

Thomistic Considerations on Whether We Ought to Revere Non-Rational Natural Beings

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IN RECENT times, not only do some environmental extremists counsel us to have reverence for non-rational beings, but some authors and sources faithful to the Magisterium do so as well. For example, Romano Guardini (1885–1968), a theologian whom Pope Benedict XVI commends,¹ suggests:

He [i.e., the one who cannot pray] can, for example, acknowledge the sublime with special reverence wherever he encounters it and in so doing render homage to the mystery which is behind all that is noble on earth. . . . It [i.e., his attitude] aims through earthly things at things holy and divine to which, for the time being, it has no direct access. This piety can take the form of reverence toward all living things, an endeavor not to harm or destroy anything.²

And, in *Magnificat*,³ it is increasingly common to find petitions such as these:

¹ See Benedict XVI, “He Aspired to the Truth of God and to the Truth About Man,” Papal address to the Romano Guardini Foundation of Berlin (Oct. 2010), www.zenit.org/rssenglish-31063.

² Romano Guardini, *The Art of Praying: The Principles and Methods of Christian Prayer*, trans. Leopold Loewenstein-Wertheim (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1995), 169. In the original version, Guardini uses the word “Ehrfurcht.”

³ The *Magnificat* is a monthly publication, edited by Dominicans, which contains Mass propers, a shortened version of the Liturgy of Hours, lives of saints, and spiritual writings by various authors including Fathers and Doctors of the Church.

“You are the source of all life: —grant us reverence for all that lives.”⁴

“Blessed are you, O Lord our God; you created all things and pronounced them good: —fill us with reverence for the works of your hands.”⁵

In this paper I intend to discuss whether we ought to revere and show reverence toward non-rational natural creatures. First, I will set out what Thomas Aquinas says about reverence: what it is and toward whom it ought to be held or shown. Second, I will consider whether contemporary speakers of English use the word “reverence” in ways compatible with Aquinas’s teaching about reverence. Ultimately, I suggest that we should take our cue from Aquinas as to our use of the word in regard to creatures; that is, given there is reason to regard and treat rational creatures in a way different from non-rational ones, insofar as they differ in nature and destiny, we should reserve our use of the words “revere” and “reverence” to beings that are rational, lest our use of language efface the precise meaning of these words and consequently obscure the real differences as to how we ought to regard and treat each of these two kinds of beings.

What Is Reverence?

According to Aquinas, reverence is the proper act of both the gift of piety and the gift of fear: “Although [the act of coming to the aid of those in distress] will have no place in heaven . . . nevertheless there will be the principal act [of the gift of piety] which is to revere God with filial affect.”⁶ “To revere God is the act of the gift of fear.”⁷ The two gifts complement each other, and the reverence they involve has two facets. Both gifts stem from love: love moves us to do what is good for the beloved and also to fear what would separate us from the beloved. Thus, when speaking of the gift of piety, Aquinas says:

The Holy Spirit moves us, among other things, to this, that we have a certain filial affect toward God, according to Rom. 8:15: “You have received the Spirit of the sons of adoption, by which we cry out: Abba, Father.” And because it pertains properly to piety to show respect (cultus)⁸ and service (officium) to one’s father, consequently the piety

⁴ *Magnificat*, August 2010, 241. See also, *ibid.* February 2012, 386: “For the word of creation, we praise you, O God: —teach us to reverence all that your word has brought into being.”

⁵ *Magnificat*, January 2011, 150.

⁶ *ST II-II*, q. 121, a. 1, ad 3. (The article treats whether piety is a gift.)

⁷ *ST II-II*, q. 81, a. 2.

⁸ The meanings of “cultus” include care, respect, reverence, and worship.

according to which we show respect and service to God as father through the instinct of the Holy Spirit is a gift of the Holy Spirit.⁹

And when speaking of the gift of fear, Aquinas first makes plain that filial fear stems from love for the father, and then equates filial fear with reverence for God: "The relationship of servant to master is through the power of the master subjecting the servant to himself, but the relationship of son to father . . . is the opposite, [i.e.,] through the affect of the son subjecting himself to the father . . . by a union of love."¹⁰ "Filial or chaste fear does this [makes man subject to God and not fighting him] insofar as through it we revere God and flee withdrawing ourselves from him."¹¹ Reverence thus embraces both a desire to exhibit attentive service and a fear of offending, both of which are rooted in love.¹²

The virtue of religion (*religio*) also has a close relationship with reverence:

To revere God is the act of the gift of fear. It pertains to religion, however, to do certain things on account of divine reverence. Whence it does not follow that religion is the same as the gift of fear, but that it is ordered to it as to something more principal.¹³

Religion, then, is concerned with expressions of reverence:

⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 121, a. 1.

¹⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 19, a. 2, ad 3. See *ST* II-II, q. 19, a. 2: "It will be filial fear if it is on account of fear of fault; for it belongs to sons to fear offense to the father."

¹¹ *ST* II-II, q. 19, a. 9. See also *ST* II-II, q. 19, a. 5, ad 2. Note that in heaven, reverence no longer takes the form of fear of offending God, for it is impossible for the blessed to do so. Rather it takes the form of what we would call "awe:" "Therefore [in heaven] fear will be destroyed as to the act that is to fear separation, but it will remain as to the act which is to admire or to revere that being [who is] difficult [to attain], which happens when man from the consideration of so great a height contracts in his own smallness" (*Scriptum super Sententiis* [Paris: Lethielleux, 1956], III, d. 34, q. 2, a. 3, qc. 4).

¹² See *ST* II-II, q. 22, a. 2: "But filial fear which shows reverence to God is as a certain kin to the love of God, and a certain principle of all those things which are observed in reverence of God. And therefore precepts in the law are given concerning filial fear as they are given about love because each of them is a preamble to the external acts commanded by the law to which pertain the precepts of the Decalogue. And therefore according to the authority adduced [namely, Deut. 10:12: 'And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you except that you fear the Lord your God?'], fear of God is required from man, both so 'that he walk in the way of God' by worshipping him [i.e., God], and so 'that he may love him [i.e., God].'"

¹³ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 1, ad 1.

To revere, as such, is an act of fear; but to show reverence, insofar as this is due to God, is properly the act of *latría*. . . . Just as to fight bravely, as such, is the act of courage, but to fight in the army of a king as a soldier—something which is owed to him [the king] by reason of the fiefdom he holds—is an act of justice.¹⁴

Aquinas makes a similar point when speaking of the relationship of reverence to honor:¹⁵

Reverence is not the same thing as honor; but in one respect [it] is the first motive for honoring [a person], insofar as, namely, a person from the reverence which he has toward someone, honors him. In another respect it is the end of honor, insofar as, namely, someone is honored for the purpose that he be held in reverence by others.¹⁶

Revering someone stands to honoring someone (which is a way of *exhibiting* reverence) as an internal disposition to a type of action driven by that disposition. Accordingly, I will sometimes rely on passages in which Aquinas explicitly refers to honor but could just as well have been speaking of the reverence underlying it.

The Proper Object of Reverence

Reverence first and foremost “directly regards the excellent person, and therefore according to diverse notions of excellence, it has diverse species.”¹⁷ Elsewhere, as we shall see, Aquinas makes it clear that reverence is appropriate only when the superiority or excellence in question is either properly divine, as is true of God, or makes the creature in some way divine.

When speaking about God, Aquinas affirms that “reverence is owed to God on account of his excellence.”¹⁸ The excellence of God can be viewed in light of his essence or in light of his being a principle in regard to creatures (e.g., creator and redeemer). When discussing the unity of the virtue of religion, Aquinas maintains that it pertains to religion “to exhibit reverence to the one God according to one reason; namely, he is principle of creation and governor of things. Whence he himself says

¹⁴ *In III Sent.*, d. 9, q. 1., a. 1, q1a 4, sol. 1, ad 3.

