



All God's Critters: A Feminist Reflection on Darwin and Species

ANN M. PEDERSON

I just put our eleven-year-old Airedale terrier “to sleep” about three weeks ago. Named after a Benedictine monk at St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota, Wilfrid was an incorrigible terrier. Arthur Peacocke, famous for his work in religion and science, reminded me that my terrier’s obdurate personality probably coincided with the qualities of his ancient British namesake, St. Wilfrid, Bishop of York, who helped to defeat Celtic Christianity in 664 C.E. during the Synod of Whitby.

Several years ago at a conference at St. John’s University, Dawn Adams, native Choctaw and paleontologist, decided that Wilfrid might be an appropriate spiritual director for me. As a companion species, he might just have enough insight about play and rest to teach me about sabbatical, love of life, and my kinship with all of God’s critters. So, as one named after a Benedictine monk and deemed worthy to be called a spiritual director, this woolly, wiry Airedale terrier taught me a great deal. We were, indeed, companion species intertwined in God’s fantastically wild creation.

Both evolutionary theory and feminist thought have made clear that humans can no longer understand themselves as the center of the universe. This will have striking implications not only for our relationship with other humans but with all God’s creatures.

FEMINIST THOUGHT AND CHARLES DARWIN

Two hundred years ago, Charles Darwin, author of *On the Origin of Species*, was born in Shrewsbury, Shropshire, England. Charles was baptized in the Anglican community and initially raised as a Unitarian. He studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh and theology at the University of Cambridge. Since his death, Darwin's initial theories on evolution have been revised and combined with new understandings of evolution and with the science of genetics. Evolutionary science, developmental biology, and genetics inform and drive ongoing change in the practices of medicine and biotechnology. Ethical reflection on the human body seems barely able to keep up with the rapid pace of this change. The creation of God is outrageously wonderful, awesome, expansive, and constantly shifting.

Sixty-four years ago, Donna Haraway was born in Denver, Colorado, and was "schooled by Thomas Aquinas and other Aristotelians."¹ A daughter of a sportswriter, Haraway was intrigued with narrative. She completed her doctorate in the Biology Department at Yale University, writing on the function of metaphor in developmental biology. Her latest book, entitled *When Species Meet* (2008), chronicles the stories of humans and canines, companion species in the tangled web of evolutionary epics. Haraway's work is shaped by feminist theory, Marxism, and postcolonial theories. She claims that feminist thought challenges the status quo of how things work, asks who knows and who doesn't, messes up what is tidy, and reshapes the way the human story is told and by whom.

The paradigm shifts of evolutionary biology and feminist thought challenge what has been told about the way humans understand their place in the universe. To put it bluntly: we are no longer the center of the universe.

To bring Darwin and Haraway together is to reflect on the way that evolutionary theory shapes most everything in this twenty-first century. The paradigm shifts of evolutionary biology and feminist thought challenge what has been told about the way humans understand their place in the universe. To put it bluntly: we are no longer the center of the universe. While this is hardly news to contemporary scientists, many Christians still find this news an affront to their basic theological worldview and spiritual practices. To bring Darwin and Haraway together is to construct theological proposals that challenge the sometimes patriarchal and often anthropocentric views about God's creation and God's action in the world. We are all, *ta panta* (Col 1:16), God's critters.

Such theological decentering and reconstruction must consider the ways in which modern sciences have challenged the human's role within the cosmic

¹Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003) 15. Haraway is currently professor and chair of the history of consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

drama. Donna Haraway explains that there have been four great historical “wounds” to the pride of the human ego: (1) Copernicus removed the Earth from the center of the universe; (2) Darwin placed humans in the world of “other critters”; (3) Freud “posited an unconsciousness that undid the primacy of conscious processes”; and (4) the information or cyborgian “wound” that “infolds organic and technological flesh and so melds that Great Divide as well.”² Lapdogs and laptops are part and parcel of the same organic/techno flesh.³ The boundaries between culture and nature, flesh and machine, human and nonhuman (divine and human) implode upon themselves and are transfigured.

Another boundary that modern humans are keen to maintain is that between science and religion. In Darwin’s and Haraway’s thought and practice, religious and scientific narratives meld together, reconfiguring old patterns and paradigms. Whether the realization comes from evolutionary biology or from feminist techno-science, we, as Christians, cannot avoid the realization that not only are we not the center of the universe, but also that we are linked to the other species of this world in a manner that continues to change the face of our planet. If only we were so lucky today to have both scientists and theologians mutually familiar with one another’s fields of study. Such a call for study and dialogue seems not only interesting but imperative.

