

# THE DEATH OF COMPANION ANIMALS AND THE POLITICS OF GRIEF

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*“Give graciously to all the living;  
do not withhold kindness even from the dead.  
Do not avoid those who weep,  
but mourn with those who mourn.” – Sirach 7:33-34*

The death of our companion animals is a defining feature of our relationships with them. Because they have short life spans relative to ours, we know when we take them in to live with us that on a day that comes too soon we will have to watch them die. Their deaths are intimately connected with our love for them. Yet despite the fact that Americans spend well over sixty billion dollars every year on their pets, it is still far from universal that as a society we grant them loving treatment after death, or believe in an afterlife for them, or commiserate with the owners who grieve their loss.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I wish to examine the reason or reasons for the withholding of sympathy on the part of many people in our society toward those who have lost animals they cherish.

What happens when one has lost a “pet,” a companion animal? What often happens is that the bystander, the onlooker who beholds the griever but has never personally experienced this kind of loss, withholds a significant measure of sympathy and support because the loss is not understood to be worthy of sympathy. A perfunctory word or two may be spoken to the grieving guardian who can readily tell that the sadness expressed is not actually felt. The bystander—and this is, I think, a largely unconscious or subconscious process—concludes that an animal simply is not, and should not be, worthy of the emotion of grief. The bystander may assume that the griever’s love for the animal is excessive, unbalanced, misplaced, sentimental, irrational, distasteful, perhaps a compensation for the lack of the griever’s love for human beings (the insufficiency of it, at any rate, if not the total absence). If not derided outright or ridiculed, those who grieve the deaths of their pets may even be seen as neurotic, as psychologically or emotionally damaged. In one way or another, they are often pathologized by those who do not understand their experience. As Kelly Oliver points out referring mainly to human-nonhuman companion animal relationships: “To love animals is to be soft, childlike, or pathological. To admit dependence on animals—particularly emotional and psychological dependence, as pet owners often do—is seen as a type of neurosis.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms “pet” and “companion animal” interchangeably in this essay, and I do the same for “owner,” “guardian,” and “parent.” One may object that “companion animal,” “guardian,” and “parent” should be the preferred terms, as “pet” is objectifying and “owner” commodifies the animal, and that both terms suggest that non-human animals have a mainly passive role in human-animal relationships. Nevertheless, I use both terms consciously to emphasize the tension-filled status of “pets” and “owners.”

<sup>2</sup> “Pet Lovers Pathologized,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2011). “Some people find it both excessive and distasteful that many of us waste both money and emotions on our companion animals when they die,” writes Margo DeMello in the Preface to *Mourning Animals: Rituals and Practices Surrounding Animal Death* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016), xiii. Other scholars and writers who have documented uncomprehending and socially dismissive responses to animal guardians dealing with the deaths of their companions include, but are not limited to, the following: Betty J. Carmack, *Grieving the Death of a Pet* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2003); Thomas A Wrobel and Amanda L. Dye, “Grieving Pet

In socio-political settings, the external expression of loss, or lack thereof, is by definition a form of political act because it defies, or supports, the selective social norm's tendency to dictate who is worthy of grief and hence of life itself. A socio-political abyss, along with a psychological and emotional one, therefore, separates those who have loved and lost animals from those who have not. That abyss owes its existence to the bystander's likely internal insistence on objectifying the animal, on denying it the right to occupy a space in human imagination, a space in which it can be loved and grieved, a space that gives rise to sympathy and empathy. That abyss, that gulf, is reflected in the still-widespread attitude toward human mourners of nonhuman animals, whose grief, as I mentioned above, is usually not recognized, nor admitted, and oftentimes even derided, whence it falls under the rubric of disenfranchised grief. The absence of social recognition and acceptance of the validity and depth of the guardian's grief and the consequent absence of social support serve to magnify and intensify it by effectively disenfranchising it.<sup>3</sup> As disenfranchised grief is not legitimized by others, the bereaved person may be denied access to rituals, ceremonies, or even the right to express thoughts and emotions publicly. Many humans living with such grief do not only suffer internal turmoil, but their grief, at a time when a gentle, sympathetic gesture would be most appreciated, is often met with indifference. This is something that anyone who has ever lost a beloved animal knows only too well.

