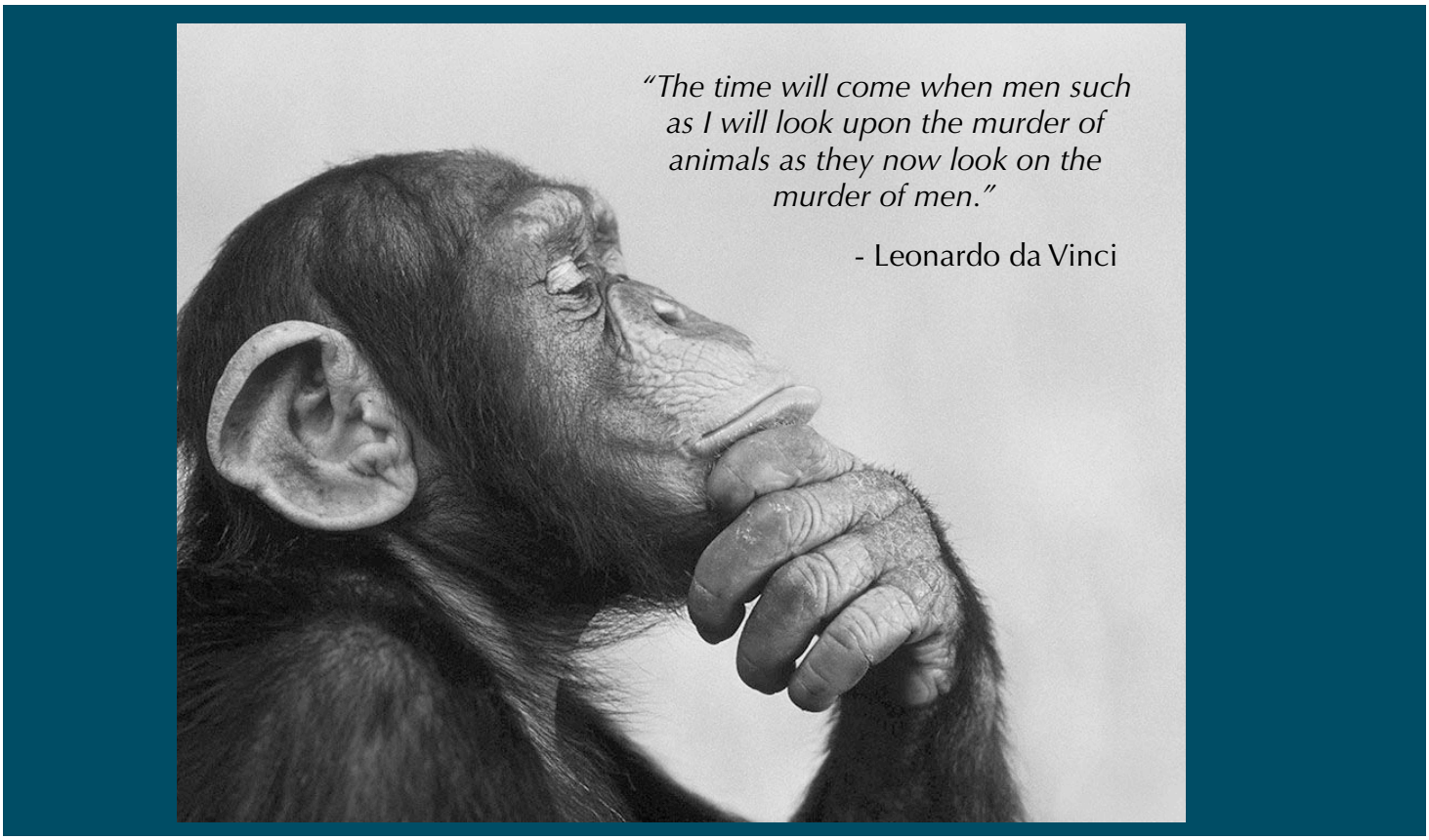
SUFFERING, EMPATHY, AND ECSTASY:



ANIMAL LIBERATION AS THE FURTHEST REACHES OF OUR MORAL EVOLUTION

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"A powerfully written work." —Dr. Peter Singer, Princeton University, author of *Animal Liberation*

According to historian Roderick Frazier Nash, environmental ethics is "arguably the most dramatic expansion of morality in human thought." I completely agree, but I would go even further and change "arguably" to "absolutely." That humans would grant ethical consideration to something other than another human is unparalleled in history, and it shows an evolution in morality that transcends anything known to this point. But as radical as it may first appear, granting ethical consideration to the physical life system supporting our own existence just makes logical sense. As we know from our growing ecological problems, if we don't rein in our behavior and expand our ethical circle we'll simply create the conditions for our own further suffering, and perhaps even extinction; and this is why ethics is best characterized as a self-imposed restraint on human behavior.

Now from this perspective environmental ethics can be seen in an entirely anthropocentric way, with arguments for conservation based solely on human self-

interest: if we don't change our behavior and the way we pollute and destroy our own world, then we will ultimately be harmed. And there is ample evidence to support this. For instance, in the year 2017 it was estimated that approximately nine million people died worldwide due to human-generated pollution. Based on this alone, it seems prudent and humane to begin extending ethical consideration to the natural world; it is in our best interest to do so, since we all breathe air, drink water, and eat food grown in soil.

But there's another form of environmental ethics not based on human self-interest, one that I will argue is the pinnacle of human morality. It's a view of the world that has the possibility to not only save humanity from itself, but to also save billions of nonhuman beings in the process. It's an ethic that can be summed up in three words: "reverence for life." The renowned doctor-philosopher-theologian, Albert Schweitzer, coined these words in 1915. Its fundamental maxim is this: the importance I give to preserving my own life—*the* most precious thing I possess—I should also give to every other living being, human or otherwise. Admittedly, it's a radical viewpoint, but one that is viable nonetheless.

With reverence for life, we encounter an ethic that goes beyond any form of human self-interest. Here, animals and the rest of nature are not cared for because this care greatly aids in our moral or physical development—though it does both of these. Nor are animals and nature cared for because they serve some further utilitarian purpose for us. Rather, all life is respected and preserved simply because every life form has its own intrinsic worth to itself and to its world, beyond any value we can attribute to it.

What makes this ethic so compelling is the simple fact that, when embraced, it encompasses and supersedes every other ethic or movement for rights humans have known. For the person who makes reverence for life their own, it is impossible to view the life of any other human, or even another species, as worthless or simply there for us to use without necessity. It subsumes all other ethics into itself and denounces every bias against an "other": color of skin, gender, sexual orientation, religion, tribe, culture, and even species—these are all rejected as grounds for oppression or exploitation. Schweitzer highlights its radical nature when he says that "a man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, that of plants and animals as that of his fellow men. . ." Though reverence for life comes from something much deeper than human self-interest, we will see that it nonetheless brings positive environmental, humanitarian, and health effects —things that do actually end up benefiting us on an individual and societal level.

