

FROM DRAGONS TO WORMS: ANIMALS AND THE SUBVERSION OF HIERARCHY IN AUGUSTINE'S THEOLOGY

Peter Huff

The theological interpretation of nature was a major issue in the life and thought of Augustine. Figuring critically in the intellectual process which allowed him to accept the Christian religion, the vision of a natural order created by an immaterial and eternal deity became a dominant theme in his theological literature. "Few other passages of Scripture," William A. Christian has observed, "intrigued Augustine as much as the first sentence of the book of Genesis."¹ The fact that he devoted much of his spiritual autobiography to an extended meditation on the meaning of creation testifies to the importance which the idea held for him. In fact, so prevalent is the theme in his writings that it is difficult to find one of Augustine's works which does not in some way address the issue of creation. In addition to the last portion of the *Confessions*, Augustine wrote three commentaries on Genesis and assigned Book XI of *City of God* to the subject.² Discussions of the order of the universe, the place of man in the world, and God's maintenance of creation appear in virtually all of his writings. Drawing from the Bible, the natural history tradition of classical literature, the Judeo-Christian hexaemeral literature,³ and even apparently direct observation,⁴ Augustine's literary output represents a lifelong attempt to comprehend the elusive character and infinite variety of nature.

Peter Huff is a Ph.D. candidate in Historical Theology at St. Louis University, Missouri, where he teaches in the Department of Theological Studies of the same University. He obtained a B.A. in History and Religion from the Mercer University Atlanta, Atlanta, Georgia and graduated as Master of Divinity from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. He continued his studies in Religion at the Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

1. William A. Christian, "The Creation of the World," *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, (ed. Roy W. Battenhouse) (Oxford University Press; New York 1955) 315.
2. John Hammond Taylor, introduction, *De Genesi ad Litteram Imperfectus Liber*, by Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 2 vols. (Ancient Christian Writers, 41-42 Newman Press; New York 1982) 1:1-4. Henceforth ACW.
3. Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, (University of California; Berkeley 1967) 163, 187, 196. Cf. Frank E. Robbins, *The Hexaemeral Literature: A Study of the Greek and Latin Commentaries on Genesis*, (University of Chicago; Chicago 1912).
4. *De Genesi ad Litteram* 3.18.12, ACW, 1:81-82.

Appropriately, in light of Augustine's preoccupation with the theme, critical studies have focused on the various components of his theology of creation as they appear in his texts: the belief in creation *ex nihilo*, the relationship between eternity and time, the goodness of the material world, the reconciliation of an instantaneous creation with the biblical six-day cosmogony, angelology and demonology, and the concept of *rationes seminales*.⁵ Surprisingly, though, few examinations of Augustine's theory of nature have investigated his thoughts concerning the place of animals in the scheme of creation. Notable exceptions to this rule are Holman's survey of nature imagery in Augustine's theological discourse and Pope's brief chapter on Augustine's interest in the non-human creatures of the world.⁶ This tendency is unfortunate, since the majority of Augustine's references to nature are animal allusions.⁷ By their practice most students of Augustine's thought validate Pope's ironic comment: "Some will perhaps be apt to imagine that a purely speculative philosopher and theologian like Augustine can have nothing interesting to tell us concerning the animal world."⁸ The truth is, of course, that few historians or theologians would even think to raise the question. For the modern reader Augustine's discussions of animal life function as curious reminders of his archaic eccentricity or as irritating interludes interrupting the flow of "real" theology. This paper, concentrating primarily on what Augustine said about animals in *City of God*, is an attempt to take seriously the ancient Christian fascination with man's non-human companions in the world and to demonstrate that Augustine's view of animal life shaped his larger understanding of the meaning of creation. A comprehensive assessment of Augustine's theory of animals is beyond the scope of this study. What I will attempt to show is the way in which Augustine's appreciation for animals mitigated his philosophical allegiance to the concept of hierarchy and forced him to introduce a countervailing concept accounting for those aspects of creation which do not fit neatly under the category of hierarchy.

