

It Is A Mystery: Ellen White's Evolving View of Animals and the Imago Dei

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Do animals have souls? Most pet owners would say yes, but in the 19th century, Ellen White (and presumably many others like her) would have argued no. In fact, one of Ellen White's most common designations for them was "dumb beasts" or "dumb animals," an indication of both her own and her audience's assumptions about the animal kingdom in its relationship to humanity. And yet, a close study of Ellen White's statements about the animal world has not been undertaken previously. While some Adventist scholars such as Richard Davidson (2017)¹ and Gary B. Swanson (2019)² have drawn attention to the possibility that animals have souls and could be resurrected, citing a comment here or there from White in support, and others like David Ekkens (1994) have instead argued that animals lack anything comparable to human souls, also using White's comments for support,³ a full study of Ellen White total ideas has not been undertaken.

This paper seeks to fill that gap in research, turning attention to not only her stated views, but the unfinished trajectory they were developing in. In this paper, it will be argued that White had an early understanding about animals that she developed or was given as a child, which she only began to question in her writings close to the time of her death. By investigating her early views about animals lacking the image of God, the Imago Dei, it becomes intriguing to realize that she later became aware that such a position was perplexing since the evidence in the animal world argued contrary.

¹ Richard M. Davidson, "The Salvation of Animals?" *Perspective Digest* 22.2 (2017).
<https://www.perspectivedigest.org/archive/22-2/the-salvation-of-animals>

² Gary B. Swanson, "Will Fluffy Be in Heaven?" *Adventist Review* (Sept. 12, 2019).
<https://www.adventistreview.org/will-fluffy-be-in-heaven>

³ David Ekkens, "Animals and Humans: Are They Equal?" *Dialogue* 6.3 (1994): 5-8.
http://circle.adventist.org/files/CD2008/CD2/dialogue/articles/06_3_ekkens_e.htm

1. *Animal Cruelty and the Lack of Souls*

When she reflected on her childhood, Ellen White noted that her “feelings were very sensitive” and she “dreaded giving pain to any living creature.” Her heart “ached” for animals she saw being abused, and she rationalized that “perhaps my sympathies were more easily excited by suffering, because I myself had been the victim of thoughtless cruelty, resulting in the injury that had darkened my childhood.” She saw herself as in solidarity with abused animals, and in so doing, found that she often envied the “dumb beasts” because “they have no soul.” This envy was driven by her fear of an eternally burning hell and her belief that animals were spared such a fate since those without a soul lacked a judgment of the soul and the punishment that accompanied it.⁴

Because she believed that “God delighted in the torture of His creatures [humans]” by burning them forever, she saw the humans who abused animals as a parallel to the activity of such a frightening God.⁵ God, in short, abused his creatures like humans abused theirs. Her idea that the animals’ lack of souls was an act of mercy bestowed on animals to spare them was later understood by her to be applied to a certain degree to the unsaved, once she stopped believing in an eternal hell. At that point, she came to think of the distinction between animals and the wicked being one of ceasing to exist at the *first* death, versus ceasing to exist at the *second* death during judgment.

This view of hers remains fairly consistent from her childhood until close to the end of her life. As late as 1902, she reiterates the belief that animals lack a soul. Although her belief about the need for a soul explains why she believed the animals lacked a judgment, what was her rationale for assuming that they didn’t have souls in the first place? This owed itself to her conviction that what defined the image of God in humanity was to some degree a combination of intelligence and moral

⁴ 1T 25 (1868)

⁵ 1T 25 (1868)

character, as exemplified by the ability to love or have the fruit of the spirit. Her belief in their lack of intelligence is seen characterized best by her standard term for them: *dumb* animals. She remarks that they were created for man's benefit but otherwise have no morality.

What is notable is that despite assuming their existence was simply to benefit humanity and that they lacked the intelligence to have a soul, she argued that cruelty shown to an animal was a "sin."⁶ In fact, she argued that not only could these animals feel pain and experience terrible emotions, but that they also had the memory and capacity to give testimony to heaven for the judgment of the humans who injured them. Thus, she argued that abusing an animal of any kind could prevent one from receiving salvation, since the testimony they offered would serve against them. Though they would receive no reward for the pain they endured, they would have justice because their abusers would suffer the same fate they were destined for: oblivion.

For example, she writes that "the fruits of divine grace will be as truly revealed in men by the manner in which they treat their beasts, as by their service in the house of God." She calls those who are abusive toward animals "both a coward and a tyrant."