Reverence for life also has an inherent self-transcendent, or spiritual, quality. Because I identify myself, first and foremost, as a living being related to all other living beings—regardless of species—I see myself as an integral part of the universal ground of all life. This is a profound departure from the commonly held view that humans are truly the only ultimately worthy species on the planet. As such, reverence for life is more than just the following of some doctrine or concept; rather, it is best understood as a realization. We can understand it analogically in the way that Buddhism speaks of *satori*, which is an awakening to life's true nature. And like all the great spiritual wisdom traditions, reverence for life emphasizes a view of reality in which all life is connected in all dimensions of existence. The great conservationist, John Muir, intimated this in his spiritual naturalism: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."

But before we get to the essential reasons why one would embrace this ethic, as well as where it could lead us in the future, it's important to take a short look back at the history of the struggle for basic human rights. As we do this, we'll understand why nonhuman animals are the last group of living beings to be brought into the ethical circle of humanity.

The Nature of Ethics: The Need for Restraint and the Granting of Rights

In the hearts and minds of any oppressed group the moral trajectory is slow moving. Think of how many years it took for people to speak up for, and achieve, some liberation for groups such as African slaves, women, gays, children who were forced to labor in factories, Native Americans, blacks in modern America and, now, nature herself. And still, these rights often only exist quasi-symbolically; institutional and ideological oppression continue to keep these groups down in significant ways. Children are still forced to labor in many countries, gays are still discriminated against, women still suffer physical and economic exploitation, Native Americans still remain isolated and marginalized, and on and on.

And this points to a fundamental problem we see continually in the struggle for rights: the psychological, economic, and physical benefits held by any oppressing group or person are not easily surrendered when new groups demand a consideration of their rights. For instance, imagine the response you would have gotten from a white, property-owning male during the establishment of the United States if you'd told him that women, blacks, and gays would eventually have, in theory at least, equal rights with them. It would have been unthinkable, and certainly not desirable. And this exposes why, when their power is under threat, the dominating group does not care how its personal desires negatively affect the masses underneath them.

So whether speaking of one group of humans dominating another race, or humans dominating another species, the outcome is always the same: the basic rights of one powerless group are ignored or overrun to satiate the desires of the oppressing group. With this in mind, Nash draws an apt connection between the domination of black slaves and the domination of nature: "The exploitation of almost four million blacks underlay the prosperity and luxury of Southern life in the same way that the exploitation of other species and of the environment underwrote and continues to underwrite American affluence."

In all biases against a race, sex, or species, the balance of power remains tilted in the favor of the oppressor; that is, until a sufficient number of sensitive people see that limits have been crossed and then speak up against the overindulgence of the dominating group. And it's this fact that led philosopher Tom Regan to rightly observe that "the animal rights movement is a part of the human rights movement." If there is any single group of oppressed sentient beings on the planet right now, it is surely animals. It's estimated that around 70 billion farmed animals are killed *each year*—and this does not even count the billions of sea creatures killed for food. That's about 10 times the entire human population killed *every year* for human consumption.

In addition to the immense suffering this entails, raising and then killing animals is also an incredibly wasteful way to feed ourselves. For instance, if everyone in just the United States reduced his or her meat consumption by 10%, there would be enough food for every person on the planet. As it is right now, we grow a vast amount of grain and then feed it to animals —grain that could be fed directly to humans. In addition to this waste of edible grain, it also takes almost 2,000 gallons of water to produce *one pound of beef*—the amount of water you'd save by not showering for about six months. So realizing that hunger could be eradicated just by slightly changing our eating habits, we begin to see the vital importance of questioning our food choices. And this exposes a clear link between animal liberation and humanitarianism. When we view an animal's concern for its own life as equally as we do our own, we not only save that animal from an unnecessary and painful death, we also save a hungry human from unnecessary suffering and potential death. With this in mind, I would argue that every human minority group that historically needed liberation from human oppression—and those who still need liberation—should be the most sympathetic to the plight of animals today.

Every fight to gain rights for a new group is fundamentally a struggle against limited worldviews. And the historical biases that lead to limited worldviews are many and varied: religious, economic, political,

ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, tribal, cultural or, in the case of animals, one's species. But as history shows, over time and often with great physical and ideological struggle, the oppressing group usually begins to feel empathy for the oppressed group, slowly sees them as members of their community, and then grants them some rights. This may take years, or it may take decades. It may come with a slow ideological shift, or through bloody revolution. We saw this during the Civil Rights movement in marches against white oppression. During this time, members of the African American community were forced to choose between obeying unjust laws, or breaking these laws due to their dehumanizing effects. Modern day animal liberationists are in the same position. They can sit by and watch billions of animals be unnecessarily tortured and killed in animal laboratories and factory farms—both of which are legally sanctioned by society—or they can break what they see as unjust laws in an effort to liberate their fellow living beings from unjust tyranny. This dilemma is summed up in the maxim "what is legal is not always right, and what is right is not always legal."

It's important to remember that in every instance throughout history when new rights were granted, it took not only the oppressed group speaking up for its rights—it also took a significant number of sympathetic people from other powerful groups speaking up in their defense. Whites marching for civil rights alongside blacks in the American South are an example of this. And today, this fact underscores why animals are the last group of sentient beings to have a significant recognition of their rights: they cannot speak for themselves and thus rely entirely on us. That so many humans are now demanding an end to the unnecessary cruelty toward *all* animals and, furthermore, seeking to grant them equal consideration in their right to life and liberty, is an astounding development in the history of human morality. For example, in the United States alone the growth of veganism has been around 600% in just the last three years.

What's clear today is that our moral evolution toward nature and nonhuman animals is quickly expanding. But the origin of this humane movement really began several centuries ago. So to help understand this radical ethical extension to other forms of life, it's useful to go back to the early settlement of America.

Some Scientific, Political, and Philosophical Origins of Animal Liberation

"He who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men. We can judge the heart of a man by his treatment of animals."

- Immanuel Kant

Quite surprisingly, it was in the West where the first overt legal defense for the humane treatment of animals emerged. I say it is surprising because it is typically in Eastern philosophies and religions that we see a wider embrace of reverence for life. In the West, many people speak of life as sacred, but life is here often qualified as *human life*. In the East, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism expand the concept of life to include every living organism (though, oddly, this doesn't always mean those adhering to an Eastern perspective are vegetarian). Nonetheless, the ideas of reincarnation, respect for all life, and the interconnectedness of all beings, keep large numbers of people in the East advocating for reducing or eliminating suffering in nonhuman animals.

What the West had going for it was the political theory of "natural rights," which originated in the thought of 17th century English philosopher and political theorist, John Locke. Natural rights is the idea that every person, by virtue of their very existence, has a natural or political right to respect and an unfettered existence, i.e., the right to liberty, free expression, and life itself. Of course, initially this idea just applied to humans. Nonetheless, natural rights were significant because they were the first political articulation of the idea that liberty and the freedom from coercion or domination are fundamental to a good society.

But also accompanying this nascent understanding of natural rights was the right to revolt if governments acted in hostile ways toward its citizenry. So whether fighting the ruling monarchs in old England or challenging the hegemonic

corporations in modern day capitalist economies, natural rights philosophy is still there to challenge tyranny and call into question the moral legitimacy of any dominating power that might overrun the rights of a person or community. As we'll see later, the liberal tradition of natural rights eventually helped lay the philosophical groundwork for an extension of moral consideration to the natural world. But the very specific application of natural rights philosophy to animals came around the middle of the 17th century.

