

Animals — the need for a new Catholicism

David S. Oderberg

On 8 February BBC 1 broadcast a programme on the work of Dr. Robert J. White, the American neurologist based in Cleveland, who is world-renowned for his experiments, which he calls 'body transplants', in which the body of one monkey is transplanted onto the head of another, through a joining of the carotid arteries and jugular veins, and a clamping together of the two spinal columns. In his most successful experiment, the creature remained alive for seven days, though it was paralysed from the neck down. A photograph showed it lying down, its face contorted in a grimace.

Hundreds of such experiments, involving primates of all sorts, dogs, cats, and various other animals, have been carried out in many countries, notably the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union. Dr. White has been showered with awards by his peers, both for his research and for his work with brain-damaged human accident victims. At the same time he is vilified by animal rights campaigners.

He says he can 'understand' why some people feel outraged at his experiments and his proposals for further research; people also felt outraged at the thought of kidney and heart transplants—but they are now commonplace. True, he admits, the brain is different, as it seems bound up with the very *existence* of a person in the way that their heart or kidneys do not, but as long as helping human life is the goal, there is no reason why the brain should not also be treated as transplantable, either with its original head, or into another brainless head (though the latter operation has never succeeded and is technically much more difficult).

In the television interview, conducted with Dr. White in the U.S.A., he spoke freely of his hope and belief that human body transplants will become a reality. He claimed that 'six months of practice' would be all that was needed to perfect the operation. He also spoke of the possibility that 'important' people could be kept alive through body and brain transplants; he gave the example of an important cancer scientist with an intact brain and a diseased body that threatened his life. Presumably he would also be thinking of transplanting healthy bodies onto quadriplegics' (or maybe paraplegics') heads so that they should move freely again. The various practical implications of such research are too

numerous to enumerate here, but can easily be imagined.

As I listened to Dr. White expound his views I assumed that, by the language he was using and the way he was thinking, he must (to the extent that he had thought about moral philosophy at all) be a utilitarian: the best overall consequences seemed to be all that mattered; the noble end of helping humanity justified the means of experimenting on monkeys in the way he had; animals were there to be 'used' by man for man's benefit, i.e. they had a *utility value* for mankind. It is true that the huge upsurge of interest, during the last fifteen years, in animal rights, and in the question of the morality of exploiting animals (experimentally or otherwise) merely to benefit man, is almost wholly due to the utilitarian movement in philosophy, led in this respect by Professor Peter Singer. I do not, however, believe there is a *necessary* connection here. Rather, it is because of the utilitarian focus on pain, pleasure, suffering, and so on, that this movement naturally gravitated towards issues of animal rights; for in the case of animal exploitation, revealed most graphically in the battery farms and the laboratories, it was clear that there were (and are) manifest examples of *wholesale* pain and suffering that were being ignored by all but a few people.

One does not *have* to be a utilitarian to be a supporter of animal rights. One does not *have* to deny the distinction between ends and means; or obliterate the difference between acts and mere omissions; or reject the Principle of Double Effect, and its distinction between the intention to do evil and the mere knowledge or foresight that evil may come about as the result of one's actions. One can hold to a fundamentally Catholic moral theology and still support animals' rights, deploring Dr. White's experiments on monkeys, rejecting their moral legitimacy. Indeed, the Catholic Study Circle for Animal Welfare, which works vigorously for animal rights, not least through its journal *The Ark*, would unquestionably be outraged at such experiments.

How shocked, then, I was to learn that Dr. White is a devout Catholic. He was shown attending Mass at his church, taking Communion; he was interviewed in his office, sitting in front of a relief of the Madonna and Child. He spoke with reverence of the sanctity of human life, agreeing with what he sees to be the teaching of St Thomas that animals exist *solely* to benefit man, and may be used in any way which furthers that end.

