

CAN WE TALK?

UNDERSTANDING THE 'OTHER SIDE' IN THE ANIMAL RIGHTS DEBATES

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[Note: Following this discursive essay is a philosophical conversation, 'Pass the Turkey,' meant to illustrate some of the themes of the essay. Folks can read just the first, or the second as well. They both have one obvious virtue: they are pretty short! RSG]

Animals can be such a vital, powerful presence that we often have vital and powerful responses to them. These responses, we may think, lead to obvious truths and easily agreed on, shared values.

Alas, just the opposite is true. Our encounters with animals can result in complicated, divisive, and even downright hostile encounters with our fellow humans. Folks who just want to show off a little wealth and wear a warm coat are accused by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals of wearing “The look that kills!”; and might end up with ruinous red dye tossed on their \$8,000 mink. Your mother serves a beautifully done up turkey, and you dismiss it as a needlessly slaughtered fellow creature rather than an act of love. The research scientist thinks he’s trying to cure cancer, and gets accused of careerist opportunism on the flesh of the 200 million animal subjects “used up” each year. A farmer whose family has raised chickens for generations, or a global corporation providing beef at a tiny fraction of what meat used to cost, are told that they are causing global warming by all the oil they use and mass starvation because what they feed the animals could feed the world’s poor. Somebody is just trying to put food on his family’s table, and a referendum in Massachusetts takes his job away by making greyhound racing illegal. A father wants to bond with his son in the Great Outdoors—and hears that sport hunting is cruel, patriarchal.

Should we just forget about all this conflict? Leave the whole subject to someone else? Well for the most part that is what most of us do. We think and feel what we think and feel, and leave the ravings of the animal fanatics, the inventory in the labs, the blood on the slaughterhouse floor to others.

Yet if you have opened the pages of this book you probably have some interest in the hard work of thinking about morality—and, as I’m presenting it here, thinking about morality is not something we can do alone or just with people who think like us. Rather, it requires that we take seriously people who think very differently. So let us look at some reasons why it can be so hard to come to agreement on how humans treat animals.

There are (at least) five reasons at work.

Reason 1. **We have extraordinarily powerful feelings about this subject.** And as I have seen from my students, talk shows, intellectuals writing on both sides, and public statements of animal rights groups and the meat industry, these feelings can

translate into very strong moral intuitions. Our gut responses are so immediate and forceful that it seems the moral ideas that grow out of those feelings could not possibly be wrong. When other people have *opposing* powerful feelings and intuitions some find it easy to be quickly dismissive. How can “they” be so naive? unthinking? pretentious? Who are they to guilt trip me and tell the whole world it is wrong? And who are *they* to live without a heart?

These powerful, opposing intuitions can be summarized this way:

The animal rights activist intuitions. *Animals suffer, just like us. They love their mates and their children, they romp on the grass and tussle with each other. They delight in soaring across a dawn sky, running through the forest, chewing their cud. And despite the occasional time when they hurt people, they are pretty much defenseless against us. And think of how much suffering we cause them: in labs, in farms, at the meatpackers. If you really, really look at them, listen to their screams, take in their wounds, how can you continue to do this to them?*

People First Intuitions. *People are more important than animals. They just are. And anyway life is hard enough already—if I want a steak or fried chicken, I’ll just have one. They taste good. And the idea that some rat or pigeon has rights is just, well, ridiculous. People need food. Science needs lab animals. People all over the world are starving and sick and you want me to worry about a cow or a mouse? Get real. If you want to go gaga over your labradoodle, that’s fine. But leave the rest of us alone. Most people, most of the time, are going to use animals for whatever they want. It’ll never change.*

Things would ease off a bit if we could say at this point, “Why don’t we all just agree to disagree? If you don’t want to eat meat or wear fur, no one is making you. People have different beliefs about God, they vote for different political Parties, they like different music and food, so why can’t each of us get along with people who have differences about eating meat, using animals in experiments, or the amount of space a veal calf should have in his cage before he’s slaughtered?”

This would be a welcome, calming response. With people so attached to their opinions, we’re not going to convince anyone; we should just leave well enough alone and keep to ourselves.

Yet it will not work.

And it will not work because whether or not a particular “difference” is allowable is part of the problem itself. As individuals, as a society, we have to draw lines: between differences that are a matter of taste (like a really bad wardrobe) and differences that will put you in jail (like abusing your kids). We can handle people who wear stripes and plaids together. We (some of us, anyway) learned to accept people who have different names for God than we do. But we *cannot* let people routinely whip their five year olds. Or have sex with them. If you think that’s o.k., too bad. For a whole bunch of reasons, such differences are just, well, *too* different. And they are different in a particular *kind* of way: so morally wrong that they simply cannot be allowed.

So while when we think about animals the option of tolerance for differences is surely a *possible* option, animal rights and animal care just might not be a toleration kind of issue.

At the same time, even if we think our views are so morally right that people on the other side are not just different but wrong, and *so* wrong that what they do should be illegal and considered an ethical outrage, whichever side *we* are on there still are an awful lot of people on the *other* side. If we are going to get along with these people morally—thinking of them as moral agents who deserve respect for their choices just as we do—at the very least we had better try to understand them. As well, such understanding might lead us to a bit of common ground in which both sides could get something they want.

For this to work our powerful intuitions must coexist with the faith that people who feel and think differently should not be swept aside simply as cruel or naïve. We cannot talk reasonably to these people, or even think intelligently about them, unless we entertain life from *their* point of view. When views have a long standing, broad acceptance—as human superiority, meat eating, and the scientific exploitation of animals do—we have to take them seriously on their own terms. Similarly, when so many people are moral vegetarians, or oppose using animals in science, as do now, it will not work to write them off as overly sentimental hippies. If either side is dismissed at the beginning attempts to communicate with—or even to comprehend—these different people will be doomed from the outset. And where would that leave us? Well, perhaps exactly where we are right now. But is that where we want to be?

Another strategy to end the conversation quickly (and then maybe go out for a burger) would arise if the People First types observed that even though there are legal limits on what you can do to your pets, and some slowly adopted and very minimal standards dictating the treatment of animals in labs, animal rights supporters are still a tiny minority. “You can feel what you want,” a People First person might mutter, “and yell about animal cruelty as loud as you please, but you haven’t got a real chance, and you are just too outnumbered.”

For two reasons this quick dismissal does not really work. First, the vast majority has been wrong before. Very, very wrong. One need only think of slavery, or of societies in which women have no political rights, or times when we were ruled by hereditary aristocracies. All these were the accepted norms of their day. All were opposed at first only by tiny minorities. Do any of us want to be like people who thought it was perfectly fine to keep slaves? Or exploit peasants? Or beat their wives? If we claim to be moral—and don’t we all want to think we are basically decent?—shouldn’t we take a few minutes and really listen to the other side?

Second, the animal rights position, small minority though it is, is making something of an inroad in social life. Vegetarians may be a small number, but they are a steadily growing number. There are more limits on animal labs than there used to be. In terms of wild animals we have—however inconsistently applied—an Endangered Species Act which says that normal property rights can be suspended if activity on privately owned land threatens to erase a species. There are sizable movements to outlaw bullfighting in Spain and Mexico. An NFL quarterback went to jail for training dogs to fight each other and killing them when they didn’t. The ecological evidence for the disastrous effects of factory farms continues to mount.

So while a People First type might have the dominant legal and cultural forms on his or her side *now*, the balance might well be shifting.

Despite the power of our intuitions, then, and the certainty of the moral ideas to which they give rise, a truly moral conversation—in which we open ourselves to what the other person is saying and find as much truth in it as possible—seems to be called for.

Reason 2. **We relate to animals in so many different ways.** Just as our relations with strangers and with family, as employees and as citizens, as professionals or as

soldiers, involve different moral values and imperatives, so might our different kinds of relations with animals. Do the principles or values that we use in one context make sense for others?

Consider: we use animals for food, for work, for scientific experiments. There are pets and wild animals and zoo animals. Animals are prey for hunters, sacrifices for some religions, companions to the blind, and somewhere in Asia (I forget where exactly) monkeys serve food in a restaurant.

How are we to make sense of all these different contexts? I will not offer a simple, universal rule, because I think that if I did it would be so abstract that we would not really know what it meant until I described how it operated in each context. (After all, we talk about the “rights” of workers and hospital patients, to healthcare and free speech, of religion and carrying weapons. Does using the one term (“rights”) really tell us how we are supposed to act in all these differing settings?) Since this is not a book just on animals, there is no space to examine all these contexts. But we can compare two very different contexts and see how the differences affect our responses.

