

Beatrice Marovich, "Peaceable Kingdoms in the Digital World," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 7, nos. 1–2 (2018): 93–113.



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Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception is an independent, open-access academic journal dedicated to the promotion and dissemination of innovative research in reception history, broadly conceived, within and across religious traditions.

www.relegere.org

ISSN 1179-7231

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Peaceable Kingdoms in the Digital World

This essay argues that the biblical image of the peaceable kingdom offers a useful filter through which to examine and contemplate the passion and fervor for interspecies friendship in the digital era. I argue that the digital medium of the animal video (more specifically, animal videos that document and record interspecies friendships) can be read as an alternate spacetime: one alleged to be outside of predation. But I also argue that, when we look closer at both the biblical context of this passage as well as visions of interspecies kinship that derive from, or resonate with, the biblical text, the dystopian underside of this almost utopian image can be rendered with more clarity. Perhaps, however, this biblical image—with its messianic undertones—can also help us to set in sharper relief the non-predational, creaturely, potentialities that might still emerge from these digital peaceable kingdoms.

DIGITAL MEDIA are changing the way that we experience animal life. On the Internet we can peer into the mundane life moments of an almost limitless range of species. Through platforms like YouTube, we can consume this digital content almost endlessly. Alexander Pschera argues that the Internet has emerged as a new “shared space of being” for animal lives and suggests that the digital spread of animal life online “softens” the Internet, with new

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forms of biophilic content.¹ Animal lovers, of course, can find more than their fill of images and videos on the web. But anyone who frequents social media networks will even have trouble avoiding animal videos: they are among the most viral content on the web. The Internet Age—with its ubiquitous digital media—has presented us with a host of viral animal celebrities: Grumpy Cat, Denver the Guilty Dog, Henri le chat noir, or Maru the box-loving feline. Some are even nameless, such as the raccoon stealing cat food.² These celebrities are, no doubt, beloved. But the Internet holds a particular sort of affection for interspecies friendship, particularly when these friendships have been memorialized in a shareable video format.³

These digital files seem to offer a vision: the dream of a better world where so-called natural competitors, or even predators and prey, can get along. As we interact with them, these media pull us into an alternate dimension that is slightly in tension with our own. When we extrapolate visions of the spirit, moral messages, or other life lessons from these videos, we reach expectantly for another possible world, grasping for a place that does not yet exist (but, we may presume, merely awaits its full actualization). As imagined worlds, these digital visions seem to become variations on the theme of the peaceable

¹ Alexander Pschera, *Animal Internet: Nature and the Digital Revolution*, trans. Elizabeth Lauffer (New York: New Vessel Press, 2014).

² “Raccoon Steals Cats’ Food (Original),” YouTube Video, 1:16, Rigoberto Gonzalez, uploaded November 27, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTcjzaqLopE>.

³ The ways in which digital media are changing our experiences of animal life have been elaborated in a number of different critical directions. Jussi Parikka does what he calls an “archaeological” examination of the relationship between animality and technology, looking into the history of technology itself, uncovering the often subterranean resonances between insect life and digital forms of technology. See Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). Akira Mizuta Lippit argues that animals have entered, in modernity, a new “economy of being” wherein they no longer serve as sacrificial victims but instead (though media such as film) become undead specters. See Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animals: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Nicole Shukin examines the way that digital capitalism has rendered animal life into a raw source of capital, through the Internet. See Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). Matthew Cole and Kate Stewart examine the way that children digitally manipulate other species, playing games that experiment with, and test, their developing human powers. See Matthew Cole and Kate Stewart, *Our Children and Other Animals: The Cultural Construction of Human-Animal Relations in Childhood* (London: Routledge, 2014), ch. 8. Margo DeMello reflects on the life of Internet animals, including the fact that cats appear to be the most viral animals on the Internet. See Margo DeMello, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

kingdom: the idealized habitat pulled from Isa 11:6-9, where the wolf lays down with the lamb and the lions eat straw rather than flesh.

This essay stages a conversation between the biblical image of the peaceable kingdom and the digital medium of the animal video (more specifically, animal videos that document and record interspecies friendships). In what follows, I argue that interspecies animal videos might be read as peaceable kingdoms, of a sort. Like the biblical image of the peaceable kingdom, these digital animal kingdoms have been (and can still be) used for deeply ambivalent ends. The image of the peaceable kingdom is, like the interspecies animal video, a utopian figure underwritten with dystopian possibilities. In what follows I suggest that while there appear to be curative elements that can be extrapolated from the animal video, as a peaceable kingdom this medium also harbors the potential to commend a kind of escapism, even exploitation. And yet, perhaps, as a peaceable kingdom the animal video—with its messianic undertones—can also help us to set in sharper relief the non-predational, creaturely potentialities within digital realms.

The Animal Video as Peaceable Kingdom

The vision of the peaceable kingdom—offering the glimpse of a world without violent predation—bears a certain kind of curative potency. This glimpse is a dream image, but dream images do have a tangible effect on the body. If much of life's suffering results from domination and exploitation, then the loss of predation would significantly reduce this suffering. It is in this sense that the absence of predation promises a (dream-like) form of relief, or respite, from this violence. We might imagine that it is only through the ethical behavior of humans that predation itself could vanish. Nature is, after all, alleged to be red in tooth and claw. But what makes the peaceable kingdom so distinct as a dream image is that it places non-predation within the more-than-human world. It naturalizes non-predation. In a very similar manner, the animal video naturalizes a narrative of non-predation.