¹⁵ See *ST II–II*, q. 103, a. 2: “honor is always due to someone on account of some excellence or superiority.” See also *ST II–II*, q. 103, a. 1: “honor implies a certain testifying to the excellence of someone.”

¹⁶ *ST II–II*, q. 103, a. 1, ad 1.

¹⁷ *ST II–II*, q. 104, a. 2, ad 4.

¹⁸ *ST II–II*, q. 84, a. 1, ad 1. See also *ST II–II*, q. 81, a. 3, ad 2.

(Malach. I), 'If I am father, where is my honor?' For it belongs to the father to produce and govern."¹⁹

In another passage Aquinas indicates that greater reverence is owed God in virtue of his essence than is owed him in regard to what he does for creatures. Here Aquinas addresses the question of whether God should be praised vocally. In the body of the article, Aquinas notes that in regard to vocal praise "we address words to God in order to lead ourselves and other listeners to reverence of him."²⁰ He then addresses the objection that God is owed something greater than praise:

We are able to speak about God in two ways; one way, as to his essence. And thus, since he is incomprehensible and ineffable, he is greater than all praise. The reverence and the honor of *latría*, however, are owed to him in this respect. Whence in the Psalter of Jerome it is said as to the first 'praise keeps silence for you, God' and as to the second, "to you a vow is rendered." In another way [we are able to speak about God] according to his effects which are ordered to our utility. And according to this, praise is owed to God.²¹

In both the above passages we can see something about reverence that Aquinas notes elsewhere, namely, that it differs from love as to its object:

The object of love is the good, the object of honor or reverence is something excellent. The goodness of God is communicated to the creature; not however, the excellence of his goodness. Therefore, the charity by which God is loved is not a virtue distinct from the virtue by which we love the neighbor; however, religion, by which God is honored, is distinguished from the virtues by which we honor our neighbor.²²

It would imply contradiction for God to create another infinitely good being or for him to endow another being with the capacity to create.²³ His incommunicable excellence lies in his being infinitely good, creator, supreme governor of the universe, redeemer, and other things such as these. For this reason, an exclusive form of reverence and honor is owed to God ("*latría*").²⁴

¹⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 3. See also *Summa contra Gentiles*, ed. C. Pera, O.P., et al. (Turin: Marietti, 1961), III, chap. 119. (Hereafter cited as *ScG*.)

²⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 91, a. 1.

²¹ *ST* II-II, q. 91, a. 1, ad 1.

²² *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 4, ad 3.

²³ See *ST* I, q. 45, a. 5.

²⁴ See *ST* II-II, q. 103, a. 3, ad 1: "as religion par excellence is called piety, insofar as God is Father par excellence, so too *latría* par excellence is called *dulia*, insofar as God par excellence is Lord. The creature, however, does not share the

Although God does not communicate the supreme excellence of his goodness, he does communicate his goodness to creatures. He does not do so equally;²⁵ thus some creatures excel others in goodness. The creatures to which he communicates his goodness in the highest degree are those that he creates in his own image; and upon these he further freely bestows grace, which is a certain participation in the divine nature. It is to such beings that reverence is to be shown:

“*Dulia*” conveys the reverence and honor that can be shown to a creature. Since, however, honor is not owed except to divine things, as the Philosopher says in Bk. I of the *Ethics*, it is not owed properly and directly except to the one possessing grace and virtue which makes [one] divine.²⁶

Grace is a sharing in the divine nature, and the supernatural virtues dispose us to live in a manner befitting our elevated nature.²⁷ Humans are said to be deiform in virtue of both.²⁸ The humans and angels who are in heaven securely possess grace and in addition are united to God in the beatific vision.²⁹ As such, they are more worthy of reverence than people living on earth who are in the state of grace.

As for those who possess purely human virtue alone, they are plainly less like God than those who possess supernatural virtue; still, they are

power of creating, by reason of which God is owed *latría*. And therefore the Gloss makes that distinction, attributing *latría* to God according to creation which is not communicated to the creature, *dulia* according to lordship which is communicated to creature.” See also *ST* II–II, q. 81, a. 4: “Honor, however, is owed to someone by reason of excellence. A singular excellence belongs to God, however, insofar as he transcends all things infinitely according to every manner of surpassing. Therefore special honor is owed to him.”

²⁵ See *ST* I, q. 47, a. 2: “Therefore, just as divine wisdom is the cause of the distinction of things for the sake of the perfection of the universe, so also he is cause of inequality. For there would not be a perfect universe if only one grade of goodness were to be found in things.”

²⁶ *In III Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 3.

²⁷ See *ST* I–II, q. 110, a. 3 and *De veritate*, q. 27, a. 2.

²⁸ See *In II Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 4, ad 3: “Grace confers perfection on the soul as a certain divine being . . . according to which those who possess grace are in a certain manner constituted deiform, on account of which they are referred to as sons by the grace of God.” See also *In III Sent.*, d. 27, q. 2, a. 1, ad 9: “Insofar as men through charity are made deiform, they are thus above men, and their intercourse is in heaven. . . .”

²⁹ See *ST* II–II, q. 103, a. 4, ad 2: “the greatest reverence is owed to man from the nearness he has to God.”

more like God than those who lack it, since natural virtue disposes them for supernatural virtue.³⁰

Why Should Reverence Be Shown to Bad People?

What about human beings who are not in the state of grace and lack human virtue? It seems that they should not be honored or revered, since “Honor is nothing other than a certain protestation of the excellence of the goodness of someone.”³¹ While Aquinas maintains that reverence is “not owed properly and directly except to the one possessing grace and virtue,”³² he goes on to say:

But there are many ways for someone to have virtue: either as virtuous in act, and honor is owed to this person properly and according to himself (*secundum se*), or as having a natural aptitude for virtue, and thus honor is to be shown to anyone having the image. Or as ordered to

³⁰ Here is not the place to investigate in detail the relationship between natural virtue and supernatural virtue. Aquinas maintains that in some sense it is true that “if man does what is in him, God gives him grace” (*De veritate*, q. 24, a. 15). See also *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 11, ad 2.

³¹ *ST II–II*, q. 103, a. 2. See also *In III Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 3, obj. 1: “It seems that sinners ought not to be honored with *dulia*. For the honor of *dulia*, as the philosopher says, is reverence shown to someone in testimony of virtue. But sinners who are also prelates do not have virtue. Therefore, those who honor them give false testimony, which is a sin.”

³² *In III Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 3. One might ask whether someone should be revered and honored for excellence in forms of goodness that do not make a person good in an unqualified way, e.g., should an excellent baseball player be honored and revered? In one passage Aquinas seems to say that all human excellence makes a person divine: “In regard to the excellence of a man, two things should be noted. First, a man does not have of himself that according to which he excels, but it is as it were something divine in him. And therefore honor is not principally owed to him, but to God” (*ST II–II*, q. 131, a. 1; see also *ST II–II*, q. 103, a. 4 and *II–II*, q. 102, a. 1, ad 2). However, in other places he makes it clear that human excellence that is not subordinated to the end of the moral life does not truly make a person divine. He distinguishes natural industriousness and astuteness from prudence (see *ST II–II*, q. 47 a. 13, ad 3, *ST II–II*, q. 53 *proem* and q. 55, a. 3), and says that a good thief is said to be good by metaphor (*ST II–II*, q. 92 a. 1, ad 1). Accordingly, someone who used a personal excellence for a bad end should not be revered: “In another way, someone can revere men insofar as they are in opposition to God. And in this manner those who do not revere men are praised . . .” (*ST II–II*, q. 19, a. 3, ad 1). Thus, an eminent scientist or a star football player who mocks God and religion should not be revered, despite his excellence. This is reflected in how athletes are commonly selected for admission to a hall of fame; their character and citizenship are factors, and not just their skill.

leading to or conserving virtue; and thus it is owed to all prelates, who are ordered to this, that they direct others to virtue.³³

