

1 | <AT>Not Alone on the Third Plateau

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5 | <TXT>It is of course essential to disclose passively accepted beliefs that inhabit and shape the  
6 | roots and edges of American philosophy if the scope of our tradition is to continue to evolve to  
7 | meet situations that seldom fit neatly into inherited categories. Our dialogue with Roger Fouts is  
8 | an occasion for supplementing and correcting uncritical perpetuation of narrowly (vs. broadly)  
9 | humanistic intellectual habits. His lecture is also an occasion for confronting complex issues of  
10 | how best to comport ourselves toward other species.

11 |         With notable exceptions such as McKenna and Light's Animal Pragmatism and the work  
12 | of Paul Thompson, scholars working in the American grain have taken a back seat to utilitarian  
13 | and Kantian philosophers in responding to the profound impact of human practices on other  
14 | species and rising concern about animal use and treatment. Due to this relative neglect, the  
15 | debate has been more anemic than it might have been. Yet despite this neglect, it is no longer  
16 | possible for philosophers to simply pre-suppose that our second-order desires simply outrank the  
17 | first-order needs of other animals. Despite the troublesome assumption of utilitarians and  
18 | Kantians that there is a single right way to reason about morals and a single uppermost factor in  
19 | moral situations, Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and others have highlighted that our prejudices  
20 | toward other animals are premised on a metaphysical or ethical caste system, not ethical  
21 | reflection.

22 |         Fouts's work has found its way into many of my own courses, ranging from

1 environmental ethics to introductory philosophy. At first blush this may appear something of a  
2 stretch. To see the philosophical fit, consider the oft-quoted dictum stemming from Claude  
3 Lévi-Strauss's work on totemism: animals are good not only to eat (bonnes à manger), but to  
4 think with (bonnes à penser). This phrasing obviously lacks universal appeal, but it is true that  
5 the study of animals has a broad humanistic bearing on how we understand ourselves and on  
6 what policies we will endorse in relation to nonhuman nature. Revealingly, the subtitle of the  
7 first edition of Fouts's book Next of Kin was "What Chimpanzees Have Taught Me About Who  
8 We Are." Attention to other animals can disclose aspects of culture that implicate abiding human  
9 interests. But these aspects of culture remain inconspicuous if we confine scholarly attention  
10 solely to humans.

11 We are, for example, mostly unaware of the customs that possess us, and as Dewey  
12 observes, this makes it difficult to intelligently evaluate and reconstruct customs in light of  
13 circumstances. Instead, the tendency is to champion routine customs in blind conformity or to  
14 dismiss them in reactionary defiance. This aptly characterizes several decades of academic  
15 discourse about the appropriate relationship between humans and other animals. Fouts's work on  
16 chimpanzee and human communication is in this respect richly humanistic, as it enables us to  
17 own and appraise social habits.

18 The persistent attempt in ethics to exclude nonhumans from moral consideration has lost  
19 its intellectual credibility, although prevailing intellectual habits still give a bye to dismissive  
20 attitudes. Shining Fouts's spotlight on the classical pragmatist tradition, one would naturally  
21 assume that the Darwinian continuity model elaborated in classical pragmatism via Peircean  
22 synechism would sparkle on the subject of human-animal continuity. It arguably does shine to

1 some degree in Peirce (see Anderson), and Dewey throughout his mature philosophy strives “to  
2 connect the higher and ideal things of experience with basic vital roots” (Art Aas Experience; 26).  
3 In the first chapter of Art Aas Experience, for example, Dewey celebrates with verve, our  
4 continuity with animals. He writes:

5 <EXT>To grasp the sources of esthetic experience it is, therefore, necessary to have recourse to  
6 animal life below [sic] the human scale. The activities of the fox, the dog, and the thrush may at  
7 least stand as reminders and symbols of that unity of experience which we so fractionize when  
8 work is labor, and thought withdraws us from the world. The live animal is fully present, all  
9 there, in all of its actions: in its wary glances, its sharp sniffings, its abrupt cocking of ears. All  
10 senses are equally on the qui vive. (24)