When the animal video becomes a peaceable kingdom, its animal subjects often act as spiritual gurus, of a sort. Not only are animals the subjects of the video but (particularly in interspecies videos) they also become teachers. In many cases they appear to stand as principled examples of relational harmony—models or guides that we, humans, should seek to emulate in order to actualize the peaceable kingdom here on Earth. This moves animal lives outside of a frame in which they appear to exist merely as commodities

for human culture, and into a different condition of subjecthood. BuzzFeed Animals has, perhaps, become one of the digital epicenters for the distribution of viral animal content. And BuzzFeed Animals loves interspecies friendship. Like much of what can be found on BuzzFeed, of course, there is a heavy dose of irony ladled into this digital content. BuzzFeed Animals' tone invites its readers both to feel all of the inevitable "feels" that this animal content provokes and to simultaneously observe oneself feeling these feels with a dose of self-critical awareness. But this theme—the notion that interspecies friendship can be a moral exemplar for human life—is an enduring and popular one.

While BuzzFeed often publishes video content, they also publish listicles of GIFs and photographs, pulled from Instagram and other social media sites. In 2012, on BuzzFeed's animal channel, Summer Anne Burton posted thirty photographs of interspecies "friends" (a mallard and a cat, a turtle and an alligator, a dolphin and seal, a dog and a boar piglet, etc.) under the headline, "The 30 Most Inspiring Interspecies Friendships of the Year." The teaser below the headline argued that the year 2012 was, "the year when species, great and small, decided that love > hate," ultimately suggesting that these animals should be "an inspiration to us all."⁴ If a turtle can ride happily on the back of an alligator, we might infer, let these creatures be a model of civility and camaraderie for us humans. They succeed where we humans fail: to be companionate within and across radical forms of difference. In a 2013 BuzzFeed story, Burton posted photographs of Tinni and Sniffer—the "real life" fox and hound. The images were captured in the forests of Norway, by the photographer Torgeir Berge—guardian of Tinni the dog, who watched this friendship with a wild fox unfold and planned to create a children's book with the content. "Anyone who looks at these pictures can see the affection and understanding that they share," Burton wrote. "If only humans could all be as kind and accepting as this pair."⁵ They are models, in other words, for camaraderie and coexistence.

Burton is far from the only one to express such a sentiment. In 2011 CBS News' Assignment America reported on the "animal odd couple": Tarra

⁴ Summer Anne Burton, "The 30 Most Inspiring Interspecies Friendships of the Year," *BuzzFeed*, December 26, 2012, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/summeranne/interspecies-friendships-of-the-year>.

⁵ Summer Anne Burton, "Real-Life Fox and the Hound Friends Will Melt Your Heart," *BuzzFeed*, December 4, 2013, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/summeranne/real-life-fox-and-the-hound-best-friends-will-melt-your-heart>.

the elephant and Bella the dog. The two became best friends at The Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tennessee. While most elephants adopted another elephant as their best friend, Tarra became attached to Bella—a dog no more than a sixteenth her own size. The Internet was pleased by this odd couple (and traumatized to learn of the death of Bella not long after this—most likely after she was attacked by a coyote). This particular video has (as of January 2017) more than 4.7 million views on YouTube. In his account of the couple's friendship, reporter Steve Hartman ended his news segment with a bit of a scold: "Take a good look, world," he chastised, "if they can do it, what's *our* excuse?"⁶ The moral message here, of course, is that these interspecies friendships can serve as both a critique of human sociality (pointing to its limitations and prejudices) as well as a model. This critique is meant to shake us up: to show us that connection across difference is not only possible but is actively practiced by nonhumans. These interspecies friends become spirit guides of a sort, serving as icons or exemplars who point to a possible world that humans have the potential to establish as well—should they take the necessary steps to address their anthropoid shortcomings.

While many of the Internet's animal celebrities are primarily comedians—creatures who generate a good laugh—the celebrity couples who emerge as icons of interspecies friendship bear a special kind of status. They often function as non-dogmatic moral exemplars for the digital world. They become animal teachers, animal spirit guides, animal gurus. They are figures to watch, to listen to, and to learn from. They model, for humans, a possible transformation of sociality, or social relationships. The digital record of interspecies friendship, itself, might have its curative elements (as it feeds us the vision of a world without predation). But there is undoubtedly something curative in the way the medium challenges us to think with animals as guides, as counselors. This affects a subtle shift in the status quo of our human relations with other animals, and models a form of regard or respect.