5. Eugene Portale, *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine*, (trans. Ralph J. Bastian) (Henry Regnery Co.; Chicago 1960) 136-151. Vernon J. Bourke, *Augustine's Quest of Wisdom*, (Bruce Publishing Co.; Milwaukee 1945) 224-247. Christopher J. O'Toole, *The Philosophy of Creation in the Writings of St. Augustine*, (Catholic University of America Press; Washington, D.C. 1944). Henry Woods, *Augustine and Evolution*, (Universal Knowledge Foundation; N.p. 1924).
6. Mary John Holman, *Nature-Imagery in the Works of St. Augustine*, (Catholic University of America; Washington, D.C. 1932). Hugh Pope, "St. Augustine and the World of Nature," *Saint Augustine of Hippo*, (Newman Press; Westminster, MD 1949) 228-253.
7. Holman, *Nature-Imagery*, 144.
8. Pope, "St. Augustine," 228.

Animals and the hierarchy of being

Much of what Augustine said about animals in *City of God* does not deal directly with the metaphysical question of non-human organisms in the realm of creation. Rather, Augustine's remarks, especially in the first ten books, often serve the interests of his argument against pagan civilization and its claims. His accounts of bizarre animal behaviour from classical lore and contemporary stories of exotic creatures and beasts were primarily aimed at destroying the propositions of his opponents. Referring once to the incorruptible flesh of the peafowl, Augustine admitted that he did not necessarily believe all the fabulous tales he reported. "I have decided that I should neither affirm nor deny their truth," he revealed.⁹ Despite his genuine interest in the oddities of nature, many of Augustine's references to talking oxen, flying serpents, immortal salamanders, and the like, function rhetorically within his critique of the pagan idea of metempsychosis and the occult practices of astrology, necromancy, and divination. "In most cases these nature-allusions form an integral part of the argument and hence are unavoidable."¹⁰

Eliminating these rhetorical uses of animal imagery from the scope of our inquiry, *City of God* still offers a wealth of material for analysis. Premodern man lived in close proximity to the world of beasts, and few human needs were not satisfied at least in some respect by the use of an animal product or the employment of animal labour. The Romans, in particular, from the sober classifications of the philosophers to the mass carnage of the circus, reveal a measure of the animal kingdom's appeal for the ancient mind.¹¹ In this respect Augustine was typical of his age and culture. His writings betray an imagination fascinated by the appearance, behaviour, and mystery of animals. According to his understanding, the defence of Christianity's truth and the interpretation of its picture of reality required theological consideration of the non-human forms of life on earth. For one who sought to know the wonder of nature and the range of universal history, knowledge of the ways and meaning of animal life was an intellectual necessity.

In *City of God* Augustine used the conventional notion of a hierarchy of created being as an organising device for his reflections on creation. Derived

9. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 21.7, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, (trans. Henry Bettenson) (Penguin Books; London 1984) 978-979. Hereafter cited as DCD.
10. Holman, *Nature-Imagery*, 31. Cf. Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge University; Cambridge 1990) 38-39.
11. J. M. C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, (Cornell University Press; Ithaca, NY 1973) 15-31.

from a synthesis of classical, Neo-Platonic, and Christian material, Augustine's version of what Arthur O. Lovejoy called the Great Chain of Being serves as a conceptual tool for rendering meaningful and coherent the range of contingent forms of existence.¹² Influential in western thought until its breakdown in the nineteenth century, the Chain of Being

is the idea of the organic constitution of the universe as a series of links or gradations ordered in a hierarchy of creatures, from the lowest and most insignificant to the highest, indeed to the *ens perfectissimum* which, uncreated, is yet its culmination and the end to which all creation tends.¹³

Conceived as an immense scale of being extending from the edge of nothingness to the hem of divinity, "the whole material universe," according to Augustine, "its shapes, qualities, its ordered motions, its elements disposed throughout its whole extent," exists in an ascending sequence of appointments reaching from inert matter to those creatures around the throne of God. Within this scale all creatures "which exist in any mode of being, and are distinct from God who made them," possess their special excellence and are assigned their respective stations and purposes. Each being according to its nature occupies a determined position in the hierarchy and is oriented toward a divinely ordained end.¹⁴ "The God of our worship is he who has created all beings, and ordered the beginning and the end of their existence and their motion."¹⁵ Explicitly sanctioning the inequality among beings, Augustine exploited the idea of hierarchy to explain both the ordered form of the cosmos and the staggering diversity within it.¹⁶ Living beings rank above the inanimate, sentient over those which merely nourish and maintain existence, and intelligent beings grade above the irrational. But creation is not arranged into separate and mutually exclusive categories, for each level of being serves that above it and possesses in addition to its own distinguishing characteristic the qualities of the class or classes of beings inferior to it.