Here is one: When you order a delicious Veal Parmesan at a fancy Italian restaurant you are consuming the flesh of a living being who had been confined in a cage so small that it could barely move, always in the dark so that its flesh would be pale, without any company (which it needs, being a social animal), and to preserve the delicacy of its taste never fed the solid food it requires.

Clearly there are all sorts of *cultural* reasons to keep eating that Veal Parmesan. It has been a delicacy for a very long time. It tastes great. People earn a living raising, cooking, and serving it. Yet if you lean in the animal rights direction, as I do, it might seem pretty easy to dismiss all such defenses of veal by pointing out that slavery was culturally supported and that people made money off of the Holocaust. But this quick dismissal does not work when you are talking to someone who remembers how his family really enjoyed his grandmother’s cooking—whose heart opens in the memory of everyone sighing with pleasure around the dining room table; or who is paying for his son’s alternative medical treatments for debilitating asthma by working in at Ricci’s Italian Paradise. The simple, painful truth is that the vast majority of people simply do not equate cages for veal calves with concentration camps. So comparing the treatment of

animals to the horrors humans have inflicted on each other might be morally valid, but it may not reach many of the people you need to convince.

Yet it *is* very hard to defend the way veal calves are raised without saying flat out that the pain of animals is morally meaningless. This position says that we can cut down trees, dig holes in the ground, hammer brass—and in exactly the same way do what we want to any animal that is not human. It is a kind of orthodox anthropocentrism—people are the center of all things and the beings out on the periphery do not count for very much. Yet, interestingly, even people who believe this sort of thing typically do not believe it *completely*; and it is that lack of completeness which leaves an opening for the other side. For example: a good number of the veal parmesan eaters (or servers) doubtless have their own special, favorite pets that they would not dream of treating the way veal calves are treated: animals whose welfare, happiness and pleasure count for something. The fundamental inconsistency here—that the pain of our pets matters but that of our dinner does not—creates a deep logical hole that is very hard to climb out of. (And you cannot climb out of it by pointing out that we are usually a lot nicer to our family than to strangers. You might not be obligated to help people in faraway places who are starving. But that is not a great analogy to the animal context. You might not be obligated to save starving animals either, but you might be obligated to stop having animals killed so you can eat them.)

So when we look at veal—and indeed meat eating generally—what we have is a deeply entrenched social practice which is, when examined, pretty much without any moral justification. Whether or not this moral indefensibility extends to hunting buffalo a thousand years ago, or to the Inuit peoples in the Arctic Circle who pursue seals now, or even to individual hunters with waterproof camouflage jackets and long distance rifle scopes taking a bead on some moose, is really beside the point. Right now, we are talking about mass produced animals who end up in shrink wrapped packages at the local supermarket.

What can the veal eater say in response? Not much, which is why his or her response is generally laughter, contempt, ignoring the truth, not looking at films of factory farms and slaughterhouses, saying “that’s just the way we do things around here,”

and repeating “it tastes good,” as if that were sufficient *reason* to keep eating it. One usually gets a lot of attitude, but very little argument.

So if the cheerful meat eater does not want to engage seriously with an animal rights advocate’s claims that July 4th barbecues are like Nazi death camps, what are we to do?

Well, and initially this might seem to be beside the point, we can start by recognizing that the moral failure of modern meat eating is not the end of the story. For if the modern meat eater is doing something morally wrong every time she whips out her Visa card to pay for prime rib, she is surely not the only one who commits moral wrongs. I remember a telling conversation I once had with a highly intelligent and passionate animal rights advocate. We had just been part of a panel discussion at a national meeting in San Francisco. And while the panel was all pretty much pro-animal rights some of the questions from the large audience had been quite hostile to our position. “Ahh Roger,” she complained, real pain in her eyes, “they don’t get it. After all that’s been written, they just don’t get it.” “You’re right,” I commiserated. “But of course all of us have our moral limitations. You’ve come to this conference from Texas, I from Boston. Think of how jet travel damages the ozone layer; and how the money we spent on this not really necessary trip could have been spent on other things.” She stared at me for a second. This wasn’t the moral solidarity and self-righteous mutual appreciation she had expected. The pain in her eyes blinked out and a kind of vagueness replaced it as she backed out of the room, barely murmuring her goodbyes.

In other words, *yes* eating meat, at least the way we do it here and now, is wrong. But *yes* as well there are *many* things we do that do not add up morally. I certainly have my own ethical weaknesses. Like everyone else I know I am morally flawed, at times deeply. And indeed every animal rights activist, including the ones who believe that our mass consumption of animals is a kind of Holocaust, lives in a way that harms animals. Such activists drive their cars and plug into the power grid, thus contributing to the global warming that is eradicating countless species. Even their fully vegan diet involves large-scale agriculture that displaces animals. And when their children are sick, they do not reject “out of principle” medicines that have been developed though testing on animals.

The bind we are all in, and one of the things which distinguishes ethics in an age of global warming, is that short of dropping out completely we cannot help but be part of the problem. Certainly we will be less of a part if we stop eating animal products, and refuse to buy consumer products tested on animals. But so long as we are functioning members of this society, we will be a part nevertheless.

As well, the sad truth is that a lot of people who love animals can at the same time be pretty uncaring about other people. They might give large donations for animal shelters but nothing for world hunger, peace activism, or to stop abuse against women. They might cherish animals deeply but think of and speak to animal eating humans with hatred and verbal violence. They might take refuge in a comforting sense of superiority, endlessly taking the moral inventory of everyone else's moral failings (which are, doubtless, considerable) while never seriously examining their own. In other words, they might be great about animals and only mediocre on most other moral concerns.

This line of thought does not eradicate the tensions between People First and Animal Rights. It does, however, enable the morally critical Animal Rights activist to approach his or her adversary with a less arrogant and more modest posture.

At this point there may be some comfort for both sides to be found in what is probably for most readers an unexpected source: the vegetarian perspective of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who at his death in 1935 was the chief rabbi of pre-state Israel. As an esteemed leader of Orthodox Jewry Kook functioned in a community in which meat eating—and lots of it—was the accepted rule. There was no way he could simply demand vegetarianism from his followers: the ruling would not have been understood, and certainly not followed. But Kook was not about to issue such a simple, absolute rule. In fact, he argued that biblical history showed that humans, though ultimately headed for a non-meat diet, simply were not capable of it yet. In Genesis God initially gives Adam and Eve only vegetable food to eat; after the “sinful generation” of Noah, however, God told them they could eat flesh “after all the desire of your soul.” At the same time, however, as Kook pointed out, there are many biblical rules which restrict what and how we eat: we are not allowed to boil the kid in its mother's milk, or take the mother bird along with the eggs', or eat blood. There are foods that are forbidden. Thus the way we eat is a matter in which God's commands operate. It is morally significant and demands that we

limit ourselves. These rules, said Kook, indicate that humans are involved in a very long process of moral development. This process starts with some restrictions on what we can do to animals. It will end up in an ideal of respect and care, including a refusal to use animals for food. We are not capable of the end point yet, but we are on the way to it.

One does not have to be an Orthodox Jew, or a religious believer of any kind, to appreciate the force of this position. One need only see that a partial improvement is better than no improvement at all, even in the realm of morality. And that the practical truth of any moral claim—animals rights, women’s rights, gay marriage, what we owe to people starving faraway—is only as powerful as the level of moral development of the people we are talking to. No matter how right a moral claim is, if humanity is not ready to take in its truth, it will have no social consequence. Like so much else in life, the effectiveness of a moral truth depends on where we are historically and socially.

So if the vast majority of people on this earth are not yet morally capable of being vegetarians, and if all the anti-meat eaters are themselves morally flawed, what can the moral vegetarian say to the lover of Veal Parmesan? Perhaps something like this:

First: would you treat your pet this way? If not, what’s the difference? Second, I’m hardly morally perfect myself, and there are indeed a lot of other moral issues besides the abuse of animals. So when I raise this issue I’m not coming from any position of moral superiority. I’ll see if I can help you on this issue, and God knows you can probably help me on another one. So I’m asking you as a fellow struggler in the long effort of moral betterment to consider that veal calf. And third: how can we make all this at least a little better? This last question has some resonance in the real world. For somehow there has been agreement on legal restrictions in some countries on how you can raise veal, and in other matters relating to animals as well. If these new laws are not enough for the moral vegetarian, I completely understand. But moral life is often, perhaps typically, not a case of “enough.” It usually is, at best, a case of getting a “little bit better.”