Aquinas does not say that unrepentant sinners are owed reverence properly and according to themselves insofar as they have the aptitude to become virtuous. Still, it seems strange that they are owed any reverence at all by grace-filled and virtuous individuals who are superior to them as such. Aquinas sometimes deals with the objection that moral and spiritual inferiors should not be shown reverence by pointing out that those who appear superior may have hidden faults that render them inferior to others and/or the others may have hidden virtues that make them superior,³⁴ and thus even apparently superior individuals can legitimately “consider others as superior to oneself” (Phil 2:3). However, he acknowledges that people cannot be expected to do so in every case:

And the monition follows “but in humility considering each other superior.” For as it pertains to pride that man extols himself beyond himself, so it pertains to humility that man subjects himself according to his measure. But in what manner will the superior be able to fulfill this? . . . [G]iven that one person, as to everything, is good, and another bad, nevertheless you and he bear a twofold persona, namely, of yourself and of Christ. If therefore you may not put that one before you by reason of his person, you may by reason of the divine image.³⁵

One is left asking: why should one put another before oneself simply because that person is in the image of God, given that one is also in the image of God? The answer lies in the fact that rational beings who remain open to God, even when they are wicked and as such inferior to the just, are nonetheless superior beings, and can be revered as such:

Honor is nothing other than a certain bearing witness to the excellence of goodness of someone. The excellence of someone, however, can be consid-

³³ *In III Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 3.

³⁴ See *ST II-II*, q. 161, a. 6, ad 1: “Someone without falsehood can believe himself and pronounce himself to be viler than all according to the hidden defects he recognizes in himself and the gifts of God that are hidden in others.”

³⁵ *Commentary on Phil. 2:3 in Super Epistolas S. Pauli*, ed. P. Raphaelis Cai, O.P., vol. 2 (Rome: Marietti, 1953), c. 2, lec. 1. See *ST II-II*, q. 161, a. 3, ad 1: “Not only ought we to revere God in himself, but we ought to also revere what is his in anyone whatsoever, not nevertheless with the same manner of reverence by which we revere God. And therefore through humility we ought to place ourselves under all of our neighbors for the sake of God, as is said in 1 Peter 2: ‘Be subject to every human creature for the sake of God;’ nevertheless we ought to show *latría* to God alone.”

ered not only by comparison to the one doing the honoring, so that, namely, he is more excellent than the one by whom he is honored, but also according to himself (*secundum se*) or in comparison to certain others. Accordingly, honor is always owed to someone on account of some excellence or superiority. For it is not necessary that the one who is honored be more excellent than the honorer, but perchance to certain others; or even to the one honoring as to something, but not simply speaking.³⁶

One group of beings to which the living, hardened sinner is superior consists of the damned. This comes out in Aquinas's response to the following objection:

[I]t seems that demons ought to be shown *dulia* [i.e., the form of honor that can be shown to a creature],³⁷ for the divine image remains in them; for natural goods remain in them in the most lucid manner, according to Dionysius. But *dulia* is exhibited to man by reason of being an image. Therefore, it ought to be shown to demons.³⁸

Aquinas responds by noting that "in demons, the natural aptitude for virtue is bound; and therefore *dulia* ought not to be shown them."³⁹ The demons can no longer actualize their natural aptitude for virtue; they can no longer choose to love and obey God but are rather set in permanent opposition to him. Thus, they are not worthy of reverence. As Aquinas puts it in the *Summa theologiae*: "they are our superiors in nature," but they "are irrevocably bad, and are to be held as enemies, rather than to be honored."⁴⁰ We can infer then that humans who are dead and confirmed in evil are also not to be honored, despite their being created in the image of God. Hardened sinners who are alive are superior to such individuals and to the demons, since they remain capable of friendship with God.

³⁶ *ST* II–II, q. 103, a. 2. Bestowing "the most improved player" award on someone would seem to be an example of honoring the excellence of someone as measured "according to himself" (*secundum se*).

³⁷ See *In III Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 3 (quoted earlier in the main text; see note 26).

³⁸ *In III Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 3, obj. 5.

³⁹ *In III Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 3, ad 5.

⁴⁰ *ST* II–II, q. 103, a. 2, ad 2. To speak in terms of the distinction that Aquinas makes concerning the good absolutely speaking as opposed to the good *secundum quid* (see *ST* I, q. 5, a. 1), the demons possess goodness *secundum quid* that is superior to human goodness, while lacking goodness absolutely speaking. And since they are entirely devoid of goodness absolutely speaking (no longer even having the potency for it), they plainly lack any excellence of goodness absolutely speaking, and for this reason are not objects of reverence.

Reverence Has a Stronger and a Weaker Sense

Aquinas again does distinguish the reverence owed hardened sinners in light of their potential for grace and goodness from that owed to the graced-filled and virtuous. The reverence owed the latter is owed to them properly and according to the rational individual that they are, and present in them is some personal excellence that renders us unable to fully pay our debt to them.⁴¹ The reverence owed the former is not owed to them properly, but only as bearers of the divine image still open to God, and absent in them the sort of personal excellence that would indebted us to them in a way that cannot fully be repaid.⁴² To the extent that one can reasonably regard oneself as having hidden vices another might not have or as lacking virtues that another might have, one can rightly show that other reverence in the stronger sense.

Comparison of Humans to Non-Rational Beings

Also Reveals the Superiority Inveterate Sinners Do Possess

Inveterate sinners' superiority in the line of something divine also comes out in Aquinas's response to an objection that argues that non-rational beings should be honored. The objection reads:

It seems that irrational beings [ought to receive the honor of *dulia*]. For in them is a vestige, which is a likeness of God, just as an image is, even if it is not as distinct a likeness. More and less does not diversify species. Therefore, *dulia* is owed them.⁴³

Aquinas responds: "*Dulia* is not owed the likeness of a vestige, as it is owed the likeness of an image, because it has no aptitude for virtue."⁴⁴

⁴¹ See *ST* II-II, q. 80, unicus: "For there are certain virtues which render a debt to another, but are not able to render what is equal. . . . Third, it is not possible for man to recompense virtue according to an equal recompense. . . . And thus *observantia* is added to justice through which, as Cicero says, 'men excelling others by some position of honor are worthy of reverence (*cultu*) and honor.'" See also *ST* II-II, q. 102, a. 1, ad 2: "Since it is true that through science and virtue and all other things of this sort someone is rendered apt to a state of dignity, the reverence which is shown to some on account of any excellence whatsoever pertains to the same virtue [i.e., *observantia*]."

⁴² Individuals lacking virtue may still be owed reverence because they are parents (and thus share in God's fatherhood) or because they are political leaders (and thus capable of leading the community to the common good); see *ST* II-II, q. 63, a. 3; *ST* II-II, q. 103, a. 2, ad 2; and *In III Sent.* d. 9, q. 2, a. 3, ad 3.

⁴³ *In III Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 3, obj. 6.

⁴⁴ *In III Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 3, ad 6. See *ST* II-II, q. 121, a. 1, ad 3: "Just as through piety which is a virtue man shows service and respect (*cultum*) not only to one's

There is a sharp line dividing creatures that have a capacity for virtue and grace (which again are what make beings divine) from creatures that do not have such a capacity:

The likeness of an image is found in human nature according as it is *capax Dei*, namely, by attaining him through its proper operation[s] of knowledge and love. The likeness of a vestige, however, is found only according to some representation existing in the creature from divine impression; not however, from this, that the irrational creature . . . is able to attain God through its operation alone.⁴⁵

Non-rational creatures, considered in their own nature, may be superior to us in certain respects, e.g., cheetahs run faster,⁴⁶ but they are not absolutely superior to us; they are inferior to us as to their substantial form, which “dies with their body.”⁴⁷ In addition, as merely sentient beings they are incapable of being raised to share in the divine life:

The sense of sight, because it is entirely material, in no manner can be elevated to something immaterial. But our intellect or the angelic intellect, because it is in some manner according to nature elevated from matter, is able to be elevated higher to something beyond its nature through grace.⁴⁸

Any inferiority humans might have to other earthly creatures is outweighed by our capacities to know and love God by our natural faculties of intellect and will, capacities that make it possible for us to be further

corporeal father, but also to all joined by blood insofar as they belong to the father; so also piety, according as it is a gift, shows reverence (*cultum*) and service not only to God, but to all men insofar as they belong to God.” One might object that non-rational creatures belong to God as well. We, however, belong to God in a special way since we bear his image, that is, so long as we do not permanently close ourselves to him.

