

# Redeeming the Lost Teleology: St. Thomas Aquinas' Stand on the Beast's Place in the World

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**Abstract:** What is an animal? A philosopher might consider it simply a sentient being. However, when someone asks, “What is an animal in relation to man?” The answer is not a simple definition but an actual and practical response on how the beast and man, a vegetative-sentient and a vegetative-sentient-rational being, exist together in the created world. Moreover, this question of relation led to dichotomy of views. In this study, the researcher will attempt to understand critically one of the philosophers, who made a stand towards the place of beast in relation with man, the Angelic Doctor, Saint Thomas of Aquinas and to clarify his stand against the prejudices of some animal rights activists. Furthermore, this will also be a contribution to the discourse on man-beast relation. The study will revolve around these three sub-problems: (1) an inquiry on the beast's powers and relation with man where oppositions on whether animals have rights or should be treated morally is in question; (2) a discussion of Aquinas' stand towards animals in general and its relation with man and; (3) the conclusion which deals with responsibility, ends, and relational unity between man and beast.

**Keywords:** animal ethics, man-beast relation, relational ecology, teleology

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The life of human beings is interrelated with animal life. Despite the difference in rational prowess, it is inevitable that a relationship will flourish between them, because they exist and partake within the same realm—in the world – where they can encounter each other in their whole being. In the evolutionary perspective, human beings emerged from the primate family, e.g. chimpanzees, baboons and monkeys. The *australopithecines*<sup>1</sup>, who lived from 3-4 million years ago, were one of the known ancestors of humankind who dueled with prehistoric beasts in order to survive. Thus, human beings first encounter with animals is born out of savagery that in order to survive man must kill the beasts vice-versa. For

instance, the *Homo Neanderthal* hunted for woolly mammoths and as for smilodons or sabretooth cats, they preyed on man during the Ice Age. However, the history of mankind is not always a clash between man and beast, especially during the stone age. Although, during the time of *Homo Sapiens* they used dogs to track down the hunt, it was during the stone age, particularly *Mesolithic age*, that man and beast work hand in hand to sustain each other i.e. domestication of animals. During those times, man's food, particularly crops, were tilled by cows and cattle, while man fed them for their sustenance. Indeed, man's foremost relationship with animals was more of surviving rather than an intimate relation. But, the irony is that animals

though not hunted anymore served as stock foods for man. Man raised pigs for their meat as well as cow, chicken, and horse. This is a manifestation of a 'parasitic' or 'one-sided' relationship, for man gains labor and meat from the animals while the beast gains nothing.

The emergence of guns in the 14<sup>th</sup> century paved way to more animal encounters, particularly a violent one, wherein animals were shot either for food or sport. During this time, there is what they called an *open season* wherein hunters graze the forest to shot any creatures. Those shot were hung in their cabins as trophies reflecting skill in hunting. Of course, this hunting extends at the skies above and the sea below which led to the extinction of various animal species e.g., the dodo bird and the elephant bird. Before, man often hid from the beasts but it seems that there is a role-reversal — the predators are being preyed.

The beast, in relation to man, is more than just mere utility without innate worth i.e. besides the sustenance provided by the former, the latter cannot just presume the beast's worth similar to things. With reference to this problem, various philosophers and thinkers struggle to clarify the dilemma whether the beasts deserve either hostility or care . In order to redeem the forgotten worth of the beasts in the hierarchy of beings, the researcher will utilize St. Thomas Aquinas' stand on the relationship between man and the beast. According to him, every creature follows a specific *telos* or purpose. This is emphasized in Aquinas' *fifth way concerning the existence of God* . As it was stated:

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards

an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.<sup>2</sup>

Based on the statement above, the place of the beasts in the hierarchy of beings should be delved deeper to veer away from the fixated categorization of the beasts as mere instruments without innate worth or a misappropriation of their real worth in the grand design.