Here’s another context: Your child has been born with Cystic Fibrosis, a generally fatal genetic condition in which a missing enzyme leads to lung and digestive problems. While CF used to spell a quite early death for everyone, recent research has now enabled many to live into their 30s and 40s.

If it is your child, doomed to a life of frequent lung infections, rounds of seemingly endless coughing, near constant chest physical therapy to clear the distinctly thick and immovable CF mucous, do you care how many lab animals have to die to find a cure, or even something that will enable your child to have a somewhat longer, somewhat more tolerable, life? In forty years the median survival age for CF has gone from 10 to 37. *That's* what you're counting, not the number of mice that were used up to develop treatments, and potentially a cure, for your child.

If meat eating, in particular veal, is an immoral self-indulgence (no matter how culturally supported, tasty, and emotionally resonant), the use of animals for research to cure deadly diseases is something else. Here we have what at least looks like a clear choice: allow a child to suffer and die young, or do what needs to be done for the human at the expense of animals. If you are that parent—or the child himself—do you think you will put much stock in accounts of animal suffering?

Once again of course the Animal Rights defender can simply say that there is no reason to prefer the human to the animal. And questions of degree and scope can also be raised. How many animals would you sacrifice for a cure? A million? A hundred million? A hundred billion? And for what disease?—for one that afflicts some 300,000 in the U.S. like CF? For one that afflicts 300? Or 3? Is there no limit at all?

Further, and more powerfully to my mind at least, it can be argued that using animals for research costs money, that money for health care is limited, and that there are a lot of other things that we can do with that money that are good for people's health and do *not* involve animal cruelty. We can clean up the environment so fewer people get cancer from pollution; we can teach people to have better health habits so lifestyle diseases diminish; we can encourage people not to eat animal foods, since they are a big contributor to ill health. These measures will not hurt animals at all; in fact they will help animals *and* people. It is a win-win solution.

Yet even the best environmental regimes and an entire population doing yoga, meditating, and eating nothing but salads, brown rice and lentil stew will not end genetic health problems like CF. We will still have the desperate parent and the sick child, the people with a terrible illness and the animals whose lives we will want to sacrifice to find better treatments.

Perhaps once again the only approach with a reasonable chance of success is to try to make things a little better. First, stop all the stupid, wasteful, even insane animal experiments: the ones that drip cosmetics into rabbits' eyes until they go blind; or that smash monkey's heads into walls to see if having heads smashed into a wall will injure the brain; or that test how long it takes to make animals crazy by randomly subjecting them to electrical shocks.

As for the CF experiments? Well, even if they are wrong, perhaps we could agree to talk about them later. Just as it would be an improvement, even if not necessarily good enough, to improve the living conditions of veal calves, so there is a lot that can be done to limit or eliminate animal experiments *before* we get around to stopping the research aimed at curing lethal illnesses.

In a moral life we are often faced with difficult choices. Sometimes these are really false choices, and we should make sure we know who or what has said "Choose between A and B." Maybe there is a C that would work out for us all—like the holistic and preventative health measures described above. But at times, and sadly, there are cases when no way out of the painful alternatives is possible. "People are born to trouble," said Job, "as the sparks fly upwards." "Life," said the Buddha, "is suffering." We will have pain in this life, and so will everyone else, and no amount of moral goodness will ever take that away. Even the animal rights defender cares more for his own child than his own pet; or would be more upset if he ran over a neighbor's child than if he ran over a neighbor's dog. Just as the "I can do anything to animals I want" types might have pets they cherish, animal rights supporters still privilege people. That is one reason this issue of animal experiments is both very difficult and a place where agreement across real differences might be reached.

Reason 3. **Animals kill and eat other animals, why shouldn't we?** To be honest, this is a concern it is often hard for me to take seriously. Yet I have heard it so many times from students and from people at my public lectures that my inability to see its force must signal a real lack in me.

Initially I suppose there is a kind of appeal to this idea. Do we want to live more "naturally," to "learn from nature"? Then we should remember that nature, as Hobbes said, is "red in tooth and claw." The lions eat the gazelles, the hawks eat the rabbits, and

those o-so-cute dolphins at Sea World do not live on bean sprouts, but on lots and lots of fish. Why should people alone be restricted from this vast banquet? If we are tougher, or at least smarter, than all the other animals, that's just their blues. If the lion is truly the "king of the forest" no one will be telling *him* to lay off. People should have the same privilege.

And this argument gets even more pointed in the context of hunting. We are, say some hunters (at least the ones who want to talk about it), getting back into nature, experiencing the wilderness as our forbears did, tracking and killing in a primordial struggle that bonds us with the circle of life the way humans used to before we were made weak and decadent by civilization. There is a mystic connection between hunter and animal which all those who buy packaged hot dogs can never understand. And those of you who criticize hunting as a brutal celebration of death do not comprehend the respect, the love even, that passes between hunter and prey.

What bothers me so much about these arguments? Two things, at least.

First, if people truly want to experience the primordial struggle between hunter and prey, well then let them actually have that experience. Let them walk to wherever they are going to hunt, using weapons and wearing clothes they have made themselves. Let their total consumption of meat be dependent on the hunt and the hunt alone. No more \$200 boots and toasty down parkas. No going out for steak afterwards, or driving to the national forest for deer season. When today's hunters want to do try it this way, they will at least be more honest. I still might wonder why they can't commune with a living being without killing it; or have a bean salad and soy yogurt for dinner instead of venison. Perhaps they could connect to animals by tracking them, taking pictures, or writing poems. But until they make the real sacrifices needed to "get back to the primordial" their stated desire seems a little insincere.

There are similar problems with the idea that we should learn from nature and eat whatever we want. The truth is that we simply do not want to live "the way the animals do" because we want to live like people, not animals. And that means we want to live in a society guided by moral norms. We do not just accept "what is," but are frequently talking about "what ought to be." Do you want to live "naturally" and have a stronger male take your wife or girlfriend away, as is done in some animal communities? Or have

to be the mate of the guy in the pack with the biggest muscles? Do you want to be eaten for food yourself? Or, like some spiders, have sex and then get your head bitten off?

I think not.

The point to all of this is that as attractive as a moral position seems initially, if you cannot live by it, it does not amount to much. By that I do not mean perfection. I am not suggesting that if we cannot love our neighbors as ourselves we should totally abandon the religions which tell us to; or that if do not always take other people's rights seriously we should abolish the *Declaration of Independence*. I do mean that if we put forward a moral position which seems to require a certain amount of responsibility, and we are not willing to even try to live up to that responsibility in our own lives, we should not pretend it is really a something we believe in. It is pretty clear that our hunters will not live like Native Americans of a thousand years ago; and that the person who wants to live "like nature" will also want his or her own life and property protected by a moral code and a good police force.

Thus my arguments, I am convinced, win. But so what? Is that the best we can hope for in a moral conversation? Could it be that there is something more important than my own knee-jerk rejection of moral stands I do not like?

I think there is. And here is part of it. Any widely held belief—even one that is inconsistent, poorly informed, or just dead wrong—almost always has some connection of vital importance to the people who hold it. If we truly are to understand one another, to develop our moral life through connected conversation with other viewpoints, and to create a moral community *together*, we must try to find out what it is that binds people to positions we completely reject.

At this point some people will point to revolutions or activist social protest movements and say *that* is how we should respond to moral evil, not by trying to find out what is vital and authentic in it. We do not need to "understand" Nazis, wife-beaters, racists, or colonialists—we just need to confront and defeat them. Indeed that may be the case in some situations, though it might certainly be argued that often a lot of unnecessary antagonism, self-righteous condemnation of other people, and outright violence slows things down or leads to a continuation of violence in the end. Maybe feminism in the U.S. would be further advanced now if the movement in the 1970s and

80s had showed more compassion for men, for example. Perhaps violent revolutions tend to create violent post-colonial governments. Maybe nonviolence—political and emotional—is a more effective, long-term answer to the problems of profound injustice. And maybe it is not.

In any case right now what I am concerned with the process of *moral* life, sustaining a moral community, and trying to hear and be heard by people who may think very differently that we do. Here the goal is understanding and connection, not victory and correctness. We can leave political power, forcing other people to change how they act whatever they think, to another time.

