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*The Cattle in the Long Cedar Springs Draw*

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Thirty years ago I encountered the following argument for vegetarianism.[[1]](#endnote-1)

1. Every individual who is the subject of a life has a right to life.

2. Some humans—e.g., the severely congenitally cognitively limited—lack language, rationality, autonomy, and self-consciousness, and yet they are subjects of a life.

3. Severely congenitally cognitively limited humans have a right to life.

4. Some animals—e.g., all mammals—lack language, rationality, autonomy, and self-consciousness, and yet they are subjects of a life.

5. We ought to treat like cases alike.

6. The cases of some humans are like the cases of some animals.

7. Therefore, some animals have a right to life.

This argument is baffling not because it is ambiguous. The premises are all straight forward and they’re clear enough to be intelligible when taken, as we must initially take them, at face value. Nor is it difficult to understand why someone would be motivated to propose it for it’s a valid argument; its conclusion cannot be false if all of the premises are true. No, I was not initially puzzled by the argument’s meaning or intent; I saw rather quickly its logical virtues and moral implications. My befuddlement arose over the longer term as I observed my prolonged inability to bring my behavior, and especially my diet, into line with its conclusion.

1. Introduction: The baffling argument from overlapping species

The argument continues to stump me, not because it is a bad argument but because—in spite of its strengths—it seems to convince so few and the few it convinces have such difficulty changing their lives in the way it seems to require. My students and friends typically recognize its force but, like me, find it very difficult to bring their daily activities into line with its implications. Why? It is not that we are poor reasoners, even though most of us are. The explanation, I am convinced, is a practical one; it is a failure of will.

Evolution has not equipped us to reason deductively; the ability to appreciate a sound argument carries no fitness advantages. Nor does natural selection seem to filter for empathy with those outside of our in-group. We are by nature, as it were, in touch with the emotions of those we love, and it is easy to care for the babies produced by the women in one’s family. But we are ill-equipped to understand, much less sympathize with, the feelings of strangers. And if we have a hard time imagining what it is like to be another member of our species—say, the mother of two youngsters living in Sierra Leone—how much harder it is to think about being a cow. We are wholly unprepared to entertain the idea that nonhuman animals are subjects of a life. We don’t see that mammals have rights not because we are not deducing the right conclusion from the premises. We don’t see it because we don’t feel it.

The argument from overlapping species is curious because even though it is a valid argument for vegetarianism, it has persuaded virtually no one to become a vegetarian.

2. Why it matters

A word about why the question matters. It matters because its answer bears directly on how we should treat cows. If the received view of cows is correct, then cows are the most clueless of animals, docile idiots that, at best, enjoy a kind of blank contentment while chewing their cud until a bolt is driven into their skull. The received view supports institutions that entail extensive cattle suffering. We separate calves from their mothers at birth and tether so-called veal calves in solitary stations without access to their mothers or conspecifics. In the U.S., we killed and ate 32.5 million cattle in 2013. Each American on average consumes a dozen cows during their lifetime. However, if the received view of cows is wrong, if it underestimates the animals’ cognitive capacities and their moral standing, then we need help to revise our understanding of the animals.

So, how does it feel to be a cow? Here is where imaginative literature may help.

3. Why literature is necessary

Literature is necessary if cows and pigs have a right to life, if the widespread meat-production and meat-consumption practices of the industrialized world are not only on balance misery-producing but unjust as well, and if people have a hard time admitting these facts to themselves. Now, to address the injustice, the works of philosophers such as Tom Regan (Regan 2004) and Peter Singer (Singer 1993) are essential to help us see the reasons for vegetarianism. And the discoveries of scientists such as Frans de Waal (F. de Waal 1997) and Jaak Panksepp (Panksepp 1998) are critical to help us see the evidence about the mental lives of mammals. But equally as important are the sculptors, moviemakers, poets and story-tellers who help us *feel* what the lives of nonhumans might be like. For in the face of our excuses as to why we never even try to see the world from the perspective of another species, artists can give us impetus to do so.

