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# The Lost Sheep in Philosophy of Religion

New Perspectives on Disability,  
Gender, Race, and Animals

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To Benjamin, Jameson, Margaret, Mary, Sadie, and Kona,  
children of God who shame the wise—

To everyone whose voice has been silenced, whose dignity  
has been downtrodden:

*He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.*

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge,  
“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

## 8 Animal Gods

*Blake Hereth*

### Introduction

It's ridiculous that non-human animals have received so little attention within analytic philosophical theology.<sup>1</sup> Doubtless this reflects widespread speciesist assumptions about them. Aquinas, for example, believed animals lacked souls and thus couldn't survive death (Dougherty 2014, 159–161). And some philosophers believe animals lack moral status altogether (Dougherty 2014, 56–76). Fortunately, the tides are changing. Philosophical theology is beginning to address issues of animal ethics (Miller 2012; Clough 2018), eschatology (Graves, Hereth, and John 2017; Harpeth 2018), and the problem of evil (Murray 2008; Dougherty 2014; Crummiest 2017). But any philosophical theology is incomplete without a consideration of whether, how, and why non-human animals take their place within theology proper—that is, within the doctrine of God. This chapter defends a particular view within philosophical theology proper: the view that some non-human animals are divine. Call this view *zootheism*. If *zootheism* is true, then a lack of attention to non-human animals within philosophical theology is not only a glaring omission but an *impious* one, for excluding *them* is excluding *God*.

### *Three 'High' Views of Animals*

Let's first distinguish between three possible 'high' views we might take of animals in theology proper. The views are 'high' insofar as they elevate the status of animals. We might think that some god or gods *manifest* as animals. This appears to be the view of Ancient Egyptians, whose divinities include Khepre, who appears as a beetle, and Anubis, who appears as a hybrid human-jackal; Hindus, with Ganesha, who appears as an elephant, and Vishnu, whose ten incarnations include four as animals, including a fish, a turtle, a boar, and a hybrid human-lion (Haberman 2018); Ancient Greeks, who believed Zeus and other gods appeared as animals (Thumiger 2014); and Christians, who maintain that the Holy

Spirit descended on Jesus during his baptism embodied as a dove. Let's call this *zoomorphism*, and let it be the following view:

**Zoomorphism:** Some divine person appears as an animal.

As a view of the status of animals, zoomorphism can qualify as a 'high' view. Christian theologians and philosophers have long believed it an honor that God would take human form (Anselm 1998; Swinburne 1994). Of course, it's possible to appear as an animal without being one. Xenophanes, for example, once remarked that if horses and oxen had a conception of God, then God would look remarkably like horses and oxen (Diels and Kranz 1952, B15). Thus, zoomorphism doesn't entail the stronger view that animals are worthy of worship or that they're divine. We can thus further distinguish between two other positions, the first of which is:

**Zoolatry:** Some animal is worthy of human worship.

Examples of this might include certain pagan, neo-pagan, and indigenous North American traditions in which animals are revered or worshipped either as divine or quasi-divine individuals (Kemmerer 2012). Assuming that divinity necessarily possesses other properties such as omniscience and omnipotence, and that those properties are distinct from worship-worthiness, zoolatry doesn't entail the existence of any divine animals. We can therefore identify at least one further position:

**Zootheism:** Some divine person is an animal.

This view, unlike zoomorphism, maintains that divine persons don't *merely* appear to be animals. They *are* animals. As divine individuals, they are worthy of worship, but also omnipotent and omniscient. This was, historically, a popular view among Greeks in Antiquity (Aston 2014).

There are, I assume, *theistic* and *deistic* variants of zootheism. We might call these *zootheism* and *zoodeism*, respectively. On a zootheist view, divine animals exist and are involved with the affairs of the world. Perhaps they created the world or sustain it, are involved with schemes of earthly redemption, and the like. On a zoodeist view, divine animals exist but aren't involved in these ways. Perhaps they play other roles, such as explaining moral facts and principles or the rationality of belief in God. The paper ahead defends a variant of zootheism/zoodeism.

### *Anselmian Theism*

When arguing that God has some property, many philosophical arguments appeal to a principle of divine perfection. For example, when

arguing that God is omniscient, it is often argued that because God is perfect and because knowledge is a good-making property with an intrinsic maxima, ontological perfection entails omniscience and thus God is omniscient (Morris 1991, 83; Flint 1998, ch. 1). Saint Anselm of Canterbury is often identified with the view that God is *ontologically* or *metaphysically* perfect, possessing all the compossible properties of perfection (Anselm 1998). Anselm's views have received extensive treatment and defense elsewhere (Morris 1989; Nagasawa 2017; Rogers 2000), so I shall forego a defense of them here. Here's Thomas Morris's explication of Anselmian theism:

It is the strongest of intuitions for the traditional theist that God is a greatest possible, or maximally perfect, being. Informing this conception are value intuitions regarding what properties are, objectively, perfections. That goodness is one of those properties is about as strong a value intuition as there can be, whose content borders on analyticity.

(Morris 1989, 50)

Let's distinguish between the *procedural* commitments of Anselmianism from its *substantive* commitments. The latter includes commitments to properties like simplicity, omniscience, and omnipresence, whereas the former is more basic. It includes only a commitment to the view that God is necessarily maximally perfect. Call this basic commitment Anselmianism.

**Anselmianism:** Necessarily, God is a maximally perfect being.

I shall assume Anselmianism in this chapter. All of my argumentation relies on the view that God is a perfect being, and I draw inferences from this perfection as other philosophers have done. While I am uninterested in defending Anselmianism from objections, I shall endeavor to defend the inferences I draw from it. If my arguments succeed, Anselmianism entails zootheism.

## The Power Argument

### *Principles of Fair Power Distribution*

The first argument for zootheism concerns a fair distribution of power. To get the argument started, I'll begin with a highly plausible claim:

**Divine Asymmetry:** If God is both omnipotent and a member of group G, and if S is neither a member of group G nor omnipotent (and if no one else outside of G is omnipotent), then G has a decisive power asymmetry over S.

