

The Christian Understanding of Animal Immortality

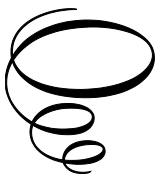
The Christian Understanding of Animal Immortality:

An Orthodox Perspective

By

Natalia Doran

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FOREWORD

Animal companionship is an important part of many people's lives. Bereavement is felt by such people very keenly, and it is made even harder to bear by uncertainty about the ultimate fate of their beloved pets. The popular image of the animal "going over the rainbow bridge" is going to be less of a comfort, and more of an intellectual insult to Orthodox Christians, who live their spiritual life within a tradition of sophisticated metaphysics. Whatever the answer they are looking for might be, it is not going to be a sentimental platitude, and it is going to have to fit within an authentic spiritual structure.

Yet Christians, who are used to turning to their faith for comfort in times of trial, and who, in principle, believe in the afterlife, become strangely agnostic when it comes to the issue of the immortality of animals, and especially of individual animals.

A certain degree of agnosticism is, of course, justified. After all, even in matters concerning our own ultimate fate, we are not provided with a great deal of detail. This is affirmed by both the mystical and the systematic theological traditions. The great 7th century mystic St Isaac the Syrian teaches: "Scripture has not explained to us what the things of the age to come are; ... Scripture has declared to us that the good things to come are incomprehensible, and have no similarity to anything here."¹ St John of Damascus, a thinker who gave the Christian East perhaps the closest thing to a systematic theology that it possesses, agrees: "He (God) has revealed to us what it was expedient for us to know, whereas that which we were unable to bear He has withheld."²

However, at least concerning our own fate we know this much, that we "look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come", and we affirm this in reciting the Creed in the course of every Divine Liturgy. In the case of animals, such clear and set statements do not exist. There are no direct answers, either in Scripture or in patristic literature, to the

¹ St Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, Massachusetts: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2020), 121.

² St John of Damascus, "Writings by St John of Damascus", in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol.17, trans. Frederic H. Chase JR. (UK: Ex Fontibus Company, 2012), 166.

question: “Will my dog go to heaven?”, which children ask and adults are embarrassed to ask.

And yet there is hope that a tentative narrative of animal immortality can be constructed within the Orthodox theological paradigm. Potential prooftexts do exist, although approaching them as such is often a matter of inference. Furthermore, Orthodox anthropology, in considering the role and place of the human within God’s creation, will logically provide certain ideas regarding the ultimate fate of animals. Last but not least, the very conceptual tools that emerged in the course of classical Trinitarian and Christological debates can provide a solid framework within which signposts for the discussion of animal immortality can be discovered. The task at hand is, in the words of the great 20th century theologian Fr George Florovsky, discerning the mind of the Fathers and applying the principles, thus discerned, to the current issues under consideration.

As St Basil the Great said in his treatise *On the Holy Spirit*: “Hunting truth is no easy task; we must look everywhere for its tracks.”³

It should be stressed, however, that the inquiry will strive to avoid any type of intellectual overreach: it is not a matter of formulating a doctrine (God forbid!), but of looking for a glimmer of hope in what can be a place of extreme pain.

³ St Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980), 16.

CHAPTER ONE

THE RELEVANCE OF THE ISSUE OF ANIMAL IMMORTALITY

Emotional connection between animals and people

My favourite cat has died: they will tell me that this death is not tragic because an animal has no personality. This argument is of no importance to me in my experience of deep grief and that for various reasons. An animal in which the great qualities of beauty, intelligence, tenderness, and charm are displayed has a clear individuality, unrepeatably, unique of its kind. This is not personality in the human sense, but all the same it is personality in a different degree. What, however, is most important is that my great love for my cat demands, as all love demands, immortality, eternity for the object of its love. I cannot think of the Kingdom of God without a place in it for my Murya. It is a question of a relationship which is completely personal on my part, and the death of the creature to whom I am not allowed the right to ascribe personality may be a very tragic thing for me. Descartes's theory that an animal has no soul and is a mere mechanism has always stirred me to revolt. The theory seems to me to be stupid and for this reason I have never been able to feel very fond of Descartes. But the denial of the possibility of immortality in the case of animals stirs me to revolt no less.¹

These are the words of the famous 20th century Russian philosopher and theologian Nicolas Berdyaev. He is well known for his exploration of Christian existentialism, freedom, dignity, personhood. There are hints of these themes (which will be explored in detail further on in this book) in the above quotation. But what comes across most strongly, in these words of his, is not so much philosophy or theology, but pure unadulterated pain, the pain of the loss of a beloved companion.

Thus the discussion of animal immortality can start in a very humble place, namely the emotional connection that people feel with their companion

¹ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, trans. R. M. French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949), 151.

animals. And such people are many in number, and include not only laity, but also clergy and monastics, some of whom are known to have enjoyed the companionship of pet animals.

A few examples can be taken from accounts of Mount Athos, otherwise known as the Holy Mountain, the monastic republic occupying one of the peninsulas in Northern Greece. It is widely considered to be the centre of Orthodox spirituality; the practices accepted in its monasteries and sketes, as well as the teachings of its inhabitants, are regarded with the utmost respect and attention.

There exists an abundance of hagiographical material which describes holy men and women of the past communicating with animals, living with them, giving them instructions, ministering to them, and being ministered to by them. As we shall see later on in the book, even wild animals recognise holiness, and respond accordingly. In this chapter several examples have been selected that are more specific, and demonstrate the emotional connection between people and animals. These examples come from the 20th and the 21st centuries, and concern one particular type of animal companionship, that is, a relationship that can be described as pet and care-giver.