While some theological work has been devoted to the challenges presented by evolutionary biology and modern feminist thought, not nearly enough constructive work brings them together to think about who we are and the nature of our purpose. Some theologians reformulate models of God and the world in light of modern science and feminist thought. Feminist theologians, specifically ecofeminists, have contributed a great deal to the theological understanding of creation. The immanent images of the world as God’s body can be attributed to Sallie McFague, and reimagining God in more dynamic, nonsexist ways can be seen in such diverse theologians as Rosemary Ruether and Carol Christ. Theologians like Philip Hefner and Arthur Peacocke, both sensitive to and informed by the work of feminists, construct theological agendas in light of modern science. Their work is extremely important and follows in the footprints of much of twentieth-century revisionist theologies. Most readers of *Word & World* will find themselves familiar with such names.

The most interesting and challenging feminist appropriations and critiques of Darwin and evolutionary theories come from feminist philosophers of science. Many feminist theologians have also utilized feminist philosophies of science to construct new epistemologies and ethics. Different schools of feminist thought range from reformed to radical. Initially, feminist philosophers of science were critical of the male biases in the life sciences and the health and medical sciences. The problem could be remedied in part by just adding more women in research

²Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 12–13.

³*Ibid.*, 13.

and health care professions. But this “solution,” for many feminists, felt like a bandage over the wound. Consequently, feminist critiques cut to the very methodological and substantive core of the sciences. While some feminists believed that simply challenging the sexist biases of science was adequate, other feminists insisted that the institutions of “science” were so corrupt that they needed to be thrown out and replaced by new “feminist sciences.” One can see parallel moves in the way that feminist theologians have critiqued religion, in particular, the Christian tradition.

feminist inquiry is about understanding how things work, who is in the action, what might be possible, and how worldly actors might somehow be accountable to and love each other less violently

Donna Haraway, among many other feminist/liberationist voices, is pressing the boundaries of critique and construction in challenging and beguiling ways. She defines feminists by what they are not and then by what they are: “None of this work is about finding sweet and nice—‘feminine’—worlds and knowledges free of the ravages and productivities of power. Rather, feminist inquiry is about understanding how things work, who is in the action, what might be possible, and how worldly actors might somehow be accountable to and love each other less violently.”⁴ As a theologian, I find that she confronts my notions of the way the world works and that her lack of sentimentality helps me to ask the tough questions.

In her latest work, *When Species Meet*, Haraway writes of our cohabitation with “other critters” in our world, particularly those we claim as companion species. The “Great Divide” between human and nonhuman animals is brought back together in her postmodern narrative. We are created through the relationships with all the critters in the world, becoming who we are through our relationships with all the entangled, muddled bodies of this world. Consequently, *how* we get together and get along with the creatures around us will determine our future well-being. Haraway’s book is not a sentimental best seller about dogs and other pets, but rather a realistic and respectful treatment of the tails/tales we weave.

Haraway’s primary metaphor is that of dog and human, “messmates and companion species, and significant others to one another.”⁵ This tale is not a sloppy story about how dog is “man’s best friend,” but rather a twisting story that explores the politics, economics, geography, biology, and contemporary practices of breeding, training, showing, and loving our companion species. As dogs and humans, “[w]e make each other up, in the flesh. Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in flesh a nasty development infection called love. This love is a historical aberration and a natural/cultural leg-

⁴Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 7.

⁵Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 15.

acy.”⁶ A theologian doesn't have to push the metaphor too far to see how stories of significant flesh and love are about another companion species—divine and human. Or we can think about how we all are “other” to each other, and that our very specific differences provoke us to take our call seriously to love our neighbor as ourselves. The parable of the Good Samaritan extends not only to our human neighbors, but also to our other brothers and sisters in God's creation. Determining how we love and respect each other is not an easy task, for we notice, with Haraway's help, that our relationships are complicated, cluttered, and knotted.

What I find so challenging, yet helpful, about Haraway's work is that it is not simply a treatise that tells us to “be kind, don't eat animals.” Nor does she eschew technologies or research. Life simply isn't that easy or simple. We realize that we tend not to eat that which we name and that those of us in the first world spend more money on our companion species than some folks have for mere survival. Whether in urban or rural arenas, we all labor and live together, from the research we do in veterinary labs to the beds we share in our homes. To be an animal is to be of use to one another. And to be of such use, we must understand our otherness and respect our similarities. When we try to make distinctions amongst ourselves and other animals we need to move beyond the typical dualisms and categories that hamper our lives together.