Not all literature about animals is meant to help us see the world from their perspective. To the contrary, most stories involving animals are written for some other reason. Talking foxes and bears and dogs have enlivened storytellers’ dialogs for a long time. Often, the animals are ciphers for human virtue (or vice). Often, the beasts’ decisions embody values parents are wont to pass along to their children (or not). As early as Aesop, wolves were donning sheep's clothing and tortoises outrunning hares (Aesop and Gibbs 2008) while young listeners, surely taken most by the spectacle, were not immune to the hidden moral. Watch out for the seemingly mild; appearances can be deceiving. Go slow and steady, not fast and intermittent, to win the race.

Often, too, authors enlist animals’ voices to portray the development of character (e.g., Peter Rabbit in [Potter 1902]), warn against political ruin (*Animal Farm* [Orwell 1945]), or enlist sympathy for abused animals (*Black Beauty* [Sewell 1877], *Charlotte’s Web* [White 1952]). In these and other ways, literature deepens our affective identification with the emotions and interests of nonhumans. And yet these literary animals all have a common feature: they are attempts to teach humans about ourselves.

Less often, storytellers aim to teach us about the animals themselves. The difficulty here is to get inside the animal’s head without imputing to them cognitive traits they do not have. The scene is littered with abysmal failures because animals lack our narrative capacities and yet the job of the storyteller is to, well, *tell a story*. Few, if any, nonhumans can rearrange their memories in the way required to fabulate and few, if any, can play with their plans for the morrow in the way required to dream about the future. How can you make an interesting story without being able to rearrange the pieces? Despite the challenge, Yann Martel has bravely ventured inside the mind of a Royal Bengal tiger in *Life of Pi* (Martel 2001), Chuck Rosenthal has imagined the world from a horse’s perspective in *Ten Thousand Heavens* (Rosenthal 2013), and Tania James takes on an elephant’s point of view in *The Tusk That Did the Damage* (James 2015).

The attempts are not entirely successful. But that’s understandable. For the goal is to “think like a dog,” and not to think-like-myself-if-I-were-a-dog, but the anthropomorphic hurdle is high. The philosopher Thomas Nagel sounds a skeptical note about all of these attempts in his classic essay, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” (Nagel 1974). He argues that we can never understand the perceptual experience of the bat, the bat’s “subjective point of view,” even if we have complete scientific knowledge of its neuroanatomy and behavior. Considering the evidence, however, Kathleen Akins goes one step further and argues that we *can* know what it’s like, and it’s like *nothing at all*. Here she echoes tentative conclusions of the early Peter Carruthers (Carruthers 1992), that nonhuman animals are automatons whose motions are directed by fixed action scripts controlled by non-representing mechanisms. Akins offers fascinating visual thought-experiments to try to prove herself wrong, but concludes that a bat’s webbed forelimb maneuvers through space and vocalizations constructing the world through echos of ultrasonic beeps is, at best, “boring” and “myopic” (Akins 1993a) and, at worst, lacking phenomenal, conscious, or sensible qualities altogether (Akins 1993b). I think, to the contrary, that the prospects for trans-species understanding are less intractable, and here I agree with (Allen-Hermanson 2015). First, we must enlist artists alongside philosophers and scientists to help portray animal emotions and mental states. Second, we must try to take the perspective, as Temple Grandin urges (Grandin 1995, 2005) of humans with radical cognitive limitations, people I call “far-persons” (Comstock 2017). When we try to compare an animal’s mental states with a person’s mental states, we face an admittedly daunting gulf. But when we take the perspective of cognitively limited humans, as we surely can given the right assistance, the distance to be bridged is less confounding.

The two extremes mentioned above—the confident tone of the story-teller taking the animal’s perspective, and the equally confident rhetoric of the critic announcing the impossibility of doing such a thing—poses a dilemma for the literary-philosophical wing of Animal Studies. I believe, as I say, that the conflict can be mediated if we look to the cognitively disabled. But it will also help if we recognize that literary narrative itself may be the wrong medium for the job. Why *not* narrative? In well-written stories, the ones we admire most, we find complex, extended temporal horizons, forward and backward. We find scenes that retrieve old memories—the further back in our lives the better. We find plot lines that sound universal themes—the more global and cross-cultural the better. And we expect the characters to help us in some way anticipate our own futures—again, the more distant and specific the better. But nonhuman lives typically lack such complexity. Animals, it seems, live more “in the moment” than we do. And if this is true, then perhaps the lyric is better suited to conveying their points of view. For example, consider these lines from Mark Doty’s poem, “Golden Retrievals” (Doty 1998):

Fetch? Balls and sticks capture my attention

seconds at a time. Catch? I don't think so.