Many “animal stories” are told in relation to one of the best known and loved 20th century saints, recently glorified St Paisios the Athonite. Like all Orthodox saints, he enjoyed a special relationship with wild animals, but the stories that are of particular relevance to the present discussion are the ones that tell of his companionship with animals that could be seen almost as pets of his. Two such stories are told. One is about a certain deer whom the saint regarded with great affection. The other is about a little bird who visited the saint daily during his time in Sinai:

A deer often came and ate out of his hands. He made the sign of the Cross on his forehead using dye, and told the local hunters to stay away from the monastery and to watch out for the deer with the mark. If they came across it, he said, they weren't to shoot at it. Unfortunately, one day a hunter found the deer and, ignoring the Elder's instructions, killed it. The Elder was greatly saddened, and made a prophecy about the man which turned out to be true down to the last detail.²

Above the hermitage, there was a ridge where the Elder used to go to pray with his prayer-rope. He made friends with a robin who would come there and named the bird Olet after a word meaning “child” in the Bedouin

² Hieromonk Isaac, *Elder Paisios of Mount Athos* (Chalkidiki, Greece: Holy Monastery “Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian”, 2012), 120.

dialect. When he would call Olet, the robin would immediately come and sit on his shoulder, and eventually it began to eat out of his hand.³

These accounts are significant because they reveal relationships that go beyond general compassion for animals, typical of all Orthodox saints, and beyond wild animals losing fear of holy men and women, which is also well attested in hagiography. The stories tell of personal friendship, companionship and love between St Paisios and specific animals: not just any deer and any bird, but the deer with a cross and the bird marked with the name Olet. The relationships are therefore something analogous to what common, lay pet guardians experience. The great sadness that St Paisios felt at the death of the deer is, unfortunately, also something that resonates with anyone who ever loved and lost an animal.

Another person recently glorified by the Church is Elder Porphyrios, a saint loved far beyond his native Greece, and known for his deep spiritual insight, humility, and gifts of discernment. He is recorded as telling several stories about his companion animals, who, in his case, happened to be birds: two parrots and a wild eagle whom he tamed. St Porphyrios prefaces these accounts by saying: “Prayer is to approach everything made by God with love and to live in harmony with everything, even with wild nature. That is what I desire and attempt to do.”⁴

The stories that he proceeds to tell are remarkable inasmuch as the saint clearly spent a lot of time taming his birds: both parrots, who could not be handled by humans to begin with, as well as the majestic eagle who eventually (and for obvious reasons) was given the name of John, and who became a firm friend. The second parrot proved to be very adept at talking, and St Porphyrios taught him to say the Jesus prayer and some other pious sentences.

What stands out in these tales, and what makes them slightly different in emphasis from the numerous stories of saints and animals from past ages, is the fact that St Porphyrios actively sought and built the special relationships, investing a great deal of time and effort in them, and clearly derived a great deal of enjoyment from them. Because of his exalted existential status as a saint, common Christians can draw comfort from the fact that, through his actions towards his pets, he almost sanctified, so to speak, close and loving relationships between humans and their animal friends.

³ Hieromonk Isaac, *Elder Paisios of Mount Athos*, 208.

⁴ *Wounded by Love: The Life and the Wisdom of Elder Porphyrios*, ed. Holy Convent of the Life-giving Spring-Chrysopigi, trans. Father John Raffan (Greece: Denise Harvey (Publisher), 2013), 220.

Another holy man who loved birds is Elder Gabriel of Karoula, one of the great 20th century ascetics. He is known for his incredible feats of abstinence, his gift of prayer, and many other spiritual gifts. A modern publication of the lives of twenty-four Athonite Fathers of the 20th century recounts the following observation:

He took his chisel and made a little cistern on the boulder near his cell and flattened the surface next to it, forming a little table. Twice a day he put rainwater in the little cistern and dry bread on the flat surface, setting a table for the little birds. He clapped his hands and called out in a special way and flocks of blackbirds, doves, and other birds flew to him. ... He had a robin, whom he called ‘Lalouli’, with whom he was more familiar and of whom he took special care.⁵

As in the previous two accounts, it is clear that the holy elder actively sought out the company of the birds, particularly Lalouli, and treated her as a pet.

When Elder Gabriel was nearing the end of his earthly life, he was not able to look after himself, and another monk, Father Hilarion, came to help him. Father Hilarion narrated that even at this time, very difficult physically and very important spiritually, Elder Gabriel did not forget the creatures whom he actually called his pets: “One day he told me to fill a little rock cistern with water, and at sunset, just as I put in the water, different birds, robins, chaffinches, blackbirds, and a great many others gathered, filling the area. They drank water, bathed and flew around Elder Gabriel. They would sit and look him in the eyes. He saw my perplexity and said to me, ‘These are my pets. I’ve taught them to come at sunset.’”⁶

An even more recent well-known example of animal companionship appears in the 2019 documentary *Where Are You, Adam*. Filmed in the ancient monastery of Dochiariou on Mount Athos, it allows a unique insight into monastic life, and shows, among other things, a sizeable population of cats and dogs sharing the monks’ life. The abbot, Elder Gregorios (Zumis), of blessed memory, is portrayed several times in the company of animals, at one point lovingly grooming a small white dog, and talking about the difference between people and animals, to the detriment of the former, in a way that any “animal person” would instantly identify with.

⁵ Cell of the Resurrection on the Holy Mountain, *Athonite Fathers of the 20th Century*, vol. 1 (USA: Uncut Mountain Press, 2022), 55.

⁶ Cell of the Resurrection on the Holy Mountain, *Athonite Fathers of the 20th Century*, 63.

