

Book Review Supplement

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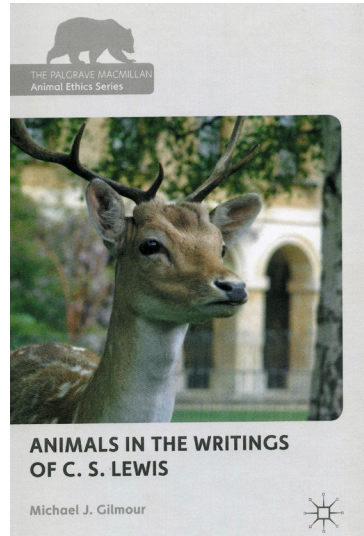
Michael J. Gilmour, *Animals in the Writings of C.S. Lewis*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), \$109.99 (hardcover).

Animals in the Writings of C.S. Lewis explores a moral framework, expressed across a breadth of Lewis's writings, for how humans should treat animals. Gilmour looks at Lewis's imaginative models distinguishing ethical from unethical treatment of animals, and also at the moral underpinnings of animal care in Lewis's Christian theology. The book is organized around five Biblical palimpsests with the themes of peaceful coexistence, humanity's dominion, paradise lost, food, and animal-human community.

The work is thorough in the breadth of writings explored (speculative fiction, poetry, essays, and informal communications) as well as the topics. As Gilmour notes, "Reading Lewis with attention to his views on animals takes us into the whole of his collected works though with an emphasis on his creative and religious writing" (2). Although the world of Lewis scholarship is so vast that any comprehensive survey would be daunting, Gilmour makes appropriate use and acknowledgement of other scholarly contributions. The writing is scholarly but accessible to a general audience. Although the approach of organizing around palimpsests does lead to a style that is rambling at times and occasionally repetitive, it is engaging.

In his preface, Gilmour notes, "As a child, as a young adult nonbeliever and as a middle-aged Christian, C.S. Lewis marvelled at the teeming life filling our world, and that is the topic of this book. He loved animals" (xii). A few pages later he adds, "Read Lewis long enough and inevitably one is left with the inescapable impression that animals matter, and not just sentimentally. A sense of theological gravitas emerges too" (13). This alerts the reader that many of Gilmour's conclusions rest on a mix of biographical information and on readings of Lewis's fiction (especially the Ransom trilogy and the Narnia stories), with an eye toward emotional expressiveness. Gilmour draws from some examples that may appear obvious to many readers, as well as from more subtle hints.

In order to interpret the evidence, Gilmour "counts on readers' awareness of the haunting presence of Genesis" in Lewis's stories—hence the use of



palimpsests. This also relates to another component of this work that ties the narrative and biographical together in a coherent argument: Lewis's essays and informal personal correspondence, which illuminate the underlying theological ideas and help interpret how certain incidents in his life may have influenced him. For example, when writing about vivisection in a section on community, Gilmour notes:

Though Lewis offers in these and other stories a fictive approach to animal ethics, he still grounds his opposition to vivisection and other cruelties in theological presuppositions. . . . He presents an all-encompassing understanding of community that assumes the Bible's high view of nonhuman creation and not surprisingly, the treatment of animals in his stories functions as a boundary marker, distinguishing good and evil, insiders and outsiders, and so on. (192)

Gilmour's approach has several strengths. The breadth makes this a valuable contribution that should be helpful for both the scholar and the casual reader. Although I have been teaching college courses on C.S. Lewis for three decades and have written a book about environmental aspects of Lewis's writing, I found the book informative, drawing my attention to some passages and biographical details I had not been familiar with.

The book also does an excellent and honest job dealing with Lewis's own lack of a fully formed moral-theological framework for his ideas about animals, and also with the conjectural nature of Gilmour's own conclusions. In light of that, I especially appreciated Gilmour's point that despite the lack of a definitive theologically based conclusion, Lewis nonetheless invites readers to imaginatively engage in asking the questions: in contemplating the worth of animals and the importance of an ethic for our treatment of the non-human world. "When gathering up the fragments of his animal writing, Lewis offers us an inclusive theological vision of a gentler world. Lewis catches readers off guard, drawing them into theological contemplations about animals without the heavy-handedness of so much religious discourse. And fantasy tends to turn our thoughts to the real" (16). Although many writers have observed elements of animal ethics in the writings of Lewis, that this book-length treatment focuses specifically on this topic, providing both a theological framework as well as observations about how that is expressed—and how important Lewis's work was and is in engaging our imagination—makes this a worthwhile contribution. To quote Gilmour:

Lewis's efforts to awaken compassion and urge a more inclusive theological vision are a welcome call to see all God's creatures as consequential, to enjoy them and protect them, to learn from them and to be in community with them. If not always systematic or

consistent, his animal writing convinces through the sheer force of his imagination and its disarming wit and playfulness.

Lewis's great contribution to animal theology is, in the end, the permission he gives us to think theologically about animals, and to do so creatively. Christianity presents us with mysteries but the exercise of contemplating those mysteries is crucial. (202)

I had only one complaint about Gilmour's arguments. Lewis's theology is (appropriately) an important part of this book, playing a role in the examples, interpretations, and organizing principles. By and large this is well done. However, on occasion while exploring theological ideas, Gilmour references anecdotes or writings that precede by many years Lewis's conversion to Christianity. For example, on page 143 in a passage on hunting, Gilmour references Lewis's 1926 poem "Dymer." Although Gilmour does acknowledge that this was a pre-conversion poem, readers are left wondering how Lewis's thinking may have subsequently changed. The references to Lewis's childhood and earlier writings are valuable, but in the context of a theological explanation the references may make it difficult, on at least one or two points, to know to what extent Lewis's theology played a role in his thinking about ethics.

Overall, however, I still found the book engaging, informative, and thorough.

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