theology, Plant Names, and Power," *Religions* 10, no. 3 (2019): 5. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030184.

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or consumerist forms of animal companionship. Rather, it calls for a relationship that is sensitive to the animal's autonomy and well-being. Naming calls for stewardship anchored in divine communion. By naming an animal, a sense of personhood or being is acknowledged, as if blessing them.

This act plants a seed of respect and honor. While naming does not automatically eliminate the potential for abuse, it encourages a more personal relationship rooted in relationality. Jesus illustrates this intimate relationship in the parable of the Good Shepherd, where the shepherd calls the sheep by name. The shepherd "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (Jn 10:3). Calling animals by name can change our perspective on them. They become part of our family, home, and priorities. Naming, therefore, animates love, not in a romanticized sense, but a love that empowers human companions to suffer with, empathize with, and become with their companion animals. This love can only arise from a love grounded in God's love, as Jesus echoed in the Gospel: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13).

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that anthropocentric understanding of animals also influences our language. Animals are reduced to the pronoun "it," categorizing them as objects—devoid of agency, emotions, cognition, and communication. This grammar convention has been reinforced by anthropocentric philosophical and theological traditions. Moreover, across cultures, animals are often instrumentalized as a means of conveying negative messages to insult and oppress humans, as well as other animal species. Those demeaning expressions reflect how little value we give to them. In the same chain of oppression, women, more than men, become targets of crueler animal metaphors. This phenomenon entangles animals and women in multi-layered oppression. To trace how these metaphors are legitimized and reinforced by philosophical and theological traditions, I examined Thomas Aquinas' claims regarding animal rationality, agency, fellowship, and moral standing. These claims have contributed to the hierarchical

understanding of human-animal relations. Notwithstanding his claims, Aquinas recognizes the sacramental attribute of animals and their participation in God's community of creation.

I proposed animal reciprocity through the lens of feminist animal care to counter the false claims about animals' abilities. Animal reciprocity sheds light on the capacities of animals to form reciprocal relationships with their fellow species and humans. While we rectify the unjust claims of philosophical and theological traditions about the lack of capacities of animals, it is worthwhile to embrace animals beyond these human-centered measures by respecting them because of their worth. This paradigm can redirect our attention to the wholeness of each animal in our shared environments. Entangled empathy, as an ethic of care, exposes the suffering of animals through attentiveness to their lived experiences. In this light, we are challenged to listen and encounter animals by responding to their suffering.

Lastly, to end with a pastoral intervention, I turned to the concept of naming to allude to the relationality between animals and humans—consistent with the vision of *Laudato Si'* toward universal communion. Through naming, the intrinsic worth of animals is restored in our communicative devices, while simultaneously enabling women to exercise their agency in the spirit of stewardship. Contrary to hierarchical Western thought, they are not mere "it", created to simply serve human ends. By naming, our perception of animals is transcended as we acknowledge their integrity as participants in God's community of creation. They are beings with intrinsic worth—co-sharers in God's creative design—capable of communing with all members of the community of creation.

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