Such is not the experience, however, of a woman or man who has lost, say, a child. In such a case, sympathy is forthcoming and abundant, even from those who are childless; the man or woman will feel great emotional support in their grief. Sympathy cards will be sent, along with many other kinds of support such as food, time, shoulders to cry on, and offers of simple, quiet presence. And this is, of course, as it should be. But why the difference between the generous allocation of sympathy to the one who has lost a beloved child and the sparing (at best) allocation of sympathy to the one who has lost a beloved animal?

One of the causes, and perhaps the major cause, of such a lack of sympathy is the unspoken sense, in American culture and, indeed, in many if not most of the world's cultures, that the expression of grief for deceased animals is norm-transgressive. This still fairly widespread sense converges on one main point: a human's grief for members of other species threatens humans' anthropocentric worldview. This worldview regards humankind "as the most important element of existence."<sup>4</sup> Companion animals, because they belong to other species, hold a liminal position in most cultures, and to mourn the passing of such liminal beings would be to transgress the human/animal divide.

In a recent *New York Times* article entitled "What Does It Mean to Be Human? Don't Ask," Martha C. Nussbaum, the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago Law School, writes, "We humans are very self-focused" so we tend to ask "what does it mean to be human" instead of asking what it means to be a dog or a cat or a bird. "This failure of curiosity is part of a large ethical problem," Nussbaum argues. "The question, 'What is it to be human?' is not just narcissistic, it involves a culpable obtuseness. . . . It connotes unearned privileges that have been used to dominate and exploit. But we usually don't recognize this because our narcissism is so complete." Our observations of our fellow animal creatures, of their ways of being whoever and wherever they are, ought to engender in

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Death: Normative, Gender, and Attachment Issues," *Omega* 47 (2003): 385-93; Allison Werner-Lin and Teresa Moro, "Unacknowledged and Stigmatized Losses," in *Living Beyond Loss: Death in the Family*, ed. Froma Walsh and Monica McGoldrick, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 258-61; Julie A. Luiz Adrian, Aimee N. Deliramich, and B. Christopher Frueh, "Complicated Grief and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Humans' Response to the Death of Pets/Animals," *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 73, no. 3 (2009): 176-87.

<sup>3</sup> Millie Cordaro, "Pet Loss and Disenfranchised Grief: Implications for Mental Health Counseling Practice," *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 34 (2012): 283-94.

<sup>4</sup> *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. "anthropocentric."

us a sense of wonder which should lead us to “a fuller ethical concern . . . but wonder is on the wane, and we humans now so dominate the globe that we rarely feel as if we need to live with other animals on reciprocal terms.”<sup>5</sup>

It should be relatively easy, one would think, to develop such reciprocal relationships with domesticated non-human animals because humans allow them to occupy a privileged sphere. But this is not quite the case. Despite the fact that we now possess a great deal of scientific evidence demonstrating the complexities of these animals’ lives, despite the fact that serious philosophical work has been and continues to be done on reciprocity and community with domesticated and companion animals,<sup>6</sup> we need to do much more if we wish to overcome the biases inherent in centuries of humanocentric thinking.<sup>7</sup>

It is useful to pause here briefly in order to consider the tremendous influence that the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church about animals, and the examples of many of its saints, have exerted and continue to exert on Western thought.<sup>8</sup> This is an enormous subject, the full exploration of which is precluded by the brevity and intent of this essay. Nevertheless, it is possible to show here that official Church teaching, grounded in early Scholastic views and given definitive formulation in the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, is ruthlessly and dogmatically humanocentric. The humanocentrism of that teaching is encapsulated in four paragraphs about animals in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*,<sup>9</sup> each of which I number and reproduce below, followed by a brief analysis. It is telling that these four paragraphs are found under the section dealing with the seventh commandment (which forbids stealing property and goods) rather than under the section dealing with the fifth commandment (which prohibits harming and killing).

*1. Animals, like plants and inanimate beings, are by nature destined for the common good of past, present and future humanity. Use of the mineral, vegetable and animal resources of the*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/20/opinion/what-does-it-mean-to-be-human-dont-ask.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See Will Kymlicka and Sue Donaldson’s ground-breaking work on this issue in *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Issues that are being taken up by philosophers, theologians, and other scholars include the following: the moral incongruities of the law’s classification of animals as property; clarifying the distinctions between animal welfare and animal rights; human rights advocacy as a first step for animal rights advocates; linking animal rights to the broader family of social justice struggles; applying liberation theology to non-human “others”; defining the elements of an inclusive animal rights movement; rethinking, beyond the capacity contract, membership and participation in an inclusive democracy for the cognitively disabled, children, and animals; moving farmed animal sanctuaries from the current refuge + advocacy model to emerging practices of intentional community; institutionalizing critical animal studies in universities, especially in those disciplines with close links to governance and public policy (e.g., politics, law, sociology, economics).