…

I'm off again: muck, pond, ditch, residue

of any thrillingly dead thing. And you?

Either you're sunk in the past, half our walk,

thinking of what you never can bring back,

or else you're off in some fog concerning

— tomorrow, is that what you call it? My work:

to unsnare time's warp (and woof!), retrieving,

my haze-headed friend, you.[[2]](#endnote-2)

…

That’s not a bad start on how dog consciousness might be. It’s true, the impediments to accurate cross-species translation may be so great that we will never know, and perhaps cannot know, whether any text has captured the exact *content* of a nonhuman’s beliefs and desires. But I see no good reasons to think that other mammals do not have simple beliefs and desires, and I shall help myself to this assumption in what follows. I have noted several issues without solving any of them, but I turn now to the main question I wish to address, the role of narratives in human liberation movements along with the corresponding possibility that literature might be used in the animal liberation movement.

Provocation may be necessary whenever one group exploits another, whenever a dominant group is blind to the cognitive capacities of those it subordinates. When ignorance of the facts by slave-owners in the Antebellum South, for example, led them to think that so-called Negros were psychologically limited, psychologically “more like animals” than like humans, imaginative strategies were needed to open peoples’ minds to the possibility that their attitudes were ill-founded.

In the case of slavery, the abhorrent institution was eventually overcome as African Americans struggled with their lives against the practice. But the work of writers such as Frederick Douglass was also critical, as were the narratives they crafted. These words of Douglass’ from his *Autobiography* (ch. 8) were probably more influential in ending slavery than all of the contributions of liberal moral philosophers and scientists:

We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination… Frederick Douglass, ch. 8. (Douglass, Charles, and McDowell 2009).

Douglass’ autobiography was a bestseller. If its vivid firsthand images of the effects of oppression did not help all Americans to comprehend the equality of blacks and whites, it at least provoked many whites to take the issue seriously. Douglass broached for his readers the possibility that they did not understand the cognitive capacities of blacks *at all*, and that is the only point I insist upon here. Narrative can pique its hearers’ conscience.

In the third book of his Border Trilogy, the American Southwest novelist, Cormac McCarthy, tells the story of John Grady, a teenage cowboy working on a New Mexico cattle ranch in 1952. John Grady falls in love with Magdalena and rebuilds a remote rundown mountain cabin for them to live in. Two days before they are to be married, she goes missing. John Grady discovers her body in a morgue, her throat slit. The next scene has John Grady alone on his horse, far out on the lonely hills above the Rio Grande river. And then we read this:

The cattle in the long Cedar Springs Draw up through which he rode studied him as they stood chewing and then lowered their heads again. The rider knew they could tell his intentions by the attitude of the horse he rode (McCarthy 1999).

The spare quality of the narrative belies the richness of the human psychology it evokes.

The reader shares not only John Grady’s sadness and bewilderment at the catastrophe that has befallen him. We also see the external world through his depressed, soulless eyes, as it were, seeing the train fifteen miles away moving soundlessly through the valley. McCarthy lets us in on how it might have felt to be a teenage West Texas cowboy in the early 1950s. But he also presumes to convey insights into nonhuman psychology as well, outlining the barest hints of bovine and equine beliefs, inferences, moods, and predictions. In these two sentences, the omniscient narrator implicitly claims to bring us inside the minds of cattle. They are initially unconcerned, enjoying their search for the right tufts of grass, presumably switching flies, occasionally checking to ensure that they are the right distance from the dominant bull, perhaps nuzzling a familiar subordinate or relative. The satisfaction of basic biological drives, such as eating, grooming, stretching muscles, and defecating, are pleasurable experiences. But then the calm is broken by movement on the horizon and a decision must be made. Should I stop chewing and flee? Prepare to fight? Ready defenses for conspecifics for which I feel responsibility? But, no, I quickly perceive that threat is not troublesome, and I quickly return my attention to what I am doing. Only the most perceptive would have noticed the brief pause from chewing.

