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REIMAGINING OUR KINSHIP WITH ANIMALS



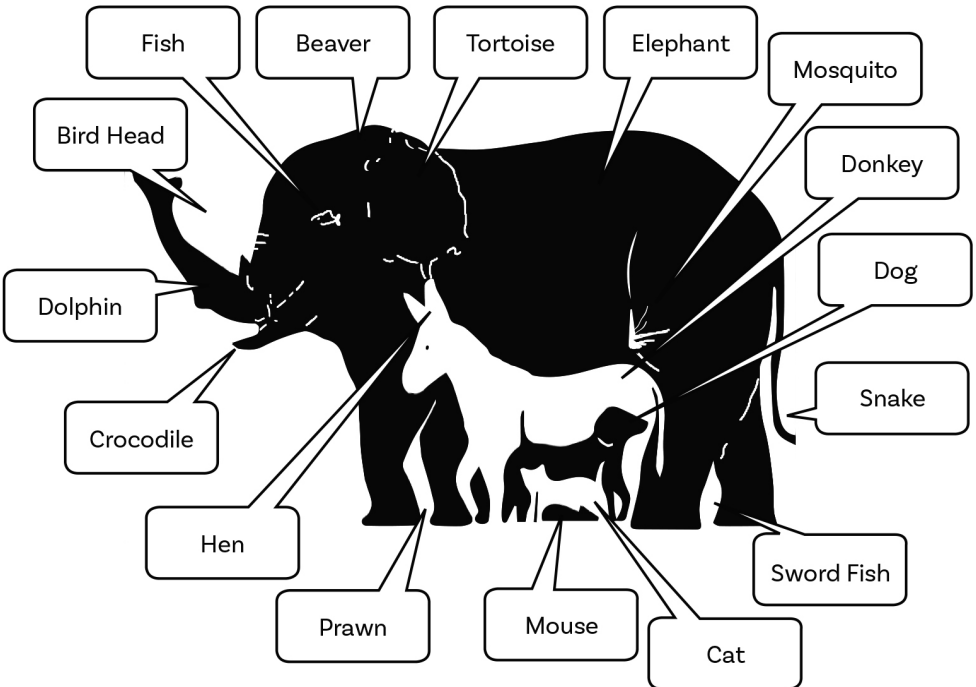
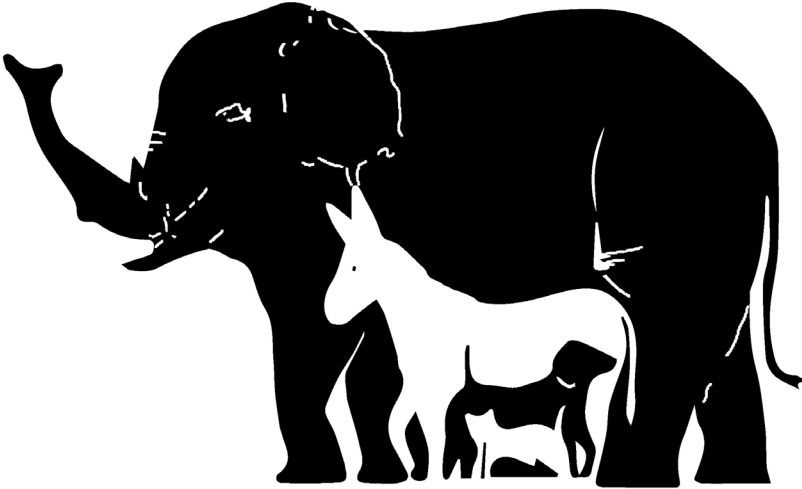
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Social media offers no shortage of quizzes and optical illusions to puzzle over.¹ Consider this commonly shared image.² The idea is to count the number of animals you can find. For most people, four animals appear immediately—the elephant, donkey, dog, and cat. Perhaps the attentive among us will also notice the mouse beneath the cat. However, for those of us who have seen our fair share of social media memes, we know that five animals cannot be the final answer. Sure

