Adam's Place in Nature: Respect or Domination?

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Abstract The creation story in Genesis speaks of humankind being given dominion over nature. Does this support the view that nature has solely instrumental value, and is of worth only insofar as it serves the necessities and conveniences of the human species? Does dominion amount to unfettered domination here? An interpretation of the story is advanced employing procedures of practical criticism. Three central images are focussed on: Adam's being given dominion over the other creatures, his naming of them, and his being made in God's likeness. It is argued that these images, in their qualification and enrichment of each other, develop the idea that animals are of worth independently of their usefulness to us. Other key parts of the Bible, that at first may seem to promote unfettered domination, are shown to be more properly read as supporting an animal-benign religious ethics.

Keywords: agricultural ethics, creation story, dominion over nature, duties to nature, environmental ethics, Genesis, man as God's likeness, naming the creatures, religious ethics.

Introduction

Great teachers in the Judaeo-Christian tradition of worship have believed deeply that nature should be regarded with reverence and respect. Other living creatures and their habitats have worth independently of human interests and needs. St. Bonaventure reports that St. Francis addressed birds and animals, however small, as "sister" and "brother," treating them as kin in coming from the same source (1988: 28). In contrast, other great teachers have spoken of nature as existing only to provide for the necessities, and even mere conveniences, of human life. Calvin spoke of "the end for which all things were created; namely, that none of the conveniences and necessaries of life might be wanting to men" (1988: 22). The tradition of worship is a rich and complex one, a mansion with many rooms, but it seems a house divided against itself on the most fundamental issues concerning humanity's place.
in nature. Can this division be resolved?

We live in an age of growing environmental concern. Many of our problems are deeply disquieting. What is to be done about global warming, ozone depletion, and the massive extinction of species in the deforestation of Amazonia? The depth of our disquietude is in part created by often unresolvable dispute over whether these are problems at all, apart from challenging technical ones. Don't we have the right to fell trees and farm cattle, in order to meet consumer needs for paper products and ground beef? A divided tradition of worship can give no clear guidance to believers here. True, in an increasingly secular world, non-religious thinkers need not wait on Judaeo-Christianity's resolution of internal differences before working to develop a sustainable environmental ethic. The pages of Environmental Ethics and the Journal of Agricultural Ethics bear witness to this. But for religious believers, some resolution is crucial. Further, whatever resolution is reached will surely have some bearing on secular ethics, at least at the general level of strengthening either the concept of intrinsic or of solely instrumental value in nature.

Environmental disasters often seem to spring from the attitude that humankind has dominion, in the sense of unfettered domination, over nature. Yet this has seemed to many just what is taught in Genesis. But does the biblical creation story support this interpretation? I will concentrate on three central details in the story, and on how they mutually qualify and enrich each other. There is, of course, Adam's being given "dominion" over the other creatures. But the sense of this image is in part shaped by Adam's "naming" of every living creature, and by his being made in God's own "image" or "likeness." I shall argue that these images, in their mutuality, develop the idea that animals are of worth independently of their usefulness to us; and that subsequent parts of the Bible support an animal-benign religious ethics, and give them content.

My approach sits within practical or applied criticism, as this is developed in T.S. Eliot's Selected Essays, for instance. My concern is with drawing together a consistent sense in this particular story, the creation story, not with joining theological debate on the appropriate principles for biblical interpretation, or philosophical debate on general issues in hermeneutics. This is a matter of selective focus. These other debates are vigorous, important, and not unrelated to my present concern; but they must be left for another occasion.

In practical criticism, too, there are, unavoidably, general principles guiding analysis and evaluation. But these are usually left implicit, unless challenged, so that attention can be directed to the work itself. One principle I rely on is that, in a good story, figures of speech and symbols mutually qualify one another in shaping a unified whole. These inter-relations of meaning are to be traced in the distinctive procedure of practical criticism, explication or close reading.

I am aware that the creation story is, more exactly, two creation stories, attributed to different epic traditions. To simplify, the Yahwist tradition provides Genesis ii:5-iii.24; whereas the Priestly tradition provides Genesis i:1-ii.4. The two stories employ slightly different vocabularies, and serve somewhat different religious purposes. However, I shall take it that the task for a reader of the Genesis account of creation, as we have it today, is to draw the two stories together, as far