### The Existence of an Animal Mind

In order make a meaningful and genuine encounter between man and beast possible, the researcher will first explicate the existence of an animal mind, which is essential in dealing with human mind in order to facilitate address and response between man and beast. There were numerous theories which either support or contend the existence of an animal mind. Scientists such as France de Waal, Colin Allen, and Marc Bekoff conceded the existence of animal minds by arguing that animal behaviours are *carriers of signs*,<sup>3</sup> springing forth from a complex formulation by a particular mind similar to human capability to perform complex actions. On the other hand, philosophers such as David Hume, Voltaire, and Aristotle agreed in such existence that animals can perform complex task [requiring a particular degree of intelligence] compared to machines e.g., a bird building a nest, which can calculate the precise angle of the nest base, except for St. Thomas of Aquinas, Kant and Descartes who, in unison, denied the capability of rational thinking as compared to degree of human rationality.

Rene Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, despised the existence of animal minds. According to him, animals are just mere machines doing the same functions and actions again and again. Furthermore, the reason why he detested the existence of animal minds is due

to the fact that they cannot use language. For him, only language users like man, thinks. In his *Discourse on Method*, he emphasized:

For it is rather remarkable that there are no men so dull and so stupid (excluding not even the insane), that they are incapable of arranging various words together and of composing from them a discourse by means of which they might make their thoughts understood; and that, on the other hand, there is no other animal at all, however perfect and pedigreed it may be, that does the like. This does not happen because they lack the organs, for one sees that magpies and parrots can utter words just as we can, and yet they cannot speak as we do, that is to say, by testifying to the fact that they are thinking about what they are saying; on the other hand, men born deaf and dumb, who are deprived just as much as or more than, beasts of the organs that aid others in speaking, are wont to invent for themselves various signs by means of which they make themselves understood to those who, being with them on a regular basis, have the time to learn their language. And this attests, not merely to the fact that the beasts have less reason than men but that they have none at all.

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Rene Descartes discounted the fact that even though parrots and magpies speak man's language, they just copy what they hear more like radio recorder. The patterns of migration, of hibernation, of mating season are mere mechanical functions without any variations depending on the situation. Perhaps, the reason lies in the fact that Descartes considered such because animals are not in pursuit of something higher than survival which man, whom he considered rational, possesses. The "pursuit of truth"<sup>5</sup> which persuades man to examine everything and thus gaining an aspect of the truth. Such pursuit depends on man's choice wherein he/she will consider which to examine first. This pursuit is absent in the animals, which seek not the truth rather survival.

However, Voltaire dismissed the Cartesian denial of animal minds. For him, animals don't act in a mechanistic manner instead, the complexity of animal behavior is not limited within a mechanistic point of view. As it was stated:

What! that bird which makes its nest in a semi-circle when it is attaching it to a wall, which builds it in a quarter circle when it is in an angle, and in a circle upon a tree; that bird acts always in the same way? That hunting-dog which you have disciplined for three months, does it not know more at the end of this time than it knew before your lessons? Does the canary to which you teach a tune repeat it at once? Do you not spend a considerable time in teaching it? Have you not seen that it has made a mistake and that it corrects itself?<sup>6</sup>

Voltaire contended that how come animals adapt to specific obstacles like the bird who built its nest connecting to the wall without a sense of rationality. If one speaks about a mechanical movement which is done already and follows its systematic approach like gears, what is the point of teaching dogs to do chores like hunting and a mundane example, bomb detecting. Furthermore, animals being taught has the tendency to commit mistakes and to refurbish these mistakes e.g., training of K9 units does not immediately transform dogs to be expert bomb sniffers, instead there are instances when dogs detect non-dangerous things other than bombs. Thus, from the statements above, there is an element of learning, which minds like human beings possess. Such element presupposes, a sense of development and dynamism. Animals are not just mere mechanical and irrational bodies, rather they are dynamic and rational ones.