Elder Gregorios's attitude may be unusual on the Holy Mountain, but it is not without patristic support. The suggestion that animals are better than people might raise a few hackles among modern readers, who have been schooled by humanism, from the Enlightenment onwards, to regard the human as the pinnacle of the universe. Not so in the case of Orthodox saints. The *Philokalia*, a collection of spiritual instruction from the Holy Mountain, spanning many centuries, contains some texts that advise monks, as an ascetic practice, to consider themselves lower than the animals. Referring to the saints of God, St Neilos the Ascetic, who is believed to be a disciple of the great orator St John Chrysostom, writes:

They were glad to live with the wild beasts, judging them less harmful than their fellow men. They avoided men as being treacherous, while they trusted the animals as their friends; for animals do not teach us to sin, but revere and respect holiness. Thus men tried to kill Daniel but the lions saved him, preserving him when he had been unjustly condemned out of malice (cf. Dan. 6:16-23); and when human justice had miscarried, the animals proclaimed his innocence. Whereas Daniel's holiness gave rise to strife and envy among men, among the wild animals it evoked awe and veneration.⁷

Further on in the same *Ascetic Discourse* St Neilos also reminds us that, unlike the humans, animals never rebelled against their Creator: "The animals remain within the boundaries of nature, not altering in any way what God has ordained; but we who have been honoured with the power of intelligence, have completely abandoned His original ordinance."⁸

Another Father who makes a similar comparison between animals, dogs in this case, and humans—a comparison highly unfavourable to the latter—is St Basil the Great. In his seminal work on Creation, *The Hexaemeron*, he writes:

Does not the gratitude of the dog shame all who are ungrateful to their benefactors? Many are said to have fallen dead by their murdered masters in lonely places. Others, when a crime has just been committed, have led those who were searching for the murderers, and have caused the criminals to be brought to justice. What will those say who, not content with not loving the Master who has created them and nourishes them, have for their friends men whose mouth attacks the Lord, sitting at the same table with

⁷ *The Philokalia, The Complete Text*, vol. 1, comp. St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 241.

⁸ *The Philokalia, The Complete Text*, vol. 1, 246-247.

them, and, whilst partaking of their food, blaspheme Him who has given it to them?⁹

So powerful are the words of the great hierarch, that one is tempted to end the book on animal immortality here and now, with the following *a fortiori* argument: if God will bestow eternal life on such ungrateful and rebellious creatures as humans, how much more should He show His mercy to dogs!

In spite of this, it must be noted that the love that people feel for their animal companions, though widespread and generally self-evident, is, in Orthodox circles, not uncontroversial. St Silouan the Athonite, a 20th century Russian monk revered for his teaching on love and prayer, is often quoted in this connection:

There are people who attach themselves to animals, and stroke and fondle and talk to them; and have forsaken the love of God, and because of this that love between brothers for which Christ died in great suffering gets lost. It is silly to do this. Feed animals and cattle, and do not beat them—in this consists man’s duty of kindness towards them; but to become attached, to love, caress and talk to them—that is folly for the soul.¹⁰

Anyone who genuinely loves mankind, and in his prayers weeps for the whole world, cannot attach himself to animals.¹¹

These sentiments were echoed by St Silouan’s friend, Father Tikhon the Hermit (although it is clear that Father Tikhon’s illustrious disciple, St Paisios, did not follow this particular part of his teaching, and had animal friends, as the stories quoted earlier in this chapter demonstrate). Father Tikhon is quoted as saying: “A monk should not have a relationship with animals, because these draw away his mind and heart. For instead of giving his love to God, it is distributed to the animals.”¹²

It is important to take the words of saintly teachers, and especially of a canonized saint, seriously. However, as with any patristic text, the interpretation has to be very careful, and contextual. For example, attributing general indifference towards animals to St Silouan is hardly

⁹ St Basil the Great, *The Hexaemeron*, ed. Philip Schaff (Philadelphia, USA: Aeterna Press, 2016), 83.

¹⁰ Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *St Silouan the Athonite*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1999), 470.

¹¹ Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *St Silouan the Athonite*, 96.

¹² Cell of the Resurrection on the Holy Mountain, *Athonite Fathers of the 20th Century*, 81.

appropriate. He is a saint who advocated, and displayed in his personal life, extreme sensitivity to animal suffering. He relates this particularly poignant story: “Once I needlessly killed a fly. The poor thing crawled on the ground, hurt and mangled, and for three whole days I wept over my cruelty to a living creature, and to this day the incident remains in my memory.”¹³

In order to avoid attributing internal contradiction to St Silouan’s teaching, the first quotation, ostensibly condemning affection towards pets, can be interpreted using the logic of asceticism. After all, his counsel, as well as that of Father Tikhon, was given in the monastic setting of Mount Athos. The fact that asceticism is the key is even more evident from the words of Father Tikhon, quoted above, who actually mentions potential distraction as the reason he advised against animal companionship. From the point of view of asceticism, attachment to anything worldly, be it companion animals, or business, or art, or family, can ultimately be a distraction from prayer and from following God, and, placed in such a context, can be a bad thing.

After all, Our Lord Himself said: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). So, if we are able to accept Our Saviour’s words as an indication of a hierarchy of values, without thinking that indifference to family is in itself praiseworthy, then we should have a ready key to the understanding of St Silouan’s outwardly harsh words to animal lovers. Remembering that Christ said: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt. 6:33), we are free to love our pets and to care about what happens to them in eternity, as long as we strive to put God first in everything we do. If this is not true, it would follow that we should not care about our fathers and mothers, etc., either.