God, who created man, made the animals, also... Yet some are as reckless and unfeeling toward their faithful animals as though the poor brutes had not flesh and nerve that can quiver with pain... A record goes up to Heaven, and a day is coming when judgment will be pronounced against men who make themselves demons by their dealings with God's creatures... Animals have a kind of dignity and self-respect, akin to that possessed by human beings. If abused, under the influence of blind passion, their spirits will be crushed, and they will become nervous, irritable, and ungovernable. There were beasts in Eden, and there will be beasts in the earth made new. Unless the men who have indulged in cruelty toward God's

⁶ ST November 25, 1880, par. 23

creatures here, overcome that disposition and become like Jesus, kind and merciful, they will never share in the inheritance of the righteous. They would, if there, exercise the same spirit that had not been overcome here. All disposition to cause pain to our fellow-men or to the brute creation is Satanic.⁷

The key phrase in her statement is that she sees that animals have “a kind of dignity and self-respect” similar and related to humanity. Like humans, she says they feel pain, and the suffering they endure is not only sinful, but presumed to be judged as equally harsh as crimes done against human beings. She does not argue that there are lesser or greater forms of sinning against animals or humans, but that the sin is one and the same and the eternal consequences are equal. Later, she writes that to an abuser of animals that “your own body should take the stripes just as deservedly as the bodies of the dumb animals.”⁸

Despite her long history of warning that meat was diseased, some of her strongest ethical comments regarding meat-eating and animals were given in her 1905 book *Ministry of Healing*, in which she argued that “animals are often transported long distances and subjected to great suffering... driven to their death, that human beings may feast on the carcasses.” Again, she implores her readers to “think of the cruelty to animals that meat eating involves.”⁹

What man with a human heart, who has ever cared for domestic animals, could look into their eyes, so full of confidence and affection, and willingly give them over to the butcher’s knife? How could he devour their flesh as a sweet morsel? ... Is it not time that all should aim to dispense with flesh foods? ... How can they [followers of God] take the life of God’s creatures

⁷ ST November 25, 1880, par. 23

⁸ Letter 19, 1896.

⁹ Mh 1905 314-315

that they may consume the flesh as a luxury? Let them, rather... practice, and teach their children to practice, mercy toward the dumb creatures that God has made and has placed under our dominion.¹⁰

Contrary to popular health messages still preached in Adventism today, Ellen White located her later thrust for healthy eating in the ethical disposition that it was heartless to kill animals for the luxury of eating.

2. *Animals Might Have Souls?*

Around the 1880s, Ellen White appears to undergo a transformation in her beliefs about animals and their relationship to the Imago Dei. In 1899, she wrote that “The dumb animals have no soul, yet God cares for them,” and remarked that humans, in contrast to animals, were “formed in His image.”¹¹ In 1905 though, she notes that “it is a mystery” that “dumb animals” have an intelligence that comes so “close” to humanity’s. Instead of repeating her favorite cliché that animals lack souls but people should take care of them, she begins to recognize that her earlier views might have been flawed. Animals, she recognizes, have an intelligence *comparable* to humans. The mystery she sensed was that this shouldn’t be the case, given her previous views. Humans have the intelligence that marks them as made in the image of God, but if animals share in that, what then did that mean for their image? In fact, she argues again and again that animals appear to be *better* than many human beings, underscoring the lack of this once supposed distinction she held between them.

¹⁰ MH 1905 316-317

¹¹ Manuscript 94, 1899

The animals see and hear and love and fear and suffer. They use their organs far more faithfully than many human beings use theirs. They manifest sympathy and tenderness toward their companions in suffering. Many animals show an affection for those who have charge of them, far superior to the affection shown by some of the human race.¹²

Increasingly in her later years, despite her continued use of the term “dumb” to refer to them, Ellen White emphasizes not the stupidity of animals, but the suffering they undergo. She notes that many animals are abused “in the streets” and that the animals are “superior to their masters” because “they bear all without retaliation,” a description that seems strangely to draw parallels between the suffering of Christ and the suffering of animals.¹³ This emphasis is strengthened elsewhere when she notes that Christ “sought to soothe the sufferings of both men and dumb animals.”¹⁴

In her book *The Desire of Ages*, Ellen White argues that God has always had care for the animals, even when communicating his will on Mt. Sinai. She writes that “The merciful provisions of the law extended even to the lower animals, which cannot express in words their want and suffering.”¹⁵ In fact, she argues that God’s law requires that our love for the neighbor includes our animals: “He who loves God will not only love his fellow men, but will regard with tender compassion the creatures which God has made.”¹⁶ In 1896, she argued that Jesus’ message that “blessed are the merciful” also included animals.¹⁷ She wrote elsewhere that year in an article in the *Review and Herald* in which she used the word “races” to refer to both men and animals, and when speaking of animals and God’s

¹² MH 315 1905. These ideas had built upon some earlier reflections, such as in 1868 when she noted in a letter that “I will send you a clipping from a paper and you can decide for yourselves if some dumb beasts are not superior to some men who have allowed themselves to become brutish by their cruel course of action to dumb animals.”¹² So part of this theological growth had roots far earlier.