The Catholic Church is the only large-scale institution in the Western World currently fighting to protect the dignity of the human being from assault by the unconstrained and relentless advance of medical technology. One can verify this by inspecting the current philosophical literature and seeing how the 'Catholic position' is constantly taken as synonymous with the 'opposite viewpoint' against which the utilitarians are fighting. Other institutions have either given up their belief in the sanctity of human life, or never in the first place held it

as strongly as might have been thought. Judaism (to the extent that one can find a core teaching) makes exceptions concerning abortion which are clearly in opposition to the principle of the inviolability of the life of the unborn child, and is ambivalent about the proper uses of reproductive technology. Anglicanism is utterly equivocal on these matters. No major Western religious institution has a moral teaching on the dignity and holiness of human life which is as clear-sighted, as consistent, and as rigorous as that of the Catholic Church. While other organizations, both religious and secular (e.g. the numerous bioethics committees in various countries), are to a greater or less degree enthralled by the glittering horizon of genetic engineering and reproductive technology; while they regard with a certain awe and incomprehension the possibilities offered by surrogate motherhood, IVF, embryo experimentation and the like; only the Catholic Church, drawing on centuries of moral teaching and theory, consistently expresses its fear and dismay at the scientific manipulation of the very processes of life itself, at the violation of its sanctity, at the disregard of its mystery as a gift from God Himself, at the treatment of it as nothing more than something to be tamed and controlled, and used so that others might be, in some sense, 'happy'.

One might, then, sense the reason for my horror upon learning that Dr. Robert White is a devout Catholic—in fact a consultant on bioethical issues to the Vatican. How can the Church, with its endless reserves of unambiguous teaching on the absolute value of human life, a value intrinsic to the moral order, a value written by God, in His revealed truth, into the moral conscience of men—how can it harbour a man who performs the most cruel and horrendous of experiments on monkeys, who *himself* acknowledges the 'Frankensteinian' character of his work, and who, given the chance, feeling himself restricted only by the law and by public opinion, would practise the same research on human beings? There is no doubt that the alleviation of human suffering is one of his primary goals (the other being the pure pursuit of knowledge); but it was manifest that he had given *no thought at all* to the means he was using, to the possibility that no end could justify them, to the notion that he was aiming at the alleviation of all suffering of some only at the expense of the suffering of others, both non-human and, given the chance, human. He said nothing, though he was given the opportunity, about the sorts of constraints that should apply to human brain and body transplants, if they were permitted.

But leaving aside his views on as yet unrealized experiments on people, one must ask: How is it possible that the Church can harbour, as one of its own, the perpetrator of some of the cruellest and most callous acts imaginable on God's creatures? Here we have a dilemma: Does the Church, or does it not, condemn outright these and similarly cruel experiments? Does the Church, or does it not, teach that all non-human

life exists solely for the use and benefit of mankind? Is Dr. White correct to justify his hideous experiments by reference to the teaching of Catholicism? Most would say yes. (They can, though, in fact find only *qualified* support in St Thomas—he certainly did not think non-human life existed ‘only’ for human use, and he justified human domination of the animals on a hierarchic understanding of the universe which was fundamentally theocentric, not anthropocentric.)

On the other hand, the Catholic Study Circle for Animal Welfare would say no. So would the Rev. Basil Wrighton, the little-known thinker who had views ahead of his time on animal welfare, and Dom Ambrose Agius, author of *God’s Animals*; so would Jean Gaillard, author of the recent book *Les Animaux nos Humbles Frères*; and so, of course, would St. Francis of Assisi. Many Catholics are simply confused, or have not thought about the matter at all and so do not know what to say.

If the answer is no, then clearly the Church should state this unequivocally, and thereby disinter what is currently regarded as a minority view within Catholicism from its obscurity, bringing it into reconciliation with its teaching on the value of human life. Recent statements by the Pope, while encouraging, are not nearly strong enough (see *Redemptor Hominis* n.15, and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* nn. 26, 30 and especially 34). It is not sufficient to talk of the ‘natural environment’ as a whole, of ‘ecology’, of man’s ‘intelligent guardianship’ of nature, of exploitation in general, of the ‘nature of each being’ and its place in the ‘cosmos’. Abortion is not talked about in such vague terminology, nor are other threats against human life; why should the torture of innocent non-human creatures?

If, on the other hand, the answer is yes, that is, if the Church does condone such experimentation, then I would argue that there is something drastically wrong with the Church’s teaching on how man is to regard the Creation. Animals are *not* merely a resource to be exploited; they, like the rest of the Creation, are a mystery. They are, as much as is the human life which dwells in the universe with them, a gift from God and part of His plan. The Creation contains living, non-human creatures with rights of their own. However they ultimately fit into its hierarchy, it is clear that they cannot simply be tortured and abused for the benefit of man.

It is time for the Church to make clear its teaching on this urgent matter. Whichever way the question is answered, it is evident that there must be a *new* Catholicism, a Catholicism that recognises the legitimate rights of all of God’s creatures and abhors those who would deny those rights while sheltering within the bosom of the Church.