Everyone should believe this claim. Omnipotence entails possessing, at the very least, all the powers it's logically possible to have. Some, like Cartesians, think it entails having even more powers than that. But even if you think omnipotence means having *less* than all the powers it's logically possible to have, it certainly entails having the *most* powers of everyone with powers. That is, we should all believe that if God is omnipotent, then no one is *more powerful* than God, and individuals who are less than omnipotent have *less power* than God. And, of course, we think that omnipotence entails more than a marginal power advantage; it entails a decisive advantage, even over those who are very powerful.

Let's move away from God for a moment and talk about political philosophy. As it so happens in the world, individuals have powers. They can vote, express their views, engage in rational reflection, move their limbs to lift, push, and pull, and coerce people to do what they want. These powers are distributed unevenly in our world, either by nature or design. Sometimes we think it's *unjust*, or at least *less than fully just*, when individuals have unequal power. This is true, for example, in cases where individuals have equal moral interests but unequal power over them. To give one such example, consider:

*Maleficent Whites:* The white citizens of Terra make up 50% of Terra's population, but fully control the city's politics. The mayor is white, the city council is white, and all the eligible voters are white. White politicians and voters decide how and when elections are conducted, who is eligible for them, who can acquire a driver's license, and which neighborhoods are closer in proximity to the city's dangerous waste dumps and volatile gas lines. All of this, of course, has an intentionally, disproportionately negative impact on Terra's non-white population, none of whom consented to the current arrangement of power.

The actions of the white citizens of Terra are clearly impermissible. They culpably violate the rights of the non-white residents of Terra, which is unfair. Now consider a different example, which I'll call:

*Beneficent Whites:* The power dynamics in the city of Stella are the same in Terra: White residents have decisive power and make up 50% of the city's population. But *unlike* Terra, the white rulers of Stella are beneficent: They make decisions that benefit white and non-white citizens alike, and benefit them equally. Thus, non-white residents are full citizens who can vote, speak their minds, and live where they please. But as in Terra, the non-white residents never consented to this arrangement of power.

As a city, Stella is a clear improvement on Terra. The rights of non-white residents aren't violated at all, much less routinely and systematically. In fact, their rights are *respected* and thoroughly defended by Stella's white rulers.

We might even say that there's nothing *unfair* about the arrangement of power in Stella. Suppose, for example, that Stella used to be solely white and that a provisional (and white) government was arranged at that time, voted upon unanimously by the residents of Stella. The rules in Stella are such that the existing government will remain in place unless 51% or more of voters elect a new government. Since each and every white citizen votes to elect the existing white government, and since they make up 50% of the citizenry, the white government never changes hands. Plausibly, a government that's elected in this manner isn't unfair.<sup>2</sup> Nor are the decisions made by the white government of Stella unfair: they respect and defend, and never violate, the rights of any citizen.

Still, there's something rotten in the city of Stella. Although non-white voters have their interests well-represented, fairness concerns not simply *what* is decided but *who* is deciding. And although the white government is democratically elected and followed a fair process, the exclusion of non-white citizens from power in Stella is less than maximally fair. Said another way, although it's not unfair that the government is white, it would be *fairer still* if the government wasn't all-white.<sup>3</sup> This is intrinsically fairer because self-representation is fairer than other-representation. Said another way: paternalism is presumptively less fair than non-paternalism between individuals sufficiently capable of caring for their own welfare, or whose welfare isn't threatened. But it's also fairer because of the possibility of abusing power. In the event that the white rulers of Stella became less beneficent—perhaps coming to resemble the white rulers of Terra—the non-white citizens of Stella would be at a decisive (and unfair) disadvantage. Whereas the actual misuse of a skewed power distribution is unfair, it's nevertheless better (because it's fairer) to have a less skewed and more equal distribution of power. So, although there's perhaps nothing unfair about the government of Stella, it's not ideal from the viewpoint of fairness. Generalizing this point, we should say that:

**Equal Power Presumption:** If A and B have morally equal interests concerning X and their (pre-consensual) distribution of power over X is maximally fair, then A and B have *presumptive equal power* over X.<sup>4</sup>

The equal power is 'presumptive' because it can be forfeited.<sup>5</sup> For example, suppose an ideal society is constructed such that white and non-white citizens have equal power, but white citizens wield their power unjustly against non-whites. In that case, it seems less than maximally fair, and indeed unfair, that the perpetrating white citizens maintain their equal

power. But where morally equal interests hold, the *presumption* of equal power is entailed by maximal fairness. I also note that the fairness of this power distribution is *pre-consensual* because if A and B consent to a different distribution of power, that may change which distribution is fairest.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the EQUAL POWER PRESUMPTION is about which distributions are fair prior to consensual arrangements.<sup>7</sup>

Let's consider two additional claims about fairness. Both concern cases in which moral interests are not equally shared. The first concerns what maximal fairness entails in cases where there are unequal but comparable moral interests. In those cases, both parties have a moral interest over X but they have those interests to different degrees. To imagine such a case, consider the case of:

*Bedroom Window:* Jacobi and Hargun live together. One day during the spring, the carbon monoxide levels reach dangerous levels in the house, prompting the need for either Jacobi's bedroom window to be opened or Hargun's bedroom window to be opened. Jacobi is mildly photosensitive and thus prefers his window to remain shut, but Hargun has severe allergies during the spring and will suffer more than Jacobi if his window is opened.

In this case, both Jacobi and Hargun have an interest in *their* bedroom window remaining closed and opening their roommate's bedroom window instead. But Hargun has the stronger interest between the two of them, since his allergic reaction is worse for him than Jacobi's (mild) photosensitivity is for him. Thus, when debating whose window to open, Hargun's preferences should take priority over Jacobi's. Because of this, maximal fairness entails that Hargun should be empowered to open Jacobi's window, but not vice versa. There are other, but more controversial examples of this. For example, many think that potential gestators have stronger bodily interests than non-gestators (other than, perhaps, fetuses), and thus that gestators should have proportionally greater say and influence over their reproductive options (Little 1999; Denis 2008). Call this underlying principle the

**Unequal Power Presumption:** If either A has a moral interest concerning X and B doesn't, or if A has a sufficiently greater interest concerning X than B, and if their (pre-consensual) distribution of power over X is maximally fair, then A will have *proportionately greater power* than B over X.