On the other hand [a scientific perspective], France de Waal, a primatologist, explained the existence of animal minds in using argument of

*evolutionary parsimony*. According to Waal, which can be paralleled to Elliott Sober's stance:

The theory of evolution is adequate to attribute to the existence of animal minds. Wherein man and animal shared similar properties like a common ancestry with animals, especially primates and their phylogenetic tree or evolutionary changes are not that distant, i.e., despite the evolutionary changes in man there are still substantial traces of its ancestry with animals.<sup>7</sup>

Compared to other animal species, primates, particularly chimpanzees, resemble an individual human being. The chimpanzees are proficient in learning especially in problem solving skills which can be at par with human beings. "Recently in 2012, a chimp named Natasha was considered the smartest chimpanzee. One of her skills, which exemplifies her capacity for problem solving, is escaping her cage with electrical wires without getting fried numerous times."<sup>8</sup> Such ability is of primal consideration for cognitive researches because those non-human entities learn and engage in complex and flexible behaviors which resemble man. The mind barometer of an animal is not in the same degree as a human mind, but the resemblance and capability of the former is a matter to consider in a discourse of philosophical cognition.

## On Animal Communication

In order to engage a relation with the beasts, there should be form of communication between man and beast. In the previous discussion about the animal minds, animals do not speak the language of man who utters and writes words to convey a message. However, animal does not really have to possess the ability to communicate words through human language for it has a language of its own. Scientists formulated different accounts of communication where the beasts and man can

engage: biological accounts, information-based accounts and intentional accounts.

The 'biological account' of communication is "a relationship between two organisms such that a change in the state of one organism causes a change in the state of another organism."<sup>9</sup> This means that when the moment an organism affects the other and if there is a sort of response from the latter, a communication already took place. For example, when an individual tried to capture a chick from its mother hen, the hen will chase the individual away. The message conveyed is obvious for it was showed through action that evoked a reaction. This is a minimal consideration for communication in order for any engagement to happen.

On the other hand, the 'information-based' account considered communication as sending and receiving of signs vice versa. The relation is that the informant gives a code to a receiver which will decode the message. However, not all codes can be considered as information Fred Drestke upheld that "information rid uncertainty from the receiver, such that the probability of some affairs increases given the signal."<sup>10</sup> Thus, the primary goal of information is to clear obscurity e.g., the bees made circling movements to inform the swarm of a potential beehive. Accordingly, for Kristin Andrews, similar to the biological account the information-based account require a focus on the receiver, "the sender expects that the receiver receives the message."<sup>11</sup>

The last account is 'intentional communication' and it was devised by H.P. Grice. It happens when an individual does not just concerns oneself to the meaning he/she wants to convey but also on the thought that the receiver should understand the message conveyed. For instance, man in helping an injured animal will put into context his/her approach towards such, so as to reduce the stress and pain rummaging it and

thus, aiding to its recovery. However, this sort of intentional account is only possible for beings with sophisticated mind like man, according to Grice, man can reflect on his/her actions and not for animals. Thus, the researcher will uphold another intentional account of communication i.e. *ostension* which does not require a complex cognition. In such account, “a simple pointing to or eye contact elicits a sense of communication,”<sup>12</sup> This occurs when man look at the eyes of a bull, the bull will feel a sense of threat towards such contact prompting the bull to attack the man. Thus, despite the asymmetry of rational prowess, man and beasts can engage in communication, moreover, in a relation.

### On Animal Suffering

Every time there are morbid presentations of animal cruelty, where wild animals were dismembered, whether seen from television or actual, contentions like “The animal is suffering” or “Why kill those innocent creatures?” are being elicited. Perhaps, it is out of sympathy that man believes that animals experience pain and do suffer. However, animals experiencing pain and suffering is problematic due to the fact that they do not possess ‘phenomenal consciousness’. According to Fred Drestke and M.Tye, “phenomenal consciousness consists in a certain sort of intentional content (analog, or non-conceptual) being available to the belief-forming and decision-making systems of the creature in question.”<sup>13</sup> Animals do not possess complex systems which can lead to belief-forming and decision-making. Furthermore, phenomenal consciousness can lead to introspection of one’s experience or reflection which is a higher-form of thinking i.e. an individual can reflect regarding his experience of something whereas animals experience the moment without any introspection.