⁴⁵ ST III, q. 4, a. 1, ad 2. See *De veritate*, q. 22, a. 5, ad 5: “The rational creature alone is able to hold God (*capax Dei*) because it alone is able to explicitly know and love him; whereas other creatures share the divine likeness, and in this manner desire God himself.” See also *In I Sent.*, d. 37, q. 2, a. 3.

⁴⁶ See *De veritate*, q. 22, a. 11: “If man is compared to the lion according to essential differences, he is found to be simply speaking more noble than the lion, insofar as man is a rational animal, the lion an irrational animal; the lion, however, is more excellent than man if compared according to bodily strength; this, however, is to be more noble relatively speaking (*secundum quid*).”

⁴⁷ ScG II, chap. 82. See also ScG III, chap. 120: “Man is superior in the order of nature, at least, to all lower bodies, insofar as he has a more perfect form.”

⁴⁸ ST I, q. 12, a. 4, ad 3.

ordered by God to the beatific vision.⁴⁹ These things render even the bad people living on earth superior in a manner that is divine.⁵⁰

The failure to acknowledge the radical difference between humans and non-rational creatures is what is at the root of Albert Schweitzer's view that we ought to have "reverence for all life forms." Though Aquinas would agree with Albert Schweitzer that every creature is good and to be loved in keeping with its degree of goodness,⁵¹ he emphatically rejects the view that Schweitzer shared,⁵² that all life forms are equally valuable.

There is another passage where Aquinas addresses whether *dulia* should be shown to non-rational creatures. ("*Dulia*," again, is the reverence and honor that can be shown to a creature.) Here he responds in somewhat different terms. The objection he addresses reads:

Just as in the rational creature is found the image of God by reason of which it is honored, so also in the irrational creature is found the vestige of God. But another notion of similitude is implied in the name image than in the name vestige. Therefore, accordingly there also must be diverse species of *dulia*, particularly since certain irrational creatures are shown honor, such as the wood of the holy Cross, and other things of the sort.⁵³

⁴⁹ See ScG IV, chap. 54: "Although as to certain conditions, man exists as inferior to some creatures and is also like the lowest creatures as to certain things, nevertheless, according to the order of the end, nothing exists higher than man, except God alone, in whom the perfect happiness of man consists."

⁵⁰ It is the case that a non-rational creature is in some way superior to a sinner: "the soul of the sinner according to its nature is simply speaking nobler than any corporeal power; but according to fault it is made less worthy than corporeal fire, not simply speaking, but insofar as [fire] is an instrument of divine justice" (*De veritate*, q. 26, a. 1, ad 9). Fire, however, is unable to attain God by freely choosing to serve him. Thus, the superiority it has over the sinner by serving God does not qualify it as a worthy object of reverence.

⁵¹ Note that Aquinas maintains that only rational beings are rightly loved with love of charity; see *ST* II-II, q. 25, a. 3.

⁵² See Albert Schweitzer, "The Ethics of Reverence for Life," originally published in *Christendom* 1 (1936): 225-39, posted at www1.chapman.edu/schweitzer/sch.reading4.html: "Ordinary ethics seeks to find limits within the sphere of human life and relationships. But the absolute ethics of the will-to-live must reverence every form of life, seeking so far as possible to refrain from destroying any life, regardless of its particular type. It says of no instance of life, 'This has no value.' It cannot make any such exceptions, for it is built upon reverence for life as such. It knows that the mystery of life is always too profound for us, and that its value is beyond our capacity to estimate. We happen to believe that man's life is more important than any other form of which we know. But we cannot prove any such comparison of value from what we know of the world's development. True, in practice we are forced to choose."

⁵³ *ST* II-II, q. 103, a. 4, obj. 3.

His response is:

The irrational creature considered in itself is not owed by man some subjection or honor, but rather every such creature is naturally subject to man. That the cross of Christ, however, is honored, comes about from the same honor by which Christ is honored, as the royal purple garments are honored with the same honor by which the king is honored.⁵⁴

This response is closely connected with his earlier response: non-rational beings are subject to us (or in other words are ordered to us) as means to an end, as a direct consequence of our unique ability among earthly creatures to attain God by way of intellectual knowledge and love:

Moreover, whenever there are things that are ordered to some end, if some among them of themselves are not able to attain the end, it is necessary that they be ordered to the things which do attain the end, [i.e.,] to the things which for their own sake are ordered to the end; as the end of the army is victory, which soldiers attain through their own act of fighting, who alone are wanted for their own sakes in the army. All others, however, are charged with other duties, e.g., taking care of horses, preparing arms, [etc.] for the sake of the soldiers who are wanted in the army. From what has been said earlier, it stands that God is the ultimate end of the universe, which only the intellectual nature can attain in itself, namely, by knowing and loving him. . . . Therefore, only the intellectual nature is prized (*quaesita*) in the universe, and other things for its sake.⁵⁵

Indeed, Aquinas maintains that God shows reverence to human beings insofar as we are at the head of material creation,⁵⁶ whereas he does not show it to non-rational creatures:

He is called father by reason of special creation, because he created us to his image and likeness which he did not impress on other lower creatures. . . . The same is true by reason of his governance: for although he governs all things, nevertheless he governs us as lords, and other things as servants. [As it says in] Wis. 14:3: "Your providence, father, governs all things, and Wis. 12:18: "and with great reverence you dispose us."⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 103, a. 4, ad 3.

⁵⁵ *ScG* III, chap. 112.

⁵⁶ God, of course, is infinitely superior to us. Recall though that reverence can be shown to a being inferior to the one showing reverence in virtue of this being's relative superiority to other beings, so long as this superiority renders it in some way divine.

⁵⁷ *In orationem dominicam*, pr. See also *ScG* III, chap. 112: "However, when we say that intellectual substances are ordered by divine providence for their own sakes,

Non-Rational Creatures Are Meant to Lead Us to Revere God

Non-rational creatures, as traces of the divine, are not themselves objects of reverence, but rather are meant to lead us to revere God:

In a certain manner meditation on what God has made is necessary as a preparation for human faith about God. First, certainly from the meditation of what he has made, we are able in a certain manner to admire and consider divine wisdom. For those things which are made by art are representative of the art itself, as being made to the likeness of art. God, however, produces things in being by his wisdom. . . . Whence, from a consideration of divine works, we are able to gather what divine wisdom is, as in things made through a certain communication, impressed with his likeness; for it is said: "He pours out his wisdom over all his works."

Secondly, this consideration leads to admiration of the highest power of God, and as a result it gives birth to reverence of God in the human soul. For, it is necessary that the power of the maker be understood as more eminent than the things that are made.⁵⁸

It is appropriate to admire great works of art. To admire a work of art, however, is not the same thing as to revere it. The beauty and order of natural things are admirable.⁵⁹ But again, our appreciation of these things is not meant to lead us to revering them, but to revering God:

we do not understand by this that they are not further ordered to God and to the perfection of the universe. For they are said to be cared for for their own sakes and others for their sake insofar as the goods that are shared by divine providence are not given to them for the utility of another; but to their use yield those things which are given to others from divine ordination. Thus it is said . . . in the psalm, 'you have made all things subject under his feet; sheep and oxen, all these, and wild animals.' And in Wis. 12:18 it is said: 'You, however, Lord of power, you judge with tranquility and with great reverence you dispose us.' See also *ST* II-II, q. 103, a. 3, ad 1: "*latría* [is attributed] to God according to creation which [excellence] is not communicated to a creature, [while] *dulia* [is attributed] according to lordship which is communicated to a creature."

⁵⁸ *ScG* II, chap. 2.