1 This chapter draws on and extends some ideas that the authors developed previously in “Philosophy as Therapy for Recovering (Unrestrained) Omnivores,” in *Philosophy Comes to Dinner: Arguments about the Ethics of Eating*, ed. Andrew Chignell, Terence Cuneo, and Matthew C. Halteman (New York: Routledge, 2016), 129–47. We are grateful to the Humane Society of the United States for permission to repurpose some material from Matthew C. Halteman, *Compassionate Eating as Care of Creation* (Washington, DC: Humane Society of the United States, 2010) and to the *Banner* for permission to repurpose some material from Matthew C. Halteman, “Eating Toward Shalom: Why Food Ethics Matters for the 21st-Century Church,” *Banner*, February 19, 2018. <https://www.thebanner.org/features/2018/02/eating-toward-shalom-why-food-ethics-matters-for-the-21st-century-church>.

2 This image appears to have first been posted on Facebook in 2016. The editors have been unable to locate the original designer, and the image has been redrawn for this volume.

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enough, it turns out that with careful inspection, sixteen animals can be spotted. Though these other animals are there all along, they are hiding in plain sight.

This clever meme offers a trivial example of how a shift in perspective can enable something previously invisible to become suddenly obvious. But such shifts in perspective can occur in more dramatic and transformational ways as well.

In this volume, for instance, we invite readers into a new frame of reference that brings environmental racism into view. (See Heffner, chapter 11.) We highlight human dependence on God's nonhuman creatures by showing how our (literally invisible) microbial gut bacteria enable us to digest our daily bread. (See Al-Attas Bradford, chapter 5.)

In this chapter, we invite readers to shift their perspectives, putting animals at center stage, even though this means confronting the many consequences of our current treatment of animals. We suggest that to care for creation, human beings must learn to see animals as fellow creatures, not just resources. We must also change our consumer habits to reflect this new vision. We hope that learning to *see* animals differently might inspire readers to *think, feel, and act* differently toward animals too.

The sad truth is that humankind's treatment of animals as mere resources to be stewarded for consumption has a big, negative impact on creation. Because we are so defensive of these practices, both individually and as a culture, it is easy to remain naïve or willfully ignorant of their impact. Being less defensive of ourselves and more curious about animals can promote important changes in our attitudes and actions that can have a big, positive impact on creation. But before we consider the drawbacks of seeing animals as resources and the benefits of seeing them as fellow creatures, let's take a look at how such a shift in perspective might play out in real life.

A Transformation of Vision

Imagine a college student, Jasmin, who has grown up with dogs in her family home. These dogs are deeply loved, spoiled, given costly medical attention when necessary, and have their own Christmas stockings. They are generally considered by everyone to be members of the family.

During college, Jasmin finds herself in an environmental studies class that visits a sustainable farm to learn about prairie restoration, wastewater treatment, and wind power. While visiting the farm, Jasmin falls in love with the peaceful surroundings, the beauty of the land, and especially the animals on the farm.

She returns outside of class hours to help Farmer Marie feed the animals, trim the goats' hooves, and weed the vegetables. All the while, baby goats nip at Jasmin's heels. She stops to check on Betsy the milk cow, who is about to deliver a calf. She gets to know several other animals on the farm by name too, including a friendly, mischievous goat named Freckles and a flamboyant rooster named Rocky.

One day when Jasmin visits, she is excited to see that Betsy's calf has arrived. Betsy nuzzles the calf and keeps him close by her side, becoming protective of the calf when Jasmin approaches. When Farmer Marie emerges from the barn, Jasmin congratulates her on the new addition to her farm. Marie thanks Jasmin and says, "We hoped she'd have a girl so we could expand our dairy herd, but since it's a boy, at least we can count on a freezer full of veal for our Christmas dinner!"

Jasmin finds this comment unexpectedly jarring. There are few people in her life she admires more than Farmer Marie. Marie is clearly a deeply caring person who sees farming as a God-given vocation, regularly professes her love for her animals, and seems committed to showing that care in practice. Moreover, Jasmin has eaten veal herself at least a dozen times, and beef is a mainstay of her diet. So it's not as if Farmer Marie's comment conveys any new, much less shocking, information.