The warning against inappropriate attachment, not to animals, but to fellow humans, is given in patristic spiritual instruction as well. St Isaac the Syrian, whose homilies are considered an invaluable source of instruction for monks, reminds his readers that great Fathers of the past, known for their undistracted prayer and stillness, avoided human contact even of the most innocuous kind: “For those of them who loved perfect stillness were not concerned with preserving the love of their neighbors by means of familiarity, nor did they endeavor to extend themselves so as to give the latter comfort, nor were they ashamed to avoid association with persons reputed to be in honor. ... And Abba Theodore, though he met

¹³ Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *St Silouan the Athonite*, 469.

men, this meeting was like a sharp sword, and he greeted no one when he was found outside his cell. And Abba Arsenius did not even greet those who came to him to salute him.”¹⁴

The Watchful Elder Auxentius of Grigoriou, a 20th century monk who achieved extraordinary levels of spiritual prayer, reported that conversations were for him an unacceptable distraction: “He avoided discussions, because, as he would say, ‘When I speak, I afterwards have trouble in my spiritual labours, as I get distracted by other thoughts.’”¹⁵

These were the words of a great ascetic, a man of rare talent. It is, of course, safe to assume that most people are not in such a position, and for them being distracted by interaction with either people or pets is very far down the list of spiritual problems. Ultimately, whether or not our love for an animal, or a human, is excessive and distracting, must be a question of one’s individual spiritual life, in its entirety and harmony. It is an issue that one can only aspire to address by participation in the sacraments of the Holy Church, especially in the sacrament of confession, not by one-size-fits-all answers.

Intuitive reaction to the destruction of anything good

Important though the emotional aspect of pet companionship and bereavement may be, the question of the survival or destruction of animals has wider implications for believers’ overall conception of God and His wisdom and love. When faced with the death of their beloved pet, a Christian may find solace in the intuitive thought that a good, wise and generous God could not possibly first create and then utterly destroy something so beautiful and so full of the capacity to love and to be loved, as their animal companions. This intuition may have patristic support.

In his famous work *On the Incarnation*, the very courageous (*Athanasius contra mundum*) and authoritative Father of the Church, St Athanasius, writes:

Was He to let corruption and death have their way with them? In that case, what was the use of having made them in the beginning? Surely it would have been better never to have been created at all than, having been created, to be neglected and perish; and, besides that, such indifference to

¹⁴ St Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, Massachusetts: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2020), 350-351.

¹⁵ Cell of the Resurrection on the Holy Mountain, *Athonite Fathers of the 20th Century*, 101.

the ruin of His own work before His very eyes would argue not goodness in God but limitation, and that far more than if He had never created men at all. It was impossible, therefore, that God should leave man to be carried off by corruption, because it would be unfitting and unworthy of Himself.¹⁶

The text refers to humans, of course, but an *a fortiori* argument can be constructed out of it. The saint's words would be even more relevant for animals: after all, humans rebelled against God by free choice, whereas animals are cursed (cf. Gen. 3:17) through no fault of their own, but only because of the Fall of the human. As St Athanasius points out, if God called into being creatures that were simply going to be destroyed later, it would be wasteful and unreasonable. And, if Scripture is interpreted in a way that makes God appear wasteful and lacking in foresight, such interpretation can hardly be correct. Which leads one to conclude that, in the case of animals, a form of immortality can also be hoped for.

The question may arise whether St Athanasius's statement can be used to justify *apokatastasis*, universal reconciliation, the idea that all creatures will eventually be saved. This idea is widely believed to have been condemned by the Church, and sliding into it in the course of an argument would be very undesirable indeed. It is not, however, necessary to give consideration, let alone try to settle, this question in the context of the discussion of animal immortality. The problem of the reconciliation to God of creatures who knowingly and deliberately reject Him (fallen angels and some humans) is different from the question of the destruction or survival of creatures who never knowingly turned away from God (animals).

The nature of evil

A related argument for the preservation, rather than the destruction, of creation (which would, of course, include animals) follows from the patristic concept of evil. According to the Fathers of the Church, evil has no ontological content. In strict terms, it does not exist. If this sounds counterintuitive, it would be helpful to point out that evil is only a perversion of the good, or lack of the good; it is parasitic in relation to the good and has no independent existence. This understanding of evil was not unique to Christian thought. Neoplatonists, most notably Plotinus and Proclus, and Stoics, for example Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, followed

¹⁶ St Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. D. Nutt (Apollo, Pennsylvania: Ichthus Publications, reprint from 1891), 26.

the same line of thought. Indeed, any philosopher who wants to trace reality to one single principle would naturally take care not to attribute anything less than perfect to that single cause.

Among Christian thinkers, St Gregory of Nyssa, one of the extremely influential Cappadocian Fathers, and an authoritative source of classical theology, explains this matter at length in *The Great Catechism*: “As we say that blindness is logically opposed to sight, not that blindness has of itself a natural existence, being only a deprivation of a preceding faculty, so also we say that vice is to be regarded as the deprivation of goodness, just as a shadow which supervenes at the passage of the solar ray.”¹⁷ St Gregory concludes that evil has no independent existence, and therefore no real existence. He writes: “For there is no other origin of evil except the negation of the existent, and the truly-existent forms the substance of the Good.”¹⁸

A similar understanding of evil is presented by the thinker known to us as Dionysius the Areopagite, or Pseudo-Dionysius, unrivalled in his combination of universal (Eastern and Western) influence and successful anonymity. Pointing out that everything in the universe has God as its cause, and that we cannot assume God to be the cause of evil, he concludes that evil comes about as a result of numerous partial lacks and deficiencies in the entities created by God. In other words: “What we are left with is this, namely, that evil is a weakness and a deficiency of the Good.”¹⁹ Therefore evil cannot be said to have proper ontological content, or proper existence, “if evil has no specific cause then it must be contrary to nature, and what is contrary to nature has no place in nature.”²⁰

To show that the understanding of evil outlined above is typical of patristic thought, St John of Damascus, the father of systematic theology, can also be quoted: “For evil is not some sort of a substance, nor yet a property of a substance, but an accident, that is to say, a deviation from the natural into the unnatural, which is just what sin is.”²¹

¹⁷ St Gregory of Nyssa, “The Great Catechism”, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff and Rev. Henry Wallace (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 481.