⁵⁹ Aquinas quotes in a number of places Augustine's affirmation (in the *Enchiridion*, Bk. 2, chap. 7) that "the individual things that God made are good, but taken together the universe is very good, because the admirable beauty of the universe is formed from all" (*ST* I, q. 25, a. 6, obj. 3); see also *ST* I, q. 48, a. 1, obj. 5 and *ST* I, q. 19, a. 9, obj. 2.

Aquinas speaks of the order of creation as admirable in *In IV Sent.*, d. 46, q. 2, a. 1, qc. 3: "[I]n the work of creation, divine power is chiefly manifested in this, that what is rendered wonderful is that things are produced in being; but in the work of governing, by which things are disposed in an ordered way, the order of things itself is rendered admirable, and therefore is attributed to wisdom."

[T]he heavenly bodies serve man insofar as they point to their Creator by their beauty and magnitude: whence in Scripture, man is frequently moved to considering the heavenly bodies, so that from them he may be led to divine reverence, as is manifest in Is. 40:26: "Lift your eyes to the heights and see who has created these things."⁶⁰

Note how Aquinas's teachings seem to follow closely those of Ps. 8:3–6:

When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than the angels, and dost crown him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet.

The psalm begins by expressing admiration for the heavenly bodies which are works of God's hands, but then goes on to acknowledge that God has made all of non-rational creation subject to human beings, who are little less than the angels. Admirable though the heavenly bodies are, they are inferior to us,⁶¹ and for this reason Aquinas maintains that they are not to be an object of our reverence.

It is pertinent to note here that according to Aquinas one of the causes of idolatry is "the ignorance of the true God; whose excellence men were not considering because they were showing the worship belonging to the divinity to creatures on account of the latter's beauty or power."⁶² The overestimation of the excellences of non-rational creatures can be an occasion for idolatry. For this reason, there seems to be a danger that, if people start regarding nature as worthy of reverence, they might take the next step and revere it as God. Some of the things that the celebrated eco-theologian, the late Thomas Berry, says seem to bear this out. Berry laments that the notion of a transcendent deity has "led us to treat the phenomenal world with something less than the reverence paid it by

⁶⁰ *Compendium Theologiae in Opuscula Theologica* (Rome: Marietti, 1954), q. 170. See also *ST* Supplement, q. 91, a. 1: "All corporeal beings are believed to be made for the sake of man; whence even all things are said to be 'subject' to him. However, they serve man in two ways: in one way, to the end of sustaining his corporeal life; in another way, to advance his knowledge of what is divine, insofar as man 'perceives the invisible things of God through the things that are made,' as is said in Rom. 1:20." See also *Super Epistolam ad Romanos*, chap. 1, lec. 6.

⁶¹ See *ScG* III, chap. 120: "It is manifest that there does not follow from the celestial bodies such a degree of noble perfection as is in the rational soul. Therefore, they are below the grade of dignity of any and every human being. Therefore, some worship is not owed to them by man."

⁶² *ST* II–II, q. 94, a. 4.

those cultures in which there is a sacred dimension to trees, to rivers, and to the whole of creation.”⁶³ Later he goes on to say:

With regard to time and season, rituals were established to create a consciousness of the moments of cosmological change: the dawn and dusk of the daily sequence of sunlight and dark, the increase and decline in the phases of the moon, the winter solstice. . . . These moments of change were the moments when the shining forth of the phenomenal world was most evident. Such moments were moments of grace, moments when the sacred world communicated itself with special clarity to the world of the human.

This intimacy with the universe can be seen in the initiation ceremony of the Omaha Indians. When an infant is born, the child is taken out under the invocation ‘O Ye Sun, Moon, Stars, All Ye that move in the heavens, I bid you hear me. Into your midst has come a new life. Consent Ye, we implore, make its path smooth that it may move beyond the first hill.’⁶⁴

In this ceremony we see an instance of the idolatry of which Aquinas speaks. And it seems more than a coincidence that Berry’s positive evaluation of it goes hand-in-hand with his advocating reverence for non-rational creation.

Objections to the View That We Are Not to Reverence Non-Rational Creatures

Now there are some objections that can be raised against Aquinas’s view that we are not to revere non-rational creatures, and they need to be addressed. One objection can be drawn from what Aquinas says regarding cursing irrational creatures:

However, to curse irrational beings insofar as they are creatures of God is the sin of blasphemy. To curse them, however, considered in themselves, is pointless and vain, and as a consequence, illicit.⁶⁵

[C]ursing a creature insofar as it is a creature redounds to God, and thus *per accidens* has the notion of blasphemy; not however if the creature is cursed on account of fault.⁶⁶

⁶³ Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 25.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 115. See also 121: “The human is the model for understanding the universe, as the universe is the model for understanding the human. For certainly humans have nothing but what they receive from the universe.”

⁶⁵ *ST II-II*, q. 76, a. 2.

⁶⁶ *ST II-II*, q. 76, a. 4, ad 1.

One might argue that revering non-rational creatures insofar as they are creatures of God redounds, at least *per accidens*, to the Creator.

First, just because one ought to avoid one sort of act does not automatically mean one is morally obligated to perform the opposite sort of act; for example, just because one ought not damage one's neighbor's garden does not mean that one has an obligation to take care of it. Thus, if we are to avoid cursing creatures as creatures of God, it does not necessarily follow that we are obligated to do the opposite. Secondly, even if this were the case, the opposite of cursing a creature (which means to wish it harm) is not to revere it, but rather to bless it (wish it well);⁶⁷ thus, if it is a sin to curse an irrational creature as creature, it does not follow that it pertains to virtue to revere an irrational creature.

One might still wonder whether revering irrational beings, insofar as they are creatures of God, might not have *per accidens* the notion of revering God insofar as it redounds to God. This seems to be what the authors of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* have in mind in one of the few passages in Church documents in which "revere" is used in regard to non-rational creatures:

Redeemed by Christ and made a new creature by the Holy Spirit, man can, indeed he must, love the things of God's creation: it is from God that he has received them, and it is as flowing from God's hand that he looks upon them and reveres them.⁶⁸

Aquinas would point out that lower things are naturally ordered to the higher being that is ourselves, and rather than having a fear of harming them, we are meant to use them, even though doing so often involves their destruction. While it would be irreverent to destroy a creature with the intention of offending the Creator, it is not irreverent to do so with

⁶⁷ We do not rightly bless non-rational creatures considered in their own natures. See *ST* I, q. 20, a. 2 and ad 3: "Friendship cannot be had except with rational creatures, in whom there happens to be a mutual return of love and a sharing in the works of life, and for whom it happens that things occur well or badly, according to fortune and happiness; as also there is benevolence properly speaking towards them."

⁶⁸ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 44. See also John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 42. See also United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Useful Resources for Dioceses and Parishes": "From its inception in 1993, the USCCB Environmental Justice Program has sought to urge Catholics throughout the country to become more aware of the links between reverence for the environment and social action on behalf of those negatively impacted by the environment" (www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/useful-resources-for-dioceses-and-parishes.cfm).

intention of using that creature in accord with the Creator's intentions. Christ, far from advocating reverence for all creatures, sent the demons that he had exorcised from a man into pigs that subsequently leapt off a cliff to their death. As Aquinas comments: "[Christ did this] so that man would recognize his dignity, since he permitted that so many thousands of pigs be killed for the salvation of one man."⁶⁹ Christ ate fish (see Lk 24:43) and presumably meat (the Paschal lamb). Things that one rightly intentionally destroys are not things that one reveres.

Someone might also challenge the distinctions Aquinas makes to explain why non-rational creatures considered in their own nature are not to be shown reverence, whereas certain non-rational things such as images of Christ and things dedicated to God, such as churches and holy oils, are to be shown reverence. Let us consider the various cases, starting with sacred images.