<sup>8</sup> To examine the teachings of the world’s major religions concerning animals, see Norm Phelps, *The Longest Struggle: Animal Advocacy from Pythagoras to PETA* (New York: Lantern Books, 2007) and *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Animal Ethics*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Clair Linzey (New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, English translation for the United States of America (United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1994). The *Catechism* sums up, in book form, the beliefs of the Catholic faithful. It was promulgated by John Paul II in 1992 with his apostolic constitution, *Fidei depositum* (“the deposit of the faith,” i.e., Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition). In this constitution, John Paul II declared that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is “a valid and legitimate instrument and a sure norm for teaching the faith,” “a sure and authentic reference text for teaching Catholic doctrine.” It is important to note, however, that the teaching in section 2267 on the death penalty was revised by John Paul II in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* and revised again by Pope Francis in 2018. Whereas the death penalty was long considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes, the Church now teaches that “the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person, and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide.” So, it is possible for the teachings of the *Catechism* to be revised.

*universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives. Man's dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbor, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation. (sect. 2415)*

There is no suggestion in this paragraph that it is intrinsically wrong to use animals, who are sentient beings, as “resources” because they can be harmed or violated if used in this way. The indiscriminate lumping together of animals with plants and inanimate beings that are not sentient, as all destined to serve the common good of humanity, demonstrates an instrumentalist view of creation and a kind of detached agnosticism with regard to the distinct differences between animals and, say, rocks, an agnosticism that promotes objectification of and violence toward animals. Furthermore, “common good” is not defined. This paragraph suggests that it refers to the common good of human beings only; animals, as “resources” meant to be used, are excluded from the “common good.”

*2. Animals are God's creatures. He surrounds them with his providential care. By their mere existence they bless him and give him glory. Thus men owe them kindness. We should recall the gentleness with which saints like St. Francis of Assisi or St. Philip Neri treated animals. (sect. 2416)*

This paragraph contains positive theology concerning animals and constitutes an advance over the first paragraph. Animals are included within the sphere of direct moral duty.

*3. God entrusted animals to the stewardship of those whom he created in his own image. Hence it is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing. They may be domesticated to help man in his work and leisure. Medical and scientific experimentation on animals, if it remains within reasonable limits, is a morally acceptable practice since it contributes to caring for or saving human lives. (sect. 2417)*

Despite the view implied in the second paragraph that animals have a value independent of humans because of their worth to God, this third paragraph endorses our current use of animals. It asserts that it is not morally wrong to cause animals to suffer and die even though such activity harms the animals themselves and should therefore be understood as an offense to God. In more specific terms, it fails to see that the terrified look of an individual in a transport truck destined for slaughter is coming from the eyes of a brother. It fails to see that a rich, complex life is being turned into a commodity labeled as food, pest, workforce, entertainment when its God-given existence has imminent potentiality whose loss is not only grievable but worthy of fierce protection and defense. This paragraph also fails to specify what “reasonable limits” are, who sets these limits, who oversees them, and who guarantees them. Inflicting pain and suffering on animals in scientific experiments is said to be “morally acceptable” because it contributes to “caring for or saving human lives.” Again, “man” (rather than God) is made the measure of all things; man’s “dominion” (domination, actually) is reaffirmed and anything at all can be done to animals when man is the measure. It is hard to read such sentences as anything other than a capitulation and assimilation to an assumptive world of inevitable violence, in other words, to an acceptance of anesthetizing and desensitizing. This not moral strength. This is moral breakdown. Paragraph three also fails to address the fact that many, if not most, uses to which animals are put have been demonstrated by science itself to be unhelpful and therefore unnecessary to caring for or saving

human lives.<sup>10</sup> It should also be noted that the word “hence” at the start of the second sentence is misleading: there is no inherent logical connection between stewardship and using animals for food and clothing. Stewardship denotes care and responsibility for people and/or other living entities in creation, not the abdication of such care and responsibility (by killing) that using animals for food and clothing implies.