¹⁸ St Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Soul and the Resurrection”, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 450.

¹⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names”, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. C. Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 94.

²⁰ Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names”, 93.

²¹ St John of Damascus, “Writings by St John of Damascus”, in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol.17, trans. Frederic H. Chase JR. (UK: Ex Fontibus Company, 2012), 387.

To properly appreciate St John's thought, it must be noted that the word "accident" is for him a technical philosophical term, of Aristotelian origin, denoting a quality "which may either be present or active without destroying the subject"²². An example of an accident can be some mud on a horse—it is a real quality, but it is of no consequence to the status of the horse as a horse (unlike, for example, the possession of hooves) and can be destroyed without destroying the subject. And it is precisely an accident, in this technical sense, that St John considers evil to be.

Indeed, the Fathers taught that death itself, the ultimate evil, is only a privation of life, which has no independent ontological content, and therefore does not actually exist. Explaining the role of the devil in the origin of death, the great defender of Orthodox contemplative practices St Gregory Palamas writes: "He was justly driven away from the life from which he had already fled, and became a dead spirit, not dead in essence, for deadness has no essential existence, but dead through casting off true life."²³

In terms of the ultimate fate of animals, the patristic concept of the origin and nature of evil may legitimately give rise to the following intuition in the heart and mind of a believer. The very same Creed in which we say that we "look for the resurrection from the dead, and the life of the age to come" begins with the affirmation that we believe in "one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible". The visible things are, by definition, the material ones, including animals. Since God, as he created the world, declared all of His creation to be good, and since the good is the only thing that actually exists, one might say that nothing will be destroyed except that which did not exist in the first place, i.e. evil.

There is no logical need for us to fear that some parts of God's creation, namely humans, will persist into eternity, while others, namely animals, will be destroyed. It is entirely possible to assume that everything that truly exists, i.e. the good, will continue to do so—including animals. It must be stressed that this is only an intuition based on the patristic understanding of good and evil, nothing more. But nothing less, either.

As in the case of St Athanasius's thought on wastefulness, outlined above, the interpretation of the patristic concept of evil also has the potential of straying into the dangerous territory of *apokatastasis*. However, once again, it is not necessary for the present discussion to dwell

²² St John of Damascus, "Writings by St John of Damascus", in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, 43.

²³ St Gregory Palamas, *The Homilies*, trans. C. Veniamin (USA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2009), 248.

on the fate of angels and humans who reject their Creator. We are considering the fate of animals, who have not rebelled against God.

Indeed, it has been argued that they cannot do so, that they were not created with the behavioural flexibility of angels and humans, which would have allowed them to choose something contrary to their nature and to go against God. For example, when instructing monks in virtue, St Isaac the Syrian contrasts the fixed and undeviating nature of animals with the flexible nature of the human. This difference means that humans can be praised or blamed for their moral or immoral behaviour, whereas, in the case of animals, “their natural animal merits profit them nothing”.²⁴ In the sense of their moral choices, animals are outside the ethical categories of good and evil. Nevertheless, taking into account the fact that ontologically they are part of the creation that God pronounced good, it seems reasonable that we can hope for their ultimate survival, rather than destruction.

Universal connection between humans and animals

Furthermore, the teaching of modern, as well as classical, Orthodox theology emphasises a close ontological connection between humans and animals, a connection that goes beyond emotions and beyond intellectual intuitions, important though these aspects are.

Orthodox cosmology and anthropology go hand in hand, and always operate on the premise that the human is an integral part of the natural world. *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Church*, a fundamental official document of the Moscow Patriarchate, provides guidance on various social issues and forms part of the curriculum of the theological studies on seminary and academy levels. It states: “One of the main principles of the Church’s stand on ecological issues is the unity and integrity of the world created by God. Orthodoxy does not view nature around us as an isolated and self-closed structure. The plant, animal and human worlds are interconnected.”²⁵

The same premise is contained in the analogous document of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*: “We must also recall, moreover, that human beings are part of the intricate and delicate web of creation, and that their welfare cannot be isolated from the welfare of the whole natural world.”²⁶

²⁴ St Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 162.

²⁵ <https://russianorthodoxchurch.ca/en/the-basis-of-the-social-concept-of-the-russian-orthodox-church/2408> accessed 29/11/2025

²⁶ <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos> accessed 29/11/2025

The basis for these methodological statements is classical patristic teaching. Some of the most fundamental philosophical tools of classical Christian anthropology are the interrelated concepts of microcosm, the tripartite human soul, the human as the bridge between the material and the divine, as well as the idea of the whole of creation as a hierarchy of beings. None of these were original to Christian thought, having been used by various classical pagan philosophers, notably Stoics and Neoplatonists. Nevertheless, just as Christians were able to convert pagan holidays and pagan temples into Christian feasts and churches, they were also able to “baptise” many technical philosophical terms for Christian use, keeping their basic meaning, but imbuing them with additional semantic layers and spheres of application. Since the four concepts mentioned above all emphasise the connection between humans and the rest of creation (naturally, including animals), they have direct bearing on the discussion of animal immortality, and will be considered in detail in the next chapter.