And yet somehow her relationship with Farmer Marie's animals has led her to see animals used for farming in a different light. Her natural response has been to relate to these animals more like she relates to her dogs at home and less like she relates to her lunch. Suddenly, she sees things differently and feels downright alarmed later in the day when she and Farmer Marie find that Freckles the goat has a severe infection and needs medical treatment. Farmer Marie remarks with noticeable regret that the visit from the veterinarian would cost more than Freckles' market value, and so sadly it makes more sense to euthanize him than to pay for an expensive course of treatment.

Jasmin feels conflicted. Though she understands Farmer Marie's predicament and believes that Marie's lament is genuine, she suddenly finds this calculation upsetting. She is bewildered, too, that just weeks ago, she probably wouldn't have cared much about the fate of a sick goat. But now that she has direct personal experience of goats as unique individuals—similar to her experience of her beloved dogs as individuals—the idea that a creature like Freckles could be reduced so casually to a mere economic resource is deeply troubling to her.

Jasmin cares more about Freckles' suffering because she knows his name. (See Rienstra, chapter 8.) To Jasmin, Freckles is no longer just *something* to be bought, stewarded, and sold but *someone* with personal, creaturely dignity and moral worth. Jasmin is achieving a deeper understanding of both herself and Freckles, discovering a fellow earthling with moral standing beyond her instrumental relationship to him as merely future food. (See Joldersma, chapter 4.)

What Jasmin is experiencing is similar to what happens when you look more closely at the elephant optical illusion above. She was previously attentive to a number of animals in her life. The dogs and cats that lived in her house and slept at the foot of her bed, for instance, appeared clearly to her from the outset as individuals with desires and preferences, worthy of moral consideration, medical care, and daily attention and affection. But the interests of animals on the farm were invisible to her, even though on some level she knew they had physiology, cognitive capabilities, and moral standing similar to those of the companion animals in her home. She hasn't necessarily gained any new information through her visits to the farm, but the way she views this information has shifted and snapped into perspective in a new way. What was previously hiding in plain sight—the intimate bond between Betsy and her calf, the self-assured swagger of Rocky the rooster, Freckles' interest in continuing to enjoy his life—is now plainly evident and indeed even glaringly obvious to her.

From Transformed *Seeing* to Transformed *Being*

Jasmin's transformed vision of farm animals begins primarily as a new way of *seeing* the world. But it doesn't take Jasmin long to realize how

intimately connected this new way of seeing is to new ways of *being* in the world. She starts noticing subtle changes in the way she goes about her daily life. At the snack table backstage at play practice, she finds herself passing on the ham sandwiches and choosing a veggie sub instead. In English class, she elects to write a persuasive speech defending stronger animal welfare laws in agriculture, and in biology class, she decides to forgo dissecting a pig in favor of using a computer simulation.

When her brothers start making bacon jokes in front of a vegetarian family at church, she silences them with a subtle side-eye and explains why she was upset on the ride home. And at the cast party on closing night, Jasmin not only chooses vegetarian pizza but also explains to one of her friends what has motivated the switch. *Where did this confidence come from?* she wonders to herself. Three months ago, she was grabbing the last slice of meat-lovers pizza and wouldn't have dreamt of making waves with her friends over this issue.

Much to her surprise, Jasmin is not only *seeing* animals used for farming in a new light but also *engaging with* them in her daily life in ways that reinforce and clarify these recent revelations and motivate and embolden her to pursue further progress. Her new vision is naturally giving rise to adjustments and changes in her behavior. With each new action, the vision becomes just a little clearer, less threatening, and more approachable. As the vision is incrementally clarified, new behaviors become easier and easier to try. Jasmin is becoming less and less defensive of the views about animals she grew up with and more and more curious about where her newfound animal consciousness might lead her.

One day, a few months later, she comes across an article with a startling headline on a classmate's social media feed. The headline reads, "Veganism Is 'Single Biggest Way' to Reduce Our Environmental Impact on Planet."³ A year earlier she would have ignored or dismissed the article.

3 Olivia Petter, "Veganism Is 'Single Biggest Way' to Reduce Our Environmental Impact on Planet, Study Finds," *Independent*, June 1, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/veganism-environmental-impact-planet-reduced-plant-based-diet-humans-study-a8378631.html>.