Aquinas argues that one should show the reverence of *latría* to images of Christ by making a distinction between the twofold motions one can have toward an image:

The first motion, by which someone is moved toward an image as a certain thing, is other than the motion which is to the thing [that it is an image of]; the second motion, however, which is to an image insofar as it is an image, is one and the same with the motion which is toward the thing [of which it is an image].⁷⁰

Applying this distinction, he goes on to say that no reverence is to be shown to a wooden sculpture or painted piece of cloth, insofar as it is a thing, but that we rightfully show reverence to an image of Christ as image, for to show reverence to Christ's image in this manner is to show reverence to Christ himself. He then concludes:

No non-rational being considered in its own nature is an image of God, and therefore it cannot be claimed, as is the case of an image, that revering it as image is to revere the thing of which it is the image.⁷¹

Aquinas is hesitant about whether even showing reverence to human beings, who are images of God insofar as they are images, is acceptable:

The motion which is toward an image insofar as it is an image is referred to the thing of which it is an image, nevertheless not every

⁶⁹ *Super Evangelium S. Matthaei* (Rome: Marietti, 1951), chap. 8, no. 737.

⁷⁰ *ST* III, q. 25, a. 3.

⁷¹ See *ST* III, q. 25, a. 3 and *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 3, ad 3.

motion which is toward an image is referred to it insofar as it is an image. And therefore sometimes the motion toward the image is other in kind than the motion toward the thing. Thus therefore it ought to be said that honor or the subjection of *dulia* regards absolutely a certain dignity of man. Granted that according to that dignity, man is to the image or likeness of God, nevertheless man, when he shows reverence to another, does not always refer this in act to God.⁷²

Aquinas does not deny that one could revere the human being who is the image of God as image; however, he notes that we do not always do so. Later in the *Summa theologiae*, however, he emphasizes the danger of showing reverence to human beings as images of God insofar as they are images:

Reverence is owed to the rational creature for its own sake. And therefore, if the adoration of *latria* were to be exhibited to the rational creature in which the image [of God] is present, it could be an occasion of error, as namely, the motion of the one adoring would stop at man as a certain thing, and not be carried to God, of whom he [man] is an image—which is not able to happen in regard to an image sculpted or drawn in matter lacking consciousness.⁷³

Again, non-rational creatures are not even images of God, so they do not even allow for the possibility of being revered insofar as they are images. In addition, though they are apt to direct our minds to God, they can also be an occasion for idolatry:⁷⁴

Any corporeal creature can be said to be made either for the sake of its proper act or for the sake of another creature or for the sake of the whole universe or for the sake of the glory of God. But Moses, in order to call the people away from idolatry, touches only that cause alone according as they are made for the utility of human beings. Whence in Deut. 4 it is said: “Lest by chance you raise your eyes to the heavens and you see the sun and moon and all the stars of heaven, and deceived you erroneously adore and worship them, which the lord God created in the service of all peoples.”⁷⁵

⁷² ST II–II, q. 103, a. 3, ad 3.

⁷³ ST III, q. 25, a. 3, ad 3.

⁷⁴ Is it a mere oversight that the following advertisement for the Sacred Door Trail does not mention God? “The Sacred Door Trail (SDT) is a 165-mile interfaith pilgrimage trail loop . . . dedicated to spiritual unity, peace, and our connection to Earth and each other. . . . What is special about the trail is that it is a shared sacred path, shared by many people, faiths and indigenous cultures that care to support such a vision. The trail serves to reconnect people back to our original church, our original temple—Mother Earth.”

⁷⁵ ST I, q. 70, a. 2.

As for things dedicated to God, the fact that these things have to be dedicated or consecrated to serve for the worship of God indicates that they are not of themselves holy or in some sense divine. As Aquinas notes:

Something is called sacred from the fact that it is ordered to divine worship. However, just as from this, that something is ordered to a good end, it shares the notion of good, so too from this, that something is deputed to the worship of God, it is made a certain divine thing, and thus a certain reverence is owed to it, which is referred to God. And therefore everything that pertains to irreverence of sacred things pertains to the injury of God, and has the notion of sacrilege.⁷⁶

If all water or oil is holy or sacred,⁷⁷ there would be no need for water and oil to be blessed in order for them to be holy water and sacred oil.⁷⁸

It is true that holy water (etc.), like ordinary water, is something inferior to us. The reverence we show it is not because it is superior to us, but rather because it is dedicated to divine worship. Non-rational creatures may lead us to knowledge of and worship of God, but they are not, as such, things used in divine worship. Those who were motivated by natural reason alone to worship God would rightly show reverence to the things they dedicated to divine worship,⁷⁹ but not to creatures insofar as

⁷⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 99, a. 1.

⁷⁷ More and more often one comes across environmentalists referring to non-rational creatures as sacred. For example, the 4th Annual Student Symposium on Science and Spirituality (October 21, 2011) held at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago had as its theme: "Sacred Soil, Living Water, Holy Air: Science, Spirituality, and the Elements of Earthly Life." The annual Festival of Faiths has been using as their themes in the last few years "Sacred Water," "Sacred Earth," and "Sacred Air." Dozens of other references from ostensibly religious sources could be added to the list. The same use of "sacred" is found in explicitly pagan literature, e.g., in these announcements posted on a site listing pagan festivals only: "[The] Sacred Harvest Festival is a overwhelmingly friendly and family-oriented Pagan gathering hosted by Harmony Tribe, a magic tribal community celebration of earth-based nature spirituality" and "The EarthSpirit Community and Taelin Productions invite you to join us for the thirty-third annual Rites of Spring—a gathering open to all who celebrate the sacred nature of the Earth" (www.fairiefaith.net/festival.list.html).

⁷⁸ God does not call the ground Moses stands upon sacred because He created it, but rather because He was present there in a special way (see Ex 3:5).

⁷⁹ See *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 2, ad 3: "[I]t belongs to the dictate of natural reason that man do certain things for divine reverence; but that he determinately do these or those things does not belong to the dictate of natural reason, but from the institution of divine or human law." See also *ST* II-II, q. 88, a. 1, ad 1: "[T]he oblation of sacrifice in general belongs to the natural law . . . but the determination of sacrifices is from human or divine institution."

creatures led these individuals to knowledge and reverence of God. (This is not to deny that certain creatures are especially suited for being employed in divine worship—and arguably were created partly with this goal in mind—e.g., water for baptism.)

None of the reasons then why we treat certain non-rational creatures with reverence applies to non-rational creatures considered in their own nature, and this is so even if their nature is seen as the work of God. Again, the beauty of the ocean might lead one to revere God, and indeed is intended by God to do so,⁸⁰ but, admirable as the waters themselves may be, they are not a being superior to us to which we owe reverence.

Should Non-Rational Creatures Be Shown Respect?

Perhaps one could make a case that Aquinas would maintain that we should treat non-rational creatures individually and collectively with *respect* for the limited excellence that they have. (Again, Aquinas acknowledges that non-rational beings excel humans in certain ways). Aquinas repeatedly acknowledges that non-rational beings are not simply meant to serve humans, but are ordered by God to other purposes as well: “Any

⁸⁰ Jame Schaeffer expresses a view similar to the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 44 in *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 82–83: “If the physical world is embraced as a medium through which God’s presence is experienced and a glimpse of God’s character is manifested, reverence for the material world and its constituents seems warranted as a way of responding to God. Of course, reverential behavior by believers does not constitute reverence for the natural world itself. From the perspective of this concept in particular and Christianity in general, the world with its diverse biota and abiota is not sacred. God alone is sacred, in the strict sense of the term. Reverential behavior is aimed toward God, whose presence and character are mediated by the sensible world. . . . When viewed from a sacramental perspective, individuals of species, communities of biota, ecosystems with their interconnected components, the entire biosphere, and the totality of the universe will be revered because they mediate God’s presence and God’s attributes. Reverential behavior will aim to ensure that species, ecosystems, and the larger biosphere are not prevented from acting according to their natures so they can continue to mediate God’s presence and character.” At first she seems to say that creation is meant to lead us to revere God, but then she speaks of the universe itself as rightly being revered insofar as it does this. Aquinas would agree that there is a difference in response to (e.g.,) water as a natural good and water seen as a work of God, but again would say that the latter response should be one of admiration and not of reverence, for non-rational creatures are not divine or superior to us in nature. Also, to say that God’s non-rational creation is “sacramental” (meaning that it is a tangible means by which we may become aware of God’s presence) is not the same thing as to say that it is sacred and worthy of reverence.