Conclusion

Thus, it becomes clear that the ultimate fate of animals matters not only because people who love them want some comfort when they lose their friends, but also because the suggestion that animals are going to be destroyed forever appears to go against both the basic intuition that nothing in God’s good creation is going to be wasted, and against the patristic philosophical concept of good and evil. The idea that animals will be with us in eternity is also reinforced by the fundamental understanding of the overall connectedness of the whole of God’s creation, the understanding that forms the basis of modern theology in the global Orthodox community.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MICROCOSM, THE TRIPARTITE SOUL, THE BRIDGE AND THE HIERARCHY

The human as a microcosm

The concept of the human as a microcosm (a little cosmos/world/universe) makes use of the simple self-evident fact that we contain in us, in our bodies and minds, everything that is found in the entire “big universe”. St John of Damascus incorporates this concept into his work of systematic theology entitled *The Fount of Knowledge*. He lists in detail the qualities that the human has in common with inanimate matter, with plants, with animals, and, finally, with the angels:

In common with inanimate things, he has his body and its composition from the four elements. In common with the plants, he has these same things plus the power of assimilating nourishment, of growing and of semination generation. In common with the brute beasts, he has all these plus appetite—that is to say, anger and desire-sensation, and spontaneous movement. ... Through his power of reason man is akin to the incorporeal and intellectual natures, reasoning, thinking, judging each thing, and pursuing the virtues, particularly the acme of the virtues which is religion. For this reason, man is also a microcosm.¹

The explanation quoted above was not a theological breakthrough of any sort, but rather an affirmation, an approval for Christian use, of a well-established philosophical concept. The affirmation was probably needed because some classical philosophical concepts could bring in with them hidden metaphysical assumptions that were pagan in nature. In the manner of a cognitive Trojan horse, such assumptions could look neutral on the outside, but pervert the discussion at a later stage. The idea of the human

¹ St John of Damascus, “Writings by St John of Damascus”, in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol.17, trans. Frederic H. Chase JR. (UK: Ex Fontibus Company, 2012), 237.

as a microcosm was, on the authority of St John of Damascus, not one of them, and was safe to use in Orthodox theology.

St Isaac the Syrian finds the microcosm concept indispensable for explaining contemplative prayer. In the Orthodox tradition, a mystic would progress from the practice of virtues to the contemplation of the *logoi* (the inner principles) of created entities, and then to the contemplation of God's uncreated Grace. St Isaac points out that the second stage is possible precisely because of our affinity with all other creatures, whereas the third stage is qualitatively different because of the absolute ontological gap between us and God: "For we possess vision of the natures of things through participation in their twofold nature, because there is a portion of all things in us. But we do not have a portion of the nature of the Divine Essence, and so neither do we have, by nature, vision of It."²

Further evidence of the microcosm concept being in regular use appears in St Gregory of Nyssa's treatise *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Through his wise and saintly sister Macrina, he states: "It has been said by wise men that man is a little world in himself and contains all the elements which go to complete the universe."³

In terms of the future fate of animals, the microcosm idea can take the discussion in two directions: one encouraging, one alarming for animal lovers. The first line of interpretation would confirm and strengthen the conviction that the human is an integral part of the whole creation, not only existing in it in an interconnected way, but also bearing the entire universe in their very make-up. Our fate is bound with that of animals to such an extent that, if we expect to survive into the age to come, we can expect animals to do so also.

Such an optimistic conclusion would, however, be premature. An alternative interpretation is possible, one that would assume that the entire purpose of creating the material world was to prepare the ground for the humans and to sustain them once they have been brought into existence. It could follow from such reasoning that in the age to come the rest of the material creation can be discarded like a used ladder, because the human's future state, though still incarnate in some way, would no longer be dependent, by necessity, on anything material, making the rest of creation superfluous. The whole creation will be transfigured and saved, but only in

² St Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, Massachusetts: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2020), 264.

³ St Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection", in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff and Rev. Henry Wallace (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 433.

the sense that the human, who is a little universe, will be transfigured and saved. This approach can be described as anthropocentrism. It is not in itself characteristic of Christian theology, which is theocentric, rather than anthropocentric in its nature, but it is a faulty exegesis that should be forestalled.

Anthropocentric notions can find support (false support, as we would, hopefully, conclude later) in the texts from patristic literature that affirm that, in creating the world, God prepared the setting for humans, for which reason they were made last, and that everything was made for the sake of the humans. Examples of such statements can be found in a very clearly stated form in *The Homilies* by St Gregory Palamas:

For our sake before we existed He laid the foundations of the earth, spread out the sea upon them, poured out air in abundance over everything... If all this was also necessary for the animals to survive, yet they too were made, before we existed, for the service of man, as the prophet David sings in the Psalms.⁴

Last of all came man (Gen. 1:26), who was worthy of God's greater honour and consideration both before and after his creation. All the visible world was made before him for his sake. ... Man was a great wonder surpassing all else, towering above everything, superior to all.⁵

Heaven, earth, this whole visible world, and everything above the earth was produced for our sake. For all these things, which existed prior to any human being, were brought from non-being for our sake and made ready in advance for love of mankind.⁶

Before considering why it would be wrong to read into these inspired texts the notion that the material creation does not matter in itself and that it can be discarded at a future stage, it is worth bringing into the discussion another conceptual tool that was widely used by Church Fathers, that of the tripartite division of the human soul. It is closely connected with the microcosm concept and it can produce, when taken in isolation, the same two interpretations.

⁴ St Gregory Palamas, *The Homilies*, trans. C. Veniamin (USA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2009), 17.

⁵ St Gregory Palamas, *The Homilies*, 45.

⁶ St Gregory Palamas, *The Homilies*, 399.

The tripartite division of the human soul

The doctrine of the three-part division of the human soul originates in Plato's *Republic*. The highly ambitious self-declared mission of this famous book is to prove that the good is better than the bad. To prove such a fundamental point requires precisely the whole book, and it is achieved with the help of the metaphor of a city. Plato—or Socrates, of course—argues that the good in a human soul is too small to see, whereas if we look at it within a city it would, like something written in large letters, be easier for us to discern.