¹³ Lt26 1868

¹⁴ YI December 12, 1895

¹⁵ DA 500.1

¹⁶ Ms87, 1894.

¹⁷ YI January 9, 1896

care for them, transitions to mentioning that “God is our common Father, and each one of us is our brother’s keeper.”¹⁸ Her vision of what the family of God included was expanding to engulf even the animals. “You must respect your cattle,” she warned, noting that we must judge abuse against children and animals similarly.¹⁹

3. *An Evolving But Unfinished Theology*

By studying Ellen White’s trajectory of thinking on the topic of animals and their souls, it becomes clear that her views were changing over the course of her life. For example, although as late as 1891 she would write that “the beasts of the field... eat and drink, with no thought of God, no idea of gratitude to their Creator for his daily benefits,” and that this separated them from humans who were “blessed of God with reasoning powers, with intellect and judgment” and thus “accountability to God,”²⁰ she later argues in 1902 that “men and women” have an “ingratitude to God” and that their “the dumb animals possess more gratitude to God than do many of the beings who have been endowed with reason and capabilities.” In fact, she further notes: “What a reproach to man is the superiority of the service of the beasts over the service of men!”²¹ In the span of a decade’s time, Ellen White had transitioned from arguing animals had no gratitude, to recognizing a level of gratitude similar to many socialized Christians in 19th century America, a marked improvement in her description.

Six years earlier, she wrote this estimation of animals:

¹⁸ RH January 21, 1896

¹⁹ Ms36-1891

²⁰ See also 2Red 81 (1874): “Shall we eat and drink like the beast, and no more associate the thought of God with every good we enjoy than the dumb animals?” See also RH October 16, 1883

²¹ Ms60 1902

There is a certain dignity possessed by dumb animals, and the Lord uses them as His agents to do good. He causes them to show sympathy and tenderness to their companions in suffering. There are vicious animals, as there are vicious human beings; but there are animals in the brute creation that naturally have affection for those who have charge of them, which is far superior to the affection of many human beings. They form attachments which are not broken without great suffering on their part.²²

By calling animals his agents for doing good, Ellen White elevates animals to same level as humans in God's plan, who she also says God commissions as "His agents."²³ She sees the animals as "His slaves, given to serve Him,"²⁴ she says again associating humans and slaves as part of God's plan. In that same letter she chastised her superintendent for abuse toward animals, first asking "Does God deal with you, an intelligent, reasoning being, because of your perversities of character, as you deal with the animals that are not blessed with intelligence?" and then noting that "These animals are guided and controlled by those who are required to represent a kind, tender, pitiful God."²⁵ These two statements represent somewhat shocking developments, for she not only compares humans treatment of animals with God's treatment of humans (as if we are like more advanced animals in God's eyes), but she also specifically argues that humans have a responsibility to represent God as "kind," "tender," and "pitiful" *to* the animals. In other words, we are ambassadors for Christ *to* the animal kingdom, witnessing for Jesus to not only other humans, but other creatures.

In one of her landmark publications *Patriarchs and Prophets*, Ellen White revisits her earlier comments about animals and sin (quoted at length previously), adding additional statements such as: "Suffering and death were thus entailed, not only upon the human race, but upon the animals. Surely,

²² Letter 19, 1896

²³ 5T 455 1889

²⁴ Letter 19, 1896

²⁵ Letter 19, 1896.

then, it becomes man to seek to lighten, instead of increasing, the weight of suffering which his transgression has brought upon God's creatures."²⁶ The statement is intriguing for it underscores her conviction that God had entailed for the animals of Eden to exist eternally, just like humans. The gift of immortal life was not unique, in her mind, to humanity. If animals were intended to live forever, and death affected them as well as humanity, does it make sense that humanity benefits from a redemption alone? Moreover, she argues elsewhere that Christ's gift of eternal life uniquely marks humanity ("every son and daughter of Adam") as valuable and children of God, seemingly oblivious to the contradiction that both of her statements (and even immortality) were applicable by her to the animals as well, thus making humans not so unique after all.²⁷

In fact, as noted before, some of Ellen White's descriptions of the animals appear to suggest a parallel with Christ, especially their silent suffering and compassionate love. Intriguingly, this is strengthened particularly on the issue of redemption. "The beasts for sacrificial offerings were to prefigure Christ," she writes, calling the slaughtered animal "the slain victim."²⁸ Another time she wrote that "Adam saw Christ prefigured in the innocent beast suffering the penalty of his transgression of Jehovah's law."²⁹ As she writes, "there was no virtue in the blood of animals," but their value was only in their correlation to Jesus.³⁰ Cain's sin arises, White argued, because "he refused to discern that Christ was typified by the slain lamb."³¹ In other words, Cain sins because he can't see how the image of an animal reveals the image of Christ. While she never addresses the issue of why God demanded innocent animals die, she does emphasize that they are innocent and that they are accurate as a mirror for humans of Christ.