I think both the EQUAL POWER PRESUMPTION and the UNEQUAL POWER PRESUMPTION are true. But even if you reject them, you should accept one further principle, which I'll call the

**Shared Power Presumption:** If A and B both have moral interests concerning X and their (pre-consensual) distribution of power over X is *maximally fair*, then *neither A nor B has presumptive decisive power over X*.

If, for example, A has *decisive* power over X (and B doesn't), then B lacks meaningful power over X. But that's less than maximally fair because B's interests concerning X are meaningful. This is true even if we distinguish between *having* decisive power over X and *using* decisive power over X. Thus, even if the non-white citizens of Stella have *greater* interests than the white citizens, this at most entitles them to *greater* political representation on (for example) the city council. It wouldn't entitle them to total control of the city council or veto-proof majorities.

### *From Principles to Zootheism*

Let's now return to the first claim I made in this section:

**Divine Asymmetry:** If God is both omnipotent and a member of group G, and if S is neither a member of group G nor omnipotent (and if no one else outside of G is omnipotent), then G has a decisive power asymmetry over S.

Suppose now that God became incarnate as a human (and thus is a member of the group Human) but *didn't* incarnate as a non-human animal (and thus isn't a member of the group Animal). Let's also suppose that no non-human animal is either divine, human, or omnipotent. Assuming that many, if not most, members of both Human and Animal have moral interests, it follows that the group Human has *decisive* power over Animal.<sup>8</sup> But this is less than maximally fair, according to the Shared Power Presumption. If you think even some members of Animal have even some proportionately strong or equally strong moral interests with members of Human, you'll also think this power distribution violates the Equal Power Presumption.

Such a distribution is incompatible with an essential divine property: *being maximally fair*. We should think not only that God avoids being *unfair*, which is the minimum standard of fairness, but that God is instead the exemplar of moral perfection. This property requires not only that God be fair with existing individuals and groups, but that representatives of those individuals and groups exist within the Godhead.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it's not enough for those individuals to exist *contingently* within the Godhead, for contingent membership in the Godhead is contingent power in the Godhead and contingent power is contingent maximal fairness. Thus, animal members must enjoy *necessary* membership in the Godhead and share eternally in the Godhead's power. It's not enough for there to be

animal divines who come into existence whenever non-divine animals exist, and then cease existing when animals disappear. There must be no divine individual who possesses decisive power over a divine animal. The Godhead, therefore, must at every time come ‘pre-equipped’ with a membership that covers all possible interest-possessing creatures, including animals. Where moral interests are equal or roughly equal, the power must be equally or roughly equally shared.

### *Which Animals Are in the Godhead?*

What animals have a place in the Godhead? I’ll make four speculative comments on this. I’ll briefly support each of my comments.

The first is that such animals must be *sentient* and *possess some degree of intentionality*. The former is necessary for having moral interests whatsoever, and the latter is essential to *sharing* power (Cochrane 2018, ch. 2). Those incapable of exercising intentional power are also incapable of sharing it, and principles like the Shared Power Principle assume a capacity for some minimal exercise of power. It’s worth noting that this is a very low cognitive bar: the ability to choose, whether explicitly or tacitly, one state of affairs over another. Call this *agency* or *executive power*. This doesn’t require deliberative (or reflective) agency, but rather the kind of agency characterized by having preferences or desires (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 112). These animals act on the basis of reasons, whether propositional or merely perceptual. As Jeff Sebo (2017, 6–8) argues, many non-human animals have the latter kind of agency.<sup>10</sup> Dogs, for example, exercise perceptual agency when they place their faces in piles of food because they view the food as *to-be-eaten*, or a lion experiencing “her cubs as *to-be-protected*” (Sebo 2017, 11).

Second, divine animals *don’t* have to be moral agents in either the propositional or perceptual senses (Sebo 2017). Many animals have moral interests, including very strong ones, without possessing moral agency of any kind, and excluding them from sharing power in the Godhead on that basis would be less than maximally fair.<sup>11</sup>

Third, I take no stance on whether maximal fairness requires *maximal membership* in the Godhead (i.e., whether each and every animal is in the Godhead).<sup>12</sup> One natural reaction to the Shared Power Presumption is that it entails maximal membership because particular individuals have particular interests and distributing power to interest *types* over interest *tokens* thereby permits some individuals to have decisive power over other individuals with the same interest type, which is less than maximally fair. To see what I mean, consider citizenship theory: if A and B have morally significant interests, then the *starting place* for A and B is to be empowered and for neither A nor B to have decisive power over the other. If maximal fairness requires that each and every individual with interests be divine, then you and I are divine, as are our animal

companions. On the other hand, if maximal fairness requires only that *interest kinds* be represented in the Godhead, then it's enough that there is a divine individual who shares our interest-kind (e.g., our interest against suffering or our interest against heteronormativity).

Fourth, there's reason to prefer either a social monotheist or polytheist variant of zootheism over a strict monotheist view. I'll first explain the models. The first is a *strict monotheist* view on which there's a single divine individual who's uniquely God and who instantiates the various metaphysical properties (e.g., kinds, interests, and perspectives) required by divine moral perfection. The second is a *social monotheist* view on which multiple divine individuals who jointly constitute God and who instantiate the relevant, perfect-making properties. The third is a *polytheist* view on which there are multiple divine individuals, each of whom is God, who individually instantiate divine perfection. I'll briefly defend my view that there's reason to prefer either a social monotheist or polytheist model over a strict monotheist one.

The first reason to prefer either a social monotheist or polytheist variant of zootheism is that a single divine individual can't instantiate supreme love. In "Trinity and Polytheism," Wierenga develops and defends a social model of the Christian Trinity. The central idea of social trinitarianism is that the oneness of God can be explained by appeal to social or relational properties that the members share. For Wierenga, this means showing that there can be three divine persons without there being three gods. He makes the following proposal:

That is, something is *a* God just in case it *is* God. The *Quicumque Vult*, however, says, in effect, that something can be a divine Person without being identical with God. One might have uncritically been inclined to accept [that being divine entails being God], but the *Quicumque Vult* denies it. One thing I think reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity does is to call into question such uncritical acceptance. Perhaps, in fact, a thing is identical with God just in case it is a trinity of divine Persons.