But this year she reads on with interest: “Avoiding meat and dairy could reduce your carbon footprint from food by nearly three-quarters.”

Given that popular science journalism is often sensationalized, Jasmin traces the article back to the peer-reviewed research on which it was based. It turns out that the research was published in the prestigious academic journal *Science* by two professors from the University of Oxford who “consolidated data covering five environmental indicators; 38,700 farms; and 1,600 processors, packaging types, and retailers.”⁴ Jasmin knows better than to believe that any single study is definitive, but this experience feels like a turning point. From now on, she is not just going to pass on the occasional slice of pepperoni pizza. She is resolved to eat less meat, experiment more with plant-based foods, and see where things go from there.

Seeking Transformation through Openness to Experience

Jasmin’s experience illustrates that to see clearly what is hiding in plain sight and to begin living out these new revelations require two things. First, she needs a *transformation of vision* so that she can see animals as valuable individuals. Second, she needs a *transformation of practice* so that her daily actions match her new vision.

To clarify how these transformations work, let’s further investigate the idea of something hiding in plain sight. Why do some things appear evident to us from the outset and other things fail to appear until a jarring experience brings them into relief? Our ability to see some connections and miss others has a great deal to do with our background experiences and beliefs. What we have been taught and have experienced in the past primes us to pay special attention to experiences that confirm our expectations and to respond defensively to, downplay, or dismiss experiences that contradict our expectations. The background beliefs that give rise to our expectations are set early on by shaping institutions such as the family, religion, and culture.

For instance, in Jasmin’s home, there was no contradiction on Christmas morning between stuffing a stocking for the family dog with one

4 J. Poore and T. Nemecek, “Reducing Food’s Environmental Impacts through Producers and Consumers,” *Science* 360, no. 6392 (June 1, 2018): 987–92.

hand and snacking on bacon with the other. She was aware from trips to petting zoos and basic science classes that dogs and pigs are similar in many ways. But Jasmin never thought to question the different treatment they received because it was so common and widespread. And even if she had experienced a passing concern that this behavior was inconsistent, she would have reassured herself with the religious teaching that human beings have “dominion” over animals. She always took this to mean that animals are here for human use.

Furthermore, she trusts her teachers, parents, church leaders, and mentors like Farmer Marie as moral authorities in her life. None of them have seemed overly concerned about these inconsistencies. Without the intervention of a transformative experience such as coming to know Betsy the cow and Freckles the goat, her background beliefs and experiences would likely have offered enough moral and spiritual cover for her to dismiss any creeping doubts about her Christmas morning routine of celebrating with her dog while eating a pig.

Such background beliefs and experiences condition us to notice certain things and miss others. But then what explains cases in which we have truly jarring experiences that shake or even transform our previous beliefs? And what should we do in these cases? Jarring experiences are unsettling, but they perform an invaluable service to us in the pursuit of becoming good knowers and thoughtful moral agents.

When we experience something that feels jarring, this uneasy feeling is good evidence that there is cognitive dissonance at work. By cognitive dissonance, we mean a mismatch among our beliefs, attitudes, and actions. This mismatch occurs if we believe or value one thing but act in a way that suggests we believe the opposite. For instance, if we believe that all humans are made in the image of God but we harass and bully those who are different from us, we should feel unsettled about this inconsistency. If we want to live lives in which our beliefs and values are consistent with our actions, as we assume Christians generally should, we must remain attentive to these jarring experiences. They are clear red flags to help us notice and respond to cognitive dissonance.

Swapping Curiosity for Defensiveness

An important first step for making invisible creatures visible, then, is becoming aware of experiences that are jarring and noting them as red flags. But there is a second step that is equally important: turning away from the defensive feelings that often arise after such jarring experiences toward curiosity about where the experience might lead. The process of feeling unsettled in the wake of a new experience or reflection is uncomfortable. We human beings have a strong internal pull to remain comfortable, even complacent. Familiar habits are difficult to overcome, even for otherwise curious and engaged individuals. Our natural response is to get defensive, which could shut down the important process of investigating our beliefs to root out the inconsistencies causing the cognitive dissonance. Defensiveness is a natural response, but it closes one off from learning from a range of experiences. While defensiveness in response to a new, jarring experience closes us off, curiosity opens us up to being tutored by new experiences.