In other words,

12. C. A. Patrides, "Hierarchy and Order," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, (ed. Philip P. Wiener) 5 vols. (Charles Scribner's Sons; New York 1973) 2:438-439. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, (Harvard University Press; Cambridge 1964).
13. Lia Formigari, "Chain of Being," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* 1:325.
14. DCD 8.6; 11.16, Bettenson, *Concerning the City of God*, 307, 447.
15. DCD 7.30, Bettenson, *ibid.* 291.
16. Cf. Lovejoy, *Great Chain*, 67.

Augustine's hierarchy is not a static classification, but a dynamic interchange of forces conspiring to a single end, in which the greater includes the lesser in a higher form, and in which the higher subdues the lower, to the achievement, first of its own perfection, and secondly the perfection of the whole. The end of all creatures is God Who is manifested in their perfection.¹⁷

Nature in all its discriminate forms, simple and complex, gravitates toward God and reveals the beauty of the uncreated mind.

Within this framework of cosmic hierarchy Augustine believed that animals, including "the multitudinous varieties of birds, with their songs and their bright plumage" and "the countless different species of living creatures of all shapes and sizes," play their designated role in concert with other created beings.¹⁸ Blessed with their own dignity as works of God, animals are praiseworthy creatures to the degree that they fulfill their function in accordance with their hierarchical status. Appealing to the biblical authority of Wisdom 11,21, a verse he often cited to support his metaphysics, Augustine maintained that every created thing has its proper "measure and number and weight."¹⁹ In addition to God, its ultimate end, each creature is invested with a tendency toward a proximate end. For an animal, Augustine said, this end is the instinctive drive to protect and procreate life.

Why, even the irrational animals, from the immense dragons down to the tiniest worms, who are not endowed with the capacity to think ..., show that they wish to exist and to avoid extinction.²⁰

When animals satisfy the needs of the senses, reproduce after their kind, and struggle for self-preservation they are cooperating naturally with the "hidden plan that rules the beauty of the world."²¹

To support these speculations about the role of animals in creation Augustine elaborated the ancient category of the animal soul. Part of his classical inheritance included the postulation of three types of soul animating living

17. W. J. Roche, "Measure, Number, and Weight in Saint Augustine," *The New Scholasticism* 15 (1941) 369.

18. DCD 22.24, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 1075.

19. Roche, "Measure," 350-376.

20. DCD 11.27, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 461.

21. *De Genesi ad Litteram* 3.16.25, ACW, 1:19.

things: vegetative, sensitive, and intellectual.²² Though he defined the doctrine elsewhere,²³ in *City of God* Augustine assumed the presence of a soul in animals granting them the natural endowments of "memory, sense, and appetite."²⁴ As evidence, Augustine pointed more than once to the reality of animal pain: "The pain which the animals suffer commends the vigour of the animal soul as admirable and praiseworthy after its own fashion."²⁵ The soul within an animal, Augustine claimed, provides its natural orientation toward unity and integrity. Imagining an entire universe of creatures in motion toward a final state of perfect harmony with the eternal peace of God's mind, Augustine saw the animal soul as one constituent part in a cosmic process of reconciliation. God, he said, "directs the peace of the whole scheme of things." The "peace of the body, we conclude, is a tempering of the component parts in duly ordered proportion," and "the peace of the irrational soul is a duly ordered repose of the appetites." Even animal flesh consumed by another beast "finds itself subject to the same laws which are diffused throughout the whole of matter for the preservation of every mortal species, establishing peace by a harmony of congruous elements."²⁶ The ultimate goal of hierarchy, in nature or society, is the conformity of unequal souls to a pattern of organic concord.

As Paul Kuntz observed regarding the concept of hierarchy in Augustine's *Confessions*, "the important thing is not the level on which a thing is, but how it is related to what is below and to what is above."²⁷ The same is true in *City of God*. Frequently Augustine used animal imagery in his discourse simply as a foil for his Christian anthropology. The rhetorical value of his definition of animal life lies in its revelation of the superior position of man. There can be little doubt that, according to Augustine, "man was preeminently the object of the Creator's gracious intent."²⁸ The real nature of the excellence of animal existence is disclosed most fully when seen in its inherent inferiority to that of human life.