*4. It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly. It is likewise unworthy to spend money on them that should as a priority go to the relief of human misery. One can love animals: one should not direct to them the affection due only to persons. (sect. 2418)*

This paragraph misses the point out that something greater than human dignity is offended when animals are made to suffer and die: the entire moral order of God’s creation is offended. Animal death is “needless” only when it is divorced from human benefit, advantage, or gain. But it is precisely for the sake of human benefit, gain, or advantage that we cause animals to suffer and die (as paragraph 3 states). So, in fact, it seems that animals can never suffer and die “needlessly,” except perhaps when they are subjected to hideously cruel acts perpetrated by psychopaths. Furthermore, in practical terms the sentence about money means that we should not spend *any* money at all on animals until *all* human misery has been eradicated. And when, pray tell, would that day come? Finally, the paragraph permits us to love animals somewhat, but not too much. The *Catechism* here reaffirms the early Scholastic view that affection for animals is disordered or disproportionate, especially if it in any way approximates the intensity of love that humans can have for each other. By doing do, it also implicitly reaffirms that friendship is possible only between humans, since animals are not, according to traditional Catholic thinking, “persons.” The paragraph fails to recognize that friendship requires a reciprocity of presence and love, which animals and their guardians experience and attest to. Pet parents understand, as Dag Hammarskjöld wrote, that “friendship needs no words.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The use of animals in scientific research has long been the subject of heated debate, the history of which has been treated in numerous books and is therefore too long and complex to present here. But it can be briefly summarized. The debate centers on the question of the moral status of an animal. In pre-modern times, the dominant view was that animals had no moral status and treating an animal well was more about maintaining standards of human dignity than about respecting any innate rights of the animal. In modern times, the question has shifted from whether animals have moral status to how much moral status they have and what rights come with that status. Defenders of animal experimentation usually argue that animals cannot be considered morally equal to humans, and thus lack fundamental rights. Hence, the benefits to humans from such experimentation outweigh the harm done to animals. But it is precisely this argument about benefits that has come into question in recent years by scientists themselves. Despite many decades of studying conditions such as cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, diabetes, stroke, and AIDS in animals, and the use of over 115 million animals in experiments globally each year, we do not yet have reliable and effective cures. Peer-reviewed studies have found that most experiments involving animals are flawed, wasting taxpayer dollars in addition to wasting the lives of animal subjects. Furthermore, 94% of drugs that pass animal tests fails in human clinical trials and often produce toxic or lethal results in humans. Such experiments belittle the complexity of human conditions that are affected by wide-ranging variables such as genetics, socio-economic factors, deeply rooted psychological issues, and different personal experiences. 95% of animals used in experiments are not protected by the Animal Welfare Act. Moreover, the Animal Welfare Act has not succeeded in preventing horrific cases of animal abuse and torture in research laboratories. Alternative testing methods now exist that can replace the need for animals. So, we are left with the perennial ethical question: Do the ends justify the means? For more information, readers can consult Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine ([www.pcrm.org](http://www.pcrm.org)) and Medical Research Modernization Committee ([www.mrmcmcd.org](http://www.mrmcmcd.org)).

<sup>11</sup> In a conversation with me, Christopher Welch stated that “there is a moral value to the way the animal experiences its relationship to its human(s).” Welch is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Rivier University and holds the Ph.D. in Theology and Education from Boston College.



What is disastrous about these four paragraphs, logically flawed and morally ambivalent as they are, is that they constitute the *official* teaching of the Roman Catholic Church about animals. While it is possible to find Catholic figures, even saints, bishops, monks, nuns, and teachers who have historically said or done things most favorable to animals (and there are many), they do not represent official teaching.<sup>12</sup> Only that which conforms to the teaching authority—the *magisterium*—of the Church officially represents authentic Catholic teaching: hence the importance of the *Catechism*. This is a serious matter because the power of the Catholic Church is immense in the world today, and it here lends the power of its teaching about animals to major social institutions that hold outdated, anti-progressive views on animals and commit some of the most egregious moral abuses of animals in our world. Unfortunately, the *Catechism*'s position on animals can be used by those who want to exploit animals with moral and legal impunity. But there are those within and outside of the Church who hold more ethically developed views, and some of them are working to emancipate it, and other churches as well, from their unchristian attitudes toward animals.<sup>13</sup>

Influenced over the course of hundreds of years by religious teachings about animals in the Western world,<sup>14</sup> society continues today to set limits according to which some beings are grieved when they pass away—for example, family members, friends, workplace colleagues, human beings generally (though there are, sadly, exceptions)—while others are rendered ungrievable in what Judith Butler identifies as a “differential allocation of grievability.” This differential allocation generally discredits non-human animals as revealed in many kinds of discursive practices that create and maintain “exclusionary exceptions of who is normatively human,”<sup>15</sup> that is, of who is, and is not, grievable. But some discursive practices push against such exclusions. As one kind of expression of sympathy, condolence cards, for example, challenge societal exclusions and limits, and those who exchange them as they commiserate with one another over the deaths of their animal companions clearly aim to create a shared space of cultural understanding and discourse about what it means to lose a pet.