In 1641, just around the time the French mathematician and philosopher, Rene Descartes, was arguing that animals were irrational, unfeeling "machines," across the Atlantic another opposing sentiment was being expressed in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Nathaniel Ward, a lawyer and minister, was asked to prepare the first legal statutes for the new colony. Though only applying to domestic animals, Ward proclaimed that "no man shall exercise any Tirranny or Crueltie towards any bruite Creature which are usuallie kept for man's use." Obviously not taking the immediate step toward animal rights, it was still one of the first significant expressions of the idea that animals were due at least some moral consideration. In America, this sentiment was then advanced by the early humanitarians, though they were mostly utilitarian and human-centered in their concerns regarding animals. For them, cruelty to animals was wrong because it had a corrosive effect on the human soul and morality, not because it inherently violated the rights or interests of animals.

In direct opposition to Descartes, Locke argued that animals could indeed suffer and, therefore, they deserved some ethical consideration. Again, it was not because animals necessarily had rights but, rather, that inflicting unnecessary cruelty and suffering on animals was morally harmful to the animals and to humans. The fundamental belief was that cruelty to animals likely indicated someone would also be cruel to a fellow human, and this had a negative moral effect on society as a whole. It was an astute observation by Locke, since today we know from many empirical studies that young people who torture or exhibit senseless cruelty to animals have a statistically higher chance of cruelty or violence toward other humans in their adulthood.

Because the humanitarians began their concerns with the animals closest to us, specifically domesticated animals and those used for experimentation, it's not surprising that the birth of medical science in the 17th century, with its heavy reliance on vivisection, brought out some of the most vehement protests. Buoyed by Descartes idea that animals had no feelings and were just automatons, the early vivisectionists engaged in brutal scientific research on animals—subjecting them to experimentation without any anesthesia. Because Descartes' dualistic views placed humans on a level entirely separate from animals, it was easy for the experimenters to justify this cruelty; to them, animals were simply objects who could feel no more pain than a tree could. From modern scientific research, we know now how incredibly wrong this assumption was. But during these early years of science, a lack of understanding about basic physiology only increased the sense of separateness between humans and animals. As a result, the groundwork was laid for a moral insensitivity that allowed for the ruthless domination of both nature and animals.

But over time the humanitarian movement grew in both England and the newly formed American colonies, and one of the most steadfast intellectuals arguing for extending rights to animals was the English philosopher and jurist Jeremy Bentham. Building on Locke and Ward before him, Bentham reframed the foundations of animal ethics by proclaiming that animals did, in fact, have rights. As a utilitarian philosopher, he based his ethics on the "greatest happiness principle," arguing that the virtue of an act issued quite simply from whether or not it caused pain or pleasure—two primary experiences all sentient beings share in common. According to Bentham, as feeling beings, animals had every right to happiness, as well as protection from pain and suffering. Bentham even tied his rationale for animal rights to the liberation of slaves, hoping for a future day when humans did not discriminate in their concerns for other beings based on the color of their skin or "the number of their legs."

In one of the most perennial statements in the history of moral philosophy, Bentham boiled down his ultimate foundation for our stance toward animals into three questions: *"The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk?, but Can they suffer?"* Here, rather than laying the basis for our ethical considerations on more complex faculties and experiences like language, rational intelligence, or whether or not a being had a soul (something, admittedly, we can't define or know anyway), Bentham asked us to instead locate our ethical concerns on the more basic experience of pain and suffering—something all sentient beings share in.

By shifting our ethical foundations to experiences as primary as pain and suffering, Bentham also caused people to further question the inner states of animal consciousness, their emotions, and their sense experience—particularly the ways they overlapped our own. In contrast to Descartes, Bentham thought most sensitive people could see with their own eyes that animals did, in fact, suffer, even if the depth and quality of that suffering was still out of our cognitive reach. Eventually, it was out of these vast uncertainties regarding the nature of nonhuman animal consciousness that a significant new branch of scientific study was birthed in America in the 1970s, cognitive ethology—the study of conscious awareness and intentionality in animals.

Darwin and Morality

Many of cognitive ethology's scientific insights into nonhuman animal consciousness were first intimated in Charles Darwin's early studies of animal behavior—studies that often showed the existence of what we might term nonhuman animal "morality." And this is where the significance of Darwin comes into play regarding our ethical views toward other animals. As we know, people who couldn't reconcile their religious beliefs with the emerging scientific facts of the time— "religious literalists," we might call them—were not happy with Darwin's theories. His research into the evolutionary relationship between primates and humans brought humanity back down into the realm of nature, something that seemingly undercut our uniqueness and spiritual significance. By unveiling the evolutionary unity of life, Darwin established a line of continuity between *all* animals, humans included. This was, and still is, a significant development in our moral consideration of nonhuman animals, especially in light of facts such as this: humans and chimpanzees share about 99% of their DNA with each other.

So while Descartes and theology were busy denying the existence of a soul in nonhuman animals, and thus elevating humans to a place of vast superiority, Darwin was moving in the other direction and making biological and evolutionary connections between humans and other animals. Based on his studies of animal-human similarities, as well as his empirical observations of cooperative, or "mutual aid," behavior in other species, Darwin drew some striking ethical conclusions. He noticed the increasing survival value of animals working together towards a common purpose, and how such behavior was "selected for," i.e., how it assisted in a species' survival and evolution. Renowned biologist E.O. Wilson summed this up quite simply: "Within groups, selfish individuals beat altruistic individuals, but groups of altruists beat groups of selfish individuals." In other words, those who work together in a group toward a common purpose or goal will ultimately dominate and evolve beyond those who seek out their own limited self-interest. This seemingly contradicts the misunderstood phrase "survival of the fittest," which was coined not by Darwin, but by philosopher Herbert Spencer. Darwin instead used the phrase "natural selection," which had more to do with how well an organism fit into its environment (like a puzzle piece), than how physically "fit" it was or how well it dominated those in its immediate environment.

Related to this, Darwin also observed a strong corollary between animal social behavior and the origin of human morality. For example, it seems the way early humans evolved morally was by practicing what we might call a "virtue" in front of their group, and then that virtue was emulated by other adults and passed on to children—much the way some nonhuman animals do. Today, this process still forms the fundamental basis for our approach to education and parenting. And it was through this

social process that Darwin hoped human society would continue to advance in its sympathies, widening its ethical sensibilities to eventually include "all sentient beings" in its moral code. In a striking personal moment in his classic work *The Descent of Man*, Darwin made his sentiments clear regarding human treatment of other animals: "Everyone has heard of the dog suffering under vivisection, who licked the hand of the operator; this man, unless he had a heart of stone, must have felt remorse to the last hour of his life."