So let's rewind to the immediate aftermath of Jasmin's jarring experience on the farm. She is uncomfortable with Farmer Marie's attitude toward eating Betsy's calf for Christmas dinner and toward reducing Freckles to market value. She is also somewhat confused by it, since Farmer Marie seems to genuinely care about her animals. Jasmin can't help but think to herself that this kind of inconsistency is also operational in her own bacon-fueled Christmas morning routine. Jasmin immediately experiences a familiar defensiveness rise in her gut, and the onslaught of replies comes easily at first. She is just being a bleeding heart, attributing human attributes to animals. Sure, our treatment of animals in industrial farms is troublesome, but animals were given to us for food. And Farmer Marie's animals seem happy here on the farm until their deaths. Jasmin didn't set up the system, and animals are going to be raised and slaughtered whether she participates or not, so it is not her problem.

In the past, Jasmin might have been content to let these defensive arguments win the day, short-circuiting her thought process and soothing her concern. But what if Jasmin doesn't let these knee-jerk defensive

replies have the final say? What if she notes the defensiveness but moves past it to curiosity? What will she do next in such a case?

If Jasmin is open to following her curiosity to a truly transformed vision, she will not shrink from new experiences that are initially uncomfortable. On the contrary, she will seek out these jarring experiences, knowing that they can give rise to confidence-inspiring actions. New, bold actions may lead her to yet more jarring experiences, but she will be open to these as well. That is how transformation works: there is always something more to be uncovered. In Jasmine's case, her curiosity will lead her to pay closer attention to the interests and behaviors of the animals on the farm. She will investigate more about their biology, psychology, and cognitive capabilities. In the process, she will be continually surprised at how much they have in common with human beings. As her vision transforms, she will naturally and automatically be nudged in the direction of adopting new behaviors.

Though Jasmin's vision is beginning to change, and her actions are changing too, the behaviors she has newly adopted may feel tedious or ineffective at first. Over time, though, her sense of authenticity will grow, and in fact, the behaviors will end up opening new avenues of awareness. For instance, at first, Jasmin's newfound concern for animals applies only to those land animals that resemble her family pets. However, on a subsequent family visit to an aquarium, Jasmin sees the sea animals through a new lens. She is moved to investigate further the environmental destruction of their habitats at the hands of human beings and to learn more about their abilities to forge relationships, make memories, and anticipate the future. At home, she notes a wasp nest in a tree outside and wonders how she previously was able to see only a nuisance in what now appears as a unique wonder of engineering.

Jasmin is especially surprised to realize that as her actions continue to transform, so does her vision. She is particularly taken aback at how these lifestyle changes have reinvigorated her faith. When this process of transformation first began, she had to admit to feeling a little alienated from certain people at church who seemed skeptical of her new commitments. She even worried that maybe she was straying from a Christian vision of the human-animal relationship.

These worries prompted her to investigate further. She soon discovered Christian theologians such as Nekeisha Alexis-Baker, David Clough, and Sarah Withrow King (whose work we recommend in appendix 2). These perspectives gave her the tools to return to the Bible with new eyes, prepared to see something wonderful hiding in plain sight that is often overlooked: the Bible tells of God's deep love for nonhuman creatures, and it shows God's deep desire to restore relationships between all species. This harmony between human and nonhuman animals is described in the Genesis creation story (Genesis 1:20–31). It is anticipated in Isaiah's promise of the wolf and the lamb lying down together (Isaiah 11:6–9). It is clear in Paul's testimony that Christ's power will reconcile all creation to God (Colossians 1:19–20).

For the first time, Jasmin understands that God's human and non-human creatures fundamentally belong together. The strong bond that unites them is more like a loving family relationship than an instrumental relationship between a steward and a resource. The word *kinship* captures the nature of this bond. (See Meyaard-Schaap, chapter 3.) Jasmin is confident that she wouldn't have been as receptive to understanding other creatures as part of God's family if she were still thinking of them and treating them like mere resources to be stewarded. And she is encouraged by the thought that her new behaviors are not only consistent with the Christian vision but also opening her to a richer, broader, more coherent understanding of it.