The hunters, and those who would think nature teaches us to act without moral limits, are both expressing, however indirectly, a yearning to find some source of value, meaning, and connection that is beyond the human. They seek to learn from nature, probably in the hope that what is so often missing in their own lives and that of their culture can be gotten from some source outside the weaknesses and disappointments of society. In nature there is vitality, honesty, strength, and acceptance of fate. In nature the only masks are part of an evolutionary strategy, like the butterflies whose markings make them look poisonous when they are not. In nature there is no waste, and everything fits, and everybody's death is someone else's life—or at least so it may seem to those of us trapped by television, roads, bureaucratic regulations, the tax code, and email.

If the way hunters root authenticity and love of life in violent power repels me, and if a good deal of hunting really is a celebration of power and death, it also may be the case that at least some hunters are authentically seeking a spiritual struggle without the ambiguities and irrelevance of so much of conventional life. Life or death, clear success or empty handed failure, you hit the death point on the moose or you don't. In every wild animal there is a worthy opponent—because they will never lie or cheat in the struggle, never call in a shady lawyer to help them prevail, never call you names or guilt trip you. They will simply fight to the death with a clarity and a love of life that inspires our own.

If any of these speculations about the deeper motivations of people whose attitudes towards animals I reject are true, then there is a basis for some kind of communication. Even, perhaps for some kind of commonality and solidarity. For I too seek some wisdom and inspiration in the realm of nature, and I too admire the clarity and

integrity of animals. If I can see what is beautiful in what other people think and want, as well as what is wrong, I will have upped my chances at finding allies, and at least will have learned to be a little less angry, superior, and self-righteous. I can diminish my own ethical smugness, which really only hides my insecurity, and probably all the pain I feel as well. And maybe I and the people whom I am so sure are wrong can join together on things we both support, like protecting wilderness. Better they should hunt and join Sierra Club to help protect the forest and the animals in it, then be so alienated from all the soft-hearted and morally superior environmentalists like me that they ignore everything but the next kill.

Reason 4. **Individual animals can wreak havoc on other species of animals and on ecosystems as a whole.** In the industrialized world it is very rare for animals to be a threat. The occasional snarling German shepherd, the deer that eats the lettuce from your carefully tended garden, pests in the grain supply—these can be pretty unpleasant, but are very small exceptions to a general rule in which domination runs from people to animals, not the other way. People, after all, kill about five million sharks a year; sharks kill around ten people.

But there are ecological contexts in which animals are very significant threats, and have done irreparable damage, to other animal species and indeed to ecosystems as a whole. Consider, for example, the case of feral cats in the U.S. Lost or escaped or simply abandoned when no longer wanted, these cats have multiplied to a population in the tens of millions. They, in turn, kill billions of small rodents and millions of birds a year. Some of those birds are members of endangered species and it is feral cats, some people think, who are a big factor in making those birds endangered.

Do we have the right to kill the cats to save the birds?

Then there are rabbits in Australia, whose effects make America's feral cats look like child's play. Introduced for food in the late 18th century, some rabbits escaped or were let loose, exploded as a population and have since been responsible for widespread ecological damage including erosion, plant species loss, and alteration of rain forest ecosystems. They have also threatened the Australian food supply by eating what sheep farmers wanted their sheep to graze on.

Should we kill the rabbits to save the trees whose bark the rabbits eat and the birds who live in the rainforests the rabbits destabilize? Should we kill the rabbits to make it easier for Australian farmers and keep the price of mutton low?

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of living a moral life is not figuring out what is right, or even the decision to be moral rather than a scoundrel. It is what to do when faced by competing obligations, by conflicts not between right and wrong but between right and right. The tension between the rights of individual animals to be free from human violence and the survival of species and indeed whole ecosystems is real and painful. In academia a little growth industry for philosophers has involved writers on both sides of the issue—some for animal rights, some for a more ‘holistic,’ ecological approach—accusing the other side of just not understanding why their chosen policy of protecting the ecosystem or leaving the animals alone was dead wrong. Practically, there has been real live conflict between those who would control the feral cats by trapping and killing them, and the cat defenders who destroy the traps.

While I tend toward the holistic, control the feral populations, protect a threatened species against an overpopulated one direction, I know there are arguments on the other side. Some might ask to know why we cannot simply catch the feral cats and sterilize them (as is sometimes done). Others wonder if posing a casual question “Should we kill the cats?” really takes in that each of these animals is a unique center of intelligence and experience. More challengingly, some might demand that I consider “culling” the human herd to save all the species *it* is threatening instead. And if I will not even consider that possibility, and am so quick to ask about killing the cats, why is that?

But which side is “right” is not my concern right now. Instead, I will just point out some things about moral life that this conflict reveals.

Once certain kinds of actions are taken, it is too late to avoid painful conflict. “We” decide to colonize Australia, to have a meat diet, to bring in rabbits. “We” decide that anyone who wants a pet cat can have one, that sterilizing cats is optional, and that if they get to be too much of a bother you can just get rid of them. We also take animals to ecosystems where they have no natural enemies, try to create new businesses (tent caterpillars which destroy trees in the northeast U.S. came from the attempt to create a domestic silk industry), or get careless. The rest—dead birds, dead trees, overthrown

rainforests—are inevitable. If we get caught up in the immediate problem (cats vs. birds) we might not pay enough moral attention to the processes which led to these consequences, to the decisions and values which make them inevitable.

Therefore the question that intrigues me about animals which threaten species loss is not “what should we do about the animals” but “*what should we do about ourselves?*” In an age of global warming many problems which seem to be about other things will come back to this one.

Feral cats *are* a problem, no doubt. Just ask the birds they kill. But along with our conservationist concern over the birds, maybe we should worry about how much *we* eat—and everything else we do. Perhaps we should control ourselves first, and deal with the animals after.

How much of what threatens animals comes from animals? And how much from us? Feral cats are bad for birds and rabbits in Australia are terrible for the Australian rainforest. But so are habitat loss from endless housing developments and large scale agriculture, pesticides in the food chain, and global warming. Should we kill the feral cats and the rabbits? Maybe we should. But maybe we should do so only *after* we develop a comprehensive plan for human land use that leaves some room for the rest of the animals, have learned how to farm without poisonous chemicals, and have drastically scaled back on energy use. Maybe the focus on those “damn cats” is a way of taking the focus off of ourselves. In any case, if we concentrate on ourselves first, and try to institute some changes in the way *we* live, we might be so busy that we would not have the time and energy to worry about the cats.

Of course in the short run it is easier just to poison some cats or shoot some rabbits (though the rabbit problem hasn’t gone away, rabbits being a remarkably resilient species). And the conservationists have a point when they warn that if we wait for large-scale social changes it will be too late for many bird species. But if all our attention goes to the short-term, if we give ourselves tacit permission to continue with the same old policies for population, housing, energy use, agriculture, and transportation, then these policies will continue to decimate the environment and eliminate species far more than anything cats and rabbits could ever do.

Reason 5. **If we took our role in animals' pain seriously we would have to change the way we live.** Animals suffer for lots of reasons: they freeze to death in bad winters, get torn to shreds by prey, and grow old and starve because they can no longer hunt. If you put enough sad music on the screen as we witness such moments, doubtless many an eye will fill with tears. But such tears are easily remedied by a moment's reflection on the endless and necessary cycles of life and death. If people are born, we will die. And the same goes for them. And that's o.k.

But there are other forms of suffering that do not go down so easy. The sea birds covered in oil, the fox gnawing off its leg in a fur hunter's trap, the long, long lines of cows waiting to be bludgeoned and then have their throats slit, the millions of mice to be used for God knows what, including the ones who have been scientifically, genetically *engineered* to get cancer ("onco-mice" they are called). Not to mention whole species, thousands of them, dying off because humans have taken their habitat, or brought in exotic species against which they have not evolved defenses, or just eaten too many.

What happens when we look at their pain? Quite often not a whole lot, for most of us do not bother to look. Or if we do what we see is an abstraction: x million killed in experiments, x thousands of species lost. But what if we do look, carefully, slowly, willing to accept whatever feelings arise, at—say—Polar Bears which have to cannibalize each other because global warming has melted so much ice they can no longer hunt. Look at them—magnificent creatures clad in thick white fur, superbly adapted to the frigid ice and snow, at home even in the sea. Mothers that protect their young, playful cubs, powerful hunters of seals. They are dying, dying not from old age or struggle with predators or competition in the herd, but because we are killing them. Through global warming. Reckless sport hunting. Human-made toxins that build up in their flesh.