McCarthy’s paragraph had me reading the intentions of a horse and the designs of its rider from the perspective of the cow. Furthermore, from inside the cow’s head “I” was reaching out to get inside the head of the odd-shaped single object in front of me that appeared like a horse with a human-shaped object on it. And I was doing so in cow-fashion. I was not trying to listen for the semantic content of (what we know were) John Grady’s words, which could not have made sense to me in any case insofar as I lacked language but, rather, I was trying to predict the movement of the odd-shaped object from the movements of the lower part of the object, the horse-shaped part. The object’s familiar, lower, part, I saw upon examination, was uninterested in me, had no designs on heading toward, much less chasing, me. From these observations I inferred that the larger object as a whole had no plans to move in ways that would require my attention. So I returned to the tuft of grass at my feet.

Notice what we have been doing. We have assumed that we, as cows, are capable of reading other minds, reasoning in inferential fashion from behaviors of one animal species, a horse, to the moods and intentions of another animal species, *Homo sapiens.* And notice how different this way of thinking about cows is from what Frans de Waal calls anthropodenial. Anthropodenial is the opposite of anthropomorphizing; it is the under-estimating of an animal’s mental agility. When we engage in anthropodenial of cows, we make a mistake; we underestimate the powers of the animal’s psychology (F. de Waal 1997, 1999). Thinking about McCarthy’s expertly chosen words may help us avoid this mistake. However, we must go on to ask whether the same words might lead us into a different mistake. Before tackling that problem, let us take stock of where we are.

We are focusing on a mental state in which a cow is chewing but attentive. The state is not vigilance. There is no freezing or startle response. Nor is there insentient automaticity, a nonconscious state in which behaviors continue on autopilot without any sense of awareness. Rather, the animal is paying attention to a novel object, but the flow of experience is uninterrupted, starting with the rapid canvassing for the right clump of grass and continuing through the gustatory pleasure of realizing one has a particularly moist mouthful. There is a deeply felt emotional quality here, a non-narrative positive mood associated with the enjoyment of one’s surroundings. It’s the feeling of wanting to proceed in habitual fashion and learning that what may have been a threat entering one’s visual field is not a concern.

This lyrical state is often, and aptly, described as bovine contentment. Bovine contentment is, not to put too fine a point on it, a good thing, a valuable state of the world. It may not have extended temporal horizons and may not involve plans that reach into tomorrow (“I hope the rain holds off so we can do this again on Tuesday”) or stretch into the past (“Reminds me of that day last week when we found water”). But relaxed consumption is a deeply valuable state even if commonplace and ubiquitous, even if the state does not involve propositional attitudes about its place in a history of the agent enjoying the state. Passionate, in the moment, personal peace is undervalued and underappreciated. I want here only to underline the value of the lyrical, because non-narrative, experience in a world in which the value to humans of temporally-extended narrative episodes needs no defense.

To summarize. Literature can pique our imagination, help us overcome our lethargy, and assist us in imagining ourselves in the skin of another species.

4. But not sufficient

Yet literature can lead us into other mistakes. While I know of no author more attuned to the worlds of horses that work cows than Cormac McCarthy, his narrative may not be trustworthy when it attributes to cows higher order cognitive skills such as mindreading. The cattle, he writes, are studying things. Are they?

Here are two skeptical reasons not to take the passage literally. First, we should prefer interpretations of animal and human behavior that fully explain a phenomenon without invoking unnecessary psychological capacities. Second, lower level explanations of the cows’ behavior are available.

Let us take up first the claim that cows *study* objects. To study is to do more than see, perceive, or observe. It is to search for connections between the object and potentially-associated parts. It is to look for causes, or part-whole structures, or logical entailments. When I study the pond in the backyard I do more than look at it. I try to figure out where the water is coming from and flowing to, whether I’m seeing sticks or fish beneath the surface, and how the willows function to hold the bank together. If we are to interpret behavior properly using theory of mind ideas, theory of mind activities must be going on. But there is little reason to think that the Cedar Springs cows were searching for causal or structural connections when they looked at the shape constituted by John Grady and his horse. Perhaps this simple, behaviorist, explanation is correct. The cattle *saw a shape*.