Interspecies animal videos are a viral phenomenon for a number of reasons, however, and transforming the way we regard animals may not be chief among them. In a 2015 piece for the *New York Times*, "Learning from Animal Friendships," Erica Goode explored our fascination with interspecies social connection, querying researchers on what it is we are learning from in-

⁶ Steve Hartman, "The Animal Odd Couple", for *CBS News Assignment America*, YouTube Video, 2:44, CBS News, uploaded January 2, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBtFTF2ii7U&t=23s>.

terspecies animal content on the Internet. Speculation as to the cause of this enduring obsession was varied. Evolutionary biologist Marc Bekoff, who has examined morality and ethics in life beyond the human, pondered that perhaps interspecies animal videos offer a way for humans to be “re-wilded”—a way to re-connect with their animal nature. Donna Haraway, best known as a posthumanist thinker who explores the critical nuances of human relationships with their animal kin, offered no explanation of the phenomenon but instead expressed a total lack of surprise at the fact that such content has overtaken our digital culture. “In a situation in which terrorism is cultivated from every angle and we are taught to fear practically everything, why should anybody be surprised that there’s a profound desire for the pleasures of the peaceable kingdom?” she asked.⁷ The format, Haraway suggests, offers humans something of a salve, or a tonic. Watching an animal video removes us from the fear and the horror of the world we know we are living in, and places us into another living habitat. Or, the animal video gives us another filter through which to look at the environment we inhabit. This dislocation does something for us, emotionally, psychologically, perhaps even spiritually. Interspecies Internet content gives us a small taste, in the present moment, of a peaceable kingdom that we might expect and wait for. Perhaps—to unfurl Haraway’s speculations in another direction—there is an affect embedded within these digital peaceable kingdoms that drives a kind of religio-spiritual reaction, or posture of response. What we get from this content, in part, is a spiritual curative (with digital animals acting as our spirit guides).

In a reflection on the animal videos of YouTube, and the way that these both motivate and shape scientific enterprises, philosopher Vinciane Despret notes the widespread religious tone that commentary on these videos often adopts. It is not uncommon, she writes, to type out an Internet search term such as “love and cooperation in living things” and be confronted with a religious (or religiously informed) website, offering images of nonhuman creatures engaged in some sort of common enterprise. Those invested in promoting religious views and perspectives, then, seem to gravitate toward this content. Discussion of it, Despret notes, is often written with a moral tenor (insisting, for instance, that “solidarity is of vital importance”) or with a theologically speculative sense of wonder (“who else but God could create a

⁷ Erica Goode, “Learning from Animal Friendships,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/27/science/so-happy-together.html>.

world in which such phenomena can be found?”).⁸ Are those with religious agendas disproportionately driven toward this content because it seems to offer confirmation that the miraculous—in all of its theological glory and wonder—is *real*? Or a confirmation that there is something at work within the fabric of nature itself that calls us to be good?

It is also possible that the nature of this content provokes a form of conversion writ small: a change of heart, or a change of mind. The alteration provoked by a conversional transformation undoubtedly bears spiritual potencies. Conversion is, of course, a term that seems indelibly bound to the political theologies of Christianity.⁹ It is a term, then, that has the religious-spiritual written (often problematically) into it. Despret suggests that there is something transformative in this digital content—although she does not suggest that such transformations be deemed religious in nature. Instead, Despret suggests that animal videos themselves illuminate new modes of self-production in the Internet age. These videos, she argues, “are a vector for a previously unseen production of new forms of subjectivity—new ways of being, of thinking oneself, of presenting oneself, and knowing oneself.”¹⁰ Is there a religious-spiritual element to this form of self-production or self-creation? Perhaps. There are often spiritual stakes inherent in act of self-creation; self-help literature (for instance) is littered with texts that promise to liberate one’s spiritual state through new forms or acts of self-creation. As self-help literature has also shown us, however, the spiritual liberations of self-transformation can also be profoundly absent of intersubjective ethics. Perhaps we could say the same for the transformational potencies of the digital animal video.

In a 2015 piece for the *New York Times*, Bob Morris published a confessional meditation—“In Praise of the Cute Animal Video”—on the digital medium’s psychological effect. He describes himself watching cute animal videos, on YouTube, noting that they cause a “spike” in his “well-being.” This drives what Morris describes as an “addiction” to animal videos. But, he notes, he is far from the only person to “self-medicate” with what he calls “critter porn.” Morris does not pretend to have determinate answers as to the

⁸ Vinciane Despret, “Y for YouTube,” trans. Brett Buchanan, *Ctrl-Z*, no. 6 (2016), <http://www.ctrl-z.net.au/articles/issue-6/despret-y-for-youtube/>.

⁹ Daniel Colucciello Barber, “The Immanent Refusal of Conversion,” *The Journal of Religious and Cultural Theory* 13, no. 1 (2014): 142–50.

¹⁰ Despret, “Y for YouTube.”

cause of this addiction. But he does speculate on some possibilities. “Does it have to do with the fact that when we look at animals we don’t have to think about one another, or any of the issues of race, class and politics that make modern life so overwhelming?” he ponders.¹¹ Watching animals seems to remove us from our human context. When it makes the problems of human life distant, it facilitates a kind of escape. It appears to cure our human misery and woe. But, instead, it may simply ignore it. Perhaps in this case what feels curative is the pleasure of acting as a (potentially exploitative) spectator. When we seek this media out to rescue us from human problems, this peaceable kingdom becomes an escapist fantasy. This is not, of course, a novel retreat: it has always been available for those who have the privilege to leave other vexing vectors of subjectivity (race, gender, class, politics) to the side. And for those humans who are never animalized through racial, sexual, or class politics, the escape into animal life might be a retreat into a lifeworld that feels entirely, innocently, other.

Is the peaceable kingdom of the animal video merely an escapist fantasy that facilitates a retreat from our all-too-human world? There is nothing inherent in the biblical vision of the peaceable kingdom to serve as a safeguard against either escapism or exploitation. In biblical interpretation this is a vision that quickly turns inward—back toward the exclusivity of a purely human subjectivity, as well as an inner world of contemplation that remains silent on the nature and shape of the world outside of it (a form of spiritual navel gazing, we might say). Thus, attempts to actualize, or bring about, the peaceable kingdom tend not only to be clumsy and delusional but are often underwritten with the violence and predation they seek to avoid.