The point is that it is not just the suffering of the individual polar bears that gets to us, or even the potential loss of this majestic species, it is *how hard it is to look at ourselves*. To save the Polar Bear, and the Big Cats, and the cows on the assembly line how much would *we* have to change? How much of our economy, our culture, our family life? How many laws would we have to pass? How many Thanksgiving get-togethers would feel (and taste) different? Would we have to give up our dream of endless economic expansion so that we left some room for other species? Would we have to

convince all the folks who believe that charbroiled steak equals a good time that tofu is just as good? Would we have to say that the whole human enterprise of the last 10,000 years—seeking more and more power, wealth, control, technical expertise, and shopping—should be (deeply, seriously, essentially) restrained?

Between the intensity of the pain we feel, the guilt over our own complicity, and the seeming impossibility of what *all* of us would have to transform, we are left in a difficult and contorted moral position. Guilt for ourselves and rage against “the others” who “just don’t get it.” The need to do something to “make it all stop” and the certain realization that we can’t. A life which seems hard enough already, in which these animals rights types want to add in *more* concerns, problems, things to feel upset about.

It is all too much...

There is no way out of this conflict and confusion. That is, no way that will lead to a simple fix of the problems, or a universally accepted way for people on different sides to come together and create a calm, reasoned, agreeable moral conversation. Like calling for women’s equality in the seventeenth century (as a very few did), or demands to end slavery in 1820, according full respect for animals is just something that is not psychologically, and hence morally, possible now. Every minute of every day our civilization may indeed be committing monstrous crimes, and perhaps the anguished, “extremist” cries of animal rights activists are just what we need to wake us up. I suspect however, that in this case whatever changes we make will necessarily be gradual, more based in quiet understanding and slow, moderate improvements than wholesale moral condemnations.

Probably some animal rights activists, and perhaps even the animals themselves, would think this is a cowardly cop-out in the face of mass slaughter. Perhaps it is. But we should remember that the long struggle for women’s social and legal equality is far from over; and that while the slaves were freed in 1865, over a century later African-Americans were still fighting for even basic civil rights. In all the changes that have taken place, who knows how much was accomplished by anger, verbal violence and coercive laws, and how much by the slow, patient work of moral conversation—by doing our best to understand the Other despite bitter disagreement? Maybe reflecting on this history will tell us that even now we could be a little satisfied with limited gains that make life a little

better, rather than clinging with rage and bitterness to an impossible ideal. In any case, like it or not, big changes are slow.

In the meantime, those of us who pay attention can at least acknowledge how upset this makes us. We can commiserate with other people's moral limits, knowing we have plenty ourselves. We can ask ourselves what the difference is between the Golden Retriever who sleeps on our bed at night and the bacon we eat for breakfast. And if we are really willing to feel the full range and intensity of our emotions about our animal cousins, to take in their pain and our responsibility for it, and to have compassion for them and for our fellow humans at the same time, who knows what might result? Not enough, to be sure. But surely enough to make a difference.

PASS THE TURKEY:
HOW POLITICALLY CORRECT ARE ANIMAL RIGHTS?

Roger S. Gottlieb

[Draft chapter from
HEARING VOICES
CONVERSATIONS ON MORALITY AND THE MEANING OF LIFE IN AN AGE OF
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Roger S. Gottlieb

At the end of *The Witness*, a short and deceptively simple documentary about how working class building contractor Eddie Lama became a vigorous advocate of animal rights, there is an extremely powerful scene. Earlier in the film vivid film clips showed animals caught in traps, skinned for their furs, and crammed into crates—horrific images of pain and misery. In the movie’s last scene Lama has outfitted a truck to be a kind of moving theatre. He pauses on city streets and people who glance over see the vivid clips. At this point in the movie we only see people’s reactions: surprise, shock, horror, grief. The onlookers are a random collection of New Yorkers. How many vegetarians, or vegans, or animal rights types among them? Probably no more than in any other random group, which is to say, not very many.

This moment in the film offered no arguments: no claims about obligations to sentient beings or the imperative to equal consideration for suffering, about how much we are similar to animals or how the way we treat animals mirrors how we treat each other. There were only visceral responses to an argument whose form was “Look!” And viewers of the movie have no way of knowing what happened to any of the onlookers afterwards—if they went on to have a Big Mac for lunch, put a down payment on a chinchilla coat, bought that overpriced but really cool leather jacket at Barney’s—or joined PETA.

I do not know what time of year these scenes were shot, but I have wondered what could have happened if one of the affected onlookers were on her way to a Thanksgiving dinner...

**

Bright November sunshine flooded into the Bertram’s living room as Kate entered, mumbling Thanksgiving greetings to her family: parents, two younger brothers, well turned out sister-in-law, and, straight out of central casting, a warm, friendly, and alcoholic uncle. Her withdrawn, downcast hellos surprised her brother Ned, who looked up from his copy of *Mother Jones*. ‘What’s up, sis?’ he asked.

“I just saw the most horrible thing. There was this big van, a truck almost, that had signs about fur and animal cruelty. I’ve seen those before. But the back of the truck was open and inside was a huge TV screen showing these awful movies: cows being clubbed to death, little animals gnawing their legs off to get out of traps, chickens all stuffed together in some huge industrial henhouse.” Her voice trailed off.

Looking closer, Ned saw the tear tracks in Kate’s makeup.

“Well, what can you expect? We’ve gone over this a million times. In this society *everything* is treated like a commodity. That’s just what capitalism does. People’s labor, fish, forests, iron in the earth...doesn’t make any difference. As long as means of production are owned by a self-satisfied conscienceless class of rapacious bastards, that’s the way it will be. We’ll only have kindness when capitalism is replaced by socialism.”

Ned patted Kate on the back and tried to change the tone. “Hey Mom,” he shouted playfully, “how’s the turkey doing? I’m starving!”

Steven, the baby of the family but now at nineteen, stopped massaging the reflexology points on his left foot, hoping in vain to sooth an upset stomach. If it were possible he would have been more bored with Ned’s endless Marxist sloganeering, but he’d reached his boredom limit years ago.

“I can see you’re right in tune with history Ned,” he chuckled. “The capitalists are rapacious, but you’re going to enjoy your dead bird just like the head guys at Citibank.”

Ned sighed. He knew that younger brothers were like that, but had hoped that on a family day Steven would give it a rest. “I believe I have told you,” he said with a fair imitation of patience, “that if you really care about moral values, practically any moral values, what you have to do is change social institutions. What difference does it make if I don’t eat meat? Everyone else will, and nothing will change. Besides,” he grinned with just a hint of mischief, “and don’t tell my sensitive Vegan sister, there’s nothing quite as good as roast turkey with all the trimmings.”

“I’m surprised how little you get this,” Kate murmured. And then when Ned glanced at her quizzically, she elaborated more firmly. “It’s not about some future

time when all the 'isms' you talk about so endlessly are overcome. And it's not even about 'how people treat animals.' It's about what happened to me when I looked at that video footage. I felt something wrench me deep inside, like a cry for help at night. When I felt that I wasn't thinking about 'society' or 'ethical values' or 'aren't people and animals different' *or 'aren't they really the same.' I just felt sick, and wanted it all to stop. And I felt a little like killing myself, it was so awful."¹

"When I was about seven," mused their already somewhat tipsy uncle Isaac, "my father and I woke up to hear something crying out. It was high pitched and lonely and desperate, and it made us very upset. Out we went at 2 in the morning, searching suburban streets with a huge flashlight in search of the sound. We had no idea what it was—an animal, a baby, a lost child. We just felt how scared and lonely it was. And we wanted to help."²

His voice trailed off and his eyes returned to the glassy stare he cultivated, while his fingers tightened on the whiskey glass.

"Well," broke in Ned, "what was it?"

"Oh," said Isaac. "Was a puppy. Cute little puppy. We picked it up, gave it some warm milk and let it sleep on an old blanket in the kitchen. Next morning we called the ASPCA."

"Did someone lose it?" asked Steven.

"Nope...just abandoned. The ASPCA had to gas it, since no one would adopt. Too bad. Sweet little thing."

This was just the turn Steven had waited for. "That's what I mean. Uncle and Grandpa. They're not big deal political types like you Ned, or big deal thinkers like Dad, but it's the heart that matters. Grandpa and Uncle responded to a cry in the dark. Kate responded to the picture of the tortured animals. We don't have to have some fancy explanation or justification of *why* we feel this way. We just know we do."