Could the cattle really have understood John Grady’s intentions? To do so, they would have to have been ruminating about the context of his behavior. They would have to have been thinking, for example, about his reasons for riding in the aimless way he was riding or, perhaps, at least about the causes of his moving his head in the way he is moving it or, if not that, then his view about whether he ought to turn around suddenly and reverse course. They would have to infer the causes of his behaving in this way in order to assess the probabilities that his mood might suddenly change and his designs toward them become more nefarious. For these sorts of mental activities are what we do when we interpret another’s intentions. We interpret their movements to be motivated by their beliefs and desires. To be reading John Grady’s mind, the cattle would at least have to be thinking about some of his cognitive and conative states. For if they were not thinking about John Grady’s beliefs and desires, they could not be thinking about his motivations, hypotheses, means-ends reasoning, or goals. An intention, even the most simple intention, is an attempt to fulfill a desire by means of acting on a hypothesis one has reason to believe will be successful in achieving the goal. To read John Grady’s intentions, an observer must be thinking at a minimum about what John Grady is seeing or wanting to do, what options he thinks are available to him to achieve his ends, and what reasons he acts on when he selects his course of action. Were the cattle thinking *that*? Unlikely, for a reason I will now explain.

Morgan’s canon is a methodological principle developed by C. Lloyd Morgan in 1894 to guide the study of comparative psychology.[[3]](#endnote-3) It states that “In no case may we interpret an action as the outcome of the exercise of a higher psychical faculty, if it can be interpreted as the outcome of the exercise of one which stands lower in the psychological scale.”[[4]](#endnote-4) This ensures that we are on solid ground when we attribute psychological capacities to nonhuman species. If a first-order explanation of an animal’s behavior is available in terms, say, of stimuli and responses, or operant conditioning, or mere associative learning, or even world-directed beliefs and desires, then that is the explanation we should use. In the case of bovine behavior in front of us, a first-order explanation is available.

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Cows are sentient, social, form hierarchies, have basic emotions, and can communicate simple concepts (“Back off!” “Come here,” “play?”) with blunted vocal signals, posturings, and behaviors. But they lack syntax, abstraction, self-consciousness, and theory of mind, the things necessary to study, read intentions and make inferences about attitudes. To understand, explain, and predict a cow’s behavior, we do not need to attribute to them the ability to express propositional attitudes or to have an internal autobiographical mental life. Given Morgan’s Canon, we ought to select the lower level interpretations in B and reject McCarthy’s higher level, metaphorical, account in A.

If I am right, cattle have simple and dull perceptions, sensations, pains, pleasures, learned beliefs and instinctual desires which feel *the same* to the animals as they do to those of us who have them but cannot report on them. The trouble is that those of us who can report have difficulty focusing on the lyrical—the simple and dull—because we are inveterate story-tellers driven to embed the low-level in the high-level. The reason to think these states feel the same to the cow as they do to some of the non-reporting among us is that the feelings are processed in the same parts of the cow’s brain as in the human brain, the basal ganglia, the nucleus accumbens, the hypothalamus, and so on. These structures process very basic somatosensory information necessary to survival, providing a proprioceptive map and reference frame by which we and the cows understand our body’s place in space, respond to others’ claims to territory, convey our innate sense that we are dominant over or submissive to others in our immediate temporal present, and experience pleasure and contentment.

If I am right, cows feel exactly the same simple and dull emotions felt by the non-reporting, such as hunger, thirst, fear, sexual desire, urges for social companionship and communicative expression, and parental-child bonding. These emotions are sponsored by the paleomammalian complex, or limbic system, in both individuals.

Cattle apparently do not have the feelings of executive control over oneself, feelings that reporting humans express in abstract representations such as autobiographies. The feelings of freedom and of deciding how to behave on the basis of moral reasons requires a complex process of information integration involving expansive parts of the cerebral neocortex, a level of information integration cows lack. As far as we know, cows do not have the feeling of control that comes from transcending the present moment in mental time travel or extending one’s spatial perspective beyond what is visible.

The neuroanatomical and behavioral evidence I have seen suggests that cows do not have the ability to assume another’s perspective, to look on the world from another’s point of view. Cows lack a theory of mind, the capacity to attribute others’ movements to mental states such as intentions, plans, values, and categorical desires because they lack the neural connections necessary to generate and integrate the information necessary for this level of intellectual work. The same is true for congenitally cognitively severely limited humans. But they have a right to life. And so, by parity of reasoning, do cows.