Despite the fact that animals fall on the non-phenomenal level of consciousness and lower order of thinking, it does not dismiss that animals do experience pain and suffering and such is a proper object of sympathy. Pain, according Caruthers, is a perceived ‘secondary quality’.<sup>14</sup> This means that pain is situated in a specific space or area of the body. This ‘feeling’ is not mental confirmation of such phenomenon but a physical affectation of a stimulus. Hence, unlike what is in the previous paragraph, despite the animals’ lack of phenomenal consciousness, such creatures, physically experience pain. For instance, a dog infested by ticks and fleas experiences pain because of the insect bites even though it cannot reflect on the insects’ existence.

Moreover, there is no general distinction on a creature’s response towards pain whether the consciousness is phenomenal or non-phenomenal. Whether phenomenal consciousness introspects in such experience or the non-phenomenal consciousness engages in such experience, the response towards the ‘feeling’ of pain is simply to minimize it. The response towards pain is a matter of “first-order response”<sup>15</sup> i.e. immediate and pre-rational. For example, both man and animal will strive to alleviate the pain in their stomach due to hunger by eating something. Thus, the experience of pain is shared both by phenomenal and non-phenomenal consciousness.

Upon proving that the experience of pain includes non-phenomenal consciousness [animals], a question emerges: “Where does sympathy towards animals enter?” It was discussed a while ago that animals possessed non-phenomenal consciousness; it cannot introspect and reflect on its experience of pain or even feel miserable and pitiful towards itself. That is the very reason why such are object of sympathy for man for animals despite the pain they experience does not fully realized via introspection the gravity of pain. Man, on the

other hand, can utter all sorts of meaningful cries and lamentations concerning its pain and can introspect its gravity. It is also for that reason that man feels a sense of sympathy towards those animals, the pain the latter experience are reflected by man or in a simple sense, man empathized the creatures suffering.

## Dialogue between Aquinas and the Beast

St. Thomas Aquinas' philosophy and theology dealt primarily on man's conquest in reaching the *Ultimate Truth* i.e. God and the non-human animals were supplement for the success of the former's conquest. According to McLaughlin, "The framework of Aquinas' teleology and nature provides only an indirect ethical concern towards the non-human animals and excludes a possibility to be included in direct ethical concern."<sup>16</sup> There are numerous instances by which Aquinas discussed the nature and end of the beast in *Summa Theologiae*. These can be found in the following sections: "On the Question of Murder"; "On the Work of the Fifth Day"; "On the Mastership Belonging to Man in the State of Innocence". Within these questions, there is an emphasis that the relation of the non-human animals with man in the mentioned questions were only as supplementary beings for the elevation of the latter.

"On the question of murder", it was posited whether it is justified to kill living things, especially animals. Aquinas answered:

There is no sin in using a thing for the purpose for which it is. Now the order of things is such that the imperfect are for the perfect, even as in the process of generation nature proceeds from imperfection to perfection.<sup>17</sup>

For Aquinas, it is justified to murder living things since man is beyond it in the order of being and as long as it is used for its very

purpose. As God said, "everything that moves is meat for you."<sup>18</sup> In this statement, the non-human animals are considered as instruments for man's sustenance.

The third question supports the preceding statement which deals with man's governance of the world. According to Aquinas:

...animals are naturally subject to man proven in three ways: in the order of perfection; on man's being the image and likeness of God and; on the animal's participative prudence of particular acts in relation to man's universal prudence towards practical matters.<sup>19</sup>

Since man governs naturally over the creatures beneath the order of perfection, one can do anything to the animals as subjects to their objects. That is the common view of Aquinas' stand towards treatment of animals, they are just things without any particular worth, only their utility. However, I argue that this is a shallow reading of Aquinas because they only see the apparent in animal violence and mistreatment, instead of the underlying reason for such treatment.