Their father Samuel had listened to all this, wondering if it was worth putting in his two cents. While his politics were left of center, his real identification was with political and moral theory, which he taught at NYU. He distrusted Ned's sloganeering, Kate's warm but untutored heart, and Steven's (as he thought) hippy

nonsense. “Very nice, Steven, very nice. But aren’t you being a little selective about your choice of ‘we’? Lots of people see lots of animal suffering and do nothing. People who work in slaughterhouses, keepers of sheep or cattle, breeders of pit bulls for dogfighting, practically anyone connected to the fur industry. They don’t feel much for the animal suffering they witness on a daily basis, or if they do it certainly seems as if other things outweigh their feelings pretty easily.”

“That’s because of, to pardon my French, this fucked up culture,” said Steven, with a wry glance at Ned who often attributed moral problems to “this goddam capitalist system.”

“On that we agree,” Ned added. “Who works in slaughterhouses, after all? Illegal immigrants, poor women, the uneducated. And as a job it has about the worst safety and health record around. The workers in the slaughterhouses, the farm workers getting cancer from pesticides, the wastes from hog farms poisoning the water. That’s why I hate the way animals are treated. Think of the ecological effects. It takes 20 pounds of vegetable food to produce one pound of beef, not to mention god knows how much fossil fuel--which of course only aggravates global warming and so makes life harder for victims of imperialism the world over. One pound of beef takes 20 pounds of vegetable food. And god knows how much fossil fuel that’s causing the global warming that makes life worse for victims of imperialism the world over.³ We’ll never, *never*, be decent to animals until we’re decent to people.”

Sly smile of his own. “Of course even then we’ll still have turkey for Thanksgiving. Let’s face it; people just are more important than animals.”

“And why is that?” Steven asked rhetorically? “Because we alone are the subjects of history? Have a language that enables us to justify torturing animals in moronic experiments? Write newspapers? Produce reality TV shows”?

“Now, now, Steven, don’t get all upset,” chimed his mother Rachel, taking a break from Turkey roasting, potato baking and apple pie crust rolling. “Why are people more important than animals? Oh I don’t know. We just are. Don’t tell me you’d feel just as bad running over a squirrel as over a human child. Why would you feel different? Who can tell! Dinner in about a half hour guys.”

“In other words,” said Samuel gently, “there are certain basic human impulses, certain “intuitions,” that are as certain as anything we can be certain of. The theoretical work is to show why these are true. But the theories will never be more certain than the intuitions themselves.”⁴

“Really?” said Anna, Ned’s wife. “Shall we add those certain intuitions about the value of animals to the ones we used to have (and a lot of people still have) about what women are worth? Or the working class compared to the rich? Or gay people compared to straight.” (Kate smiled). “How do you tell the difference between a really, really certain moral “intuition” and deadly tradition, spell binding superstition, and flat out oppression? Go back to those films that Kate saw. Some people intuit that what they show is wrong. And some don’t give a shit. How are we going to square that circle?”

“Good question, very good question,” Samuel answered.

“Oh please, Dad, spare us the professorial condescension and just get to the point,” Kate broke in.

“Ahem!” Samuel responding, trying not to smile at his spunky daughter’s mock insolence. “You are right. One person’s intuitions about the good, say Steven’s, might not agree with another’s, say that Citibank guy who’s eating turkey off of crystal plates right now,. Ultimately all we can do is try to talk things over with each other. We get as educated as we can get, we make sure that people are free to talk and to be heard, we place no limits on the discussion except those that are necessary in order for the conversation to be as free and equal as possible. And then we come out with an answer. Short of a direct word from God—and even that would have to be talked about and interpreted—what else can we do? Whatever we’d end up deciding in a really free conversation is what’s right.”⁵

“Ahh,” laughed Ned, “moral life is really one big philosophy seminar. Well pardon my skepticism, but I’d still like to know who owns the building where the seminar takes place, who’s providing the food and electricity and clothes for the people doing the talking, and who gets to report on the conversation.”

“No, no, no” said Samuel, “this isn’t just for college students and philosophy professors. It’s for everyone. It’s a conversational democracy that we all would take part in.”

“What do you mean ‘everyone’?” asked Anna.

“All the rational adults,” Samuel answered, a little irritated. “Not kids, mental defectives, or people in comas. What do you think?”

“I *think*,” Anna answered, bristling a little at the ‘mental defectives’ phrase, “that before I sign on to this I’d like to know who sets the standards for “defective”. My older brother has Down’s syndrome—would he get a chance to speak or not?”

“Well, well....” Samuel’s voice trailed off. No one had ever asked him this before. And his position had seemed so indubitable.

“And besides Anna’s older brother,” asked Steven, “what about all the other beings that speak. Go to the slaughter house, the animal labs, the fur traps. It’s not hard to hear what they are saying. They are saying ‘Stop it, for God’s sake stop it!’

“Oh well,” said Samuel, back on firmer ground, “of course animals express certain primitive emotions and feelings. They howl when they are hurt, fight, flee or grovel when threatened, and lick their babies. They communicate a bit, to be sure. But they can’t talk like people. They can’t make what we in the trade call ‘validity claims.’ That is, they can’t argue about right and wrong, rationality or irrationality, justice or injustice. Only people can do that, and that’s why even in Ned’s far off socialist society, only people get in on these kinds of conversations. Animals couldn’t, even if we wanted them to.”⁶

“You forget,” Steven said quietly, “that for thousands of years people have been conversing with animals spirits. That’s what shamans do—go into the animal realm and bring back wisdom and guidance. I know philosophers like you or Marxist types like Ned think you know everything, or at least know better than all the hopelessly unenlightened masses just waiting to be instructed. But *have* you ever tried to listen to an eagle or a dolphin? Have you ever tried to think yourselves into their skin?”⁷ Don’t you know that when we pay attention to animals *we* feel better—calmer and happier. When we’re in spiritual harmony with life it’s easier for us to be in spiritual harmony with ourselves.⁸

“Please,” responded Ned, “don’t ask us to take those marvelous indigenous peoples so seriously. It’s a tragedy that they’ve been destroyed, mainly by capitalist colonialism, imperialism, and commercialism. But they have no place in a modern world, one in which technology allows us to be the masters of nature and not nature’s slaves. Along with the Shamanism that you new age types like so much, they had some pretty awful, oppressive superstitions. And in any case surely what’s right for a small tribe isn’t going to work for a global society that solves problems with democracy and technology. Men and women who go into trances, roll their eyes back and tell us the latest news from Mr. Eagle and Ms. Bear are, as your generation puts it, just a little too old school.”

“Oh, so we’re doing so well with this modernity of ours? Global warming, desertification, polluting water aquifers, destroying wilderness, killing off species, causing untold cancers, not to mention mental misery so profound that we’re drowning in anti-depressants, alcohol, and heroin. Seems to me this marvelous ‘modernity,’ including all those so-called socialist countries of yours, could use a little shamanism, or something, from cultures that believed they had something to learn from nature, besides how best to use it and sell it or treat it like a post card. Maybe we could listen to nature, instead of always telling it what to do.”

“Really Steven,” said Samuel, “you speak as if nature and people are two different things. Yet we are as natural as any panda. We are all products of evolution, have DNA, are based in carbon, and will fall through the air if someone tosses us off the roof. And anyway, what you call ‘nature’ is really a historical product. ‘Wilderness’ meant something scary in the 14th century, and now it’s a place to escape the evils of civilization. But only,” he laughed, “if you’ve got the right equipment. All these adventures in the forest to hear ‘nature’s voice’ cost a pretty penny in *man-made* fancy backpacks, ultralight tents, and \$200 a pair gore-tex lined hiking boots. What we understand as nature just depends on where we are and what we do as a society. Nature is really something we make.”⁹

“What nonsense” laughed Kate. Then she laughed again at her father’s shocked expression—he had made this point so many times in lectures, and always to good effect.

“Look Dad,” she explained. “you and mom have been married for what, thirty-two years?”

“Thirty-three,” he smiled. “I always say it’s the first thirty that are the hardest.”

“Very funny,” said Kate. “But here’s the point. Of course you see Mom, and she sees you, through the lens of your own experience—what you want and need and feel. And that’s changed over time. In your vocabulary, it has a ‘history.’ That’s just the way people are, the way every living thing is. But does that mean that Mom is your *product*? Of course not! It just means you’re in a *relationship*—you shape her, and she shapes you, you see each other through your own point of view, *and* get that point of view changed as you go on and on (to 120 I hope) in the relationship. It’s not a matter of being the same or being totally separate, but of how you connect. Nature isn’t some totally separate thing, but a countless number of others, just like people are. We’re not saying ‘Leave this totally separate thing alone’, but ‘Let’s try to change our relationships with all these other beings.’”