Darwin wrote this during a time when such animal experiments were done without anesthesia—a thought that should make any empathetic person shudder. If alive today, he would take some consolation in the basic laws we have against such barbarous practices—though we're still far, far away from abandoning many cruel and unnecessary animal experiments. Even in the year 2018, people would be stunned to discover the types of horrific animal experiments still done in the name of "science." For instance, in the United States animal researchers are not required to give pain-relieving drugs to lab animals if these drugs would interfere with the conclusions of their experiment. In other words, if the point of the experiment is to in some way measure the pain or suffering of an animal, then so be it—regardless of how excruciating the psychological or physical pain and suffering is. Interestingly, the rationale for using animals in research all these years was that they were close enough to us anatomically and physiologically to render useful results, yet different enough from us that we felt morally immune from their suffering. These two assumptions are now under serious scientific and moral scrutiny, sometimes by the very researchers who experimented on them for years. With advanced scientific methods such as computer modeling, cell culturing, and many others, much of the cruel animal research being done today is increasingly seen as outdated and inaccurate.

One last significant element of Darwin's scientific theories is that, just like biological traits, morality can not only be passed down from one generation to another—morality can actually evolve and expand. But Darwin was also aware of the opposite: in the absence of intelligence, empathy, and humility, humanity can remain drunk with power and maintain its abusive and exploitative relationship with other humans and the rest of nature.

Religion, Philosophy, and a Sound Basis for Ethics

"The assumption that animals are without rights and the illusion that our treatment of them has no moral significance is a positively outrageous example of Western crudity and barbarity. Universal compassion is the only guarantee of morality."

- Arthur Schopenhauer

Looking back historically we can see some of the scientific, philosophical, and political theories that helped lay the groundwork for an expansion of our moral evolution. Many are based on the idea that life is an interrelated whole in which every individual holds physical/material, social, and therefore, ethical bonds to the rest of society and nature. As such, these theories make it possible to argue for defending the interests and lives of nonhuman animals, because when we see life in a more expansive way we recognize that even other species can have their life, freedom, and happiness violated.

The most radical extension of these ethical theories is, of course, reverence for life—the conviction that nonhuman animals and nature have an intrinsic worth beyond anything humans can attribute to them. For many people, this adds a spiritual/religious grounding to the other scientific, philosophical, and political reasons for granting moral consideration to animals; all existence is in some sense sacred and ultimately worthy. To desecrate or inflict needless suffering on the world's nonhuman inhabitants is an affront to the Ground of Being, or God—however one defines that. Even a non-religious writer like Edward Abbey, most famous for his novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, a fictionalized and humorous defense of eco-sabotage, wrote that the "logical extension of the traditional Christian ethic" should transcend the "narrowly human to include the living creatures that share the planet with us." And in fact, we are seeing an evolution in this

direction within many churches today; as our concept of life deepens and expands, so too does our concern for all its manifestations, human and nonhuman alike. In short, the profanization of nonhuman life is finally becoming a religious issue on a wider scale.

But as we've seen throughout history, there have been a wide divergence of views on humanity's relationship to the planet and nonhuman animals. Some see only humans as having value and rights (anthropocentrism), while some see nature and animals having rights primarily in relation to human moral self-interest (humanitarianism). And then there is the Western religious view which sees nature and its nonhuman animals as given to humans to watch over and take care of, even as we use them for our own purposes (stewardship). The first, anthropocentric view translates into the absolutely unconstrained use of natural "resources" (nature) and animals, while the second, humanitarian view maintains that the dignity of humanity is upheld when we sense that cruelty to animals is bad not just for the animals but for human moral advancement, too.

The third, religious view poses the belief that humans are the only ultimately valuable species, but since God created all of material reality it is our duty to watch over and be respectful of nature and animals. Known as "stewardship," this view still relies heavily on the assumption of human superiority. Therefore, Nash frames the idea of stewardship as a "shallow," or "reform," version of environmentalism, as opposed to the more radical "deep ecology." Again making a connection to the historical oppression of slaves and women, shallow environmentalism (such as stewardship) can be seen as "just a more efficient form of exploitation and oppression," and can be likened to "feeding slaves well or to buying women new dresses while refusing them the right to vote." In stark contrast to this, the thrust behind animal liberation, reverence for life, and deep ecology is to replace "the entire exploitative system with one premised on the rights of the oppressed minority."

The dominant religious attitude toward animals in the West has, until recently, been typified by people like St. Thomas Aquinas, a 13th century Catholic priest. Aquinas thought that since animals had no soul, humans had no moral duties to them whatsoever. Religious thinkers like Aquinas used a literal reading of Genesis 1:26 to support the idea that all beings in nature were inferior in every way to humans ("Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground'). Never mind that four verses later Genesis essentially spells out the vegetarian diet God had prescribed for humanity ("And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food"). Among other things, this highlights the inherent difficulty of trying to use an ancient text like the Bible to fully address or understand every issue human society faces.

Aquinas went on to use the word "perfect" to describe humans and "imperfect" to describe any being that was not human; of course, this implied the imperfect (nonhuman animals) were there for the perfect to use in any way they saw fit. Contrast this with the view of 20th century existentialist philosopher and theologian, Paul Tillich, who not only turned anthropocentrism on its head by proclaiming the ontological importance of the inorganic dimension of existence—calling it the "preferred dimension"—because *all life* would perish without it. He then went further with a rebuke to religious thinkers like Aquinas, bestowing on animals a "moral perfection," due to the fact that they are essentially what they should be and are not prone to objectify and destroy themselves or their world—as humans, unfortunately, are.

And then there was St. Francis of Assisi, the 13th century Italian Catholic friar who died just as Aquinas was born. As a theological antipode to Aquinas, St. Francis was known to preach to animals, and he thought it was humanity's duty to respect and protect "our humble brethren, the animals." Again, this wide interpretation of the Bible by significant thinkers throughout

history—some championing anthropocentric notions, and some decrying them as an affront to God and the sacredness of nonhuman life—shows the challenge in relying solely on religious texts to inform our moral perspectives and obligations today.

In the realm of philosophy, Arthur Schopenhauer also rejected anthropocentrism by undercutting the moral importance of the very qualities we use to deny rights to animals—advanced reasoning and/or language. Heavily influenced by Buddhism, and very much in line with Jeremy Bentham, Schopenhauer believed that moral living demands compassion *for any being who can suffer*. For Schopenhauer, the will-to-live is a vital and universal urge, existing both in humans and other sentient forms of life; to destroy a being's will-to-live, its very life, is the worst harm we can inflict upon it. And from our own observation of the will-to-live in other nonhuman animals, we know the primacy of this fact. We see it at work, for instance, in the gazelle's desperate attempt to escape a lion; in a cow's flailing effort to escape slaughter; or when a lobster grasps for its life by the edge of a boiling pot. In all these cases, the urge for life preservation is as self-evident, palpable, and equal in intensity as it is for any human.