In sum, where emotions, beliefs, and desires are concerned, cows seem to have neuroanatomical structures homologous with ours. When their behaviors convey emotions, beliefs, or desires, however primitive, we are on reasonably firm ground to infer that those mental states feel the same to them as similar mental states feel to us—minus, of course, the wider stories that we then reflectively impose on, or construct out of, these simpler states. In fact, their emotions may be more intense, more pure, than ours, because their experiences are not overshadowed by workloads going on at the “higher” levels. The cow’s brain circuits can be completely devoted to “lyrical,” non-narrative, experience. “In the moment,” as it were, cows’ feelings are unencumbered by the intellectual compulsions we feel to abstract away from our present moments, to embed them into larger narrative structures, and to analyze their meaning. The depth and intensity of the simple feelings of the cattle in the long Cedar Springs Draw may be just as deep and intense as are our comparable simple feelings.

What is the moral upshot of a Morgan-acceptable reading of cow mental states? It is not a devaluation of cow life. The Morgan-acceptable reading does not give us a reason to doubt that the animal has a right to life because that reading does not call into question the idea that the cow has an internal subjective life of its own. The cows lack the ability to read minds, yes, but they have memories and desires, beliefs and interests—however limited in time and scope these mental states may be. And because each cow’s future is very likely to contain moments of intense pleasure, deep satisfaction, and true contentment, we have every reason not to deprive the being of its future. We know the cows have these lives simply because we *see* it. We see happiness, for example, when a calf hears its mother’s call. We see relaxation, for example, when a cow realizes a horse-and-rider are not going to disturb it.

If we find this idea hard to digest it may be because we are inveterate story-tellers, always interested in investing lower level phenomena with higher level meanings. To help us resist these pleasures of over-narrativizing it will help to have some touchstones. Temple Grandin claims that people with autism spectrum disorders can help us to understand animal thinking. I think she’s right. A Morgan-acceptable reading of a cow’s mental states no more undermines its right to life than a Morgan-acceptable reading of a congenitally radically cognitively limited human being’s mental states undermines her right to life. Some humans lack the ability to read minds, yes, but they have memories and desires, beliefs and interests—however limited in time and scope these states may be. And they have full moral standing in spite of their limitations.

Consider, for example, just one such case. Brooke Greenberg (1993—2013) at age 20 had the body of a 7-month old and the mental acuity of an 11-month old (Walker et al. 2009). She had a unique condition in which she did not seem to age, named by one doctor “Syndrome X.” She demonstrated object constancy—looking expectantly to the left side of a blockade when a moving object approached it from the right side—and she understood causal relations, attending a school for disabled children. She enjoyed watching television and playing in her baby swing (Bethge 2010). She could scoot across a wooden floor on her bottom and respond appropriately to the appearance of her parents and siblings, with whom she had close attachments.

Brooke will resist and refuse activities that don’t appeal to her by vocalizing her displeasure, not with words, but with sounds typical of an infant. ‘She makes it known what she likes and what she doesn’t like,’ sister Emily said (Brown 2009).

Brooke, we read, was generally relaxed in the presence of people she trusted and expressed pleasure in seeing their faces. She could reach for objects within her grasp, was able to register emotional reactions in others and could respond appropriately to mother’s approval and encouragement. She expressed affection, pleasure, desire, fear, and anger. She could occasionally recognize a few words and follow certain instructions. She could gesture to indicate a desired object.

But Brooke could not speak or form words into phrases. She had no grammar, much less story-telling or story–following ability. She could not feed herself, having to be fed through a tube, a process that took ten hours each day. She tended to act on impulse, was sometimes overly-sensitive and easily startled. Occasionally she would exhibit a capacity to try to reach a state of psychological equilibrium, such as reaching for a favorite toy when upset. And yet it does not seem appropriate to say that she acted on the basis of moral reasons, exercised conscious control over her beliefs, or understood that others had minds of their own. She did not seem aware of herself as a continuing psychological presence. She did not seem to form multi-year narrative connections between her goals for the future and her achievements in the past.