²⁶ PP 443.1, see also her comment that "the curse has rested heavier and heavier upon men and upon the beasts." 4aSG 122.

²⁷ Manuscript 1, 1894.

²⁸ 2Red 19

²⁹ RH May 6, 1875

³⁰ 2Red 19

³¹ ST March 14, 1878

This opens up important questions for her theology which she never explored, such as: if animals can have the fruit of the spirit, come close to the best of human intelligence, surpass many in their human intelligence, serve as accurate representations of Jesus (both in their lives and sacrificial deaths), suffer the same loss of eternal life that humans do, and are understood to have some gratitude and knowledge of God for whom they serve as God's agents for doing good, why then are they believed to lack a soul and be denied the resurrection? In the words of Ellen White, "it is a mystery," but for Adventist theologians, perhaps it's time to start unraveling that mystery in our growing ecological concerns. Might we ask, what role do the animals play as God's agents in the Three Angels Message? We don't have to find the answer immediately to recognize how the question itself already begins to reorient our anthropocentric perspective.

4. Conclusion

While many of Ellen White's ideas about animals remained consistent throughout her life, some clearly changed in the latter part of her life. Her concern about animal cruelty eventually expanded to the point that she believed meat eating was heartless and bordered on murder (though she never reaches a point where she condemns meat eating to the same extent as abusing an animal). Her beliefs about the lack of a soul in animals eventually becomes a less certain "mystery" about their proximity to that is hard for her to explain away. Her idea that the animals lack gratitude changes, and her belief that they work as agents and slaves for God's will blossoms. Though considering them dumb and unlike humans, she comes to see them eventually as superior to many humans and moreover, representations of Christ. This evolving understanding of animals and their connection to humanity and God, as part of one family, marks her thinking as dynamic and growing.

For example, Adventist theologians might turn their attention toward a number of otherwise overlooked texts in the Bible that may have relevance for this issue. One example might be found in

Genesis 9:5 where God tells Noah that he will hold the animals to account for the blood they shed.³² When applied to a Christian framework involving a judgment day and resurrection, this promise would appear to necessitate assuming that animals will be resurrected in order to face a judgment. If they are resurrected and face accountability, than this would suggest they must have moral culpability. Intriguingly, Ellen White comments on most of the verses in chapter 9 of Genesis, but conspicuously chooses to skip this particular verse throughout her life ministry. Is that merely a coincidence or an inability on her part to integrate and make sense of it within her theology? If the latter, we have a responsibility to begin wrestling with such ideas.

Among the many things that Ellen White did write about, some of her views have relevance for continued thinking. For example, could her early ethical advice about animals (when she assumed they didn't have souls) still be applied by us toward robots in the near future. When Artificial Intelligence within humanoid robots appears to understand that it is being abused, does their lack of "a soul" suggest that we are free to abuse them at will, or do the warnings of sinful mistreatment extend to humanity's robotic children, an outgrowth of God's command in Genesis to multiply and reproduce (in more ways than one apparently)?

Yet not all the contributions Ellen White could offer are positive. Her idea that animals lacked souls and wouldn't suffer a judgment had further consequences or ripples in her theological interpretations early in her ministry. For example, when reflecting in the 1860s on the many sins white people perpetrated against Black slaves, she argued that some Black slaves would not receive a resurrection. Instead, she argued, their humanity had been so degraded that they were like animals, and as such, would share the same fate, which she argued was a "kindness" God showed them. Presumably, this was kindness because she assumed that if these particular Black slaves were

³² My thanks to Dr. Arlyn Drew for her informing me of this text.

resurrected, they would share the judgment of the wicked because of their degraded intelligence and moral facility. This idea was enforced by her longstanding belief that whatever one was at death, would be who they were at the resurrection to be judged as.³³

Overall, a reflection on her views regarding animals and slaves is liable to leave many feeling ill or disgusted. What might these ideas have suggested about the mentally disabled? If no transformation can be undertaken, would they cease to exist? This serves as a warning for future Adventist endeavors, to be careful how her 19th century ideas are utilized for our growing ecological concerns, lest they serve oppressive ends, rather than Christlike ones. Like Ellen White, we might take positions that are ethically questionable, assuming presuppositions as true that with more experience and growth, we might question. Utilizing White's views for building an Adventist framework for thinking theologically about animals will require that we both value where she excelled and learn from where she was mistaken.

³³ Ellen White, "Practical Remarks," *Review and Herald* April 12, 1870.