(Wierenga 2004, 291)

As motivation for this claim, Wierenga appeals to an argument by Richard of St. Victor that "divine goodness and love requires that there be more than one divine person" (Wierenga 2004, 291). The argument has also been defended by Richard Swinburne (1988). If a divine person loved only themselves, they would lack "fullness of charity" (Richard 1979, 375) that comes from loving others. Moreover, since "the existence of a third" divine person "is sufficient to permit divine persons to share in supreme love," there's no need for more than three divine persons (Wierenga 2004, 291). Reconstructed, the argument goes like this:

**Richard of St. Victor's Love Argument for Trinitarianism**

1. If God exists, then God is supremely loving.
2. If the God is supremely loving, then God shares in supreme love.
3. If God shares in supreme love, then God (a) loves themselves, (b) individually loves another person equally worthy of love, and (c) jointly loves yet another person equally worthy of love.
4. Necessarily, if God is worthy of love and some distinct individual X is equally worthy of love, then X is a Divine Person.

AuQ6 (C1) Therefore, if God exists, then there are at least three Divine Persons.

AuQ7 The central premise is (P3). As a premise, it doesn't require much to believe it. It's hard to see how supreme love is compatible with a lack of self-love. Those who don't love themselves could love *better* than they do. We often think, for example, that those who fail to engage in self-care are making a mistake, and it's a mistake of love. Similarly, we often think that those who love *only* themselves lack supreme love. That's true in cases where self-love becomes self-obsession, vanity, or selfishness, but even virtuous self-love is inadequate for supreme love where when there's no one else to love. In a universe emptied of all but one person, that person, no matter how much they love themselves, lacks a kind of love that's crucial for supreme love. Finally, it's a great good of love that two individuals who love each other *share* their love with another. This establishes both cooperation between the two towards the third, and selflessness on the part of the second. What social monotheist and polytheist models have that strict monotheism lacks are multiple divine individuals who can instantiate this supreme love. The Love Argument strikes me as very strong, and thus there's very strong reason to prefer social monotheism or polytheism over strict monotheism.

The second reason to prefer either a social monotheist or polytheist model is because strict monotheism can't accommodate the various identities that the Power Argument supports. Because the Power Argument supports not only the inclusion of non-human animals within the Godhead, but also disabled individuals, people of color, queer individuals, women, etc., it supports invariably many identities within the Godhead. This raises the worry that no single individual can instantiate *all* of these identities, or at least not at once. For any divine individual G and time *t*, either G is disabled at *t* or G isn't disabled at *t*; and if G isn't disabled at *t*, then non-disabled individuals have decisive power over disabled individuals at *t*, which is less than perfectly just.

***Limiting Power***

Since the Power Argument supports the existence of multiple divine individuals, either within one Godhead or as separate gods, how is the

power distributed between divine individuals? What's a maximally fair distribution of power between them? Let's begin with an example from William Rowe (1979, 337):

*Suffering Fawn:* In some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, terribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.

Imagine now that two divine individuals, a non-human animal (Fawn God) and a human (Human God), *foresee* Rowe's suffering fawn.<sup>13</sup> Let's also suppose that Fawn God and Human God have species-typical intelligence, and that (as a result) Fawn God is less intelligent than Human God. Suppose now that Human God dislikes fawns and is happy to see them suffer, and so is unwilling to rescue Rowe's fawn despite having the power to do so. Alternatively, suppose that Human God *is* compassionate and has the power to save Rowe's fawn, but Fawn God lacks this power because of their cognitive limitations.

Under either scenario, Human God has powers that Fawn God doesn't. In the first case, Human God is able to forego saving Rowe's fawn for speciesist reasons—a power Fawn God apparently lacks. If Human God refuses to save the fawn for this reason, this also goes against the moral interests of Fawn God who, being a fawn, has an interest in avoiding discrimination against fawns—a moral interest that Human God doesn't share, at least not to the same degree. This would violate the Unequal Power Presumption. In the second case where Human God is empowered to save Rowe's fawn but Fawn God isn't, there's no discrimination at play here. So, we might suppose that Fawn God has no special interest in the saving of Rowe's fawn, and thus that Human God and Fawn God have *equal interest* in the salvation of Rowe's fawn. But if that's true, then the EQUAL POWER PRESUMPTION tells us that Human God and Fawn God should have *equal power* with respect to saving Rowe's fawn, which they don't. Thus, maximal or perfect fairness requires either that *both* Human God and Fawn God can save Rowe's fawn, or that *neither* can. Which view should we prefer?<sup>14</sup>

Generally speaking, there's reason to think that the powers of some divine individuals need to be limited. There's *also* reason to think that the powers of some divine animals need to be enhanced. As I pointed out in section Which Animals Are in the Godhead," those incapable of exercising intentional power are also incapable of sharing it, and thus the fair power principles I've defended concern those capable of sharing forms of intentional power. This simultaneously entails the inclusion of animals like fawns and dogs who possess executive power, and the exclusion of animals like wasps and plankton who lack executive power. Perhaps Fawn God has executive power and can, merely by wishing it, save

Rowe's fawn, which is also something Human God can do. If I'm right that *all* divine individuals have some form of executive power (or agency), however limited, then in cases where they all have equal moral interests with respect to X, one divine individual has power over X if and only if every other divine individual has equal power over X. Thus, if Human God can save Rowe's fawn, so can Fawn God.

I have assumed that God's power is metaphysically decisive: if God wills the salvation of Rowe's fawn, then it follows that Rowe's fawn is saved. But that's a case where God wills F and F occurs. What about cases where one can will F only by willing E, but willing E is cognitively complex? In that case, Fawn God might be unable to will F because it requires the cognitively complex willing of E, but Human God *can* will G (and thus can will F). I am inclined to think that there's no possible case like this: that there either are no precondition cases or that, if there are, then willing F entails willing E whether or not it's clear to the agent that  $\sim E \rightarrow \sim F$ . On that view, Fawn God isn't at a power disadvantage with respect to F even if they can't (directly) will E. But suppose there can be cases like this. Or, at the very least, suppose that willing E itself is cognitively complex.<sup>15</sup> If either of these claims is true, then we need a new path to fair power. One tempting suggestion is to exclude cognitively complex individuals from the Godhead. But that would be less than maximally just, since some cognitively complex individuals share equally strong moral interests with cognitively less complex individuals. The same would be true if cognitively less complex individuals have their cognitive abilities enhanced (e.g., if willing E requires knowledge of particle physics and Fawn God knows particle physics), since then there wouldn't be cognitively less complex or even cognitively disabled members of the Godhead. Nor is it a solution to exclude cognitively *more complex* individuals from the Godhead. So, if we are to include them all while excluding greater power, then those members of the Godhead capable of forming cognitively complex aims are *unable to actualize those aims*. That is, they are able to intend those aims, but they can't bring them about.