22. Cf. George Boas, "Theriophily," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* 4: 384-389.

23. Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio* 3.22.70; 2.3.8-13, *Earlier Writings*, (ed. John H.S. Burleigh), Library of Christian Classics (Westminster Press; Philadelphia 1953) 212.138-143.

24. DCD 5.11, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 196.

25. *De Libero Arbitrio* 3.22.69, LCC, 212.

26. DCD 19.12-13, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 870.

27. Paul G. Kuntz, "From the Angel to the Worm: Augustine's Hierarchical Vision," *Jacob's Ladder and the Tree of Life: Concepts of Hierarchy and the Great Chain of Being*, (ed. Marion Leathers Kuntz and Paul G. Kuntz) (Peter Lang; New York 1987) 43.

28. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, Vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (University of Chicago Press; Chicago 1971) 295.

Compared with humans, animals are mere brutes or dumb beasts, for man, by virtue of his rational endowment, was created so that "he surpassed all living creatures, on earth, in the sea, and in the sky."²⁹ Though humans share many qualities with other beings — existence with stones, reproductive capabilities with plants, sensitivity with animals — the faculty of intelligence makes men more compatible with angels than with beasts.³⁰ The higher the grade of being, the more excellent that form of existence. To underscore this belief Augustine assembled a variety of facts in addition to man's rationality, some traditional arguments from classical literature, others original products of his own imagination. Arguing that the discontinuity between humans and animals surpasses the measure of continuity, Augustine pointed to man's erect posture, his prowess for creating languages, his ability to "imitate the cries of birds and beasts," and "all his ingenious devices for the capturing, killing, or taming of wild animals."³¹ Despite what they have in common with birds and cattle, a qualitative difference in constitution elevates men above the other creatures. "Where the animals are lacking," Augustine declared in another work, "there is our excellence."³² According to this train of thought in the mind of Augustine, animals are by definition excluded from both the Earthly City and the City of God.

Animals and the subversion of hierarchy

In *City of God* Augustine introduced a competing theme in tension with the mythic structure of hierarchy. For him, the hierarchical category was not elastic enough to interpret fully the totality of man's experience of nature. His observation of nature in the light of revelation and reason convinced Augustine that many aspects of ordinary life contradicted the notion of a hierarchy of being. For example, while his metaphysics, in *De Libero Arbitrio*, compelled him to pronounce that an "errant horse is better than a stone,"³³ in *City of God* Augustine did not feel obligated to say that a mouse, even a perfect one, is better than a piece of bread. In fact, he admitted just the opposite. "A higher price," he added, "is often paid for a horse than for a slave."³⁴ Examining Augustine's animal imagery, even in survey fashion, suggests that many of his statements

29. DCD 12.24, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 503.

30. DCD 5.11; 12.22, Bettenson, *ibid.*, 196, 502.

31. *De Genesi ad Litteram* 6.12.22, ACW, 193. DCD, 14.25; 22.24, Bettenson, *ibid.*, 588, 1072.

32. Augustine, *De Vera Religione* 2.9.53, *Earlier Writings*, LCC, 251.

33. *De Libero Arbitrio* 3.5.15, LCC, 179-180.

34. DCD 11.16, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 448.

about the natural world cannot be understood simply in terms of classical hierarchical references. Subverting the claims of hierarchy in Augustine's discourse is a secondary vision of nature which is incommensurable with the notion of an ordered Chain of Being. His language regarding animals provides literary clues revealing the implications of his alternative view of creation.

Concluding his critique of pagan Rome and his defence of Christianity against its critics, in Book XI Augustine began his exposition of the City of God in the history of the world. Significantly, when he turned to the ambiguities and ironies of historical experience Augustine also exposed the limitations of a hierarchical explanation of nature. There is a scale of excellence according to the "order of nature," he said, "but there is another gradation," he continued, "which employs utility as the criterion of value."³⁵ According to this canon of judgment created things cannot simply be evaluated by acknowledging their divinely ordained position in the hierarchy. In addition to the Chain of Being encompassing the world of things, there is "a scale of value stretching from earthly to heavenly realities."³⁶ The former, based upon "rational consideration," views the world "on the position of each thing in the scale of importance, on its own merits;" whereas the latter, looking to "the constraint of need, or the attraction of desire," sees natural things in terms of their actual performance, their historically demonstrated, rather than ontologically granted, merit. This second conceptual approach allows for the supposition that "although angels are superior to men in the order of nature, good men rank above the evil angels according to the criterion of righteousness."³⁷ It contains the implication that good stones can surpass imperfect horses, and excellent animals outrank beastly men.