As discussed, the notion of the order of beings according to their order perfection is an essential element in the determination of mastership of man over the beasts. In that case, the notion of man possessing the soul which is 'ratio-sentia-vegetative' one compared to the beasts which 'sentia-vegetative' and for plants which is only 'vegetative' draws the line of gradation and governance. But this does not mean that lesser beings are of lesser importance. For instance, since plant is a lesser being compared to man, why not just destroy it for there is no benefit from its vegetative power, man has its own. Conversely, it cannot be the case for two reasons: First is the notion of divine plan, where everything were created for a specific telos that is paralleled with the powers of soul. Second, the predominant power

of the soul in a specific being has a greater manifestation compared to the least dominant power e.g., what is predominant with man is his rational power, for animals their sentience coupled with heightened natural instinct and for plants wherein their vegetative powers can sustain the whole world. Every being possesses a particular telos that only they can harness. "Furthermore, creatures are good only by participating in God's own goodness. However, for Aquinas all beings participate in God's goodness in diverse ways. This participation determines the level of their perfection."<sup>20</sup> So man cannot just disregard the existence of the lower beings for they participate in the divine plan.

Based on the elaboration above, one can see a relational bond among beings wherein their existence, their mode of existence, and their ends are paralleled or in synched with the divine plan. Subtracting plants from such unity will give complications in the divine equation, where man in the physical sense will die of hunger or suffocation. But what does diversified modes of existence mean to the treatment of the beast? Will it vanquish the cruelty towards them or otherwise? If we mean cruelty wherein animals are slaughtered for sport or for nonsensical reasons, Aquinas' guaranteed that every being is united through

participation in the divine plan. Thus, murdering the lesser beings just for 'play' is just a waste of energy and inhibits the carrying on of the divine plan. But if we mean cruelty that is purposive and parallel to the carrying on of the divine plan, such act of slaughter is justified. Man should be focused on the end that he is aiming for and so do the other beings, even animal attacks on humans are justified because it upholds their telos of that which is survival. It is not that man does not care directly about animals but he/she cares in an indirect manner while following his/her telos.

## Conclusion

The relation of man and beast is a puzzling one for they don't speak the same language to communicate one's desire. The latter does not have the intellect to project a purpose that is born out of reflection compared to the former. However, following Aquinas, as long as both upholds the purpose they are embedded with, they in the point of view of the divine plan, shared a mutual relation. Animal cruelty might be a taboo for animal rights advocates or liberationists, but in the perspective of a culture or belief this is a fulfilment of a plan [Divine Plan] that is worth the sacrifice.

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<sup>1</sup>"In 1925, Raymond Dart discovered a fossil primate in Africa that displayed both human and primate features." Bryan M. Fagan, *An Introduction to World Prehistory* (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1995), 50.

<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas of Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, volume 1, part 1, question 2, article 3, 796.

<sup>3</sup> Kristin Andrews, *The Animal Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on the First Philosophy*, trans. by Donald Cress (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), 32.

<sup>5</sup> "In order to examine into the truth, it is necessary once in one's life to doubt of all things so far as this is possible." Rene Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* (Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1982), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. by H.I. Woolf (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1929), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Kristin Andrews, *The Animal Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Adams, "Genius female chimpanzee found to be smarter than U.S. high school students." *Natural News*, August 28, 2012, accessed November 2016, [http://www.Naturalnews.com/036980\\_genius\\_chimpanzee\\_intelligence.html#ixzz49AgOvco3](http://www.Naturalnews.com/036980_genius_chimpanzee_intelligence.html#ixzz49AgOvco3). [paraphrased]

<sup>9</sup> Kristin Andrews, *The Animal Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Animal Cognition*, 112.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Carruthers, "Suffering Without Subjectivity", *Philosophical Studies* 121 (2004): 102-103.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>15</sup> "What causes us to think and behave as we do when we are in pain will be the first-order perception of a secondary quality of the body, just as happens in other animals." *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>16</sup> Ryan Patrick McLaughlin, "Thomas Aquinas' Eco-Theological Ethics of Anthropocentric Conservation", *Horizons* 39, 1 (2012): 70.

<sup>17</sup> St. Thomas of Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, volume 2, part 2, question 64, article 1, 5009.

<sup>18</sup> *Genesis* 9:3.

<sup>19</sup> St. Thomas of Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, volume 1, part 1, question 96, article 1, 2149.

<sup>20</sup> Ryan Patrick McLaughlin, "Thomas Aquinas' Eco-Theological Ethics of Anthropocentric Conservation", 79.

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