# On Animals: Responses to David Clough's Systematic Theology

*with David Fergusson, "God, Christ, and Animals"; Margaret B. Adam, "The Particularity of Animals and of Jesus Christ"; Christopher Carter, "The* Imago Dei *as the Mind of Jesus Christ"; Stephen H. Webb, "Toward a Weak Anthropocentrism"; and David Clough, "On Thinking Theologically about Animals: A Response."*

## TOWARD A WEAK ANTHROPOCENTRISM

### by Stephen H. Webb

*Abstract.* In his work on the moral status of nonhuman animals, David Clough rejects the theory of anthropocentrism while accepting its practical importance. He thus leaves theology in a dilemma: reflection on animals should not support the very concept that practical approaches to animals require. An alternative is a "weak anthropocentrism" along the line of Gianni Vattimo's "weak ontology." A weak anthropocentrism is better suited to a Neoplatonic theory of participation, not the traditional framework of creation out of nothing, and it also can give new meaning to the idea of *imago Dei* and a Christocentric affirmation of nonhuman value.

*Keywords:* anthropocentrism; Christocentrism; Neoplatonism; participation; weak anthropocentrism; weak ontology

David Clough's (2012) important new book, *On Animals: Volume 1, Systematic Theology* is to be welcomed as a sign that the theology of animals has come of age. I want to focus my comments on his careful analysis of anthropocentrism, his portrait of Neoplatonism and its understanding of participation, and his account of the incarnation.

Clough defines anthropocentrism as "the view that humanity is God's sole and exclusive concern in creation" (p. xix), a position he rightly rejects, even though he admits that the Bible is immersed in a deeply anthropocentric perspective. He also rejects any attempt to modify or expand anthropocentrism by interpreting it as an inclusive teleology that gives nonhuman animals a place in God's plan. Instead of even the most inclusive anthropocentrism, he defends a strong version of theocentrism, which

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seems like the flip side of a strong anthropocentrism. Yet, and this is evidence of the nuances and integrity of his position, he also admits that, ethically speaking, we have to begin with anthropocentrism, lest we "rush from the acknowledged narrowness of an anthropocentric perspective to the broadest possible vision encompassing all creation, because that would cause us to miss the theological and moral significance of those particular living things that are most like us" (p. xxi). The result is a complex position that is occasionally confusing, given that what Clough rejects with one hand he brings back with the other. I think this position could be improved by the concept of a "weak anthropocentrism," which would be analogous to Stephen White's "weak ontology" in political thought or Gianni Vattimo's "weak thought" in metaphysics and hermeneutics (Vattimo 1991; White 2000; for a defense of weak anthropocentrism from process philosophy, see Deckers 2004). Weak anthropocentrism does not put humans at the center of the cosmos, but it does acknowledge that humanity has a unique role to play in responding to God's plan for the world.

A weak anthropocentrism would still be correlated to some kind of hierarchy in the universe, however, and this brings me to Clough's critique of Neoplatonism. For the first several centuries after the birth of Christianity, the model of a multileveled universe stretching along a continuous scale of beings from God to matter was common to Platonists, Gnostics, Manicheans, and Christians alike. This changed when Christians began adopting the idea of creation out of nothing. Clough celebrates the new model of creation that resulted, a model that put all of nature on a single plane. "Creation is homogeneous," Clough writes, "in the sense that everything has the same ontological status before God, as the object of his creating will and love" (p. 27). This flattening of the world, I want to suggest, came at a great cost, both ethical and metaphysical. As Clough himself admits, theologians were drawn to the great chain of being because they saw it as an "expression of God's harmonious and providential ordering of creation" (p. 58). Neoplatonist cosmology depicts all creatures participating in the divine, because there is mobility up and down the chain. And that participation can take a variety of forms due to the gradations in matter's manifestation of spirit. While Clough likes the ethical equality that comes with putting everything that exists on the side of creation, with God alone transcending the whole, it needs to be emphasized that collapsing the multiple levels of a spirit–matter continuum leads to a stark division, indeed an absolute dualism between the immaterial and the material. When the human soul is put on the side of immateriality, then everything else, including, of course, the bodies of animals, become nothing but dead matter and thus of no ethical concern. Only souls can cross that line. Consequently, participation in the divine becomes a matter of what we do (our spiritual side) rather than what we are (our spiritual–material unity).

Indeed, Clough's functionalist interpretation of the *imago Dei* leaves little room for a more robust metaphysical understanding of our role as stewards of creation. For Clough, the difference between humans and nonhuman animals is primarily vocational, a position that is indicative of a residual anthropocentrism in his thought. That difference, it follows, should not be read into the incarnation. Thus, he works hard to sever any connection between a Christocentric and anthropocentric view of creation (p. 89). "Not merely the being of one species of creature," he writes, "but the being of every kind of creature is transformed by the event of incarnation" (p. 103). To secure the reach of the incarnation beyond the human species, however, Clough depicts God uniting with a generic creatureliness, not a human being, body, and soul (p. 101). If the Word did not become a particular person, then it seems to me that God has not fully, without reserve, entered into the world. Clough affirms that the image of God is "the particular creature Jesus Christ" (p. 67) but he does not think that the particularity of Jesus Christ says anything about the uniqueness of humans.

Clough's worries about the humanity of Jesus Christ are misguided, since a high Christology need not be correlated to a strong anthropocentrism. That God became human does not need to mean that God thereby established an airtight boundary between humans and other creatures. Instead, it means that humans are first in line, so to speak, in a graduated cosmos consisting of degrees of participation in the divine, and that human existence provides the best clues, analogously construed, to the nature of the divine. Christocentrism means just that—that Christ is the center, not humanity, but since we are most like Christ, our status in the cosmos is derivative, not absolute. That is to say, the cosmos is anthropocentric, but only in a weak way, and we can have the strength to do the right thing for other animals only when we acknowledge the weakness of our unique position.

## NOTE

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