What Peace Can Be Found in the Peaceable Kingdom?

Isaiah’s messianic vision of a world-to-come, one that is free of violence and predation, is tucked away at the very end of almost a dozen chapters of judgment against Israel. Incongruous with the previous chapters’ discourses that illuminate the nature of God’s judgment upon Israel (as it becomes manifest in the encounter with Assyrian imperial power) this vision stands quite apart and remains—within the popular imagination—almost as a thing unto itself. Walter Brueggeman, a contemporary American Protestant scholar of the He-

¹¹ Bob Morris, “In Praise of the Cute Animal Video,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/style/in-praise-of-the-cute-animal-video.html>.

brew scriptures, describes these verses as a “visionary oracle” that leaves the reader—after many chapters of devastating condemnations—with the sense that, ultimately, “the promise prevails.” The prophet Isaiah refuses, in other words, to let the harshness of judgment receive finality here.¹² Critics such as the German scholar Otto Kaiser argue that verses 6–9 of this chapter were later additions—tagged on to reflect a different sentiment.¹³ Perhaps, in other words, this was never Isaiah’s vision in the first place. It is ultimately impossible to know how much of this visionary oracle was original to the prophecy.¹⁴ Nevertheless, centuries of interpreters have read them as a unity.

Perhaps the primary reason that verses 6–9 appear to be so deeply incongruous with the previous passages in the chapter is due to the proliferation of animals. These verses are not only full of animals, but they are full of animals who are doing unthinkable things: coexisting in an almost supernatural manner, one that appears to illuminate something about what life will be like on God’s holy mountain. Animal bodies seem to represent, or perform, something of God’s knowledge. Such celebratory visions of interspecies harmony are rare, in biblical contexts. The solution, for many biblical interpreters, has been simply to read these problematic and confusing animals out of the passage entirely, using the vehicle of allegory. It was often more theologically expedient, in other words, simply to get rid of them. Fourth century patristic theologian Eusebius of Caesarea, for instance, understood the animals to be metaphors for various types of human beings. The wolves were those who would “turn from their depravity” and flock back toward the church, “tame and meek as lambs.” Those animals that the verses describe as grazing together should be read, argues Eusebius, as people of various habits, types, and dispositions sitting down to “partake of divine Scriptures” together. The church, he said, brings together the poor and the common with the wealthy and the decorated—as if they were oxen and lions grazing from the same straw.¹⁵ The passage, as Eusebius reads it, carries no real visions of interspecies harmony or kinship. Instead, it is about the internal politics of the church. For a theologian like Eusebius, this verse is a call to turn inward and to think not about the natural world, but about the institution of the church.

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 9.

¹³ Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 254.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *Isaiah*, 10.

¹⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Isaiah*, trans. Jonathan J. Armstrong (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 64.

Jean Calvin, more than a thousand years later, was inclined to agree with his intellectual predecessor: these animals were to be understood as a metaphoric statement about God's promise for humans. Calvin extricated the passage from its roots in the Jewish community, claiming that it was a vision of how everything "shall be fully restored, when Christ shall reign."¹⁶ It was, in other words, a promise that Calvin believed was extended exclusively to the human life of Christians alone. Before conversion, said Calvin, humans are like "untamed beasts" and they are only able to abstain from violence when "the Lord subdues their wicked inclination." Thus this passage is the prophet, speaking allegorically, about the "bloody and violent men, whose cruel and savage nature shall be subdued, when they submit to the yoke of Christ." These heathens will become like tamed beasts.

Despite his certainty on this account, however, the passage does seem to pull Calvin suggestively outward—casting his gaze toward the natural world and momentarily shelving his diatribe on the internal politics of the church. Calvin could not help but suggest that there is a closer relationship than we might think between the violence and destruction of nature and the sinfulness of humans. When "savage" animals such as wolves, bears, and lions do some violence to humans, said Calvin, and even when domestic animals disobey us, "this ought to be imputed to [human] sin." Animals are not to blame for the violence they do: human sin (responsible for the fall) is ultimately the thing that caused it. Isa 11:6-9, Calvin reflects, is an indication of how nature would be on God's holy mountain. If there is any disruption in the harmony between species, it is not because God would have it this way but instead because "[human] disobedience overthrew the order of things."¹⁷ In spite of his proclamation that the animals exist within this passage in order to express something, metaphorically, about human life, Calvin loses his grip on this argument. He does not develop anything that might be interpreted as an environmental ethic, although his condemnation does read more sympathetically with arguments about human destruction and responsibility in the Anthropocene than one might expect from this early modern proponent of predestination. Perhaps this is also an indication of how difficult it is to read this text as if the presence of the animals themselves does not matter; ultimately, their very presence in the text continues to pull the gaze back outward, back into the living world.

¹⁶ Jean Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: T. Constable, 1852), 405.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 406.