For this purpose, the picture of an ideal city is painted, with three classes of people occupying it: (1) the craftsmen, who produce material goods, (2) the warrior class who keep order, and, (3) the kings, who are wise philosophers. If these three groups exist in harmony, with the philosopher kings ruling and the warriors assisting them, the whole city would thrive, and this thriving would constitute its goodness. Transposed onto the human soul, the system includes: (1) corresponding to the craftsmen, the appetitive part of the soul, or the desiring part, responsible for physical desires, e.g. for food, drink and wealth, (2) corresponding to the warrior class, the incensive part of the soul, responsible for the drive (or the ambition, or the “spirit”, in the sense in which a spirited horse has spirit), and, (3) corresponding to the philosopher kings, the intellectual, or intelligent, part of the soul, which is the reasoning one, and has to be in charge in order for the whole soul to function in the best way possible.

Later thinkers, notably Aristotle, identified these three parts of the soul with: (1) plant life, that strives for nutrition that sustains it, (2) animal life, that is sentient, purposeful and social, and, (3) rational human life. Thus it became customary to talk of not only appetitive, incensive and intelligent parts of the soul, but also of plant, animal and rational parts.

In this form the terminology was adopted, and widely used, by the Christian Fathers. Animal faculties of the human being are mentioned whenever systematic anthropology is called for. This is how they are described by St John of Damascus in his book *On the Orthodox Faith*: “The animal faculties are those which depend upon choice; namely, spontaneous movement and sense. To spontaneous movement belong moving from place to place, moving the entire body, speaking, and breathing, for it is in our power either to do them or not.”⁷

⁷ St John of Damascus, “Writings by St John of Damascus”, in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, 239.

Numerous mentions of the three powers, or parts, of the soul are found in *The Philokalia*: from casual references, as to something generally known and accepted, to detailed analyses of virtue and vice, within the framework of tripartite terminology, by such illustrious teachers as St Maximus the Confessor, St John of Damascus, St Symeon the New Theologian and St Gregory Palamas, as well as many others. A few examples can be listed by way of illustration:

The soul is tripartite and is considered as having three powers: the intelligent, the incensive, and the appetitive.⁸

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all you might’ (Deut. 6:5). When I heard the words ‘with all your soul’ I was astounded, and no longer needed to hear the rest. For ‘with all your soul’ means with the intelligent, incensive and desiring powers of the soul, because it is of these three powers that the soul is composed.⁹

In order to make it easier to recognize the passions in terms of the tripartite division of the soul we will classify them briefly. The soul has three aspects: the intelligent, the incensive and the desiring aspect.¹⁰

In his treatise *On the Making of Man* St Gregory of Nyssa also builds his analysis on the traditional tripartite division of the human soul. To him, this originally pagan philosophical construct happens to be entirely consistent with Holy Scripture, including 1 Thess. 5:23: “I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” St Gregory maintains that the Biblical “body, soul and spirit” stand respectively for the appetitive, incensive and intelligent (or plant, animal and properly human) parts of the soul.

It needs to be noted, by way of parenthesis, that patristic anthropology operates with several triads: not only the Platonic tripartite soul concept, but also, for example, “flesh, soul and spirit”, roughly equivalent to bodily, psychological and spiritual activity. Triads in general were very popular in late antiquity, with the names of Plotinus and Proclus immediately suggesting themselves. Christian thinkers, for obvious reasons, were

⁸ *The Philokalia, The Complete Text*, vol. 4, comp. St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 304.

⁹ *The Philokalia*, vol. 3, 253.

¹⁰ *The Philokalia*, vol. 2, 337.

especially fond of finding groups of three, which were used in their writings flexibly, as the occasion demanded.

The doctrine of the tripartite soul was used by the Fathers mainly in ascetic teaching, which is why it regularly appears in *The Philokalia*; it was not used in any type of discourse about “the brute beasts”. Nonetheless, it still has its implications for the present discussion of the future fate of animals. As with the microcosm idea, it can follow two lines of interpretation, each leading to very different conclusions for the mortality or immortality of animals.

The first interpretation would continue to emphasise the fact that, since we have something in common with animals at the very core of our being, we can empathise with them and form extremely close bonds with them, in this age as well as in the age to come.

The second interpretation, based on the principle of anthropocentrism, would not only maintain that humans alone will be saved, but also use the doctrine of the tripartite soul to brush aside Biblical passages describing animals in the age to come, such as Isaiah 65:25: “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord.” The anthropocentric understanding of this text would be that it refers not to actual living breathing animals, but to the animal, or incensive, part of the human soul, being at peace with itself in the microcosm that is the human being.

Anthropocentric interpretation of patristic texts is, however, undermined very thoroughly by another fundamental doctrine of classical anthropology, namely the idea of the human as the bridge, or the link, between the material and the immaterial, or the material and the divine.

The bridge between the material and the divine¹¹

The idea of the human as the link between the material and the immaterial is analysed at length in the classical work of Christian anthropology entitled *On the Nature of Man*. It was written in the fourth century by Nemesius, Bishop of Emesa, who, while not a saint of the Church, has been very influential in the history of Christian thought. His treatise was used extensively by St John of Damascus and St Maximus the Confessor,

¹¹ Portions of this sub-chapter were previously published in my essay “Human as the Bridge between the Material and the Divine” in *Ex Patribus Lux: Essays on Orthodox Theological Anthropology*, edited by Nikolaos Asproulis and Olga Sevastyanova (Volos: Volos Academy Publications, 2021). Reproduced here with permission.

among many others. It can also be considered a work of apologetics, since the text relies on pagan, as well as Christian sources, and is clearly meant to be read by pagan and Christian alike.