In a Youtube video, a sister explains that Brooke enjoyed shopping with her mother and that the two had similar tastes in fashion. In light of the report, one might explain Brooke’s behavior in the following way:

Brooke Greenberg studied the choices as her Mom held up two dresses. Brooke picked the one that looked more fashionable to her. Mom knew Brooke could tell that Mom also approved by the grin on Brooke’s face.

As we looked carefully at the specific qualities of bovine contentment, let us look now at Brooke’s mental state. As she grins at her mother she is not in ecstasy; there is no freezing or startle. Nor is her state one of automaticity; she is not acting on autopilot, as it were. Rather, she is paying attention to a novel object, the two dresses her mother displays for her. There is what we are calling a lyrical quality of experience here, a non-narrative positive mood associated with liking her surroundings, wanting to proceed in habitual fashion, and learning that shapes entering her visual field are a delight rather than a concern. We might describe Brooke’s mental state as child-like contentment. Such contentment is a very good thing. It may not have extended temporal horizons reaching forward into next week or backward into last month. But it is a good state nonetheless, and it is good even if commonplace and ubiquitous, even if it does not involve higher level propositional attitudes about others’ beliefs. Even though Brooke is unable to articulate what the state means to herself, it is a state to be respected. Lyrical contentment is, as we have noted, undervalued. There are no impediments to our enjoying Brooke Greenberg’s happiness with her.

But now we might ask whether there is a simpler explanation of Brooke’s behavior, for the most parsimonious explanation will be at the lowest level possible psychologically. With this end in mind, compare the two paragraphs in Fig. 2.

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Could Brooke have understood her mother’s intentions? To do so, she would have had to consider the context of her mother’s behavior. She would have to have been thinking, for example, about her mother’s reasons for picking the two objects Mother had picked or, perhaps, at least about the causes of Mother’s moving Mother’s eyes in the way she was moving them or, if not that, then Mother’s view about whether Brooke ought to respond to Mother. Brooke would have to infer the causes of her mother’s behaving in the way Mom was behaving in order to assess the probabilities that Mom’s mood might suddenly change and her designs toward Brooke become less familiar. For these sorts of mental activities are what we do when we interpret another’s intentions. We interpret the other’s movements to be motivated by their beliefs and desires. To be reading her mother’s mind, Brooke would at least have to be inferring some of Mother’s cognitive and conative states. For if she were not thinking about Mom’s beliefs and desires, Brooke could not react to Mom’s hope that Brooke would like one of the dresses.

An intention is an attempt, as we have seen, to fulfill a desire by acting on a hypothesis to achieve a goal. To read a woman’s intentions, an observer must be thinking at a minimum about what the woman is seeing or wanting to do, what options the woman thinks are available to her to achieve her ends, and what reasons the woman acts on when she selects her course of action. Was Brooke thinking *that*? Unlikely.

As we have seen, Morgan’s canon instructs us to prefer first-order explanations in terms of operant conditioning or associative learning to second-order explanations. In the case of Brooke’s behavior, a lower-order explanation is available. The second paragraph, B, provides that explanation. It is the description we ought to prefer.

Severely congenitally cognitively limited humans may be sentient, social, form hierarchies, have basic emotions, and communicate simple concepts (“Back off!” “Come here,” “play?”) with blunted vocal signals, posturings, and behaviors. But they lack syntax, abstraction, self-consciousness, and theory of mind, the things necessary to study, to read intentions and to make inferences about others’ psychological states. To understand, explain, and predict the behavior of such humans, we do not need to attribute to them the ability to express propositional attitudes or have an autobiographical life.

If I am right, Brooke had simple and dull perceptions, sensations, pains, pleasures, learned beliefs and instinctual desires which felt *the same* to her as they do to those of us who can report on our experiences. The trouble is that those of us who can report have difficulty focusing on the lyrical—the simple and dull—because we are inveterate story-tellers driven to embed the low-level in the high-level. One reason to think these states felt the same to Brooke as they do to us is that the feelings likely were processed in the same parts of our respective brains: the aforementioned basal ganglia, nucleus accumbens, and so on.

