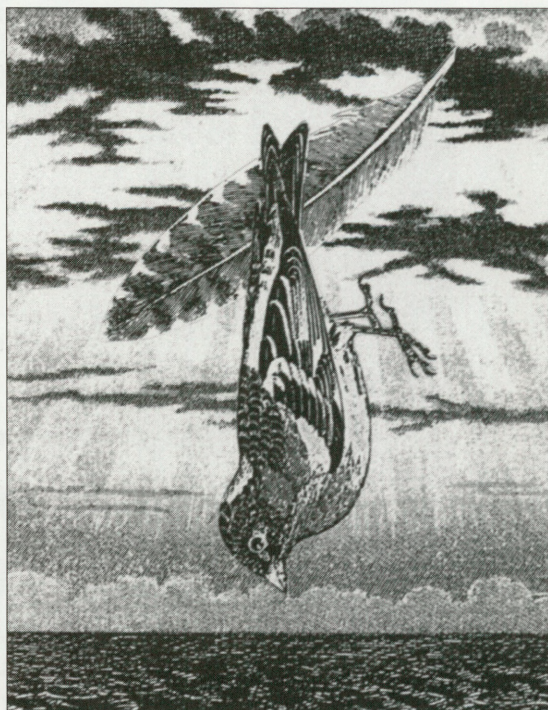


Live and Let Live: An Interview with Stephen R. L. Clark

By Gary Chartier

Stephen R. L. Clark is the most creative and accomplished philosopher of religion of his generation, a sophisticated philosophical and theological defender of the interests of the nonhuman world, and an articulate and capable contributor to discussions of moral and political philosophy, the philosophy of mind, and environmental philosophy.



Formerly a fellow of Oxford's All Souls' College (1968-75) and a member of the philosophy faculty of the University of Glasgow (1974-83), he is currently professor of philosophy at the University of Liverpool (1984-present). He has served on Britain's Farm Animal Welfare Council and is currently a member of the British government's Animal Procedures Committee.

Clark currently holds a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship for work on the ethical theory of the neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus. He is the author of many books (see box). He is also the editor of *Money, Obedience, and Affection: Essays on Berkeley's Moral and Political Thought*, and the author of numerous scholarly articles in journals. He is the subject of a recent critical study, *Not Even a Sparrow Falls: The Philosophy of Stephen R. L. Clark*, by Daniel A. Dombrowski. This interview took place online in July 2003.

Gary Chartier *In what ways does your philosophical scholarship either reflect or inform your Christian faith? Are philosophy and theology enemies or allies?*

Stephen R. L. Clark The techniques of philosophical enquiry were partly created by Christian and other theologians, and they are there to be used to help understanding. The popular view that philosophers are

is very strong reason for interference—allowing them the space to live.

GC *Are the moral constraints on our treatment of nonhuman animals largely the same as the moral constraints on our treatment of human animals?*

SRLC It is easier for us to understand what other

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bound to be atheists is simply false. I do find that mainstream theologians nowadays are sometimes too inclined to resort to rhetoric, or to buy into antirealist or constructivist interpretations, as if theological realism were somehow impossible “nowadays.” They then speak as if philosophers were theologically naïve for being realists! So there is a tension between theologians and philosophers!

GC *How did you become interested in philosophical and theological issues related to the nonhuman world?*

SRLC My wife and I converted to vegetarianism soon after our marriage because we couldn't bear to continue financing modern farming practices. I decided to give some lectures in Oxford on the topic of animals. These developed after our move to Glasgow into a larger lecture series and book.

GC *What do you believe are our primary responsibilities with respect to the nonhuman world?*

SRLC Live and let live. We also have additional direct responsibilities to domesticated animals, as part of our society and civilization.

GC *Can you say just a bit more about living and letting live?*

SRLC If God hates nothing that he has made, it follows that each creature needs the space to be itself. Imposing our own plans on others, even with the pretext of “doing them good,” denies them that space. Of course, in this world here, our very existence imposes upon others, but the better society is one in which there is the maximum liberty for each combined with equal liberty for all. Respecting God's creatures requires us also to respect their ways of being, and—unless there

humans are doing, and to empathize with their problems. It's also easier, in general though not always in particular, to come to some explicit agreement about spheres of action, property, and the like. But the fundamental requirement, of respect for God's creatures, is the same in all cases.

GC *What special obligations might we have to particular nonhuman animals in virtue of our society and civilization?*

SRLC “Domesticated” animals have been incorporated into our society (originally, the relationship may have been more balanced: a mutually supportive society was created that was neither wholly human nor wholly, for example, canine). We have direct responsibilities that go beyond the “live and let live” rule: they are owed for their service and support. If we don't provide that support we haven't the slightest right to the services we demand of them—and of course some parts of the implicit contract have long been broken, and other parts were probably illicit from the start.

GC *What, in general terms, ought to be our stance regarding the development and use of technology? At what point does putative technological advance violate the “live and let live” principle?*

SRLC When it denies space and being to others, or depends openly on a view of other creatures as mere instruments of our will.

GC *How might the practice of keeping the Sabbath reflect and inform a contemporary Christian ecological consciousness?*



SRLC The sabbatarian project as it is described in the biblical texts is, precisely, about allowing things their space—not treating them entirely as if they were made to be used by us. I wrote on this in *How to Think about the Earth*.

The sabbatarian rules include requirements to leave food for the wild things, and not to treat the world as there only for our convenience. Although we

mediated by the recognition that we are not the only creatures in the world (any more than I am the only person in the world).