For this very reason, contemporary moral philosopher Peter Singer, who published the "bible" of animal rights in 1975, *Animal Liberation*, bases his theories on the premise that human and animal interests should count *equally*: just as a human values his or her own life and experiences, so too does a cow, pig, or dog. Whether or not these animals can think abstractly, or articulate their will-to-live through language like a human, is completely irrelevant. We know that many animals have a consciousness of their own lives (self-awareness); an expectation for a future; emotional lives characterized by empathy, sadness, boredom, and joy; deep ties to their kin; and, most importantly for our moral considerations, an ability to suffer both physically and psychologically. For Singer, these are the ultimate considerations that should grasp us when we contemplate our treatment of other animals, with a fundamental commitment to the principle that no being should have to suffer needlessly.

To further illustrate this key point regarding what we use as our moral yardstick, consider a scenario I laid out in a 2004 article in the British publication *Philosophy Now*. Imagine it's sometime in the near future and our government informs us that an alien species has come to our planet. Imagine also that the alien species is aggressive/violent, much more technologically advanced than us, and unable to communicate with us. Lacking any way to defend ourselves against their aggressions, and without the ability to express our protest against their violent behavior, we would soon become objects for them to use and abuse at their whim. The implications in this scenario regarding our use of nonhuman animals should be clear. In this situation we would sense that our rights and will-to-live were being threatened or denied by the aliens, regardless of how intelligent we may see ourselves, or whether or not we have a language to protest with against our treatment. The point is quite simply this: *something more is at work in the creation of ethical demands than intelligence, language, or reason*—all the things we expect of nonhuman animals in order to give them moral consideration. In spite of our advanced intelligence and ability to communicate in a complex way with other humans, we would still be defenseless against these aggressive aliens. In this dire situation, all that would be left in us is a deep sense that our right to life, our will-to-live, was being violated—something animals experience on a daily basis at the hands of their "aliens," namely, us.

Why You'll Take a Child to Pick Berries, but not to a Slaughterhouse

Whether looking at the extension of moral and legal rights to animals from the perspective of science, religion, politics, or philosophy, the most obvious argument for granting full rights is quite simple: *as a human being, the causing of suffering and death to any other nonhuman animal is absolutely unnecessary to living my life*. In fact, by attempting to not cause any suffering to animals I can attain moral, biological/health, and ecological benefits that far exceed those I could gain

from perhaps any other action in my life.

Granted, we must seek out food, habitation, and the other necessities of life, and in the process might cause some unintended harm to other beings. We may even take life unintentionally, such as when driving a car. These are inevitable aspects of our technological life, but they are ones we can still seek to mitigate whenever possible. Schweitzer sums this up well: "The farmer who has mowed down a thousand flowers in order to feed his cows must be careful on his way home not to strike the head off a single flower by the side of the road in idle amusement, for he thereby infringes the law of life without being under the pressure of necessity." Now, Schweitzer's ethic is a radical one that might seem drastic to many, but it does bring to light a major connection between animal rights and environmental ethics: to truly live an ethical life, we have to seriously question the technologies we create and the impact they have on other nonhuman beings.

As we know, technological civilization and all the resources it requires have made lessening our impact on other life forms increasingly difficult. Nonetheless, one thing we know with absolute certainty is that in spite of our use of technology, we still largely have the choice everyday to either cause harm, or refrain from causing harm, to other beings. And in this regard there is one thing that causes more needless pain and suffering than any other: human dietary choices. What's particularly interesting about the issue of human diet is how medical research increasingly shows that the more we remove animal flesh and animal food products (eggs, cheese, milk, etc.) from our diet, the healthier we get and the longer we'll most likely live. This, of course, leads to a really basic question: if we were meant to eat other animals, then why is it that humans attain optimal health when they switch from a meat-based diet to a plant-based one? And furthermore, when we look at human anatomy and realize that our teeth and bowels are not that of a carnivore, and that we're the only species on the planet that has to cook meat to make it fully digestible, we have to wonder how the practice of meat eating has not come under closer scrutiny amongst the general population. Part of the reason, I submit, is that it's an uncomfortable topic.

Like politics and religion, discussions about meat eating elicit awkward reactions from people. I know this personally because whenever I tell people I'm vegan, I almost invariably get the response: "Well, I don't eat much meat," or the perennial favorite "Where do you get your protein?" Of course, we now know that plants have an abundance of protein for human health—and a more easily digestible and healthier one at that. All we have to do is look at a horse, elephant, or gorilla to know that you can amass significant musculature eating nothing but plants. But this issue of protein aside, why would so many people feel the need to tell me they don't eat a lot of meat? There's only one word to explain it: guilt.

When you show images of animals being beaten or killed in a slaughterhouse, most humans will pull back in revulsion and not want to see it. But, somewhat surprisingly, they'll still eat meat. Why? Because they aren't doing the killing themselves and it's therefore convenient and concealed—the blood literally is not on their hands. But put a knife in the everyday meat eater's hand and ask them to slit the throat of a cow or a pig, and I'd be willing to bet that more than 95% of people would be unable to do the task. Would you? This stark fact exposes why we'll take children to pick berries, but not to a slaughterhouse.

Within us is an innate, involuntary moral response to animal suffering. We sense and know that, like us, other species are capable of suffering and being harmed. Therefore, the vast majority of humanity recognizes, on a pre-cognitive level, that we should not participate in this act of killing, this taking of another's inviolable will-to-live. And if it's this hard for us to watch the killing, let alone take the life of another sentient being ourselves, then imagine what the pain and suffering is like for the animal experiencing its own death. It's something that should cause us to seriously ask: Is my minor interest in tasting a certain food truly worth the pain and destruction of another living being? Only when we begin to

ask questions like this will we begin to overcome the inconsistent and faulty moral reasoning leading to the deep psychological and physical suffering we inflict on other beings.

One of the greatest examples of faulty moral reasoning regarding our treatment of animals is seen in the meat eating pet owner—someone who will have a dog or cat for a pet, but will eat a pig for breakfast. It's scientifically known that a pig has the same capacity for pain as a dog, and a pig is actually more cognitively advanced and intelligent. Yet, in factory farms we'll force them into small, concrete-floored pens—not large enough for them to even turn around—for almost the entire duration of their life. As highly social, complex, and intelligent beings, here they will go crazy from the confinement, stress, boredom, and immense psychological and physical suffering. Under these unnatural conditions they have been known to resort to highly unnatural behavior, such as cannibalism and tail biting, which is why piglets have their tails and teeth cut off with pliers—all without anesthesia. It is a system of food production so callous and morally reprehensible, both in degree of suffering and sheer numbers of animals affected, that I have no doubt future generations will look back on it as we now do on the owning of slaves, or the mass killing of Jews during World War II.

With these facts before us, ask yourself how society would react if someone put millions of golden retrievers in factory farm conditions every year, and you'll then begin to see the moral inconsistency underlying our *speciesism*—the word coined by psychologist Richard Ryder to describe how, much like in racism and sexism, we hold prejudiced and exploitative attitudes toward other beings simply because they are of another species than us. As a further example, imagine how someone would react if I had them over for dinner and made a special lasagna and, halfway through dinner, when my guest says "This is delicious, what's in it?," I reply, "broiled poodle." In almost all parts of the world, people would recoil in disgust—and most would likely spit out their food. But why? What makes a dog any different than a cow or pig?