Many contemporary commentators take the presence of animals in this passage more rigorously into account. But, still, they may not understand this presence to point directly to a biblical command that we practice (or seek after) interspecies harmony or kinship. The animals are relevant, in other words, but not necessarily in an ethical or moral sense. The world to come is understood to be promising for human life, and animals may also be folded into the sense of promise. Nevertheless, this does not always serve as a suggestion that humans attend (in the present) to the ethics of interspecies connection. Relations of violence and predation, currently embedded in creation, will apparently be addressed by God in this world to come. When it comes to rectifying the violence of predation, in other words, God will take care of this by sending his messiah to work it out on our behalf. This can have undeniably quietist implications.

Kaiser argues that the presence of animals is certainly notable. But he notes that this primal peace experienced by both humans and animals is limited (within the Hebrew Bible) to this passage, along with Isa 65:25 and Hos 2:20. It is not, in other words, an enduring theme that clearly presents us with a moral or ethical obligation. Further complicating this he also notes that, in Ezek 34:25 and Isa 35:9, the notion emerges that in the time of salvation God will destroy all wild animals.¹⁸ The importance of actual animals (and actual animal lives) in the Bible, even within this specific passage, is ambiguous. Kaiser does not believe that the passage should be read allegorically, *per se*. But he does seem to think that the animals are present within it in order to point to a lesson that has little to do with the lives of actual animals. He argues that their presence in the vision, for instance, suggests the universality of the peace that is to come: a peace that will have an impact beyond the human world. But in the end, the central desire within this passage is less for something like a kinship with other creatures and more the longing for “a life with no danger.” If, as the vision suggests, a young child can be the shepherd over a flock of sheep and can play with poisonous snakes, we have reached a world in which humans are less vulnerable.¹⁹ The important function of the animals here, he argues, is to help us “regain a feeling of the primal vitiation of our lives,” which should result in a generic kind of “new reverence for life, primarily the life of people, and then, by virtue of the ultimate unity of all life, reverence also for the life of animals.”²⁰ It is unclear

¹⁸ Kaiser, *Isaiah*, 259.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 260.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 261.

whether this reverence is, also, something which is still to come or instead something that can already be actualized and embodied.

Brueggemann argues that this passage should be read theopolitically—as the articulation of a theory of government. The yearning within this passage, then, is for a ruler who will intervene on behalf of the poor and the vulnerable: those who are human as well as those who are nonhuman. The prophet imagines, says Brueggemann, “a coming time, under good governance, when all relationships of hostility and threat, in the animal world as in the human environment, shall be overcome.” Like Calvin, Brueggemann suggests that “adversarial human transactions foul the nest for all creatures.” The Bible knew this, he says, while contemporary readers have forgotten it.²¹ But the biblical imagination, here, presents a political theory that ameliorates this condition. The passage is ultimately, Brueggemann argues, “about a deep, radical, limitless transformation in which we—like lion, wolf, and leopard—will have no hunger, no injury, no need to devour, no yearning for brutal control, no passion for domination.”²² But this is not necessarily something we are called to actualize so much as it is something we can passively wait and hope for.

Brevard Childs offers a gloss that resonates with both Kaiser and Brueggemann, suggesting that what is being promised here is the rule of a messiah who will bring about a peace that is so universal, it will be felt within the human and the nonhuman realms.²³ While he notes that, in many popular interpretations, this is read as a “return” to paradise (a prelapsarian imaginary), he argues that the image is not of a “return to an ideal past” but a temporally novel action that restores creation through “a new act of God” using the vehicle of “a righteous ruler.”²⁴ Nonetheless, Childs also underscores—in this reading—the theme elaborated by Kaiser and Brueggemann. The vision that the prophet extends, in these brief verses, is the vision of a world yet to come: one that is promised but has yet to arrive. With such an expectation in mind, it is not difficult to discern why it is that visions of the peaceable kingdom often lead into forms of quietism, or even quests to escape the conditions of reality by retreating into the realm of the fantastic. If the vision is promised in a world to come, then perhaps all that is left for us to do is sit back and wait.

²¹ Brueggemann, *Isaiah*, 102.

²² *Ibid.*, 103.

²³ Brevard Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 103.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

There are, of course, those who do read the image of the peaceable kingdom as one that calls us to a kind of accountability—a figuration that calls us to actualize something in the here and now. Not incidentally, perhaps, we are more likely to run across such arguments in the field of ecocritical or ecotheological readings, where the texts of religious tradition are understood to be saying something (albeit, often quietly) about the divine desire that we humans respect the plane of creation. Animal theologian Andrew Linzey sees this figure and these verses as a condemnation of the natural law perspective that there is something “beautiful” about predation. “If predation is ‘beautiful,’” he argues, “there can be no moral imperative to live without injury.” And what the figure of the peaceable kingdom shows us is, precisely, the (divine) beauty of a world without predation.²⁵

Linzey notes that there is clearly a dream-like, fantastic, and imagined quality to the figure of the peaceable kingdom. But he also argues that we humans are “the species who can dream divine-like dreams and by divine grace actualize them.”²⁶ What this means for us, in the contemporary present, is that we can now, as humans, “approximate the peaceable kingdom by living without killing sentient beings for food.”²⁷ There is a history within the fringe (and often ascetically-driven) practice of Christian vegetarianism of reading the image of the peaceable kingdom, along with Gen 1:29, as a divine command that we cease to consume animal flesh. For many ancient and medieval monastic vegetarians, of course, the refusal of flesh had more to do with the alleged corruption and impurity of flesh than it did with compassion for other animal beings. Refusing to eat flesh was the refusal to become fleshier, or be rendered impure. Linzey also notes that, historically, the nature of agriculture and the structure of food systems would have made it difficult to live as a vegetarian. But today, he says, this form of refusal (what one might also call this strategic actualization of the peaceable kingdom) is quite possible, particularly for those with economic access to a diverse range of plant-based food sources. For Linzey, then, the peaceable kingdom serves as a call to look and think outward: to act compassionately on behalf of other creatures, and to adopt disciplines or practices that re-shape the inner world in concert with these external glances.