Developing the traditional idea of the human as a microcosm, Nemesius notes that we have one foot in each of the two camps: of angels, who are immaterial and who are therefore apprehended only by thought, and of material creatures and objects, perceived by the senses. Thus he states that the human is: "... on the boundary between intelligible and perceptual being. He is joined together with non-rational and inanimate beings in virtue of the body and bodily powers, and to incorporeal being in virtue of reason."¹²

Because we have in us everything that is found in the rest of creation, we have the unique capacity to bind it together: "When intelligible reality and also visible reality had come to be, something needed to come to be to bind them both together, so that everything should be one and in sympathy with itself, not foreign itself to itself. So man, the animal that binds both natures together, came to be."¹³

These statements are not in themselves revolutionary; they are rather an application of one of the general principles of ancient philosophy, the principle of gradual transition, which states that *natura non facit saltus* (nature does not make jumps). However, it is significant that someone as influential as Nemesius considers it a necessary part of Christian anthropology.

St Gregory of Nyssa (to whom some of Nemesius's work was sometimes falsely attributed) also operates with the concept of the human as the link, or the bridge, between the material and the immaterial. He takes it further than Nemesius though, in two ways: (a) starting with pagan conceptual tools, he then explicitly connects them with Biblical material, and (b) he gives his narrative a more pronounced teleological dimension, directing it to the ultimate mission and purpose of mankind.

In his treatise *On the Making of Man* St Gregory acquaints us with what he calls "a great and lofty doctrine". This doctrine declares that: "While two natures—the Divine and the incorporeal nature, and the irrational life of brutes—are separated from each other as extremes, human nature is the mean between them: for in the compound nature of man we may behold a part of each of the natures I have mentioned."¹⁴

¹² Nemesius of Emesa, *On the Nature of Man*, trans. R. W. Sharples and P. J. V. D. Eijk (UK: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 37.

¹³ Nemesius of Emesa, *On the Nature of Man*, 40.

¹⁴ St Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man", in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 405.

St Gregory seeks to substantiate his idea not so much by the academic philosophical principle of nature not making jumps (though he probably considers it valid), but by appeals to Scripture, including Genesis 1:27: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” The verse is interpreted by him thus: human nature is compound and, in it, the Divine, by way of the image, is joined to the material realm, to which the male/female division belongs.

St Gregory of Nyssa takes the bridge idea further in the following way also. For him, it has eschatological implications, it is connected with the ultimate destiny of both the human and the rest of the material world. It relates, in fact, to our unique role in creation. God made the link between the material and the immaterial for a purpose, and the purpose is that nothing in creation is wasted, made in vain, left “without its portion of the Divine fellowship”. In *The Great Catechism* St Gregory makes a reference to apostolic authority as the source of his idea, and himself says: “Thus the earthly might be raised up to the Divine, and so one certain grace of equal value might pervade the whole creation, the lower nature being mingled with the supramundane. ... for the organization of the whole. By the authority that presides over all things, there was a certain power ordained to hold together and sway the earthly region, constituted for this purpose by the power that administers the Universe.”¹⁵

The eschatological development of the bridge idea is, for St Gregory, not an optional intellectual luxury, but an essential part of anthropology. There is nothing in itself flattering about sharing physical characteristics with a gnat or a mouse, unless we discover God’s purpose in making the three of us share these characteristics. We were created with a mission to bind the rest of creation together and transmit God’s grace to it, and we are uniquely equipped, both physically and cognitively, to perform this mission.

An anthropocentric stance in cosmology in general, and an anthropocentric reading of St Gregory Palamas in particular, is thus made virtually impossible. The bridge concept rather stands the anthropocentric narrative on its head: instead of the whole material creation existing for the sake of the human, the human is made to hold creation together and link it with the divine. Furthermore, why would an immortal “bridge” be created, if one of the “river banks” was destined to be destroyed? If the ultimate fate of animals (to bring the discussion back to our exact subject) did not

¹⁵ St Gregory of Nyssa, “The Great Catechism”, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 480.

matter, what would be the purpose of making humans with a mission to link them to the Divine in the first place?

As far as the fact that the humans appeared last in creation is concerned, it does not logically lead to the idea that the humans are the only creatures that matter. It simply makes sense to bring into existence first the two extremes, i.e. the immaterial angels and the material world, and then the humans who link them together.

A further nail in the coffin of anthropocentrism is hammered by the patristic concept of the hierarchy of creation. This anthropological tool is used in the description of the process by which the human can link material creation to God. It must be borne in mind, however, that it is very far from what is commonly meant by hierarchy in present-day usage.

The hierarchy of creation

A clarification of the exact nature of the human's mission towards the rest of the material creation, and of the process by which God's grace is transmitted, can be discerned in the corpus of writing by the thinker known to us as Dionysius the Areopagite. He treats creation primarily as a hierarchy, which is generally understood as: mineral, vegetable, animal, human, angelic. God is not part of the hierarchy; He is separated from it by an absolute ontological gap, but is connected to it by divine grace, or divine illumination, the "good gifts" which originate with God and pass through the hierarchy of creation.

The movement resembles that of blood circulating in the human body, with its systolic and diastolic movement, i.e. procession and return. In this movement it is the function of the higher to give, and the lower to receive. In a treatise entitled *The Divine Names* Dionysius writes first of the angelic powers, receiving the "good gifts" from God: "They are understood as bodiless and immaterial, and as minds they too understand, although in a supra-mundane way. Their longing for the Good makes them what they are and confers on them their well-being. Shaped by what they yearn for, they exemplify goodness and, as the Law of God requires of them, share with those below them the good gifts which have come their way."¹⁶

Below them, on the next rung of the ladder, are the humans, who receive the "good gifts" from the angels and give them to the next level down, namely to the animals: "By means of the angels as good leaders,

¹⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Divine Names", in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. C. Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 72.