If we look at Jasmin's experience through a lens of defensiveness, her transformation may feel exhausting, and we might be moved to get defensive ourselves. You might even be tempted to stop reading this chapter to escape what seems like a spiraling process of tedious moral self-judgment that threatens not only your breakfast bacon but also most aspects of your consumer life. But note that this response is born of defensiveness, not curiosity, and that Jasmin's experience of the process need not be seen as tedious, judgmental, and filled with deprivation. On the contrary, led by curiosity and nourished by the comfort of moving toward consistency of belief and action, she actually experiences joy rather than deprivation. She doesn't need to make every change (or any change) overnight. She

just needs to move slowly, deliberately, and joyfully toward a transformed vision of the world, and living in light of this transformed vision, in turn, inspires her to take increasingly transformative actions.

What she is doing is letting curiosity be her tutor and resisting defensiveness, allowing a transformation to occur at the level of her vision *and* her actions. These are not separate processes but rather a feedback loop in which Jasmin's behaviors expand her imagination and her imagination motivates new actions. In other words, *seeing* anew leads to *being* anew. New behaviors open the way to deeper insight, which prompts new behaviors, and so on.

As a finite, imperfect human being, Jasmin should expect to experience challenges and setbacks. There may be some robust dialogue, disagreement, and even social awkwardness with others in her community who are differently experienced and have different talents, gifts, and callings. Her efforts will never be perfect. But as long as Jasmin is motivated by a desire to see God's world more clearly and to investigate the ways in which her entrenched attitudes and behaviors can obscure her vision, she will continue to be engaged in this process of transformation.

From Personal Transformation to a Transformed Creation

Let's not lose sight of the fact that Jasmin is not the only one who stands to benefit from seeking a transformed relationship to God's nonhuman creatures. Our food system and the meat-heavy standard American diet contribute massively to the environmental crisis we now face. (See the introduction.)

We currently raise and kill almost ten billion land animals annually in the United States so that Americans can eat nearly three times the global average of meat per person per year (100 kg). Feeding these animals requires huge amounts of oil, land, and water to grow grain. The animals themselves produce unsustainable amounts of manure and greenhouse gases. Processing so many animals at a profit means that underpaid laborers must work in dangerous conditions. Further, this often-exploited workforce is disproportionately made up of minorities. Eating this many animals correlates with the rise of preventable diseases estimated to cost

\$314 billion a year in health care.⁵ Meanwhile, as Jasmin discovered, strong evidence suggests that a plant-based diet is the single most effective way for someone to reduce their negative environmental impact.

But even though we all stand to gain from reimagining our kinship with animals, we should recognize that some of us have a greater responsibility to do so. Those of us who enjoy the privilege of food autonomy—the freedom to choose from a variety of healthy foods we can afford—will have more flexibility to modify our diets. We should point out that people of goodwill disagree about how we should eat, even after reimagining our relationship to animals. More concretely, our fellowship halls will likely contain a mix of omnivores, vegetarians, and vegans even after everyone in the room has given some thought to these questions. Even so, we maintain that people who are able should strongly consider eating much less meat and many more plants. We see this intentional approach to eating as a powerful way to care for the creation in a twenty-first-century American context.

If we reimagine and transform our relationship to animals, then, all of creation stands to benefit. In particular, a journey like Jasmin's should move us *away* from viewing nonhuman creatures as resources for human use and *toward* envisioning ourselves as parts of a whole creation, called to build kinship with our fellow creatures.

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5 Modified versions of this paragraph appear in Matthew C. Halteman, "Eating Toward Shalom: Why Food Ethics Matters for the 21st-Century Church," *Banner*, February 19, 2018. <https://www.thebanner.org/features/2018/02/eating-toward-shalom-why-food-ethics-matters-for-the-21st-century-church>; and Andrew Chignell, Terence Cuneo, and Matthew C. Halteman, eds., *Philosophy Comes to Dinner: Arguments about the Ethics of Eating* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1.

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