²⁵ Andrew Linzey, *Animal Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 31.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

With arguments like Linzey's in mind, it is clear that the vision of the peaceable kingdom can easily be transformed into a call for practical action, or a demand for ethical practices. The biblical passage itself, however, is ambivalent and subject to the whims of interpretation. While the vision might inspire acts of compassion, it has also inspired forms of domination, and acts of colonial violence. Perhaps the clearest illustration of the exploitative potential of the vision of the peaceable kingdom is the way that it was bound up in the birth and generation of the modern zoo. Historian Nigel Rothfels writes about the use of biblical imagery in Carl Hagenbeck's "Zoological Paradise." Hagenbeck was a German animal trader who trained wild animals, selling them to private buyers, and to enterprises such as P.T. Barnum's American circus. But Hagenbeck is perhaps best remembered for the transformations he brought to the institution of the zoo. In order to demonstrate to European and American buyers that the animals he shipped in from far-flung locations like the African savannah could live—without great expense—in these new northern climates, Hagenbeck built "panoramas" for the animals. Within these open-air scenes, the animals appeared to move around freely and at will, without the restraints of cages and bars.²⁸ Their environments were filled with water, grasses, trees—elements that gave human viewers the impression that these creatures were existing within their own natural habitat. Hagenbeck's animal gardens were extremely popular and served as the prototype for contemporary zoos in places like the US. He called his gardens an "animal paradise," evoking that mythical existence where "animals would live beside each other and the fight for survival would be eliminated."²⁹ Popular accounts of Hagenbeck's animal gardens, says Rothfels, sometimes described them as the idealized prelapsarian biblical Garden of Eden. Other times they were described as Isaiah's peaceable kingdom where the wolf and the lamb would co-exist. Still other descriptions portrayed them as Noah's protective ark. But despite the idealism of this biblical imagery, as Rothfels notes, these parks were no paradise for the animals within them. Rather, in most cases, they were holding stations "for animals brought from all over the world which were waiting to be shipped to buyers."³⁰ This peaceable kingdom, then, actually gave rise to animal incarceration and exploitation.

If it is the case that the vision of the peaceable kingdom is subject to the

²⁸ Nigel Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 173.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

whims of its various readings, is there a way to think about this imagined world that resists or refuses these forms of domination or exploitation? Is there a way of envisioning the peaceable kingdom that navigates away from a domineering spirituality, or that does not simply retreat into an escapist fantasy for the privileged? Animal videos, and the peaceable kingdoms they present us with, are no less escapist, or exploitative, than the biblical passages they echo or resonate with. But the medium through which this kingdom is presented as a possible habitat is novel. Perhaps, by turning back to a reflection on the medium itself—the digitization of animal life, on a networked web—another layer of the peaceable kingdom might become visible.

Creaturely Substrata of the Peaceable Kingdom

We humans are the ones who make animal videos happen. We have developed the technology to record, digitize, and circulate these scenes from animal lives. And so we are never really absent from any animal video. Our fingerprints are all over them. When we are too present, however, this is often understood as a fundamental violation of the animal video itself—particularly the interspecies animal video. Staging, by humans, is seen as an affront to the genre of interspecies animal videos. In 2012, the Internet fell in love with a thirty-second video of interspecies harmony: a pig, rescuing a baby goat from drowning in the pond of a petting zoo. The video was widely shared on social media, as well as television networks such as NBC and ABC. But, in 2013, it became apparent that the film had been staged; it was created as a promotion for a Comedy Central series, and deployed no fewer than twenty crew members (including animal trainers) to pull the “rescue” off.³¹ More interesting than the scandal itself, perhaps, were the responses to it. Katie McDonough, writing for *Salon*, posted a slideshow of interspecies photos, designed to “pull [us] though” the scandal. “Do not let a cheap marketing scheme change your beautiful feelings about animal friendship. It is real!” she wrote, her tone thick with the irony that any commentary on animal videos seems to demand. “One act of faux interspecies animal heroism is but a drop in the ocean of *real* interspecies animal hero-

³¹ Dave Itzkoff discusses journalistic ethics in relation to this fabrication (“Really Cute, but Totally Fake,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/27/arts/television/pig-rescues-goat-and-the-video-is-really-cute-but-totally-faked.html>.)

ism,” she concluded.³² Despite the irony, there is a clear tone of insistence in this commentary. The threat of the staged video, for McDonough, seems to be that it could make a lie of interspecies friendship itself. As counter-evidence, McDonough presents a series of images that were reportedly not staged: a tiger cub cuddling with a baby orangutan, a baby hippo hanging out with a giant tortoise, a golden retriever nursing a litter of tiny tiger cubs.