Seeing Animals as Moral Subjects

To further understand the arbitrariness and moral inconsistency underlying how we treat nonhuman animals, it's instructive to look at how we treat human babies, or human adults who have intellectual/cognitive disabilities. Neither of these human groups has advanced reasoning abilities, and in the case of babies they can't use language either. Yet, we still safeguard their well being. Why? Simply put, because they are moral *subjects* for us—we know they can be harmed. They may not be moral *agents*, but this does not negate our sense of duty to protect them. Likewise, nonhuman animals are not moral agents either. Nonetheless, like human babies and intellectually challenged human adults, nonhuman animals should be seen as moral subjects. They depend on us, unknowingly, to do what they can't, namely, exercise our ethical sensibilities and do what is in their best interest. This acting with moral consistency is what undergirds the rationale of animal liberation, just as it has in other liberation movements throughout history. It is the ability of humans to put themselves in the situation of the oppressed, sense a moral injustice, and then do something about it.

All of this points to the interesting evolutionary nature of morality; what was once considered "right," such as keeping humans as slaves, is now seen as "wrong." As we know, right and wrong are human constructs that belong only to moral agents, those who can ask questions about their choices and behavior. Animals cannot be expected to question themselves and act ethically like humans do, and this point is important because people who oppose animal rights like to claim that animals are immoral themselves because they kill other animals. This is known as the naturalistic fallacy, where humans are mistakenly equated with nonhuman animals, when we know good and well that a defining characteristic of our species is the ability to question everything—even whether or not it is wise to hunt and kill another species. We know that animals act largely out of a biological stimulus-response mechanism

when it comes to eating, whereas humans are endowed with the ability to confront a situation and ask themselves, "What should I do"? The problem regarding our treatment of other species is that humans either fail to ask this question, or if they do ask it they don't follow solid reasoning when answering it.

Animal Liberation and Public Health

We can also look at the issue of gun violence and children in order to illustrate the importance of understanding moral agency versus moral subjectivity. As we know, America is plagued with gun violence far and beyond any other country, and often this violence is directed at a very vulnerable population, children. Yet next to nothing is done to protect them from this violence because they have no voice in the political process. In fact, most adult Americans don't have much say over this problem either. We know from polls that over 90% of the U.S. population agrees we should have stricter gun control laws. But the politicians, those who are in charge of regulating such things, are financially beholden to the gun lobby. So although children depend, often unknowingly, on adults to exercise their political and moral agency with the their best interests in mind, this simply is not happening. The politicians are abdicating their responsibility to a group of moral subjects who have no voting rights, and this puts children directly and unnecessarily in harm's way.

In a similar manner, animals also have no voice in the political process, and they rely on concerned humans to speak for them. For animals, however, the situation is even worse, since only a small segment of the population is vegetarian or sufficiently concerned to speak up for them. We now see this changing in the animals' favor, but the slowness of this evolution still leaves billions of animals in a dire and deadly situation every year.

Our abuse of other species also leaves humans and their world in jeopardy, and for this reason it is quite accurate to characterize the meat and dairy industry as a public health threat—just like gun violence is. We know from numerous scientific studies that the production and consumption of animal products leads to diseases such as cancer, heart disease, obesity, erectile dysfunction, strokes, Alzheimer's disease, type 2 diabetes, and many more. And the toll these industries take on the planet are just as worrisome: vast amounts of solid and liquid animal waste end up polluting land, rivers, and the ocean; water, land, fossil fuels, and food are unnecessarily wasted to raise animals for food; a massive loss of land and biodiversity around the planet occurs, particularly as rainforests are bulldozed for meat production; there's an overuse of antibiotics, leading to disease resistance to them in humans and nonhuman animals; a wide usage of dangerous fertilizers and pesticides cause many unnatural diseases such as cancer; and finally, there's a release of incredible amounts of methane, nitrous oxide, and carbon dioxide into the atmosphere—all contributing to global warming. And if all this isn't bad enough, every human should also be deeply concerned about the rise in antibiotic resistant bacteria. Right now, 70-80% of all antibiotics are used on animals raised for food, and this gross overuse has led to a growing number of bacterial strains worldwide that are immune to traditional antibiotics. It's an epidemic that could eventually mean simple things like STDs and throat and ear infections will be untreatable, which could then lead to unnecessary death in many cases.

Added to these biological and environmental health issues, we should also consider that factory farming and most other large-scale animal agriculture systems cause immense harm to both the animals and the human employees working in these industries. Long-term studies show slaughterhouse workers plagued by high suicide rates, high levels of on-the-job injuries, high crime rates, and even high rates of PTSD from the psychological toll of killing vast numbers of innocent beings in such horrific conditions. Just imagine yourself standing in the blood and stench of a slaughterhouse, slitting animals' throats all day, or shooting them in the head with a bolt gun, and you begin to understand why these problems exist. The large-scale killing happening in factory farms is an unnatural act that

places an undue and pernicious stress on the human psyche. With this in mind, the cost to switch over to another form of food production—one more humane, without such waste, and one that contributes to the health of humans and the environment—should be looked at as a gift to both the animals and the workers.

Suffering and Empathy: The Bonds of Sentient Life

"Our prime purpose in this life is to help others. And if you can't help them, at least don't hurt them."

- HH Dalai Lama

With the scientific knowledge we have today of animal consciousness and their ability to feel pain, in addition to the growing concern about animal welfare among the general population, it's becoming increasingly difficult to push the issue of animal rights aside. Just witness the incredible protests springing up in the past few years over capturing and enclosing large whales and dolphins in tiny water "parks," such as Sea World, or the outcry and political victories in states like California regarding the conditions farm animals are raised in. Yes, the animals are still kept and used for human consumption or entertainment, but we can see the tide turning against cruel practices that once seemed "normal."

Of course, the people who want to keep the issue of animal suffering suppressed, such as animal researchers, animal agriculturalists, and others who profit from the sale or consumption of animal products or entertainment, are inclined to deny that animals suffer or feel pain because they don't want to see themselves complicit in this suffering. And this helps explain the common charge of "anthropomorphism" when people stand up in protest against animal cruelty. For those unfamiliar with the term, anthropomorphism means attributing human characteristics or behavior to a god, animal, or inanimate object. And anthropomorphism has been a convenient construct humans use to deflect moral responsibility for our guilt in animal suffering. But when people claim we are "anthropomorphizing," or projecting our feelings onto animals, we have to step back and ask why people do spend so much time attempting to apply their own emotional and/or moral sense to an animal's actions. In other words, what is it about our relationship to animals that causes such human curiosity, and even moral concern, about other species?