“Yes,” Steven jumped in, “that’s why the idea of humanity controlling nature, or, to use the word you and Ned are so fond of, ‘humanizing’ it, is not so appealing. What kind of relationship would you have with Mom if you just tried to ‘Samuelize’ her?”

“Don’t think he hasn’t,” laughed Rachel. “But I’ve ‘Rachelized’ him as well. That’s just marriage. I’ve even gotten him to cook and clean up a fair amount, though that didn’t come easy.” “To say the least,” she didn’t add, but thought. “Humanizing nature... turning nature into people?” mumbled Isaac. “How dreadful.”

“Come on Steven,” said Ned, “I know as much about environmental problems as you do. So don’t play with words. “Humanizing” nature just means we turn the world into a place where we can flourish. But so will the other species. Most of them anyway. I don’t see much of a future of the AIDS virus or Ebola if we can help it—and I don’t think you do either. Capitalism gives us the power to dominate nature, not to have to spend all our time just surviving. But under socialism people will be kind and caring and careful. We can control nature rationally and humanely.”

“Humanely?” Steven asked. “Humanely” What a dismal prospect. Did you and your pals ever think maybe you have something to learn from nature?—something other than how to control it, even ‘rationally’? Did you ever think that life is a mystery, or a miracle, and that at least some of the time our job is to open ourselves up to whatever it has to tell us—to listen, without preconceived goals, even ‘humane’ ones?”

Ned’s blank stare indicated, not too surprisingly, that he hadn’t a clue what Steven was talking about.

“Okay,” Kate said soothingly. “Let’s try this another way. Ned, what makes you think that a ‘humane’ society would be good for animals? How many times did these social movements that you talk about endlessly do anything for other types of people? And how many times did they just work for themselves, quite happy to let the ones below them continue to get treated like dirt?”

“You must admit she’s got a good point,” said Samuel, who liked few things in life better than a good point. “Craft workers in the Socialist Party of the late nineteenth century didn’t care much for unskilled workers. Men who wanted the vote for freed slaves didn’t mind ignoring the women who couldn’t vote. Middle class feminists managed to be pretty ignorant of poor women. Some of the black radicals of the sixties were incredibly sexist. Castro’s Cuba is deeply homophobic. Even environmental groups didn’t take environmental racism seriously until blacks and Hispanics and Native Americans confronted them.¹⁰ What makes you think a socialist movement that encompassed all of humanity would necessarily be ready to give up its Thanksgiving turkey, its bacon and eggs, its leather belts, its brie? Not to mention its subjects for medical experiments?”

“Exactly,” Steven pounced. “I can just see the slogan now: ‘Vote socialist, support world wide, compulsory, vegetarianism.’ You think no one pays attention to you now? That would really finish you off.”

Ned fumed, but was (for a change) at a loss for words. Even though he knew it was true, he didn’t like hearing that mass movements of the oppressed could be pretty self-serving, managing to ignore the suffering of others without blinking an eye. And he didn’t like thinking about how few people in the world shared his vision

of truly democratic socialism. Despite all he knew about exploitation, politics and history, he often felt completely powerless.

“Look Dad,” said Kate, turning to her father. “Here’s what I don’t get. Let’s say you have this perfectly open conversation about morality and politics going. Let’s say we agree that only rational, non-defective people (though of course in my experience I haven’t met anyone without lots of defects) can take part. What will they say once they get there?”

“They’ll say whatever they want, whatever they believe.”

“But what will they know and believe about animals?”

“Whatever they know and believe,” replied Samuel, getting exasperated again. “What’s your point?”

“I imagine her point is this,” chimed in Anna, way ahead of her father-in-law. “If I’m to be part of this conversational democracy, it’s not just that I can talk, there are other things I have to know as well.¹¹ I have to be able to empathize so I can have some understanding of other people’s concerns; I have to know at least a little math if I’m going to vote on tax rules, welfare payments, or state budgets. I have to be able to think of the good of the whole group as well as my own needs. Without those I’m just not going to be worth very much in the conversation. And if I’m going to talk about animals, I need to know something about them as well.”

“Yes, yes,” Kate broke in. “How can someone make sense of women’s rights if he (and I use the pronoun advisedly) has no idea of women’s experience—and doesn’t try to learn? How can someone talk about animals if he’s never been to a slaughterhouse, or sat for hours watching animals in the wild, or seen a cat give birth, or held a favorite dog in his arms while the dog was being ‘put to sleep’?”

Anna pushed on. “People are so ignorant. They don’t know how intelligent animals are—how they learn from experience and pass that learning on to their offspring, how they extend kindness to people and even other species. A friend of mine had an autistic child who was helped by swimming with some dolphins. And the dolphins could tell which kids were strong and which weak—and they’d swim fast with the strong ones and slow with the weak ones. There were some elephants in a zoo and the keeper used to get them to come in from the yard by putting their

dinner in their cages. Well this worked for a while until the animals figured it out. Then they'd go in one at a time and switch after the first one had finished, so they both got more time outside.¹²

"When you hear stuff like this, does it really make sense to say we are so much better than them? That it's really okay to treat them like things just lying around?"

"Without those experiences, what will we say when we talk about animals? What that makes sense, I mean?"

"Very nice and sweet," broke in Ned after a pause. "But not the way the world works. Look at history. Workers got rights because they organized and demanded them. The same for women, and blacks and gays and the national liberation movements that threw out the imperialists. All of political and moral history is determined by struggle. People change the world because they are struggling for their freedom and power, not because they are trying to be nice."

"No, *you* look at history," said Steven, fuming a bit. "Did you ever hear of the abolitionist movement? Led by white ministers, not African slaves. And guess what, a lot of the first animal rights people were also the abolitionists. The animal rights movement itself—which is pretty big and effective now—is not led by animals struggling for *their* freedom but by people moved by, don't take offense Ned, *love*—not hate, anger, or self-interest. They don't work for themselves, or for people in their particular group, but for *others*! The politics of the heart is the heart of politics."

"Careful Steve," teased his father, "you'll be doing slogans just like Ned. But I'd have a bit of caution if I were you. First of all, I've heard some of these animal rights types getting pretty damn angry. They might not eat beef or chicken, but some of them sound like they'd be all too happy to kill the local butcher. But even more important, I don't think you should put too much stock in all this heart stuff. It's just too damn inconsistent. People love their own children and don't care about the ones dying of starvation. Or women love women, or blacks blacks, or Jews Jews or Palestinians Palestinians—and it's just too bad about anyone not in their little

group. People open their hearts—but only so far and not farther. Passion and love—yes—but for who?”

Ned saw an opening. “And all these bleeding heart animal rights types are the same way: they love animals but don’t give a shit about people—natives displaced by ‘nature preserves’ for white hunters or tourists. Peasants whose gardens get trampled by elephants whom they mustn’t shoot because some white, western, conservation group says the elephants must be protected—and meanwhile it’s the locals who pay the price and not the noble conservationists.¹³ You can just imagine how long their ‘Save the elephants’ routine would hold if the elephants were trampling on their BMWs instead of some poor peasant’s vegetable gardens. And mostly the animal lovers are pretty selective—save the whales, sure, but who cares about rats in the ghetto, mice in your pantry, or even bats, who are a lot more important ecologically than all the charismatic megafauna who star in nature specials and bring in the big bucks.”

Rachel came in and sat down gratefully on the sofa, groaning a little to finally be off her feet. “Thank God for Aamina” (their sometimes cleaning lady and cook, who would finish dinner and serve it). “Charismatic megafauna? Great phrase. I suppose it means, like, big cuddly animals? Anyway... Ned, people are inconsistent? So what? That doesn’t make them hypocrites. Who isn’t a little off here or there? You hate capitalism, yet you’re licking your chops ready to eat this food which comes to you, duh, from a capitalist economy. Would it be better if the people who tried to save dolphins or elephants stopped caring about anything? If they turned their back on everything outside their living rooms and their bank accounts? When any of us are perfect, then we can feel smug about other people’s failings. Until then, let’s try to appreciate whatever good they do.”

“But it’s so partial, so limited,” said Ned quietly. “Maybe not as individuals, but as a society, or humanity as a whole, we’re capable of so much more. I know it sounds corny, and maybe even crazy after all the horrible communist regimes there have been, but that old stuff from Marx still touches me. A world beyond necessity, where people can be truly free to be creative and engaged with the world and

caring, and where the misery and waste of capitalism are only a distant memory.” He sighed.