“Conservatives,” in common speech, may be assumed to be “right-wing” in their approval of hierarchies, stern government, draconian punishments. My own conservatism, like the mediævals’, is of an older sort, as looking further back in history. To accuse me

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may have to farm and engineer—few of us can manage to live as Christ actually required of his followers, like the birds or the flowers, dependent on God for our daily bread—we need to acknowledge regularly that this is a concession, and that the world’s being is something that God values for itself, and not just instrumentally for “human purposes.”

One of the great errors of the Church was to take over the Stoic doctrine that everything existed only for human use—to be fair to the Stoics, they glossed this in such a way that most current human uses were utterly wrong!

GC *How are your views of the nonhuman world related to your moral, political, and theological convictions regarding other central issues?*

SRLC “Live and let live” is a principle that predisposes me against centralizing tendencies. I also heartily reject the notion that we own the world, or have even been appointed “stewards” of it.

GC *Christian ecological concern is often thought of as the province of liberals or radicals. But your theological and—to some extent—political position might be thought of by many people as conservative. Is there a conflict?*

SRLC No. Actually, I find it difficult to respond because I can’t see why there is anything odd about my position! Why is it peculiar to be both conservative and conservationist (so to speak)? The “rational” and largely utilitarian ethics preferred by self-styled progressives seem to me to be rationalizations of ingrained and unexamined prejudices, transformed into a scheme that denies anyone else a say in what is to be done. My own preference is for an ethic grounded, explicitly, in the long historical development of natural impulse,

of conservatism, accordingly, may give the wrong impression: it is because I am—relatively—conservative in my political beliefs that I am on the side of revolution against more “modern” and “progressive” ways—against rule by the would-be international classes, armed with expensive technology and an ill-conceived morality that licenses oppression.

In brief, my conservative leanings, whether in epistemology or political philosophy, are populist rather than hierarchical, and compatible—or so I think—with just that respect for “animals” that others have thought far too “progressive.” Just because we must both say and think that Being is, we must also respect the beings Being sustains.

GC *You argue in a variety of places for a thoroughgoing incarnational Christology. Is there a link between your understanding of Jesus as the Logos incarnate and your view of the nonhuman world? Does the incarnation have redemptive significance for the nonhuman world?*

SRLC **SRLC** If the Word was/is incarnate as a man, he was also—automatically—incarnate as a mammal, vertebrate, animal, living creature. The central theme of incarnational theology is that God has chosen to surround himself with companions, each reflecting some part of his glory. That was the inference—traditionally—from both the birth narrative and the forty days in the wilderness with the wild beasts.

GC *You’ve emphasized the kinship between human and non-human animals and you don’t dispute an evolutionary account of the earth’s natural history. But you’ve been kinder to “creationists” than most philosophers and scientists. Why so?*

SRLC First, because it is clear that Philip Gosse was right to point out that all the existing evidence is compatible with God’s having created the world, all of

a piece, with a merely virtual past. I don't say that God did, but the claim that he didn't do it like that is wholly unscientific: the real existence of the past is a metaphysical and not a scientific claim.

Second, because the way in which Darwinian theory has been presented over the last 150-odd years is deeply subversive of ordinarily decent humanity. What many objectors have been objecting to is "Social Darwinism," so called—a doctrine that identifies evolutionary success with merit, and provides excuses for ignoring the condition of the poor, welcoming the destruction of indigenous cultures, and presenting male, middle-class whites as the pinnacle of creation.

Even when that doctrine is abandoned, Darwinist theory continues to subvert ethical impulse: We have the ethical impulses that we do solely because they were the ones that bred themselves most successfully. Believing that, we cease to believe in our own ethical impulses (which include the wish to discover and tell the truth).

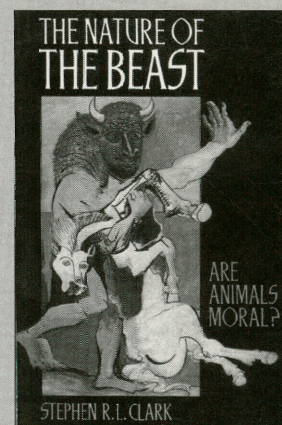
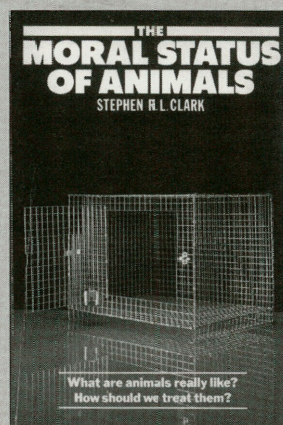
GC *How should Christians who acknowledge and celebrate the bonds among all animals and their common ancestry view the enterprise of human sociobiology?*

SRLC We should take the arguments seriously: Realizing how much of what we feel and do is to be expected of a certain sort of mammal is an important stage in our understanding. But—as above—we need to retain the notion that what our history (including our prehuman history) has done is bring us to a point where we can see something of what God requires of all of us.

A merely Darwinist story gives us no reason to believe that we can ever have "the mind of God." A nonincarnational theology (of the kind that denies that any mere creature could have the mind of God) also gives us no reason to believe that we could ever know what the world is. Some sort of incarnational theology is all that gives us reason to believe that we could conceivably discover anything about the world apart from the immediate circumstances. Having embraced such an incarnational theology, we must recognize that God redeems the whole world, and not just "us humans" (as arbitrary a class as "us whites").

Gary Chartier is an assistant professor of business ethics and law at La Sierra University, Riverside, California.

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