The social reluctance, if not refusal, to accept that one can deeply grieve the loss of companion animals denies discursive space to at least three phenomenological aspects of grief: the irreplaceability

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<sup>12</sup> Some recent papal statements and encyclicals have briefly mentioned the plight of animals in the modern world. Foremost among these is Pope Francis's encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*. It is important to note that in both *The Joy of the Gospel* and *Laudato Si'* Francis stresses that animals are not mere “resources” to be exploited (see esp. sections 33, 36, 67, and 140) and he calls for an integral ecology, an ecology that integrates the human and the non-human. In doing so, he pushes against the worst teachings about animals in the *Catechism*. This is a hopeful sign. But despite the fact that papal encyclicals are authoritative, they do not require the full assent of faith as do dogmas. They are not binding in matters of faith and morals. Yet they help the faithful enormously to think differently about animals and, as with the teaching on the death penalty, may well help to develop official Church teaching about animals in the future. *Laudato Si'* misses some opportunities, which is unfortunate. For example, it presents no specific rules or even recommendations concerning how humans should conduct themselves with regard to animals. But the door for moral theologians has opened wider, and they now have opportunities to do more.

<sup>13</sup> Welch (see note 11) makes two further points. First, John Henry Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* explains that Christian doctrine does not evolve but rather has a developmental history that is the natural and beneficial consequence of reason working on the original revealed truth to draw out consequences that were not obvious in earlier times. Second, the Church's teaching on animals in the *Catechism* “does not carry the same infallibility and immutability as other teachings” such as those on the Trinity and the Incarnation.

<sup>14</sup> See Norm Phelps, *The Longest Struggle*.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), xiv-xv. Butler's notion of socio-politically informed grievability as a determinant of a human life's noteworthiness can be equally applied to trans-species contexts, as I am doing here. For support of such application, see James Stanescu, “Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning and the Precarious Lives of Animals,” *Hypatia* 27, no. 3 (2012): 567-82.

of the lost animal; the unpredictability of the overwhelming power of grief for the lost animal; and the human's bodily empathy with the lost animal.

In our society, only people, human beings, are considered to be irreplaceable. No one will ever be able to stand in for them; they have no substitutes. But animals are not perceived by most people as irreplaceable. The word "pet" that is often used to describe companion animals intimates that what has been lost is not a unique, never-to-be-seen-again individual but one who fulfills a useful yet passive role via-à-vis humans. The focus on the primacy of that role or function fails to pay respect to the non-human individual who has been lost, and turns that individual into a mere token cat or dog or rabbit or bird or pig for whom a substitute can readily be found at the local animal shelter or sanctuary.

But a simple walk through a pet cemetery and a cursory look at the inscriptions on the tombstones reveals that the animals buried there were of inestimable value to the humans who lost them. That humans and non-human animals share a special bond as revealed in burial and other funerary practices dedicated to non-humans has been well documented by archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists. The evidence shows that that bond has grown stronger throughout history, and that its emotional intensity has increased in the last century. Whereas tombstones in human cemeteries tend to mark little more than the dates of birth and death, the stones in pet cemeteries "tell stories of love, laughter, and companionship and pay tribute to the personalities, behaviors, quirks, and memorable misdeeds of the pet buried there."<sup>16</sup> The stones placed over animals' remains are made of the same materials as those used for deceased humans, suggesting the erasure of a certain taboo, at least on the visual and aesthetic level. Inscriptions on the stones are declarations of everlasting love and remembrance, and they sometimes provide the animal with the family surname, thereby symbolically converting him or her into a relative.<sup>17</sup> One particularly poignant inscription on a stone in the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery in Westchester County, New York reads simply, "Algernon My Son I Miss You." Many pet parents also visit the graves of their animals at special times of the year such as the anniversary of the pet's death, and they may do this for many years, as they do for their dearly departed human relatives. They may also bring fresh or artificial flowers to place on the grave. The fact that some animals are buried in cemeteries at all, with all the accompanying rituals and practices that such burial involves, clearly indicates that these animals were indeed irreplaceable to those who loved them.