The aim is to prove that interspecies friendship is something that can emerge (to at least some extent) without us. It does not require human staging or enforcement. In this sense, interspecies friendship can still be “real.” We can witness it, record it, and be inspired by it. But in a crucial sense, what we want to see when we look at an interspecies animal video is the potential to not be there. We are, of course, there. We humans have created the environments in which animals who might otherwise be predators encounter one another in new ways. But we want to imagine that we need not be there (we might as well be absent). Crucially, this potential to not be there is not an evisceration. Instead, our potential to not be there makes care, companionship, and tenderness more visible.

This becomes clear in the viral videos of the BLT: the Bear, Lion, and Tiger “family” who became the most famous residents of Noah’s Ark Animal Sanctuary in Locust Grove, Georgia. In 2001 the three predators were found in the basement of an Atlanta home, after a drug raid by police. They were all young cubs, about three months of age. They were malnourished, and infected with parasites. The black bear, Baloo, had an ingrown harness which was never removed as he began to grow. The trio was brought to Noah’s Ark for rehabilitation, and caretakers anticipated that they would eventually need to separate them as they grew into mature adulthood. But instead, the three animals appeared to thrive in relationship with one another—even as adults who would have chosen to be solitary in the wild. Eventually, their collective residence became their permanent location at the Ark where they lived together like brothers. Video footage of this BLT family, on the Internet, dates at least to 2009 when the Associated Press profiled the organization. But videos of the trio proliferated, and went viral, in 2016—the year that Leo, the lion, passed away.

³² Katie McDonough, “Pig Rescues Goat’ might be fake, but interspecies friendships are real: A slideshow to pull you out of your pig hoax-related depression,” *Salon*, February 27, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2013/02/26/pig_rescues_goat_might_be_fake_but_interspecies_friendships_are_real/.

Humans, in this story, play the role of antihero. It was in captivity, in the basement of a human home, where the story itself began. Much scorn and finger-wagging is often directed toward the alleged criminal in whose home the trio was discovered, as if one human individual (not explicitly, though undoubtedly, racialized in the role of “drug dealer”) can be blamed for the horror of what happened to this animal trio, as if the problem itself has been essentially “fixed” through the police raid, and relocation of the animals to Noah’s Ark sanctuary. Often missing from the narrative elements of the story are: the multi-billion dollar illegal trade in wildlife, the ease with which big cats and other creatures are bought and sold on the Internet, the fact that a number of states in the US have no laws on the books that prevent residents from keeping animals such as lions, tigers, or bears as domestic pets. The human problems haunting the lives of this animal family are, in other words, systemic and daunting. But all of this aside, what seems to captivate audiences, in this story, is the triumph of this trio over the foils set in their paths by specific humans. The trio is inspirational, triumphant, in that they learn to conduct their lives and carry out their relationships without us, or in spite of us. Their relationship, their bond, illuminates a potential form of tenderness that develops when we are not there: it illuminates the potency of a world in which we are not necessary (a world that unfolds and thrives in spite of us).

Of course, they might not be alive had they not eventually found themselves at Noah’s Ark. Indeed, they would never have befriended one another in the first place. In that sense, it is impossible to absent the human world from their story. But their connection is what this trio creates when they are released from private (human) ownership. Additionally, a key element in this narrative is the fact that human caretakers at Noah’s Ark—based on previous knowledge of animal behavior and biology—planned to separate these animals. The trio, however, chose one another. Their friendship was peaceful and capacious. So it became apparent that (defying human expectation; against the human; without the human) they would rather live together than apart. These are the elements of the narrative that are stressed in its retelling: the life that this trio created together seems to have been made despite humans, in spite of humans, and (to some extent) without humans.

What I see in these digital peaceable kingdoms is a hunger to witness a mode of habitation that emerges without us. We witness the potential of not being there, and the form of habitation that accompanies this potential. More than that, what we see when we watch these mortal animals relating to

one another—without us—in the animal video are scenes of other creatures who (like us) also have the potential to not be there. It is a fragile scene of tenderness within mortality that is underwritten with the potential never to have happened, never to have existed, never to have emerged, never to have been there in the first place. In this sense, I suggest, it is underwritten with creatureliness. Creatureliness is often understood to be a cognate for animality: one that is marked by a theological genealogy that places creature in relationship to creator. If this were the case, we might understand creaturely life to be the raw fleshiness of animal life, sacralized by transcendent power. But I understand creatureliness, to echo the philosopher Simone Weil, as essentially nothing at all: a kind of negativity.

Creatureliness is that element of nothingness (the potential of not being there) that resonates in mortal bodies, bonding them like a glue. This is precisely what makes it so potent. “We are nothing but creatures,” Weil wrote, “but that is like consenting to being nothing” because “this being which God has given us is non-being.” To “consent to being a creature and nothing else,” she wrote, “is like consenting to lose one’s whole existence.”³³ Yet, once this consent has been given this does not amount to a total disappearance (the evisceration of being). Instead, it amounts to a different modality of occupying the space that the body takes up. As I read Weil, the nothingness of creaturely life is a substratum of our embodied existence: a consistent and insistent reminder in every moment of our mortality, our potential never to have been here in the first place, and our unpredictable potential to not be here at all. This is not, however, a mortal dread. It is instead a tender perspective on our mortality. Part of what makes this tender is the understanding that we are not alone in this potential to not be here. Indeed, it may be the only thing we share with other creatures. In its way, then, this negativity serves to bond us in an odd sort of solidarity.