The chief alternative to this position is that such members of the Godhead *can't even intend* those aims, but has the metaphysical power to bring them about. For example, a member of the Godhead could *accidentally* bring about things they can't intend. But I think we have at least two good reasons to reject this alternative view. First, this latter view makes less sense of common theistic beliefs about divine praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. If God can intend X but not actualize it, then God can be praiseworthy or blameworthy for intending (or failing to intend) X. But if God can't even intend X, then God is neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy for intending (or failing to intend) X. Second, this view needlessly limits God's power. The general principle here is that if A is unable to intend X (but could accidentally do X) while B is able

to intend X (but can't actualize X), then A has weaker agency than B. If you can't even intend X, then you could at best do X accidentally, and accidents can't be attributed to an *agent's* strength. While it might seem that B's agency is weaker than A's because B's intentions can be frustrated whereas A's can't, which seems like a genuine difference in power, the fact is that A can neither intend nor actualize X whereas B can at least intend X. We want to preserve maximal agency within the Godhead, compatible with the (prioritized) moral perfection within the Godhead (Funkhouser 2006). That means preferring a view on which an agent's *actions* are limited but their *intentions* aren't.

## The Incarnation Argument

### *Morally Proper Incarnations*

The second argument for zootheism is about incarnations. More specifically, it's an argument grounded in traditional arguments *for* an incarnation (typically a Christian one). Here's how that argument generally goes:

Because God truly loves us, and loves us perfectly, God is not content to leave us alone. God desires to share in our experiences, our joys and our sorrows, and to meet us where we are. Doing that as a distant but sympathetic bystander is insufficient for maximal love and sympathy, since there is a great chasm between God's interests and our interests. Thus, the best way to share our moral interests is to share in our nature and become one of us, to take on our flesh and to live among us—that is, to become incarnate.

Versions of this argument have been given by Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1998), Richard Swinburne (1994, 216–220, 2010, 40),<sup>16</sup> Alvin Plantinga (2004, 2013), Marilyn McCord Adams's *Christ and Horrors* (2008, 53–79), and others. I'll assume that this fundamental view of God is correct. That is, I'll assume that a morally supreme God would indeed become incarnate to share in the plight of the oppressed. It's not enough for God to become just *anyone*, therefore. As black liberation theologian James Cone argues, a morally supreme God would come to identify *particularly with the oppressed*:

The blackness of Christ clarifies the definition of him as the *Incarnate One*. In him God becomes oppressed humanity and thus reveals that the achievement of full humanity is consistent with divine being. The human being was not created to be a slave, and the appearance of God in Christ gives us the possibility of freedom. By becoming a black person, God discloses that blackness is not what the world says it is. Blackness is a manifestation of the being of God in that it reveals

that neither divinity nor humanity resides in white definitions but in liberation from captivity.

(Cone 2018, 128)

Extending this line of thinking to non-human animals, who also suffer due both to natural harms and to human-caused harms, is only natural. As Nicola Hoggard Creegan observes, “God in Christ suffers with all that suffers, human and non-human alike” (2013, 60). She continues:

Nevertheless, in the coming of the Christ, in incarnation and in Spirit, God has come very close to us and has born our suffering and taken this suffering into the very being of who God is. We do not suffer alone. There is a growing understanding that in taking on human flesh God was also drawing close to all flesh, for our bodies are studied with the signs of the animals out of which we have emerged. Read in this light it is significant that Jesus was born in a stable, with animals perhaps for company.

(Creegan 2013, 79)

If God suffers with non-human animals without *becoming* one, is that problematic? Theologian David Clough motivates the view that there’s something problematic about God incarnating *only* as a human:

For in the scandalous particularity of God becoming incarnate in the man, Jesus of Nazareth, and defeating sin and death through the cross of Calvary and resurrection from the town, it seems that all laborers up to this point have been in vain. Here, it seems, is the final and decisive evidence that God is concerned with one species, rather than the multitude of creatures I have been seeking theologically to remember, and that Christianity will never be able to escape a blinkered preoccupation with only one kind of animal: God became human.

(2013, 81)

Clough continues:

One possible theological move immediately presents itself. If God became human for human beings, perhaps God became or will become dolphin for dolphins, gorilla for gorillas, ostrich for ostriches, herring for herrings, ant for ants and plankton for plankton. We know nothing of such incarnations—why should we?—but our ignorance is not a disproof of the thesis. Such a theory of multiple incarnations would allow us to keep Jesus Christ as God’s human project, while remaining open to the idea that other animals may also have their Messiah.

(2013, 82)

Although Clough ultimately rejects non-human animal incarnations, he argues for its status as a serious theological proposal and notes that the motivation for such a view is clear.<sup>17</sup> Were God to descend from heaven and incarnate as a 21st-century white, male, cisgender, heterosexual billionaire, it's doubtful God would be *fully* partaking in our joys and sorrows or making (all of) our interests God's interests. This is because these natures are *socially privileged* in the sense that to occupy them is to distance yourself from certain kinds of oppression. Insofar as God's aim is to join us in our oppression, God must incarnate as an oppressed person. To do otherwise is to identify with creaturely oppression only minimally. This is why, in the Christian tradition, Jesus didn't incarnate as a Roman ruler or a child of an influential family, but instead was born a person of color to a low-income Jewish family under imperial occupation. But the same is true of non-human animals. They are oppressed in ways most humans are not, and God displays a lack of solidarity with them unless God suffers *as* they suffer. This requires God to incarnate as a non-human animal. Just as the world needs not only a white savior but a *black* savior, so also the world needs not only a human savior but an *animal* savior.

### *Fitting Incarnations*

First, human nature is such a good thing that given that he has created it, it is a fitting nature for God to adopt. There is in humanity a unique mixture of the rational (humans see and pursue the good as such), the sensory (have sensations, and are influenced by non-rational desires), and the physical (operate through bodies situated in a beautiful law-governed universe). It would be appropriate for its creator to put on such a nature, as it is for a designer to wear a coat he has designed. Thereby he evinces solidarity with his creation.