bodily creature can be said to be made either for the sake of its own act, or for the sake of another creature, or for the sake of the whole universe, or for the sake of the glory of God.”⁸¹

I do not think that Aquinas would deny that we ought to have a special attitude toward non-rational creatures, individually and as constituting the material universe, an attitude that reflects the fact that they have inherent excellence and are God’s handiwork ordered to his glory. Consider what he says about the renewal of creation at the end of time:

And although in that state of perfection man will not be led from sensible creatures to knowledge of God, since they will see Him in Himself; nevertheless it is delightful and agreeable to the one who already knows the cause to consider in what manner its likeness shines forth in its effect; whence it falls to the joy of the saints to consider the refulgence of divine goodness in bodies and chiefly in the heavenly bodies.⁸²

Would Aquinas then say as a consequence that we ought to treat non-rational creatures, if not with reverence, with respect? One problem in answering this question is that although the word “respectus” was apparently sometimes used in medieval Latin with a meaning similar to that of the English word “respect,” Aquinas never uses it that way. The words he uses that can be translated as “respect” in this sense are “reverentia,” “observantia,” “veneratio,” and “cultus,” and he thinks that none of them are rightly applied to non-rational creatures as such. A second problem lies in defining respect. The word “respect” when used in regard to humans can either mean to look up to someone as being an outstanding human individual or it can mean to treat human beings as persons, not harming them in any way (by taking their life, their belongings, etc.). The respect we are to have for persons is not the same as we are to have for other natural beings; we cannot morally take an innocent human life, whereas we can morally take the life of a plant or animal. Respect in the case of non-rational beings is qualified; one ought not destroy or harm them without a proportionate reason. Respect in the case of rational beings is absolute; one ought not destroy or harm an innocent human being under any circumstance.

Aquinas’s position on how we are to treat animals does not readily harmonize with the notion that we ought to respect non-rational creatures. Aquinas holds: “God does not require anything of man when it

⁸¹ See *ST* I, q. 70, a. 2 (cited earlier in the main text; see footnote 75). See also *ST* I, q. 65, a. 2.

⁸² *Compendium Theologiae*, q. 160.

comes to how he treats cattle or other animals.”⁸³ This suggests that Aquinas does not think that we should respect an animal as a being having its individual perfection and contributing to the perfection of the universe and thereby to God’s glory. Also, Aquinas thought that humans were incapable of destroying the order of creatures to each other,⁸⁴ and so he never considers whether we have any obligation to care for the integrity of creation. On the other hand, Aquinas speaks of how God does not want destruction for the sake of destruction, but only as ordered to some higher end.⁸⁵ One could infer from this that we should avoid any destruction of creatures that is not ordered to some due end. I will not pursue this question any further here, other than to note that Aquinas never explicitly takes a position on whether we should treat non-rational creatures in some special way in keeping with our admiration for them as well-wrought creatures of God.

How Do Contemporary Speakers of English Use the Word “Reverence?”

When people nowadays hear or speak of “reverence” (and “irreverence”), most of the time these words bring to mind God or things consecrated for the worship of God. We do not so spontaneously speak or think of having or showing reverence toward other human beings. The people to whom we would most often extend this word would be parents, the elderly, outstanding teachers, priests and religious (consecrated persons), and people who seem to be saintly. These are all people who surpass us in excellence and toward whom we have debts that we cannot repay; we need to practice toward them either the virtue of piety or that of *observantia*. Do we ever speak about reverencing human beings simply as human?

It is pretty rare that one’s hears the word “reverence” used in regard to people in general. Even those taking part in the pro-life movement, where reverence for human life is surely to be found, generally use the motto “respect life,” rather than “reverence life.”⁸⁶ This is understandable

⁸³ See *ST I–II*, q. 102, a. 6, ad 8: See also *De veritate*, q. 5, a. 6, ad 1: “God does not care for brute animals in this manner that he would give to man a law on behalf of these animals, namely, that man treat them well or abstain from killing them, for brute animals are made for the use of man; whence they are not provided for for their own sake, but for the sake of man.”

⁸⁴ See *De veritate*, q. 5, a. 8, and *ST I*, q. 113, a. 2.

⁸⁵ See *ST I*, q. 49, a. 2, and *ST I*, q. 22, a. 2, ad 2.

⁸⁶ Note how the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* at no. 466 speaks of *respecting* life, “Why must human life be respected? Human life must be respected because it is *sacred*. From its beginning human life involves the creative action of God and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator,

to the extent that there is reason to distinguish the attitude one ought to have to those we have some debt we cannot repay from human beings in general, and “respect” is a word similar in meaning to “reverence,” but weaker.⁸⁷ (Recall that Aquinas uses “reverence” in both a stronger and a weaker sense.)⁸⁸ Note that our reticence about using “reverence” in regard to human individuals in general hardly supports extending this word to lower beings. If Aquinas’s view that every living person is owed reverence in virtue of being *capax Dei* is right, however, we need to be reviving the use of the word in regard to human beings.

As Paul Woodruff remarks in his book *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*: “We have the word ‘reverence’ in our language, but we scarcely know how to use it.”⁸⁹ He accounts for this by noting that there has been a decline in our day in expressions of reverence toward others, be they our peers or our superiors.⁹⁰ Rituals, ceremonies, and observance of standards of etiquette that used to be part and parcel of our lives have been lost. Consider, for example, how so many young people will text-message while in the company of a friend or during class. They have no sense that

who is its sole end” (www.vatican.va/archive/compendium_ccc/documents/archive_2005_compendium-ccc_en.html).

⁸⁷ See *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th edition: “Reverence: 1: honor or respect felt or shown: DEFERENCE; esp.: profound adoring awed respect.”

⁸⁸ Perhaps another reason why “reverence” is not more frequently used in regard to humans is because in English we do not have words corresponding to “*dulia*” and “*latria*,” and so as a way of distinguishing the two we have tended to reserve the word “reverence” for the reverence of *latria*.

⁸⁹ Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Lost Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 42.

⁹⁰ See *ibid.*: “We have not lost our capacity for reverence. . . . What we are losing is a language of behavior—a self-conscious sort of ceremony—that best expresses reverence in daily life; and, along with self-conscious ceremony, we are losing many of the occasions on which people used to find ways to be reverent.” See also *ibid.*, 35: “Look at the many things we do with reverence every day: They are all the things that go wrong without it. Ritual and reverence in common life are so familiar that we scarcely notice them until they are gone. In sports, in entertainment, in the law court, the voting booth, the boardroom, there are ritual and reverence. We see them in the church whose members live in genuine awe of God, the community that votes, the department that meets well, the sports events that run with due ceremony. Most importantly, we see reverence in good leadership, in education, and in a home that is more than a place for eating, sleeping, watching television, and playing games. Home above all is the place where small rituals bring a family together into a family, where the respect they share is so common and familiar that they hardly recognize it as flowing from reverence.” Though it is certainly true that rules of etiquette can end up being so many empty formalities, and ceremony can be empty as well, it is the choice of the individual that they be such, rather than means of expressing reverence.

when one is with another person, ordinarily that person merits one's full attention; it is not like being in the presence of a dog or a houseplant.