In addition to the sometimes obvious similarities between human and nonhuman animal behavior, we're finding out through science that our attempts to understand nonhuman animal behavior lies partly in the human capacity for empathy—one of the primary qualities that helps us develop and advance as a social species. The word empathy comes from Greek (*em*="in" and *pathos*="feeling"), and literally means "feeling in" with another being. Properly understood, empathy is an interpersonal connection, not an imaginary projection—which, again, is how people use the charge of anthropomorphism to lessen or remove true concern for nonhuman animals. And this ability to "feel in," to connect with another being, is a big part of what makes us human. As social psychologist C. Daniel Batson puts it, empathy comes from imagining "another's thoughts and feelings, actually feeling as another does, imagining how one would feel or think in another's place, feeling distress at another's suffering, feeling pity or compassion, and ultimately projecting oneself into another's situation." For most people, this description extends beyond mere human-to-human relationships, helping explain our ability to have trans-species concern. An example of this might be the visceral reaction we have to seeing a lion take down and eat an infant gazelle. Internally, we empathize with the prey and experience a discomfort and sadness for the animal's fate. There are countless other examples we can envision, such as a badly limping, emaciated stray dog, or a bird with a broken wing hobbling along on the ground—things most of us have witnessed at some point in our life.

The other significant thing about empathy is that it's not restricted only to humans. One common example is when dolphins save humans from shark attacks—something documented many times over the years. Dr. Tom

White, a philosopher with an expertise in dolphins, reports that dolphins have three times as many spindle cells—the nerve cells along which empathy is conveyed—than humans. His research shows that dolphins have a highly advanced awareness of one another's feelings, but this also extends beyond their own species. For this reason, White argues persuasively that a dolphin's intelligence, acute self-awareness, ability to use advanced communication, and possession of deep emotional complexity, should cause us to classify them as "nonhuman persons." Similar arguments have been made for other species, such as monkeys and chimpanzees, and the growing number of legal cases regarding this issue indicates that society is expanding its sense of what constitutes a "person."

Today, many scientific studies are helping us understand why the vast majority of humans respond so viscerally and morally to animal suffering. For instance, one thing we've discovered is that when we are confronted with another person in pain our brains respond not just by observing, but by also copying the experience. "Empathy results in emotion sharing," explains Claus Lamm, a social cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Vienna in Austria. In 2010, Lamm and his colleagues reported in the *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* that with empathy "I don't just know what you are feeling, I create an emotion in myself. This emotion makes connections to situations when I was in that emotional state myself." Lamm and his colleagues' research showed that viewing someone in pain activates certain brain regions that are active when we ourselves are in pain, such as the insula, anterior cingulate cortex, and medial cingulate cortex. "They allow us to have this first person experience of the pain of the other person," Lamm explains, "and we can still sympathize with someone else's pain, even if we don't know what it feels like." In short, when we encounter someone in pain or suffering, our brains observe, but we also copy the experience internally—we share the emotion. And again, this activation of empathy within humans can come also from seeing a nonhuman animal suffering or in pain.

The primacy and importance of empathy in our evolution comes partly from the fact that it activates pro-social behavior, the type of cooperative and supportive behavior Darwin saw helping other animal species flourish. So if we look at the issue of empathy specifically in relation to ecology, we can see its incredible importance today. The survival of all species on the planet now ultimately depends on the increase of empathy in the human species alone. And one of the ways we can increase such empathy is by expanding our knowledge of animals' inner lives and the many ways we impact the suffering of other nonhuman beings.

The crucial scientific foundation for this understanding of animal consciousness came in 1976, when zoologist Donald Griffin published *The Question of Animal Awareness*. Through his research, the field of cognitive ethology was born. With decades of experiments to back up his theories, Griffin showed that many animals are highly conscious beings with a sense of intentionality, emotional complexity, clear self-awareness, an ability to suffer physically and psychologically like humans, and possessing advanced cognitive abilities. But Griffin's research also aided in making distinctions between animals who are highly conscious and sentient, and others who lack a more complex ability to think and feel. Though there are, in fact, varying degrees of consciousness and self-awareness, his findings largely refuted the once-dominant theory of behaviorism, which denied any notion of advanced cognitive and emotional states of animals.

Griffin's research showed that, like humans, other animals will avoid pain and choose pleasure when presented with the choice. For instance, in experiments with rats and chickens who exhibited clinical symptoms of pain, these animals consumed more food containing an analgesic than animals not experiencing pain. In addition to this type of experimentation, another primary way we can judge a nonhuman animal's ability to feel pain is by using argument-by-analogy: if an animal responds to pain in a way similar to humans, it's likely they had an analogous experience of the pain. If you stick a needle in the leg of a horse and it quickly

withdraws the leg, we can argue by analogy that the horse felt pain in a way that a human would. This comes from the fact that we have significant knowledge of the similarities in nonhuman animal and human physiology. But even in cases where an animal doesn't have the exact physiology as us, we can still observe classic behavioral and physical changes that indicate pain: loss of appetite, decrease in socialization, abnormal bodily movements, distress calls, release of stress hormones, and/or significant alteration of respiratory or cardiovascular function—indicators we commonly see, for example, in the unnatural and stressful conditions of factory farming.

Though it's been a topic of debate for many years, there is an increasing body of evidence showing that even fish feel pain—as well as other sea creatures such as octopus, crabs, and lobsters. One of the main researchers on fish pain, Dr. Robert Elwood, professor emeritus of animal behavior at Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, states: "There's no absolute proof, but you keep running experiments and almost everything I looked at came out consistent with the idea of pain in these animals." In fact, based on such research Switzerland just passed a law making it illegal to boil lobsters alive. The law now requires lobsters to be hit with a stun gun, hopefully rendering them unconscious, before they are boiled. And this is why cows and pigs are stunned in the head before they are killed in factory farms—though this crude method too often fails. As a result, animals are often seen writhing in pain, completely conscious, after their throats are slit or they are shot in the head. Again, this sight is why we'll take children to pick berries, but not to a slaughterhouse. Our sense of empathy for other beings makes seeing this too much to bear for the average person, and especially for a young child who has not yet been desensitized to animal suffering.

The scientific research mentioned earlier shows that humans have the capacity for empathy because we recognize in another's bodily feelings those of our own—it is as if we were "in" the other. In that sense, empathy blurs the separateness of oneself and the other, and this can lead to a strong concern for another human, or even a nonhuman animal. What's also notable is that empathy is different than pity. Pity is when one feels for another being, but also feels there is nothing they can do for them. In the case of empathy, where one feels oneself "in" the other, there is more likelihood of an active engagement coming from the experience. This active role, which we call compassion, is often grounded in the restraining element of ethics—the conscious act of not causing harm to another being because we can sense their pain and suffering on a moral level. But empathy can also cause us to go further; we can ask ourselves what is in the best interest of a nonhuman animal, and then make an effort to provide for that need or desire.

This ability to see our life in the life of another is also backed up by research showing that gratitude plays a large role in empathetic behavior. When we are grateful for our own life we are more likely to sense the importance of all life, and thus have concern for another being's pain or suffering—whether nonhuman animal or another human. And this turns out to be a positive feedback loop: one's gratitude for life drives toward the preservation of another life in need, and this act of preserving another life fills one with an increased sense of gratitude for one's own life. This makes one more likely to engage in positive acts toward other beings whenever the circumstance arises. For the vegan or vegetarian, this is every time he or she sits down to eat. But this requires a word of caution.