We live in a world of hybrids, mutts, transgenic species, and technologies that help us transcend our fear of death and finitude. Nothing is pure (as if it ever was), but we try to think that if we could only “get back to the beginning” then our origins story would help us undo the messes we've made and fear. And yet from the beginning, God created a world in which difference, multiplicity, chaos, and craziness were as much a part of the world as order, similarity, unity, and sanity. We know in our own history that our desire for sameness and purity cast others into slavery, internment camps, sterility, and reservations. The very way we are treated by the Other, the God Incarnate in Jesus the Christ, who is both radically different from and intimately the same as us, can offer a metaphor for how we might live with each other. As human beings, we need few reminders of the cruel and barbaric ways we have lived and treated each other and the nonhuman world around us. Our world is in crisis: we recognize that as companions in this world, our journey on this planet depends on how we respect, love, and treat each other. So, how then shall we live? I offer a few examples.

HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE?

When I teach bioethics or theology and medicine to seniors at Augustana College who are planning a career in health care, we remind ourselves that what happens up the road at the veterinary labs at South Dakota State will be a reality for humans in a few short years. Hematech, whose corporate headquarters is in Sioux

⁶Ibid., 17.

Falls, South Dakota, is working on the technology to produce human polyclonal antibodies. The transgenic cattle, created by Hematech, live in fields nearby. The only in vitro fertilization clinic in South Dakota is beginning preparation for incorporating preimplantation genetic diagnosis into their practice. Farmers and ranchers breed livestock utilizing techniques the use of which most humans are just now questioning when applied to human reproduction. Nearby farmers try to deal with the promises and threats of genetically modified crops. Such proximity of biotechnological innovations should require not only ethical reflection but also theological insight and imagination concerning how these new and startling relationships among species and between species shape the way we live together. So, how then shall we live?

our modern medical models often focus on the human condition solely within the realm of individual rights, often ignoring the larger communal and public health issues

The large health care complex of Sanford Hospitals and Clinics touts the following as its new “positioning statement”: “Improving the Human Condition.” How we interpret that phrase can make all the difference: What exactly are the limits and possibilities of improvement? For example, the most expensive health care costs are incurred at the beginnings and endings of life. Who receives these improvements? Who bears the costs? What exactly is the human condition? Does improvement deny the human condition as finite? Or does it simply enhance our capabilities and future as a species? South Dakota has some of the poorest counties in the United States and folks in rural areas suffer more than those in urban areas regarding access to goods and services. Unfortunately, our modern medical models often focus on the human condition solely within the realm of individual rights, often ignoring the larger communal and public health issues. We speak of patient autonomy, and yet most of us know that no patient is simply and only an individual. Families, doctors, nurses, chaplains, administrators, and others always factor into the decisions we make about life and death. Christianity is not exempt from individualism either. A kind of simplistic “me and Jesus” piety runs through many of our popular songs, liturgies, and literature. To make decisions of any kind based only on what an individual wants is to ignore the larger “human condition.” We are, as Haraway notes, companion species entangled within the webs we create.

I once found myself in one of these entwined webs in a conversation with my father-in-law. He was telling me about their overwhelming experience of grief when he and his wife lost their first child, a baby girl, at the age of two, because of congenital heart problems. They spent many days traveling back and forth from South Dakota to the hospital in the Twin Cities. As a last effort to save the child’s life, a pediatric cardiologist and surgeon performed a very exploratory and experi-

mental surgery for those times. The surgery didn't work and my in-laws buried their daughter soon after. Since the surgery was so new, the surgeon didn't charge the family but just told them to donate enough money every year so the surgeon could get a dog from the humane society for research. My father-in-law said to me, "I know you folks like dogs, but just think how donating those dogs has helped the cause of research." I didn't know what to say—I was caught between my love for dogs and my sadness at my in-laws' tragic loss. But, that's our dilemma, isn't it? We want to help humans, and yet we also supposedly love our companion animals. It seems that improving the human condition always requires some kind of sacrifice on the part of others, but we have rarely acknowledged the implications of that. To do so is at least a first step.

Haraway shifts the emphasis in ethical reflection about our relationship with each other and our companion species from the category of rights to labor. Such a move provides and provokes new ways of thinking about our relationship with the animal world around us.⁷ To quote Haraway at length is helpful at this point:

The posthumanist whispering in my ear reminds me that animals work in labs, but not under conditions of their own design....[F]reedom cannot be defined as the opposite of necessity if the mindful body in all its thickness is not to be disavowed, with all the vile consequences of such disavowal for those assigned to bodily entrapment, such as women, the colonized, and a whole list of "others" who cannot live inside the illusion that freedom comes only when work and necessity are shuffled onto someone else. Instrumental relations have to be revalued, rethought, lived another way.⁸

The way we live with and treat others, like the animals in research labs, is intrinsically the way that the powerful and dominant have treated those who are the "least of these." While I don't think we can rid our ethical reflection of the language of rights, we can surely supplement it with the language of responsibilities, relationships, and utility. To do so is to be honest about how we actually live and work together. All members of God's creation, human and nonhuman, eat each other, kill one another. Not to admit to such is a failure in our relationship. So, then, how shall we live?