11 <TXT>The classical pragmatists took our shared ancestry with nonhumans seriously.  
12 “Human,” after Darwin, is an adjective for our specific animal nature, not the pinnacle of a  
13 hierarchy of final causes or something sui generis. Yet Dewey is obliged both by his 1920s  
14 audience and his own intellectual habits to worry that the principal philosophical objection to  
15 such synechism will be degradation of ideals, “betrayal of their nature and denial of their value”  
16 (Art Aas Experience; 26). Experience and Nature and Art as Experience can be read as Dewey’s  
17 efforts to demonstrate that Darwinian continuity implies no such betrayal. As John Herman  
18 Randall wisely observed, enlightenment proceeds slowly and in spots. Yet many among today’s  
19 philosophical audience may share a concern opposite Dewey’s, namely that we risk betrayal of  
20 the nature and denial of the value of the more-than-human world when we fail to celebrate  
21 continuity. Dewey could not have anticipated a post-Earth Day philosophical audience informed  
22 by novel fields such as environmental ethics and animal ethics.

1 |       <EXT>Larry Hickman argues that, for Dewey,

2 |       <EXT>-the principal difference between human beings and the rest of nature is not that there is  
3 | no communication elsewhere than within human communities, but that human beings are unique  
4 | in their ability to exercise control over their own habit-formation and therefore to alter in  
5 | deliberate ways both the course of their own evolution and the evolution of their environing  
6 | conditions. (51)

7 |       <TXT>Hickman’s distinction is plausible and defensible. Yet in his principal published works  
8 | Dewey does deny communication and all related capacities to other animals. (For a carefully  
9 | cited analysis, see Appendix 1-1 and 1-2 of Fesmire. These appendices were distributed as  
10 | handouts for the 2011 Coss Dialogues session.<sup>1</sup>) Despite his synechism, with regard to animals,  
11 | Dewey holds views that are today as empirically obsolete as Ptolemaic astronomy or Aristotelian  
12 | biology. He echoes the prejudice of his contemporaries that all nonhuman animals act out of  
13 | blind habit. Even classical conditioning (~~aka-k.a.~~ the reflex arc, from which Dewey liberated  
14 | humans but not other animals) is recognized in any introductory psychology text today as  
15 | involving some cognitive processing. His view that “scientific men are under definite obligation  
16 | to experiment upon animals” (“The Ethics of Animal Experimentation;” 98-101)  
17 | was also typical of the 1920s, as was the still-common high/low evolutionary ladder metaphor.

18 |       Moreover, Dewey’s approach to defining some key cognitive concepts is suspect. As the  
19 | primatologist Frans de Waal observes, we have historically defined terms like communication or  
20 | culture in a way that excludes other animals in advance of empirical scrutiny. For example, if we  
21 | derive the meaning of “flying” from a songbird’s flight, then chickens cannot fly (de Waal). Yet  
22 | chickens do take wing and, to the annoyance of farmers, end up perched in tree limbs.

1           The beauty of Dewey’s naturalistic empiricism is that his own perspectives must be run  
2 through its threshing machine:  
3 <EXT>Only chaff goes, though perhaps the chaff had once been treasured. An empirical method  
4 which remains true to nature does not “save”; it is not an insurance device nor a mechanical  
5 antiseptic. But it inspires the mind with courage and vitality to create new ideals and values in  
6 | the face of the perplexities of a new world. (Experience and Nature, 4):