That humans could act like animals Augustine had no doubt. Though he vehemently opposed the position of the Cynics, "those canine philosophers," who maintained that human beings "should make it their ambition to resemble dogs," he confessed that what they desired to achieve often did in fact occur.³⁸ "History proclaims and Scripture teaches that men by their way of life can become like the beasts of the field."³⁹ Relying upon the authority of Psalm 48,13 in the Old Latin, Augustine believed that man could forfeit his hierarchical status and enter the ranks of irrational creatures: "he has been joined with

35. DCD 11.16, Bettenson, *ibid.*, 448.

36. DCD 11.22, Bettenson, *ibid.*, 454.

37. DCD 11.16, Bettenson, *ibid.*, 448.

38. DCD 14.20, Bettenson, *ibid.*, 581-582.

39. *De Genesi ad Litteram* 7.10.14, ACW, 2: 12.

senseless beasts and has become like them.”⁴⁰ By his station in the hierarchy man should ideally seek the company of angels, but when left to the tendencies of his heart he could renounce the excellence of hierarchy and “live like the beasts,” becoming “the slave of his desires.”⁴¹ Even the accepted marks of human superiority can be rendered as hints of degeneracy. Though Augustine enjoyed hunting as a boy and defended the practice against the Manichaeans,⁴² he recognized the negative connotations of the term “hunter.”⁴³ He also questioned the appropriateness of designating the domestication of animals as an example of human preeminence, for the people usually involved in the trade — shepherds, ploughmen, charioteers — Augustine found to be typically “fools.”⁴⁴

Given a Christian set of references, the fall of men into an animal-like state may always be defended on the basis of original sin. The abdication of the intellect and the revolt of the senses, by Augustine’s time classic evidences of the absence of grace, are subject to the interpretations of religious doctrine, and Augustine certainly endorsed a strong doctrine of human sinfulness; indeed, his theology of the will allowed for the unbridled prospects of a human descent into animality. However, while these sentiments may explain the brutish propensities of men, they can in no way justify theoretically those demonstrations in nature of man’s apparent inferiority to animals. Despite the friction it caused with a philosophy of hierarchy and a theology of sin, Augustine’s discourse reserved room for a belief in the potential superiority of non-human life forms.

In his study of the Christian views of nature expressed by theologians in the history of western religion, George H. Williams has observed that Augustine’s approach to creation cannot properly be classed as anthropocentric. Augustine, he said, is “quite clearly on the side of the relative autonomy of nature with its own divinely intended purpose apart from man.”⁴⁵ This attitude is apparent in Augustine’s conviction that creation did not suffer the consequences of man’s fall; thorns and thistles were in Paradise, providing “a pleasant and nourishing

40. *De Genesi ad Litteram* 3.12.20, ACW, 1:88; 245 n.43. Cf. *DCD* 22.24, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 1071.

41. *DCD* 12.22, Bettenson, *Ibid.*, 502; cf. 11.28, Bettenson, *Ibid.*, 462.

42. Cf. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (University of California Press; Berkeley 1969) 21. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, (Allen Lane; London 1983) 22.

43. *DCD* 16.4, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 657-658.

44. *De Libero Arbitrio* 1.10.20, LCC, 124.

45. George H. Williams, “Christian Attitudes Towards Nature,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 2 (1971) 25.

food" for certain animals,⁴⁶ and the savage attacks of rabid beasts, causing much distress to humans, do not indict nature of evil.⁴⁷ The attitude is especially clear in Augustine's suggestion that animal nature may on occasion surpass that of humanity. Though he did not subscribe to the theriophily of classical figures like Diogenes, who found beasts superior to men because of their freedom from reason, or like Pliny, who attributed greater virtue and a more natural intelligence to animals,⁴⁸ Augustine did discover factors in the natural life of animals which threatened the hierarchical status of man.