Brooke apparently did not have the feelings of executive control over herself, feelings that reporting humans express in abstract representations such as autobiographies. The feelings of freedom and of deciding on what sort of person to make oneself into come from transcending the present moment in mental time travel or extending one’s spatial perspective beyond what is visible. There is no indication that Brooke had such feelings. In sum, when Brooke’s behaviors conveyed emotions, beliefs, or desires, however primitive, her mental states very probably felt to her as those same mental states feel to us—minus, of course, the wider stories that we then reflectively impose on, or construct out of, the simpler states. In fact, Brooke’s emotions may have been more intense, more pure, than ours, because her experiences were not overshadowed by workloads going on at the “higher” levels. Brooke’s brain circuits could be completely devoted to “lyrical,” non-narrative, experience. “In the moment,” as it were, her feelings were unencumbered by the intellectual compulsions we feel. She had no need to abstract away from her present moment, to embed it into a larger narrative structure, or to analyze or generalize its meaning.

A Morgan-acceptable reading of Ms. Greenberg’s mental states may deflate higher order interpretations, but it does not call into question her moral rights. For those rights—to life, freedom of movement, and satisfaction of preferences—are guaranteed by her having an internal subjective life of her own. She may lack the ability to read minds, yes, but no matter how truncated her life may be when compared to other humans, her future contains moments of pleasure and the satisfaction of desires. If these goods are limited in time and scope, so be it. She is entitled, nonetheless, to be protected from anyone who would deprive her of them without good reason. We know this simply because we see, and see immediately, the happiness she gets from the grin on her mother’s face.

5. Conclusion

I have compared a human being to a cow. One is well advised to move deliberately in these waters. To speak about animals and mentally handicapped people in the same breath will strike many as insensitive at best, and as morally outrageous to some. However, I am convinced that speaking in this way is necessary to clarify the sort of value possessed by so-called food animals.

When ignorance of facts by individuals in dominant cultures leads to widespread animal suffering, imaginative strategies are necessary to nurture empathy and stimulate the moral imagination. Artists such as Cormac McCarthy can help, and they can help more than moral philosophers to get us to take seriously the possibility of animal rights. In an 1857 letter to A.R. Wallace, Darwin praises those engaged in “speculation,” writing that without imagination “there is no good & original observation” (Darwin 1857). Speculating about human and animal affairs is the specialty of the novelist, a fact animal activists may note.

However, speculations about animals’ mental states must ultimately be assessed by the empirical sciences. It appears that there is very little information in the bovine sciences to suggest that the cattle we raise for slaughter are not subjects of lives. The contemporary sciences seem to call for a revolution in our conception of at least some other species.

The contemporary philosophical community does not disagree. While ethicists continue to debate the soundness of the argument from overlapping species, many have concluded that a revolution in our treatment of other animals is necessary. While Frederick Douglass once had his value assessed by observers who compared him to cows and sheep, we can be grateful that no fair-minded person today would think this a plausible comparison. And now as the time comes to turn our attention to the worth of the cows and sheep, we could do worse than to listen to the most creative writers among us.

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Notes

1. I first ran into the argument here:

   “Animals, it is true, lack many of the abilities humans possess. They can't read, do higher mathematics, build a bookcase or make *baba ghanoush.*Neither can many human beings, however, and yet we don't (and shouldn't) say that they (these humans) therefore have less inherent value, less of a right to be treated with respect, than do others. … we are each of us the experiencing subject of a life, a conscious creature having an individual welfare that has importance to us whatever our usefulness to others. We want and prefer things, believe and feel things, recall and expect things. And all these dimensions of our life, including our pleasure and pain, our enjoyment and suffering, our satisfaction and frustration, our continued existence or our untimely death - all make a difference to the quality of our life as lived, as experienced, by us as individuals. As the same is true of those animals that concern us (the ones that are eaten and trapped, for example), they too must be viewed as the experiencing subjects of a life, with inherent value of their own” (Regan 1983). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Excerpts from “Golden Retrievals” [10 l.] from SWEET MACHINE by MARK DOTY. Copyright © 1998 by Mark Doty. Reprinted by permission of Harper Collins Publishers. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This paragraph appears in slightly different form in (Comstock and Bauer 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. (Morgan 1894, p. 53) quoted in (Karin-D’Arcy 2005, 179). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)