Haraway leaves us with at least one suggestion. If animals are used in experiments or lab practices, we should admit that "these practices should never leave their practitioners in moral comfort, sure of their righteousness."⁹ Humility can be our posture with one another, knowing that it is not we who are righteous, but only the God in whom we place our ultimate trust. While we are not "saved" by our ethical deliberations, we are freed to be more honest, and more humble about them. Haraway's comments about how we live with other animals translate to how we live with other humans. She draws on religious and philosophical language to

⁷Ibid., 73.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 75.

describe this practice of loving our neighbor as our self: “My suspicion is that the kind of forgiveness that we fellow mortals living with other animals hope for is the mundane grace to eschew separation, self-certainty, and innocence even in our most creditable practices that enforce unequal vulnerability.”¹⁰ From a feminist philosopher of science, we are given the powerful and realistic language of relationships—forgiveness, grace, hope, and vulnerability.

Haraway’s most famous example of practicing what she preaches is her description of OncoMouse, the patented lab creature whose genetic makeup serves human breast cancer research. Haraway acknowledges the sacrifice of this creature, though only a lab mouse, to those who are promised a kind of secular salvation. She notes that there are similarities between this secular cultural salvation icon and the Christian cross, but she doesn’t rest easily with the notion of sacrifice. We are all, she notes, both sacrificed and those who sacrifice, subjects and objects, in the research labs. We must always acknowledge the moral nature of these practices, for if we don’t, we can treat anyone and anything as something to be exploited for mere technical reasons. We must reject universal categories of suffering that wipe out the pain of individuals who suffer. Philip Hefner expands on Haraway’s work, drawing out the implications for a Christian theology centered in sacrifice and suffering. Such theological and moral deliberation is essential if we are to acknowledge, admit, and respect the ways we treat and live with the animals around us. So, how then shall we live? Here are a few parting theological notions:

1. We are all created critters, part of God’s ongoing creation. This notion is not only rooted in our evolutionary past, but also fundamental to the stories of our origins in Genesis. From the beginning, God created animals as companions for the human. We are companion species.
2. This fundamental relationship of our mutual companionship and critterhood provides the groundwork for understanding how we live amongst each other. This isn’t easy. Our future together on this planet requires serious respect and acknowledgment of our differences and our similarities.
3. This living amongst each other requires reflection on the technologies we create and the sciences we study for “improving the human condition.” To be human is fundamentally to be created, to know our limitations and possibilities. To imagine how we improve what it means to be human must be simultaneously related to the limitations and dangers of such technologies. We cannot retreat to a pristine garden of the past, for the landscape in which we live is more like a wild garden entangled with weeds. We cannot tend our garden with tools of the past.
4. Our spiritual practices, ministries to one another, and liturgies, must reflect these creation concerns—not at the periphery but at the center. To

¹⁰Ibid.

confess the ecumenical creeds is to start with the beginning, with creation and the Creator.

5. To tell the story of what it means to be human is to know biology, economics, politics, and geography. Stories are central to the shape of Christian ministry, but it is not only the human story that matters. For Jesus Christ is the one in whom *all things* hold together. That is the final point of the story—all things are in Christ Jesus.

ALL GOD'S CRITTERS

I have a new perspective on life this summer thanks to my new canine companion. At ten weeks of age, "Lord Byron" spends his life at a level at which I have not—close to the ground. So, in order to play with and train him, I have "lowered" myself to his level, where I have rediscovered grass, bugs, sticks, and places to hide. Our vet asked me what I was doing this summer and I replied, "Playing with the puppy." And he said that everyone should have a summer to do that. Puppies have an off and on switch—from play to rest—and they know exactly when to start and stop. That is a lesson that I could learn and so my summer's work is actually play. I have no choice, thanks to Byron's puppyhood, but to start and stop, play and work, eat and rest. These are the good rhythms given to all God's critters. Even God played while working and stopped to rest, calling it all "very good indeed." ⊕

ANN PEDERSON is professor of religion at Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and adjunct associate professor of ethics and humanities at the Sanford School of Medicine in Sioux Falls.