On the level of physical existence, for example, animals seem better equipped than creatures higher on the scale of being. Humans share life in the body with "the lower animals," but the bodies of inferior creatures are typically stonger and more agile than those of men. A man cannot "rival the speed of a hare, a stag, or any of the birds," nor can he compete with "the strength of a lion or an elephant."⁴⁹ Some animals are even

endowed with a natural power of moving the covering which clothes their whole body; if they feel anything in any part which needs to be driven away, they can move their hide at the spot, and only there, where they feel the irritation, and thus they can by this quiver shake off not only flies but even spears that are sticking into them. Man has not this ability.⁵⁰

Augustine also marvelled at the acute sensory powers possessed by animals. He was amazed like all the ancients at the keen ears and fine sense of smell demonstrated by even the most domestic of pets. Characteristically interested in sight, he noted that some creatures "have much sharper vision than we have for seeing in the light of the sun." The optic capabilities of humans are far exceeded by "the long sight of an eagle or a vulture."⁵¹ Indeed, even in Heaven, where the saints will be able to see "the incorporeal God directing the whole universe," the human eye will still not match the physical power of the eyesight enjoyed "by snakes and eagles."⁵²

46. *De Genesi ad Litteram* 3.18.28, ACW, 1: 94. Cf. Williams, "Christian Attitudes," 11.

47. Cf. *DCD* 11.22-23; 12.4; 22.22, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 453-456.475-476.1066-1067.

48. Boas, "Theriophily," 384-386.

49. *DCD* 22.24; 8.15, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 1073.320.

50. *DCD* 14.24, Bettenson, *Ibid.*, 588.

51. *DCD* 11.27; 8.15, Bettenson, *Ibid.*, 461, 320. Cf. *De Libero Arbitrio* 1.8.18, LCC, 320. *De Vera Religione* 29.53, LCC, 251.

52. *DCD* 22.29, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 1084.

Beyond these extraordinary qualities of body and sense, Augustine perceived how the hierarchically inferior position of animals actually contributes to a way of life attractive to spiritually minded men. While animals lack the intelligence of humans, he figured, they often behave in a manner which puts humans to shame. The gifts of imagination and will in men grant them the potential to create complicated systems of language and to engage in the dynamic developments of history, but these great endowments, Augustine realised, are not without their liabilities. Language divides as well as unites. "It is easier for dumb animals, even of different kinds, to associate together" than for men of different nationalities to commune across difficult language barriers. Voluntary action, too, can lead to destructive as well as creative ends. "Not even lions or serpents have ever carried on among themselves the kind of warfare in which men engage," Augustine conceded.⁵³ Furthermore, what appears as weakness in beasts, abstractly considered, may turn out to be beneficial in concrete experience. On the one hand, as an irrational creature an animal cannot truly be happy,⁵⁴ but on the other hand, it is free from the tyranny of despair. "No man has ever thought," Augustine wrote, "that his superiority consists in a capacity for greater unhappiness." Likewise animals are never bothered by the barbs of humour, or the unrest of ambition, or the snares of insecurity, which continually trouble and to a large degree define human experience.⁵⁵ Animal existence is not categorically worse off in every detail than human existence. In some respects, Augustine thought, it may be better.

Offering a greater challenge to the conventional idea of hierarchy are the ways in which animals encroach upon the most guarded signs of human uniqueness. As a theory of hierarchy promotes an acceptance of inequality, the common observation of nature reveals strange instances of something approaching equality. Rationality itself, Augustine concluded, finds its approximations in the lives of earthly animals. Earlier Origen had ventured the opinion that "the instinct in hunting dogs and in war horses comes near, if I may say so, to reason itself."⁵⁶ Similarly Augustine, though no disciple of Origen, came to believe that, "although there is no kind of real knowledge in the senses of

53. DCD 19.7; 12.23, Bettenson, *Ibid.*, 861.503. Cf. Pope, "World of Nature," 231.

54. Augustine, *De Diversis Quaestionibus LXXXIII*, 5, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, (trans. David L. Mosher) *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 70 (Catholic University of America Press; Washington, DC 1982) 39.

55. *De Libero Arbitrio* 1.8.18, LCC, 123.