7           <TXT>On Dewey’s groundmap of generic traits of existence (i.e., his metaphysics),  
8 | humans live alone on a third plateau (Experience and Nature, 208), a field of interaction that  
9 includes all mental life and all individuating factors.<sup>2</sup> Careful analysis of Dewey’s view of  
10 animals across his published work (see Fesmire) reveals residual traces of philosophies he  
11 elsewhere discredited, such as an echo of the hierarchical great-chain-of-being (absent Aristotle’s  
12 teleological anthropocentrism) as well as a vestige of Cartesianism in which animals are  
13 mindless automatons. For Dewey the body is in the mind, but only human bodies have minds.  
14 Moreover, when demarcating the “human plane,” Dewey’s picture surprisingly recalls planes of  
15 freedom and necessity in Kant’s metaphysics of morals. To this degree, Dewey’s is a Darwinian  
16 landscape that retains some Cartesian features. The irony of all of this from the pen of the most  
17 anti-Cartesian and radically empirical of philosophers is itself a powerful reminder of the  
18 inescapably cultural and historical nature of inquiry. Scholars of classical pragmatism are only  
19 beginning to look out of the corner of their eyes to scrutinize this part of Dewey’s horizon.

20           Nonetheless, despite his explicit utterances about animals, Dewey’s work is incredibly  
21 | congenial to Professor Fouts’s s work on animal cognition, in part because Dewey prioritizes the  
22 fullness of embodied experience over narrowly conceptual experience and thereby perceives a

1 fundamentally relational world. Dewey had gotten over the things that many mainstream analytic  
2 philosophies still have not gotten over, such as the assumption that knowing is the essential  
3 activity of the human being, or that meaning is restricted to truth-conditions and that concepts do  
4 no more than pick out objects (see Johnson).

5         A focus on imagination is perhaps the best way to reveal what is redemptive in Dewey's  
6 theory of the animal plane. He was calling us to establish social and material conditions that  
7 liberate our energies from enslavement to mechanized habits, toward a life of critical inquiry,  
8 social responsiveness, emotional engagement, and artful consummations. By casting animals in  
9 | their circa--1920s role of unintelligent and unemotional brutes driven by the inertia of habit, he  
10 | attempts to throw into relief the human potential: Aristotle's rational animal becomes Dewey's  
11 imaginative animal.

12         There is no single, self-evident moral upshot to rooting out Dewey's prejudices regarding  
13 | animal cognition in light of the work of Professor Fouts and many others. It may suffice here  
14 | simply to conclude that we cannot logically exclude any form of cruelty or subjugation from our  
15 moral frameworks. This is no less true if our primary commitment is to ameliorate our own  
16 plight. If our treatment of those who are vulnerable and dependent may be taken as a test for our  
17 values, then there is, to paraphrase Steinbeck, a failure that topples all our success exhibited by  
18 much of our treatment of disadvantaged humans and animals. Expanding our sphere of care to  
19 include direct concern for other animals can supplement, reinforce, and render more rationally  
20 coherent our exertions to deal with the atrocities humans commit against each other.

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22 <N1HD>Notes

1 <NTXT>1. I am grateful to Indiana University Press for permission to draw here from  
2 some material in “Dewey and Animal Ethics.” ([Fesmire](#)).

3 2. Dewey distinguishes the human plane, the animal plane, and the vegetative plane. All  
4 three “planes” or “plateaus” involve the “interaction of a living being with an environment” ([Art  
5 and Nature](#), 276). Operations of the “higher” include the “lower,” but not vice versa. Here,  
6 as with Peirce’s doctrine of synechism, there are no ontological barriers to continuity between  
7 human and other forms of life, although of course developmental constraints in the other  
8 direction exist. For Dewey, these are descriptive categories for “fields of interaction,” so unlike  
9 Aristotle’s parallel categories (thinking, appetitive/sensitive, nutritive), they do not support a  
10 fundamental ontology, hierarchy of final causes, or fixed teleology of any sort. Thus he fully  
11 understands that this categorization is fallible and revisable in light of new evidence (such as that  
12 available today). He says of the categories: “They stick to empirical facts noting and denoting  
13 characteristic qualities and consequences peculiar to various levels of interaction” ([Experience  
14 and Nature](#), 208).

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<sup>A</sup> Please provide the date (year) of this essay.

<sup>B</sup> Add full page range for this essay.