To think creatureliness as a negative facet of subjectivity—the potential to not be here, a potential non-being—is to think of creatureliness as a retraction of the human. Creatureliness within the human reveals a stratum of subjectivity that remains when something explicitly and exclusively human has been retracted. Perhaps the pleasure of the peaceable kingdom that we seek out or experience through the digital format of the animal video is a kind of release or retraction. What we seek therein is not the experience of conti-

³³ Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 217.

nunity with, or similarity to, other animal lives so much as the experience of a determinate subjectivity in the process of release or retraction, sedimenting into a kind of potent non-being. We experience not so much kinship with other animals as, instead, the potential for not being there that is within us (and all other creatures) at a level deeper than the marrow. This is not to say that we escape from that which binds us to this body we call human, or that we can eviscerate those markers of identity that have been impressed upon it. Instead, something throws us out of joint and releases us. And this feels, in its quiet way, almost righteous.

Perhaps this is bound, in part, to the messianic character of the peaceable kingdom. The nothing of creaturely life resonates with what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben describes as potentiality. Carlo Salzani suggests that the messianic, in Agamben's work,³⁴ can be clearly distinguished from the utopian.³⁵ Agamben's philosophy, argues Salzani, does not create the image of a different world that will be possible in the future. Instead, "to the contrary, it is in this world, in the present" that Agamben suggests that we "have to uncover" a "supplementary world that already exists, in potential."³⁶ What the messianic represents, for Agamben, is not a world that is to arrive in the future but instead something that "lies hidden in the potentialities of the present."³⁷ To the extent that messianic time inhabits the realm of potentiality (rather than actuality) the messianic serves a set of functions that might be read as negative. Agamben describes the messianism of the Apostle Paul as caught up not within the *as if* (living *as if* the kingdom of God truly existed, for instance) but instead within the *as not*. The person who is called by the messianic, who is caught up within messianic time, is revoked in this call. The messianic vocation, in essence, is a revocation: something that "dislocates and, above all, nullifies the entire subject." Agamben suggests that this is the meaning of Gal 2:20, "It is no longer I that live, but the Messiah living in me."³⁸ The subject has been revoked by the messianic and becomes differ-

³⁴ Notably, of course, Agamben's concept of messianism is largely derived from that of Walter Benjamin, who sought a redemption of the present via historical materialism, rather than a deferred messianism. I thank one of my readers for the suggestion that I make note of this.

³⁵ Carlo Salzani, "Quodlibet: Giorgio Agamben's Anti-Utopia," *Utopian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2012): 213.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 230.

³⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 41.

ently realized within messianic temporality. This is what Colby Dickinson describes as the messianic force's "hollowing out" of representation. "What the messianic force does as it moves through the given representations of our world is precisely to hollow them out," he writes, "to eradicate their content, and restore them to a place of pure potentiality."³⁹

Agamben also describes this messianic force working as a kind of Shabbat between the human and the animal—a potentiality that essentially throws a wrench into what he calls the "anthropological machine" (the social and political apparatus that constantly draws and re-draws the distinction between the human and the animal). This Shabbat—a cessation, an end, a rest, a peace—between the human and the animal does not erase or eradicate differences between the human and the animal.⁴⁰ It does not serve to blur boundaries and render these two figures indiscernible. Instead, this Shabbat renders the anthropological machine "inoperative" by highlighting its "central emptiness," exposing the "hiatus" between human and animal. In the observance of this Shabbat, then, the violence of the anthropological machine is put to rest and what emerges is a kind of peace: something non-predational. In this Shabbat between the human and the animal, a non-predational creaturely potentiality comes to the surface.

It might be instructive at this point to recall my critique of Bob Morris's praise for the animal video. Morris suggested that the animal video takes us out of the realm of human concerns (such as race, gender, or politics) and places us somewhere else. I called this an escapist fantasy. If creatureliness is a kind of retraction or revocation that reveals a substratum outside and beyond the human, then what keeps this from becoming an escapist fantasy? While creatureliness may facilitate a kind of retraction, it is not an escape. It may peel back a layer. But this is not a chemical peel: human concerns do not disappear. Instead, particles of human concern are sedimented into the strata of creatureliness. In creatureliness, human concerns begin to resonate with other realms of concern: violence and hunger are no longer, simply, human concerns. Concern is intensified, it becomes more-than-human. Forms of care broaden and intensify, as well. Humans are no longer the only creatures we can rely upon. But if we seek to forget about racial violence, gender violence, or economic violence in this creaturely substratum, then we have

³⁹ Colby Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2011), 89.

⁴⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 92.

failed to reveal its non-predational potencies. There is no solidarity to be found in this kind of forgetting, only dehumanization. There can be a kind of pleasure in an autopoietic retraction of the human. But there are others who push against the creaturely substratum because their humanity has been stripped from them. If their avenues back toward the human are blocked, they have been locked into a kingdom without peace. To push, or pull, others into their creatureliness is a form of predation.

The desire for release or retraction that emerges in the medium of the digital animal video reveals, perhaps, that the habitat we expect or seek in this vision of the peaceable kingdom is not a savannah, a mountain range, or a nest. Instead, it is a mode of habitation that is always just on the other side (the liminal edge) of the world that we already occupy. We expect something non-predational. And we wait for this not at the end of time. Instead, we seek to conceive of this non-predational habitation as something that is always potential, always pressing in our bodies that are human and creaturely. And we seek to engage it.