56. Origen, *De Principiis* 3.1, *On First Principles*, (trans. G. W. Butterworth) (Peter Smith; Gloucester, MA 1973) 160.

irrational creatures, there is at least something parallel to knowledge."⁵⁷ Perhaps more significantly, Augustine was impressed with the tokens of peaceful society existing in the animal world. While not every species was created "gregarious," all creatures occupy "their position in the splendour of the providential order" and make their contribution "by their own special beauty to the whole material scheme, as to a universal commonwealth."⁵⁸ Human beings, living in the historical tension of the Two Cities, can learn social responsibility from "even the most savage beasts."

"What kite, however solitary as he hovers over his prey, does not find a mate, build a nest, help to hatch the eggs, rear the young birds, and, as we may say preserve with the mother of his family a domestic society as peaceful as he can make it?"⁵⁹

Always eager for biblical evidence, Augustine retrieved Noah's Ark as an image of animal society with implications for the social animal man. Though commonplace in patristic interpretation, Augustine's rendering of the Ark, filled with a world of clean and unclean creatures including "mice and newts," as an emblem of Christ and the Church, unites perhaps a bit too closely for a strict theory of hierarchy the kingdom of beasts and the City of God.⁶⁰

A final element of Augustine's secondary view of nature, equally difficult to reconcile with the intimations of hierarchy, is his striking fascination with creatures at the lower end of the Chain of Being. According to the doctrine of hierarchy, each creature, no matter how insignificant, is made with its particular purpose to play in the universal scheme. Ultimately, inferior creatures, the theory requires, "achieve their proper goods in ministering to higher."⁶¹ Lesser natures, in the end, serve an instrumental purpose in the perfection of those above. But Augustine's positive rhetorical use of tiny animals goes against this spirit of hierarchy, for it strains the last lesson of the theory: the greatest excellence resides at the pinnacle of the scale. Evidently unwilling or unable to apply systematically the category of hierarchy to his reading of nature, Augustine pursued a natural curiosity in the minute parts of God's creation and revealed a preference for the small and insignificant creatures of the earth. Not quite a revolt against hierarchy, his language offers subtle resistance to the

57. DCD 11.27, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 461.

58. DCD 12.22; 11.22, Bettenson, *Ibid.*, 502.453.

59. DCD 19.12, Bettenson, *Ibid.*, 868.

60. DCD 15.26-27, Bettenson, *Ibid.*, 643-648.

61. Roche, "Measure," 368.

authoritative embrace of the theory, for it diverts attention away from the more worthy forms of existence and divests the hierarchical myth of its social function of conformity and its spiritual lesson of moral ascent.

In Augustine's dialogue, *De Quantitate Animae*, during a discussion of the soul's relation to the body, Evodius recalled that he and his boyhood friends would marvel at the quivering tails of lizards "after we had cut them off from the rest of the body." Replying to his partner, Augustine related the more recent story of an educational experiment, conducted under his supervision, which involved the impromptu vivisection of "a many-footed creeping animal, a long worm, I would say."⁶² This conversation betrays Augustine's marked attentiveness to nature's overlooked creatures. If *City of God* is any accurate indication, this interest did not diminish over the course of Augustine's writing career. Though his animal allusions comb the entire range of mythical and real creatures known to the Roman world, his discourse never wanders far from the world of flies, fleas, and assorted vermin. Indeed, the worm seems to have been the handiest antipode in Augustine's lexicon to contrast with natural wonders like the elephant and the dragon and the intimidating creatures of intelligence.⁶³ Much of his interpretation of the biblical Flood narrative, for example, centres on problems raised by the presence of "the tiniest creatures" in the Ark's cargo. His discussion of the teleological peace of the cosmos leads to a note on the "little souls" of creatures produced by spontaneous generation. And his defence of the doctrine of Hell, requiring the punishment but not consumption of bodies in eternal flame, hinges on the existence of an apocryphal "species of worm to be found in the gushing springs of hot baths."⁶⁴

For one trained to see theology as reflection on God and religious matters, Augustine's persistence in opening his discourse to the minuscule insects and pests of earthly existence seems to reveal an inordinate preoccupation with the objectionable and the trivial — something akin to Luther's scatological obsession. On closer examination, however, it suggests a rhetorical strategy chafing under the intellectual burden of hierarchical theory. While Augustine never questioned the Christian belief that humanity is the crown of terrestrial creation, when his discourse demanded the documentation of nature's grandeur or the loving providence of nature's God, Augustine habitually turned to the lower

62. Augustine, *De Quantitate Animae* 31.62, (trans. John J. McMahon) *Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 2, *Fathers of the Church* (CIMA Publishing Co.; New York 1947) 128-130. Cf. Brown, *Augustine*, 35.

