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# Before pronouncing Fido in heaven, let's consider human creatures (COMMENTARY)

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People of all ages delighted last week when media all over the world reported that Pope Francis told a distraught boy whose dog died, “Paradise is open to all God’s creatures.”

When the story proved to be false, it hardly deterred animal lovers from nurturing the hope that they will be reunited with their furry friends in the hereafter.

While I claim no special knowledge of what happens when we die, I bristle when, in this life, people put animal welfare on the same ethical plane as human welfare. I am also judgmental of people whose affections for their dogs and cats exceed their bonds with other humans.

Call it a pet peeve.

I recently unleashed a harsh judgment along these lines in the presence of my in-laws, who had only days before made the decision to have their ailing old dog euthanized.

While my wife's parents were quick to forgive my flippant judgment, I know my words stung.

Left to ponder the source(s) of my insensitivity, I realized it stems from a propensity to dismiss rather than engage important theological and ethical questions about nonhuman animals.

I did not grow up with pets and maybe that's why I have a serious blind spot in my worldview.

I have lately found myself nodding along with conservatives who worry that young people delay and forgo parenting in order to be "parents" to pets.

From luxury apartment buildings that woo childless millennials with amenities like pet washing stations to the increased prevalence of battles over pet custody in divorce proceedings, I am sympathetic to the view that a great nation should raise children, not domesticated animals.

To me, the decadence of Paris Hilton and her pathetic imitators carrying designer dogs around in designer handbags symbolizes much of what is wrong with our society.

Usually grateful when celebrities headline fundraisers for cancer research or relief efforts following natural disasters, I was less impressed when Fox aired a star-studded telethon Thanksgiving night to raise money for the homeless dogs and cats among us.

There are more than a million animal species on earth. It seems silly to speculate about whether they are saved by their faith or good works, but it is an honest question that points to the absurdity of the notion that they relate to God the same way we do.

Yet we err when we forget that we, too, are creatures. The Hebrew Bible teaches that God gave us dominion over the other animals (Genesis 1:28).

Psalm 8, a song of praise to God for creation, says of mankind: “Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor.”

The question then, is what our dominion requires.

My appetite and bank account have profited from my aversion to applying even the most basic ethical scrutiny to decisions about the meat I buy and eat.

I am not sure whether a Christian ethic forbids me from eating animals. But I am increasingly convinced that we should not torture animals, even if we eventually slaughter them.

It is at the supermarket, not the pearly gates, where we grapple with pressing ethical and theological dilemmas about nonhuman animals.

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We must be careful not to allow abstract, unknowable questions like whether our pets go to heaven distract us from alleviating human (and nonhuman) suffering here and now.

And we must weigh our compassion for animals against our greater compassion for humans who are, after all, the only creatures who bear the image of God.

A robust humanism — Christian or otherwise — places these considerations in their proper perspective. Imagining heaven as an eternal trip to the dog park contradicts much Christian teaching. But well-considered animal ethics can point us, individually and collectively, toward better human ethics as well.

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