The collision between the relative predictability of pet loss because of pets' short life spans and the unpredictability of our reactions to the expected loss points to the essential and frightful unmanageability of grief, which is one of its most salient and disturbing characteristics. Grief, regardless of its object, is a disorienting experience that leaves one confused and unsure about who one will be in the wake of the loss. Who then will I be who once were we? When a human relationship that has defined us comes to an end, all sorts of disruptions occur. Visits, routines of care for the loved one, conversations all come to an end and leave in their wake an overwhelming and painful feeling of emptiness. We are awash in countless memories, and may be for some time able to function normally only with great difficulty, if at all. No one at such a time would for a moment think to suggest that we should expect such a thing to happen again soon. For example, when I lost my mother to sudden death, no one suggested that I should "get ready" for the loss of my father (which occurred eight years later). To have done so would have been cruel. Yet the discourse about "pets" in our society constantly

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<sup>16</sup> Liza Wallis Margulies, "Hartsdale Pet Cemetery," in *Mourning Animals*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> See Nickie Charles and Charlotte Aull Davies, "My Family and Other Animals: Pets as Kin," *Sociological Research Online* 13, no. 5 (2008). The article is available at <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/13/5/4.html>. Expanding the category of legal and moral personhood to include certain animals would offer a framework for building more ethical interspecies relations. Work is advancing on this issue.

reminds their guardians that the lives of their loved animals will be brief—the normative implication being that the guardians should become “used” to a cycle of life and death in order to somehow “manage” or lessen the impact of the next loss. Instead of allowing guardians the socially sanctioned freedom to let grief have its way and take its time, a freedom generally granted in the case of human loss, guardians are told implicitly or explicitly to get on with life, the sooner the better. When the next animal’s death looms, guardians are sometimes encouraged to decide to end the animal’s life “when the time is right.” In this way, the terrifying unmanageability of grief may be somewhat mitigated by the guardian’s control over the timing of the beloved animal’s death.

This is not to say that euthanizing a beloved companion animal is not the most difficult decision anyone will ever make. Except in the case of “convenience euthanasia” which no respectable and compassionate veterinarian will perform, and no ethical and loving guardian will demand or expect, the taking of the pet’s life is done for the sake of the pet’s wellbeing. The guardian accepts to take on the emotional pain of separation and grief so as to spare the animal further physical pain or suffering. Nevertheless, the decision to euthanize, to control the timing of death, is fraught with ambiguity, psychic pain, and, in some instances, guilt. The decision may minimize if not the depth and the length then at least the unexpectedness of the impact of grief. Deciding when the animal is to die allows one a time of preparatory grieving that may help blunt the final blow. But the fact remains that under any circumstance, it is a terrible thing to take a life, even with the purest and kindest of motives. The awful finality of death and the knowledge that one is complicit in it, can ravage the psyche in ways that may take years to heal.

A third aspect of grief is bodily empathy with the deceased companion animal. When a person we love passes away, we are left with a physical void as well as a relational void. The physical void can be particularly painful if one has shared daily life with the person now gone. What is one to do with the clothing and all the little artifacts the loved one has left behind? Grievable loss is always an embodied experience. So it is with an animal companion because s/he too leaves a physical as well as a relational void. There are the empty food and water bowls, the beds, the toys strewn about the house and yard, the balls, the bones, the catnip, the litter box, the collar, the leash, the scratching post, the medicines. The dog welcomed one home from work every day, but does so no more. The cat was literally everywhere in the house, from the top of the bookcase to the back of the door, and now one “sees” him or her, ghostlike, everywhere. The house that once “teemed” with the pet’s presence is now quiet and empty. Furthermore, the guardian “read” in the animal’s eyes or behavior signals for hunger, thirst, affection, discomfort, or pain, and the memory “teems” with signals no longer to be observed and responded to. One petted, picked up, kissed the animal, buried one’s face in its fur, scratched its ears and neck, felt its warm body on one’s lap or in one’s bed, received its very physical demonstrations of affection, its rubbing against one’s legs, its head butts, its licks and kisses, and now all these mutual signs of love can be exchanged no longer.