Although we do not often use the word "reverence" in regard to people in general, it is, as it were, still on the tips of our tongues. Consider the case of those who seem the least likely objects of reverence: criminals and our enemies. We rightly punish murderers, rapists, thieves, etc., and do not share the lives of those of bad morals insofar as they are such. Still we do not shoot a thief taking vegetables from our garden, in the way we might shoot a bird or beast, and when criminals are executed we grant them a last wish, a final cigarette or access to a priest, etc.⁹¹ We do not destroy them as we would a rabid dog, without ceremony. And we do things like having firing squads so that no individual feels the burden of responsibility for having taken the guilty person's life. We also think that prisoners should be treated in a way that is in keeping with human dignity and that soldiers should treat their enemies likewise.⁹² Though they might be opposed to us and to God at the present moment, they have the capacity for repentance and may well be coheirs with us in the eternal kingdom. The good thief is among the relatively few people whom we are certain are in heaven. Whence C. S. Lewis's oft-quoted remark to the effect that we should regard every human individual with awe because he is a potential saint.⁹³

⁹¹ According to Aquinas a criminal should be shown reverence, albeit in the weakest possible way: "Someone is able to revere men in two ways. In one way, insofar as there is something divine in them, e.g., the good of grace or virtue, or at least the natural image of God, and in this manner those who do not revere men are blamed. In another way, someone can revere men insofar as they are in opposition to God. And in this manner those who do not revere men are praised . . ." (ST II-II, q. 19, a. 3, ad 1).

⁹² See "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," Article 5: "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" (www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/). It is a good question whether a purely philosophical understanding of human nature, one that makes no reference to our supernatural ordering to grace and glory, provides a sufficient basis for arguing that all living humans should be shown reverence in the weaker sense of the word.

⁹³ See C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in the Harper-San Francisco edition of *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, 45-46: "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 can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. . . . It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics."

It is the case, then, that English-speaking people at the present time still have some sense that Aquinas is correct to maintain that all living humans should be shown reverence. This opens the door to recuperating the corresponding use of the word “reverence.” Offering further hope of revitalizing the use of the word “reverence” in regard to every human being is the fact that such usage has not entirely gone of fashion. Just the other day, I heard a priest use the word “reverence” in his homily to name the attitude we ought to have toward our fellow humans. And John Paul II employed the word “revere” in a like manner in an encyclical that came out in 1995:

Because we have been sent into the world as a “people for life”, our proclamation must also become a genuine celebration of the Gospel of life. . . . For this to happen, we need first of all to foster, in ourselves and in others, a contemplative outlook. Such an outlook arises from faith in the God of life, who has created every individual as a “wonder” (cf. Ps 139:14). . . . It is the outlook of those who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image (cf. Gen 1:27; Ps 8:5). . . . It is time for all of us to adopt this outlook, and with deep religious awe to rediscover the ability to revere and honour every person, as Paul VI invited us to do in one of his first Christmas messages.⁹⁴

Aquinas would agree that reviving the usage of the word “reverence” in regard to every human alive today is a worthy goal. He would see extending the usage of the word to non-rational creatures as destroying its meaning, central to which is that it is a fitting response to God or to things that are in some way divine.

Conclusion

Aquinas maintains that “reverence” is a desire to show attentive service and honor to those who excel us in forms of goodness that characterizes them as divine, attendant upon which is a fear of offending them. God, of course, is without qualification divine, excelling creatures infinitely in every manner of goodness. He is owed a unique form of reverence, *latría*.

When it comes to the reverence that can be shown to creatures, *dulia*, Aquinas maintains that it is rightly shown only to rational creatures. Rational creatures share sufficiently in divine goodness to qualify them

⁹⁴ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 83. See also no. 41: “Thus the deepest element of God’s commandment to protect human life is the requirement to show reverence and love for every person and the life of every person.”

as images of God. They are able to know and love God, and furthermore they have been called by God to share in his own life through grace and ultimately to see God, enjoying friendship with him for all eternity. Rational beings as simply bearing the image of God, are not, however, properly speaking divine. To be properly speaking divine, their capacities to know and love God need to be actualized, as happens in the case of the virtuous and the blessed. If their capacities become permanently closed to God (or, in other words, if the rational beings cease to be *capax Dei*), though these beings remain in the image of God, they are no longer even potentially divine, and thus they are not in any sense worthy of reverence. Those who are only potentially grace-filled and virtuous are not properly speaking divine but are relatively speaking divine, as bearers of the divine image open to God.

Aquinas affirms that non-rational beings lack intellect and free will, and thus are incapable of knowing and loving God; plainly then, they lack the ability to acquire virtue, and thus can never be properly speaking divine. Moreover, since none of their life activities transcend what is physical, they are incapable of being raised to share in God's own life. Although they are works of divine art, it is the art itself that is divine, and not the things themselves. Non-rational creatures are worthy of admiration and as such are capable of leading our minds to God; but again, it is God and not the non-rational creature that is to be revered as divine.

If Aquinas is correct in his views regarding reverence, then we need to follow his lead in the language we use. More specifically, when it comes to using the word "reverence" in regard to creatures, we should use the word in a way that attends to the radical difference between human dignity, which consists in being created in the image of God and being called to eternal life, and the dignity of non-rational creatures, which includes neither of those things.

Nowadays "reverence" is occasionally used to name the interior disposition one ought to have in regard to humans who are in some way divine as being virtuous (or as being parents or rulers), albeit the word is not used so often as it has been in the past. The word "reverence" is nowadays even less frequently used in regard to human beings in general, but this usage has not entirely vanished. Both usages of the word now seem somewhat strained, but not to the point that we cannot re-familiarize ourselves with them by making a deliberate effort to do so.

Using the word "reverence," however, in regard to non-rational beings blurs the distinction between beings who are created in the image of God and *capax Dei* and beings that are not divine, made in God's image, or capable of sharing God's life. Consequently, doing so tends to fuel false

ideas about the equal dignity of all creatures and the appropriate treatment of them.⁹⁵ Extending the word “reverence” to non-rational creatures also lends itself to a mentality all too prevalent nowadays that divinizes the earth.⁹⁶

The usage of the word “reverence” in regard to non-rational creatures is especially egregious in light of the fact that the word “respect” is available for expressing how we should regard non-rational creatures in virtue of the limited excellence that they have.⁹⁷ Reserving the word “reverence” for rational creatures is in nowise prejudicial to our appreciation of God’s non-rational creatures, but rather is in keeping with the hierarchy that He Himself has established in things.⁹⁸ N V

⁹⁵ If Aquinas is correct, the first usage of “reverence” in this passage is inappropriate, whereas the other two are appropriate:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God; you created all things and pronounced them good:

- fill us with reverence for the works of your hands.

Blessed is your holy and glorious name; you created male and female in your image:

- fill us with reverence for our brothers and sisters.

Blessed are you in the firmament of the heavens; you reign over all creation:

- fill us with reverence for you who alone are God. (*Magnificat*, January 2012, 135)

⁹⁶ See the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 473: “*The Christian vision of creation makes a positive judgment on the acceptability of human intervention in nature, which also includes other living beings, and at the same time makes a strong appeal for responsibility.* In effect, nature is not a sacred or divine reality that man must leave alone” (italics in original).

⁹⁷ See John Paul II, *On Social Concern*, no. 34: “Nor can the moral character of development exclude respect for the beings which constitute the natural world, which the ancient Greeks—alluding precisely to the order that distinguishes it—called the ‘cosmos.’” See also USCCB, *Renewing the Earth*, no. 7: “The diversity of life manifests God’s glory. Every creature shares a bit of the divine beauty. Because the divine goodness could not be represented by one creature alone, Aquinas tells us, God ‘produced many and diverse creatures, so that what was wanting to one in representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another . . . hence the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever’ (*Summa Theologica*, Prima Pars, question 48, ad 1). The wonderful variety of the natural world is, therefore, part of the divine plan and, as such invites our respect. Accordingly, it is appropriate that we treat other creatures and the natural world not just as means to human fulfillment, but also as God’s creatures, possessing an independent value, worthy of our respect and care” (www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/renewing-the-earth.cfm). See also CCC, no. 2415: “The seventh commandment enjoins respect for the integrity of creation.”

⁹⁸ I wish to thank Christopher DeCaen, Robert Delfino, and Warren Murray for their helpful suggestions.