(Swinburne 1994, 218)

According to Swinburne, this is an explanation endorsed by both Augustine and Aquinas. It's a curious explanation for an incarnation, but not one I'm ready to reject. I'll simply note that if these are reasons for adopting human nature, they are also good reasons for adopting other animal natures, all of which God has also created (and all of which are therefore *good* on this view). All animals have bodies, most have sensations, and many possess substantive forms of rationality. Swinburne, like Augustine and Aquinas before him, maintain that humans *uniquely* possess this mixture, but that's problematic. If it's meant to exclude animals on the grounds that they lack a kind of propositional or moral agency and are thus 'inappropriate' or 'unfitting' vessels for God, the same should be said of cognitively disabled humans who also lack these capacities.<sup>18</sup> I also have my doubts that *all* non-human animals lack the requisite cognitive

capacity Swinburne mentions: seeing and pursuing the good for its own sake. Instances of non-human animal empathy, for example, are good evidence for the conclusion that many animals have the kind of moral agency where recognition and pursuit of the good is actual (de Waal 2016, 132–133; Rowlands 2012, ch. 9). And, at any rate, the lack of these properties is not *essential* to non-human animalkind anymore than its presence is essential to humankind. Thus, even if it were ‘inappropriate’ or ‘unfitting’ for God to incarnate as a cognitively typical animal, this is no impediment whatsoever to incarnating as a cognitively *atypical* animal.

There’s also reason to doubt that cognitive abilities like believing, intending, knowing, and the like are *comparative* cognitive perfections to their cognitive counterparts.<sup>19</sup> As one ancient and early critic of Christianity, Celsus, remarks,

And if it is said that human beings are better than the irrational animals because we live in cities and occupy prominent offices and the like—I say this proves nothing: ants and bees do as much; or at any rate, the bees elect leaders and a stratified social system of leaders, attendants, servants; they have their weapons and wage their ways, slay the vanquished, build cities and even suburbs. They share in the work of their society and punish the idlers—that is to say, in driving out the drones to fend for themselves. And the ants are no less clever, for they pick out the unripened fruit for themselves to keep it throughout the year—and set a place apart as a graveyard for those of their number who have died. Indeed, the very ants meet in council to plan strategy; this is why they do not lose their way. They have a fully developed intelligence—and it seems they have as well a clear-cut notion of certain universal laws, and even a voice to make the experience of their learning known to others of their kind.

(Celsus 1987, 83–84)

Arguably, the comparative perfection of any cognitive system depends upon how well it fulfills its cognitive design plan. Thus, if cognitive system C1 is tasked with *A*-ing and C2 is tasked with *B*-ing, and if C1’s success rate is 60% and C2’s is 90%, then C2 is a comparatively better design. Maybe this isn’t the *only* measure of comparative cognitive perfection. For example, the *quality* of the thing sought by cognitive systems might make a difference to a system’s perfection. But even if justified beliefs or the successful seeking of moral knowledge is more intrinsically worthwhile than designing a hive (as bees do) or knowing precisely how to make a long-distance flight without external instruments (as pigeons do), the cognitive *successes* of the latter abilities ought to be part of an *overall* calculation of comparative cognitive perfection. And it’s not obvious to me that the typical human cognition will emerge victorious in the contest, and this challenge was of serious concern to early Christian

philosophers and theologians, such as Augustine and Origen (Miller 2018, 43). Celsus concludes with the following remarks:

But of course, the Christians postulate that everyone is a sinner, so that they are able to extend their appeal to the public at large. Now, it is perhaps the case that everyone is inclined to sin—though not everyone does sin. But if it is the case that everyone sins, why did their god not merely call mankind in general to salvation rather than the wicked? I mean, *why on earth this preference for sinners?*

(Celsus 1987, 75, emphasis mine)

I don't think Celsus's argument succeeds, but a more successful variant of it helps make the case for a non-human animal incarnation. Within God's creation, there are sinners and non-sinners alike. The vast majority of non-human animals, for example, aren't sinners. A God who incarnated to show solidarity with the sinful while ignoring the non-sinful is problematic because the non-sinful struggle and also suffer. Non-human animals are a profoundly oppressed group, and to prioritize loving and showing solidarity with the sinful—including, in most instances, the *perpetrators* of unjust animal suffering—is to show greater solidarity with the oppressors than with the oppressed.<sup>20</sup>

### Ways to Incarnate

There are three possible ways a divine person might incarnate as an animal and dwell among us on Earth: by merely *appearing* as an animal, by *becoming* an animal, and by *preexisting* as an animal. Call these possibilities the Appearance View, the Transformation View, and the Preexistence View, respectively. I'll evaluate each of these in turn and defend the Preexistence View.<sup>21</sup> Thus, my view is *not* simply a defense of the view that God might incarnate in multiple forms (Pawl 2016a, 2016b), though I think that view is true. Indeed, I think we should expect *each and every* divine individual to incarnate. Instead, it's a defense of the view that at least one divine person is *eternally* an animal.

Let's start with the Appearance View. As a view, it's analogous to the ancient Christian heresy Docetism according to which Jesus didn't become human but merely appeared as one. There are, as I see it, two problems with such a view. First, as the Christian tradition has emphasized, it's incompatible with divine perfection. If God merely appears as one of us, then God doesn't *share* in our struggles and sufferings, and is therefore less than maximally sympathetic. Second, if God merely appears as an animal without taking on their oppression, then God engages in a kind of 'animalface': a privileged individual deciding to pass as an oppressed individual. This is morally non-ideal, if not impermissible, and thus incompatible with the divine moral nature.<sup>22</sup>