There can be a sense of pride coming from the knowledge that you are saving the life of another sentient being. But this can turn into something animal liberationists/vegans are often accused of, namely, being sanctimonious. When someone embraces veganism there is a sense of positive liberation, and it's something one wants to share with others. And while it can be rewarding and important to share one's convictions about reverencing life, it's crucial to do it in a manner that does not end in attacks on others who don't share these views. An example related to alcoholism will help

clarify this. In my own experience, a recovering alcoholic does not brag about being sober and then make one who drinks feel bad. Rather, what I've seen time and again is that, in humility, the alcoholic takes a deep sense of pride in putting aside a behavior that has caused themselves and others around them harm. Likewise, vegans can be passionate and proud about the lifestyle they've embraced, knowing they're eliminating a vast amount of the world's suffering every day of their lives. But they should also be aware that everyone is on their own path, that we ourselves probably at one time ate meat, and that people will respond more positively to calm rationality and encouragement than to sanctimony.

A last point to be made about empathy is that some argue it can be rooted in a sense of selfishness, i.e., doing something for another because there is something in it for oneself. In the case of vegetarianism, one might argue that the empathy shown for other animals is simply done because one wants to become healthier. And in fact, right now the main motivation people give for becoming vegan or vegetarian is an interest in better health. While any reason for eliminating animal suffering is surely welcome, over my 30 years of vegetarianism/veganism I've noticed that if one embraces this lifestyle change for reasons of self-interest (health), it is likely one will eventually feel inconvenienced by it and give it up. It seems that without a philosophical commitment to some level of reverence for life, it's difficult to maintain a life of conscious restraint from causing harm to other animals.

In the end, true empathy is given without expectation of reward, even if this reward is one's own health. In fact, I would go even further on a personal level and argue that, even if I knew my health would suffer a bit from not killing and eating animals, I would still choose to save these lives over choosing a bit of improvement to my health. But thankfully, the opposite is the case; I can actually become healthier by relinquishing a *minor* interest of mine, such as the taste of eating some particular animal, in order to not violate a *major* interest of another being, namely, keeping its life.

Animal Liberation and the Ecstatic Experience

Up to this point, I hope to have shown the moral connection we are capable—indeed, almost hardwired—of having toward all life, but particularly toward other sentient animals. This empathetic connection comes from our common sensory experiences and our shared participation in the pain, suffering, and even joy of existence. At the very root of this empathy is a pre-cognitive sense that all beings share one primary impulse: the will to live. If given the choice, nonhuman animals, even those with a rudimentary consciousness, will seek pleasure and avoid pain or threats to their existence.

We've seen how empathy is our ability to stand within the experience of another being, to understand and feel what that being is experiencing and, most importantly, *to care about their experience* in such a way that, strangely, we are involuntarily moved by it. But beyond this moral dimension of empathy there is an even deeper, one might say "religious," dimension to it. The word for this experience, used both in philosophy and theology, is "ecstasy," which essentially means to "stand outside oneself," or to "be beside oneself." It is essentially an elevated emotional state.

Philosopher and psychologist William James wrote a lot about ecstatic experiences and pointed out that, though science could not explain where they came from, there was an unmistakable healing power in them. Not surprisingly, James' work and writing was a major inspiration for the healing work of Alcoholics Anonymous. Even the famed scientific materialist and atheist Christopher Hitchens confirmed the veracity of the ecstatic experience: "I'm a materialist. . . yet there is something beyond the material, or not entirely consistent with it, what you could call the Numinous, the Transcendent, or at its best the Ecstatic." And for the Greek philosopher Plotinus, who is considered the founder of Neoplatonism and who wrote much on the nature and importance of developing human virtue, the ecstatic experience was seen as the culmination of

human possibility and the height of human happiness. In his experience, ecstasy came in moments when he was grasped by an expanded sense of being, and it represented to him the actualization of our truest, most essential selves.

Whether one is consciously religious or not, for those who've had an ecstatic experience there are key phenomenological characteristics that help us better understand it: coming as an upwelling of emotion, ecstasy can cause a mild shortness of breath, sense of humility and gratitude, flush of inner warmth, feeling of complete acceptance and unity with all life. . . and often, tears. It can come unexpectedly, through an encounter with music, art, nature, or even from the love between two people. It is in all religions described as the "mystical experience," where the boundary of one's ego is in some sense dissolved, and there is a feeling of the fundamental origin, unity, and sanctity of all life. In other words, though fleeting and rare, it is the peak human experience. So it's no coincidence that the psychoactive drug MDMA, which was originally formulated for counseling to put people in touch with their deep empathic feelings, is commonly known as "ecstasy."

Now, one might ask what such an experience has to do with animal liberation. My answer, based on my own experience and that of others who have embraced reverence for life or veganism, is this: when we listen to and act upon our feelings of empathy for other beings, we come into contact with our essential nature and are rewarded, even if in small measure, with an ecstatic experience. In short, ecstasy comes to us when we are being what we are essentially meant to be, namely, one being with a will-to-live respecting all other beings with a will-to-live. This is the essence of reverence for life, and for those who've embraced it there is an indescribable and powerful sense of ecstasy one can be grasped by when reflecting on the existential importance of refraining from unnecessarily harming other beings.

In its essence, ecstasy can be seen as the finite, concrete expression of love or, as Tillich expresses it, "the reunion of the separated"—the reunion of my particular life with the Ground of all life. It was partly this idea of love as an existential reunion with all life that led Tillich to denounce the failure and danger of anthropocentrism. Even though he recognized humans were the most advanced species or, speaking spatially, the "highest," the moral failures of our species still led him to the radical conclusion that animals have a moral "perfection" that demand our respect: "[O]ne should not confuse the 'highest' with the most 'perfect.' Perfection means actualization of one's potential; therefore a lower being can be more perfect than a higher one if it is actually what it is potentially. . . and man can become less perfect than any other, because he not only can fail to actualize his essential being but can deny and distort it."

Tillich confronts us here with the challenge we face in becoming our essential selves through the moral act. And what I suggest is that when we do not act out of our empathy for other nonhuman beings we experience the opposite of love and ecstasy. Proof of this comes from the stark fact that when we are honest about our feelings of seeing an animal suffer in psychological or physical pain, we experience all those emotions— sadness, revulsion, and horror—that stand in opposition to the ecstatic experience: joy, empathy, and compassion. These involuntary responses to another being's pain issue from our conscience, and bring us back to the arguments early humanitarians made regarding our empathy for animals and its significance for our moral evolution: when we profane other life forms by repressing or denying our empathetic bond with them, we profane our own life and distort the moral potential of ourselves and our species, i.e., we become less "perfect."

It's undoubted that we have incredible physical and intellectual powers over nonhuman animals, but we've yet to use these powers in a way that edifies our moral potential as a species. Through us, the universe has reached its pinnacle in terms of an advanced consciousness that can comprehend and shape its world, but this evolution of consciousness has taken us down a path of seemingly unlimited possibilities. And this is where

our moral conscience comes up against our intellectual ability; if the latter doesn't find itself in service of the former, we risk the threat of eliminating life on this planet. We can choose to unnecessarily destroy life and hinder our moral evolution, or we can embrace reverence for life and expand it. For ourselves and every other living being we share the planet with, let's hope the better angels of our natures prevail.

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