Without anthropomorphizing non-human animals, we can observe that they share many of our human characteristics. They have likes and dislikes, moods and mannerisms; they exhibit rapid eye movements in REM sleep as do humans when they dream; they have their own complex languages of barks and mews and purrs and chirps and other acoustical compositions; they play and frolic and cavort, and some even dance; they may be bored or amused; they are adventurous and curious; they are sentient and aware of themselves as individuals who can be happy and who can suffer; they have acute eyesight, keen hearing, or incredible speed (all of which humans lack); their family structures and social relationships can be as intricate, strong, and tender as our own; they can be our spiritual colleagues, fellow travelers, emotional companions, and soul-mates; their plans and purposes are just as important to



them as ours are to us; like us, they love life. Each one is unique and unrepeatable; each one has not only a biology but also a biography.<sup>18</sup> Each one is not *something* but *someone*. One spirit unites us.<sup>19</sup> That we human animals, we humanimals, if you will, have so much in common with our animal companions, invites us to ponder the beauty and meaning and mystery of their lives, to respect their innate dignity, to love them, and to grieve their deaths.

The exclusionary attitudes and practices that deny imaginative and discursive space to companion animals and to three of the main aspects of our grief in their passing has a name: “speciesism.” Speciesism is a philosophical concept which consists in the assignment of different moral worth to individuals based *solely* on their species membership. The term was coined by Richard Ryder. Apparently, its first inclusion in a formal publication was in the chapter entitled “Experiments on Animals,” Ryder’s contribution to *Animals, Men and Morals: An Enquiry into the Maltreatment of Non-Humans*, ed. Stanley Godlovitch, Roslind Godlovitch, and John Harris (London: Taplinger, 1971), 81. The term now appears in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), s.v. “speciesism.” It also appears in *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11<sup>th</sup> edition revised, where its definition is: “the assumption of human superiority over other creatures, leading to the exploitation of animals.”

The centuries of stories we have told ourselves about our superiority to and separation from animals, stories that we have employed to justify our right to use them in whatever way we want—the speciesism to which we have subscribed—these centuries of stories have sanctified our anthropocentric, prejudicial self-interest, as Nussbaum points out. “Because we have viewed other animals through the myopic lens of our self-importance, we have misperceived who and what they are. Because we have repeated our ignorance, one to the other, we have mistaken it for knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> The specter of speciesism brutally dictates the dynamics of love and loss that a human is expected to adhere to in order to comply with social standards of normal, acceptable conduct.

But speciesism is more than a philosophical concept. It is also a stable psychological construct that aligns itself with a cluster of other forms of prejudice, and as such is able to predict real-world decision-making and behavior, such as the refusal to grant that animals—not only companion animals, but factory farmed animals, migratory birds, fish, “road kill,” wildlife (which we now call less prejudicially “free-living animals”), indeed all animals—are owed as decent and pain-free a life as possible and the respect of grief when they die.<sup>21</sup> The anthropocentric ego wants to reserve the gifts of subjectivity to itself. That

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<sup>18</sup> A distinction drawn by Tom Regan and referenced in Gary Kowalski, *The Souls of Animals*, rev. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Novato: California: New World Library, 1999), 139. Tom Regan is recognized as the intellectual leader of the animal rights movement, his *The Case for Animal Rights* an acknowledged classic of moral philosophy. In “The Future of Animal Rights,” Regan explains his distinction between biology and biography: “What are other animals like,” he asks, “not merely physically but psychologically? Here is what our best science tells us. Many nonhuman animals (literally billions of them) are like us in the following respects. They are in the world. They are aware of the world. They are aware of what happens to them. And what happens to them matters to them because it makes a difference to the quality and duration of their life, as experienced by them. To express these similarities using different language, we can say that these animals have a biography, not simply a biology; they are the subjects of a life, not a life without a subject.” The article is found at <http://regan.animalsvoice.com/the-future-of-animal-rights/>.

<sup>19</sup> In *The Descent of Man* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications), 63. Darwin concludes that “The difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind.” And Konrad Lorenz states that “in terms of emotions, animals are much more akin to us than is generally assumed” *The Year of the Greylag Goose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 31.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Regan, in the forward to Gary Kowalski, *The Souls of Animals*, 15.

<sup>21</sup> In his essay “Apologia,” Barry Lopez describes a drive he made from Oregon to Indiana, stopping along the way to offer gestures of respect toward animals killed by automobiles. The essay is found in his book, *About This Life: Journeys on the*

is why it fails to see that there is a whole world of souls and spirits out there, subjectivities other than our own.