The Transformation View lacks the deficiencies of the Appearance View. On this view, God wasn't an animal before but becomes one. The purpose of doing so is to share in animal life and animal suffering, to identify with animals as unjustly oppressed individuals. But the Transformation View has problems of its own, the first of which is appropriation. Prior to incarnating, God either *was* oppressed in morally similar ways to animals, or God *wasn't* oppressed in morally similar ways to animals.<sup>23</sup> If the latter is true, then by becoming an animal, God does something morally inappropriate by *appropriating* animal suffering. God, as a person of privilege, takes on animal nature—yet another kind of animalface.<sup>24,25</sup> If, on the other hand, God *was* oppressed in much the same way as animals prior to incarnating, then this problem disappears because God doesn't appropriate their oppression, but is already with them in the struggle. But animal oppression is itself unlike other kinds of oppression, such as ableism or racism, although these forms of oppression sometimes intersect (Monroe 2018; Mills 2015). So, although one may be oppressed in other ways, one doesn't experience the kind of oppression animals experience unless one *is* an animal. Thus, if God was oppressed in ways morally similar to animals prior to incarnating, then God *was* an animal prior to incarnating. The second objection to the Transformation View is this: if God became an animal but wasn't previously an animal, then God wasn't always sharing in animal life and struggles, and therefore wasn't always maximally an ally in their plight. It's better to sympathize with, fight for, and commiserate with the oppressed when they're first oppressed than to sympathize, fight, or commiserate with them later. And it's better not just in some generic sense, but with respect to *justice*. The longer God occupies a particular position of comparative privilege while the oppressed suffer under that privilege, the less just God is.

This brings us to the final view, the Preexistence View. On this view, God both is, but never became, an animal. Thus, God was always an animal. Assuming the plausible premises that each and every divine individual is always at least a member of God and that God exists necessarily (Rogers 2000), it follows that there's a necessarily existing divine individual who is also an animal. That's zootheism. Moreover, since theism plausibly entails animal incarnation which plausibly entails zootheism, theism entails zootheism.

### Final Remarks and a Religious Experience

This chapter defends the speculative view that some non-human animals may be divine. This is a thesis about divine membership. As one example, Christians have historically believed that exactly three persons are divine, and one of them (the Holy Spirit) is often represented as a dove. Perhaps the Holy Spirit *is* a dove—a particular dove who is also divine. I called this view zootheism and I distinguished it from other, related views,

such as zoomorphism (the view that divine persons sometimes appear as non-human animals) and zoolatry (the view that non-human animals are proper objects of worship). Next, I offered two arguments for zootheism: the Power Argument and the Incarnation Argument. According to the first argument, God's perfect justice entails a presumption of shared power such that among two or more persons with interests, none of them has *decisive* power over the other. Since non-human animals have interests but would be decisively outpowered if God is omnipotent and there are no divine non-human animals, it follows that there are divine non-human animals. The Incarnation Argument says that a perfectly just and loving God would incarnate as an oppressed person to share in the suffering of the oppressed. Not only that, but God would *avoid* incarnating (exclusively) as someone possessing privilege over other groups. If God incarnated exclusively as a human in a speciesist world like ours, God would thereby incarnate as a privileged individual and fail to join (and identify closely with) non-human animals in their suffering. After considering several ways God might incarnate as a non-human animal—by merely *appearing*, or *becoming*, or *preexisting* as one—I concluded that only the third option, the Preexistence View, is satisfactory. Since the Preexistence View entails zootheism, zootheism is true.

As I conclude, I would like to reflect, briefly, on my own experiences with non-human animals. I suspect experiences such as these are widely held and could furnish further arguments for zootheism, though I won't develop those arguments here. The theologian C.S. Lewis once remarked that humans will be deified in such a way that, if we knew them in their deified state, we'd be tempted to worship them. He writes,

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.

(Lewis 2001, 45)

I confess that I've experienced a temptation like that, but rarely with humans. My deepest sources of moral inspiration—experiences of sharp shame, of caring, and of desiring to be better—have arisen from my interactions with the moral qualities of *animals*. I have approached many animals, such as my late, canine sister Margaret, with moral awe. I found in her, and sometimes in other animals, a moral purity unmatched elsewhere. And I am not alone in this reaction to animals, as other philosophers point out:

People who have risked their lives to save others—running into a burning house, jumping into a freezing river, breaking cover to help a fallen comrade—often say they did not stop to reflect. They

responded directly to a situation of need in which they perceived they could act. We consider these people moral heroes. Moral action is not just about doing things out of commitments to abstract justifications; it is about moral character and action, and motivations such as love and compassion and fear and loyalty.

(Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 116)

In 2006 a beagle named Belle became the first nonhuman animal to receive the annual VITA Wireless Samaritan Award. This award recognizes individuals in the U.S. who use their “wireless phones to save lives, stop crime and help in other emergency situations.” Belle had received special training to recognize when her diabetic owner’s blood sugar dropped to dangerous levels and to respond. One morning when her owner slipped into a diabetic seizure, Belle retrieved his wireless phone and pushed the preprogrammed button to dial emergency medical services. “I am convinced that if Belle wasn’t with me that morning, I wouldn’t be alive today,” her owner claimed. “Belle is more than just a life-saver; she’s my best friend.”

(Miller 2012, 1)

Like some other non-human animals, Margaret’s kindness, her old soul, her compassionate cuddles, and her soft but eager yearn for affection betray a *godlike* nature. These religious experiences are not so easily discounted without begging the question against zootheism, at least not by theists who accept the possibility of religious experiences.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps my temptations to feel as though Margaret was as close to God as I have ever come and to worship her were not so misguided after all. Perhaps Margaret was simply one incarnation of the divine. Christians have for centuries offered a basic argument for the conclusion that Christ was divine: that Christ was profoundly good and did no wrong (Davis 2009). That sounds like Margaret to me.

## Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, “animals” refers to “non-human animals” throughout this chapter. I prefer the shorthand for purposes of clarity and concision only. Nothing of normative significance is being implied by my usage.
2. If you think *term limits* are a requirement for any just state, modify the example so that new elections are held but the white voters always elect a *new* white government. Term limits won’t guarantee *who* acquires power, only that someone new does.
3. If you think it’s *unfair* and not merely *less fair*, then an even stronger version of the Power Argument applies.
4. For those who think it’s unfair (and not merely less fair) for A and B to have unequal power, you should still accept the Equal Power Presumption. If you think it’s not only less fair, but *unfair* than A and B have unequal power over X where their moral interests concerning X are equal, then you’ll certainly

think maximal fairness entails equal power since you'll think even minimal fairness entails it.