63. Cf. *DCD* 11.27, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 461. *De Genesi ad Litteram* 3.16.25, ACW, 1:92.

64. *DCD* 15.27; 19.12; 21.2, Bettenson, *Ibid.*, 646-648.870.965.

links in the Chain of Being. Curiously diffident regarding the extent to which the human organism alone could convincingly express the wonder of creation, he felt compelled to seek his proofs closer to the ground. The mystery of the universe is unveiled certainly in the excellent gifts granted to man, but it is more forcefully represented in the fact that the Creator of man "has not abandoned even the inner parts of the smallest and lowliest creature, or the bird's feather." God's miraculous union of the material and immaterial elicits reverent awe, "and this is true not only as that work is observed in man ..., but even in the case of the tiniest fly."⁶⁵ In these examples Augustine's reliance upon intensive, comparative, and superlative linguistic elements is especially instructive. The demands of his rhetoric required the discovery of warrants at the extreme end of the hierarchy of beings. All finite beings, he said, reflect the beauty of God's mind, but "*even the most diminutive insect cannot be considered attentively without astonishment and without praising the Creator.*"⁶⁶ In fact, God created the sometimes bothersome lower creatures, "so that we may feel a *deeper* wonder at the agility of the mosquito on the wing than at the size of a beast of burden on the hoof, and may admire *more* intensely the works of the *smallest* ants than the burden of the camels." Consequently, "it is the *smallest* in bulk that moves our *greater* wonder — for we are *more* astonished at the activities of the tiny ants and bees than at the immense bulk of whales."⁶⁷ Though he did not speak "in praise of the worm" as he did in another work,⁶⁸ in his *City of God* Augustine made literary use of the least in the animal kingdom to evoke responses in his readers which references to man alone, he felt sure, could not call forth.

As in most of his Christian writings, in *City of God* Augustine addressed the theme which engaged him throughout his entire literary career: the mystery and meaning of the created material sphere. Without a doubt the dominant category which he used to describe and interpret creation was the classical theory of a hierarchy of unequal beings. He was also ever careful to protect the superiority of man, even when championing the unique characteristics of non-human animals. However, Augustine's animal imagery exposes an assessment of hierarchy as not wholly adequate for the task of grasping the full significance of nature. All of his animal allusions do not comfortably conform to the dictates

65. DCD 5.11; 22.24, Bettenson, *Ibid.*, 196.1072.

66. DCD 22.24, quoted in Robert H. Ayers, "Christian Realism and Environmental Ethics," *Religion and Environmental Crisis*, (ed. Eugene C. Hargrove) (University of Georgia Press; Athens 1986) 152. Cf. DCD 11.22, Bettenson, *Concerning the City*, 454.

67. *De Genesi ad Litteram* 3.14.22, ACW, 90. DCD 22.24, Bettenson, *Ibid.*, 1075. Emphasis mine.

68. *De Vera Religione* 41.77, LCC, 265.

of the organising myth of hierarchy, and many of them suggest an alternative vision of nature in dissonance with the view of creation as an orderly Chain of Being. Within Augustine's rhetorical strategies a counter theme surfaces, rivaling and at times subverting his theoretical commitment to hierarchy. Introduced as the Scale of Value, this secondary approach to creation permitted Augustine to explore the nuances in his experience of nature which normally strained the limits of hierarchical theory. It allowed him to perceive greater continuity between humans and animals and even to imagine the potential superiority of animal life. Though always a minor theme in his cosmology, kept in check by broader intellectual trusts, the subversion of hierarchy in Augustine's theology of nature was a consequence of his fascination with the excellence of animal existence and his discovery of the infinite God in the lowliest citizens of the universal commonwealth.

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The Department of Theological Studies
Saint Louis University
3634 Lindell Boulevard
St. Louis MO 63108
U.S.A.