There are positive correlations between speciesism and other prejudicial attitudes such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, along with ideological constructs associated with prejudice such as social dominance orientation, system justification, and right-wing authoritarianism.<sup>22</sup> Numerous studies have shown that most people assign a higher moral value to some individuals of certain species more than to others (to dogs more than to pigs, to mammals more than to reptiles, for example), even when knowledge about the intelligence and sentience of the less valued individuals is accounted for. Some people assign greater value to some humans than to other humans (for example, to men over women, to healthy children over sickly elderly people, to able-bodied and able-minded people over severely bodily and mentally disabled people, to straight over gay people, to white people over people of color, etc.). Historically, we humans have justified the evils of colonialism and slavery, for example, by claiming that indigenous peoples were mentally and morally inferior to the white Europeans who exercised the “right” to enslave and exploit them. We do the same to animals on factory farms, in laboratories, on fur farms, in entertainment, whom we commodify and enslave as “inferior” to “humans” who belong to a so-called “higher order” from which we derive our power over them. This is speciesism: the allocation of superior worth to humanimals over non-human ones, based solely on considerations of species membership. Differential allocations of value such as those just mentioned, along with many others, have been analyzed in numerous studies about the nature of prejudice. Only recently, however, have philosophers and psychologists begun to apply the characteristics of prejudicial attitudes to descriptions of humans’ thinking about and treatment of animals. Sadly, it seems that Darwin was right when he wrote, “Sympathy beyond the confines of man, that is, humanity to the lower animals, seems to be one of the latest moral acquisitions.”<sup>23</sup> One hundred and fifty years after Darwin, we are still not quite sympathetic enough.

In conclusion, the animal’s irreplaceability, the unpredictability and unmanageability of grief, and the relational and physical voids left by the deceased animal are all indubitable signs of the finiteness, precariousness, and brevity of life. The fact that not only human life but all life is finite, contingent, and precarious should make it easier for all of us to acknowledge in our discursive practices that each one of us, regardless of our species, is unique, exceptional, individual, and grievable. Recognizing, admitting, and respecting an individual’s grief and mourning represents, after all, a minimum of ethical decency.<sup>24</sup> Oral and written expressions of condolence for the death of companion animals not only help to normalize grief for pets but also push against the general resistance to talking about death in Western society because they create a space for acknowledging difficult issues such as euthanasia and the short

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*Threshold of Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 113-18. “Apologia” disrupts our complacent attitude toward “road kill,” stimulating both anger and compassion. It forces us to wonder what these dead animals represent.

<sup>22</sup> See Lucius Caviola, Jim A. C. Everett, and Nadira S. Faber (University of Oxford), “The Moral Standing of Animals: Towards a Psychology of Speciesism,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, © 2018, American Psychological Association. I consulted the authors’ copy of the published manuscript, provided for the purpose of disseminating academic research openly. It is no longer available on the internet. The final article is available from American Psychological Association at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000182>. This article is the first, to my knowledge, to analyze the psychology of speciesism in great depth.

<sup>23</sup> *The Descent of Man*, 139.

<sup>24</sup> When such grief is directed at “unconventional” subjects, the opportunity arises to reconsider the tenuous foundations of underlying conventions. Thankfully, a growing number of humans have distanced themselves from conventionally determined ethics based on species segregation and have embraced and internalized the philosophy and praxis of interspecies equality.

life spans of companion animals.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, by challenging the diffuse, unstable, disturbing border between human and non-human life, between *bios* and *zoē*, oral and written expressions of sympathy draw the problematic distinction between human and non-human life into the limelight so that it can be examined.<sup>26</sup> Such expressions proclaim that non-human lives, like human ones, deserve to be commemorated by more than the silence of one family's or one person's private sadness. ■

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<sup>25</sup> Most recently, social media have made announcements about the health of companion animals as well as about their passing more public, widespread, and acceptable than in the past. However, as is the case with any socially unsolicited and questionable conduct, mourning for non-human animals may take more time and more public exposure before most humans rid themselves of the burden of illusory segregation from the rest of creation.

<sup>26</sup> Consider, for example, the werewolf of folklore about whom there are so many frightening stories. Consider also other less folkloric, more actually “monstrous” hybrids reported in the annals of teratology where both humans *and* animals pass across and challenge that border.