5. It can't be waived since the fairness is *pre-consensual*, and waiving rights is intrinsically consensual. Thus, the Equal Power Presumption is about the *initial* conditions of fairness.
6. Then again, this may change nothing. It seems to me at least conceptually possible that two or more individuals might consent to a less than maximally fair arrangement, since at least some facts about fairness (as we've seen) are agreement-independent. But I'll avoid making any firm commitments on this here.
7. The distinction between pre-consensual and post-consensual fairness won't make a direct difference to my argument for zootheism, but a pre-consensual variant of the Equal Power Presumption strikes me as the less presumptuous, and so more plausible, principle.
8. On my view, inclusion in the Godhead tracks *interest* kinds and not *natural* kinds, although I accept that kinds of interest might be correlated with natural kinds.
9. Edward Wierenga makes a similar argument for the conclusion that a property such as *being maximally loving*, which God is widely assumed to possess, entails not only that God loves each individual maximally, but also that there are *multiple* divine individuals. See Wierenga 2004.
10. My endorsement of Sebo's distinction isn't meant to endorse his more central claims about agency and moral status.
11. By contrast, it *wouldn't* be less than maximally fair to exclude individuals who can't exercise power, since there's literally no way of sharing power with them. A requirement for fair distribution of resources is that those resources *can* be distributed.
12. If this were true, it would plausibly support atheism. If it's true that the existence of God entails the equal power of everyone with interests, then the fact that there are power asymmetries in the actual world (e.g., between some humans and some dogs) entails that God does not exist. Cf. Moti Mizrahi's (2014) argument that natural evils of this kind are a special and unexplored variant of the problem of evil.
13. I'm not assuming that there *is* a divine fawn. Perhaps there is, but nothing I say here commits me to it.
14. As I'll argue below, this implication has significant implications for the problem of evil.
15. Presumably there are some propositions whose actualization requires complex cognitive machinery to understand. For example, willing it to be the case that a mathematician solves Fermat's Last Theorem due to its intrinsically interesting mathematical properties doesn't seem achievable for mere perceptual agents.
16. Swinburne (2010: 40) goes so far as to claim that because God has allowed creatures to suffer, God is morally obligated to share in their suffering.
17. Clough rejects animal incarnations for four reasons. First, because it's "odd and over-complex" to posit one God and argue for multiple redemptive actions. Second, because God's incarnate redemptive actions aren't species-specific, so there's no need for further redemptive incarnations. Third, because we would have to embrace agnosticism about God's redemptive purposes for non-human animals. Fourth, because (as evolutionary biology tells us) species aren't finely delineated, and thus a redemptive program that assumes otherwise is suspect. See Clough 2013, at 82. These reasons aren't persuasive. Since oppressions differ, it's neither odd nor over-complex to posit a God who shares our suffering under multiple oppressions. Moreover,

that animals suffer intensely from both natural and human causes clarifies at least some of God's central redemptive purposes, so embracing global agnosticism is unnecessary. While we might be left with some agnosticism, since God's redemptive purposes might extend beyond these aims, that's already true of *human* redemption, so this leaves us with no more agnosticism than we began. Nor does any of this depend on the view that non-human animals are a clearly delineated natural kind. It's enough that they are *perceived* and *treated as if* they are other natural kinds to motivate incarnating as a non-human animal, or at least with the *appearance* of one, so as to endure the same oppression and liberate from within.

18. This strikes me as not only ableist, but also undermines the primary purpose of an incarnation: to enjoy solidarity with *all* of creation, including the cognitively disabled, and to share in our predicaments. To think of cognitive disability as 'unfitting' or 'unworthy' of incarnation because it's an imperfection therefore misses the point entirely: *if* cognitive disability is an imperfection as suffering is (which I deny, but the objector assumes), then that's *all the more* reason to incarnate as disabled (i.e., it's a condition eminently *worthy* of incarnation).
19. My use of the term "cognitive perfections" over "epistemic perfections" is meant to designate a broader array of cognitive abilities, goals, and successes than are arguably covered under "epistemic perfections," which tend to be more doxastic in nature. For example, when bees are more efficient at construction than humans due to their less deliberative, more instinctual cognitive machinery, it's unclear this is an *epistemic* perfection, since it has little to do with what bees *believe* or *intend*. Rather, it has to do with how they *avoid* developing certain beliefs or intentions (e.g., the intention to build only if others agree), which seems like a cognitive perfection but not an epistemic one. But I don't mean to signal any difference beyond that.
20. Multiple incarnations can solve the problem of identifying too strongly with less oppressed groups. I am not advocating a kind of 'oppression Olympics' for incarnations, where God seeks to identify *exclusively* with members of a maximally oppressed group. For example, if God incarnated once as a human woman and again as a non-human animal, then God would identify with both groups effectively.
21. Some might express surprise at anything other than the Transformation View counting as a view about *incarnation*, since an incarnation without transformation isn't really an incarnation. Incarnation requires *becoming* something that one isn't. I'm agnostic about this conceptual dispute. But my view preserves a view on which an embodied God comes to be with their suffering people, which strikes me as the most important feature of any incarnation account.
22. There's a variant of the Appearance View wherein God *involuntarily* appears as an animal on Earth. But that makes a divine incarnation involuntary, which is problematic. Moreover, a perfect God wouldn't be such that they involuntarily appear as an animal without being one, since that's a kind of built-in appropriation.
23. Kevin Timpe has expressed skepticism about my view that appropriation can occur even if the transformation is complete. But my claim isn't that the *successful transformation* is appropriative, only that the *decision to transform* is appropriative.
24. This is also my standard for sufficient moral similarity in oppression: S1 is oppressed in a morally similar way to S2 such that, if S1 attempts to share in the oppression of S2, then S1 does nothing morally inappropriate (or appropriative).

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25. It might be objected that God isn't appropriating animal oppression if God *becomes* an animal. But this is morally analogous to claiming that Rachel Dolezal wouldn't have appropriated black oppression if she had succeeded at becoming a black woman. At the very least, we should think there's something morally problematic about transforming our race or species as a means of identifying with the oppressed.
26. For a traditional theistic approach to the epistemology of religious experience, see William Alston 1993 and Alvin Plantinga 1967, 2000. For a general approach to which I'm more sympathetic, see Burns 2017. For a skeptical view, see Fales 2005.

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