“I get it” replied Steven softly. “That’s what I want too. I don’t put it the same way you do. And for me it includes animals and all of nature being free. I talk about love, and the heart, and being open to the cosmic wisdom that is available whenever we really turn to it. But maybe, just maybe, it comes to the same thing. Or in any case maybe we’re headed in the same general direction.”

“Well,” said Samuel, pleased that his endlessly squabbling sons had found common ground for once. “At least you realize you’re both about equally distant from what you want, as noble as both your goals are. But you know, and this goes for both of you, we may just not be ready, as disappointing as that may seem. Imagine someone who saw the importance of women’s equality in the 17th century—there really were a few, you know. To them it was obvious—just as obvious as socialism to you Ned or animal rights to you Steven—and yet they were centuries away from the world being where they were. I know the way things are breaks your hearts.” They both looked up, startled. Once in a while Dad, despite his tendency to being long-winded and self-satisfied, showed that he actually understood something. “But sometimes you just have to accept that this is the way the world is, and it’s not likely to change all that much very soon.”

Ned said quietly, “We can still dream, and hope the dream comes true. A world transformed—without cruelty to animals, or people, or anything else.”

“Ah Ned, life is inherently cruel,” Kate reminded him. “Don’t forget that. Just ask the lion’s dinner or the trout scooped up by the bear. But it’s beautiful as well.”

They all paused to let these last thoughts sink in. Perhaps a little common ground has appeared.

Or not, for then Rachel spoke up again, her voice both kind and controlled, and with the kind of verbal authority that she usually left to her husband.

“Look, I’ve been an emergency room nurse for 27 years. And you know what I do? I just try to stop the bleeding. After that it’s someone else’s job. So I don’t hold with big changes, with perfect futures. The best I ever see are tiny little incremental improvements, if that.

“This year I cooked a free range organic turkey, a few years ago I wouldn’t have even thought about it, just gotten what was on sale at the supermarket.¹⁴ And I would have felt hurt when Kate and Steven didn’t eat the turkey. I put love into the cooking and I want people to feel that love. But I understand a little more now. There’s a tofu and lentil dish for non-meat eaters this year. You’ll have to take your chances on it, but it least it’s one hundred percent vegan—and there’s just as much love in it as in the turkey!

“So my darling children influenced me. And changed me. It may not be much, but it’s something.

“Now it’s time to put this aside and eat! And just enjoy each other, whatever we’re eating. I hope it’s good,” she said a little insecurely—always having more confidence in her ability to stitch up a knife wound than to cook a meal. Still, she didn’t mind doing it all. In fact, she felt a little sorry for people who lived in abstract arguments and never got to work with the hands making something for others to enjoy.

Kate and Steven smiled their agreement, but then exchange disappointed glances. “This could have gone somewhere,” Steven thought. “But we’re supposed to make nice for the family on this wonderful family day...while for the turkeys it’s Auschwitz.”

“Of course Mom wants us all to get along,” Kate reflected. “Steve and I don’t eat meat, Mom and Dad and Ned and Anna do. Let’s just accept each other’s differences. But what if one of us were a rapist or a Nazi? Would Mom say ‘Let’s just all get along’ then? At least a rape victim lives. The animals just die and die and die.” She then realized, with a little guilty twinge, that she hadn’t helped in the kitchen, that none of them had. “So busy yakking we let Mom do it.” She’d make up for it after dinner, and she’d make sure the others did as well...¹⁵

Ned turned to his brother, speaking softly but with a little twinkle in his eye. “I’m sorry Steven, I know how you feel, but I intend to enjoy every bite.”

Steven didn’t take the bait. “Don’t be sorry, Ned, I hope you do. And in your enjoyment, perhaps you can feel the spirit of the bird. And maybe next year, or ten

years from now, you'll find a way to take pleasure in that spirit without eating its dead body."

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In the kitchen Aamina, a political refugee from a small town in Nigeria, had heard bits of their conversation. While her English still had a ways to go, she had gotten the gist of their comments. But they made little sense to her. "All this fuss about animals. What for?" Where she grew up people had chickens, and goats, and cows. They ate the eggs and were very glad to have them. And when it was time for the animals to get slaughtered, they got slaughtered. Meanwhile hungry and sick people were all around the village.

She had fled Nigeria in the aftermath of the struggle over her homeland, the Ogoni region, slowly being poisoned by oil development.¹⁶ As the rivers and air and land had become toxic, and the children became more and more sickened, she had determined to find a place to raise her daughter that wouldn't slowly kill her. She'd worked as a guide and translator for one of the western aid agencies, and gotten a cherished political refugee visa when the army, acting on behalf of the Shell, had attacked her village to destroy the local resistance. "The people who helped me just ate whatever they ate. Roasted meat, tuna salad, hard boiled eggs, bread. What would change for people like me if these people had lentils and cauliflower for dinner instead of this turkey?"

Yet she also had to admit to herself that this family had been wonderful to her—helping with immigration status, with finding a place to live, with English lessons. "Could it be that thinking about animals the way they did had an effect on the way they thought about people?"

"Would it help if the people who raped our land had been a little concerned for how animals were treated? Would they destroy the land, and my people, less if they didn't eat meat?"

"Acch," she groaned to herself. Only Allah could know for sure. And Allah wasn't saying anything at the moment, at least not to her. It would be so much easier, so much less confusing, if people who were decent and kind about one thing were always decent and kind about all things. A lot of the men who worked for the

oil company were probably trying to support their families, to take care of their own children.

People were just too confusing, she thought. They just didn't fit into anybody's simple rule.

Soon it would be time for the long subway ride home. At least it was an early dinner and she'd be walking home from the station when other people were around. She hated walking alone to the poor neighborhood she lived in. She was scared of getting mugged, and it was sad to look at the homeless people sleeping in alleyways. And she also hated, she just realized, seeing all the stray cats—thin and sick and scared with a tiny world of pain in their tiny eyes..

"I'm sure I'll get some of the leftovers." The turkey had smelled really wonderful.

"Or perhaps," she laughed to herself, "I'll become a vegetarian and stick to the lentil and tofu dish."¹⁷

¹ Comment from author's daughter, Anna Gottlieb, after viewing *The Witness*.

² A true story from author's childhood.

³ Most environmental organizations have website pages with this information. See this National Resources Defense Council report on factory farm lagoons: <http://www.nrdc.org/water/pollution/cesspools/cessinx.asp>. For a book, see Christina Johnson, *Factory Farming* (London: Blackwell, 1991).

⁴ Technically, this balance is often referred to as "reflective equilibrium."

⁵ This position has been developed over the last 30 years both by Jurgen Habermas and proponents of "deliberative democracy."

⁶ See Stephen Vogel, *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory*, (Alban, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), Chapter 6.

⁷ For a perspective on this way of thinking, and practices to develop it, see Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self*, (Berkeley: Parallax, 1991).

⁸ Thanks to Anne Mackin for suggesting this point to me.

⁹ Vogel, *Against Nature*. I have addressed both sides of this argument in some detail in *A Spirituality of Resistance: Finding a Peaceful Heart and Protecting the Earth* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), Chapter 4.

¹⁰ Competition among oppressed groups is addressed by any serious history of progressive political movements. For an account of the emergence of awareness of and response to environmental racism, see Luke Cole and Sheila Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (NY: NYU Press, 2001).

¹¹ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹² For a wonderful introduction to interspecies communication, see Jim Nollman, *The Charged Border: Where Whales and Humans Meet* (NY: Henry Holt, 1999). Along with Nollman there are wonderful stories about what animals can do in Eugene Linden, *The Octopus and the Orangutan: New Tales of Animal Intrigue, Intelligence, and Ingenuity* (NY: Plume, 2003).

¹³ For a history and critique of western attitudes and practices in wildlife conservation, see Raymond Bonner, *At the Hand of Man: Peril and Hope for Africa's Wildlife* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

¹⁴ The value of the “free range” designation is itself rather questionable. It may mean no more than that the turkey has some extremely limited access to the outdoors. See, e.g., the “all creatures” website: <http://all-creatures.org/anex/turkey-fr-01.html>. Thanks to John Sanbonmatsu for raising this point.

¹⁵ Another point suggested by Anne Mackin.

¹⁶ For a quick overview on this struggle, see the Ending Corporate Governance website: <http://www.ratical.org/corporations/OgoniFactS.html>. Out of a highly fertile area oil

development produced a landscape colored by death, where church sermons can implore God to keep oil from being discovered nearby.