

Beyond the Bifurcation of Nature

Beyond the Bifurcation of Nature:
A Common World for Animals
and the Environment

Edited by

Brianne Donaldson

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P U B L I S H I N G

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A Common World for Animals and the Environment,
Edited by Brianne Donaldson
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AI: Whitehead, Alfred North. [1933] 1967. *Adventures of Ideas*. New York: The Free Press.
- CN: Whitehead, Alfred North. [1920] 1995. *The Concept of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ESP: Whitehead, Alfred North. 1948. *Essays in Science and Philosophy*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- FR: Whitehead, Alfred North. [1929] 1958. *The Function of Reason*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- MT: Whitehead, Alfred North. [1938] 1968. *Modes of Thought*. New York: The Free Press.
- PR: Whitehead, Alfred North. [1929] 1978. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. Corrected edition. Ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: The Free Press.
- RM: Whitehead, Alfred North. [1926] 1996. *Religion in the Making*. New York: Meridian Books.
- S: Whitehead, Alfred North. [1927] 1985. *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect*. New York: Macmillan.
- SMW: Whitehead, Alfred North. [1925] 1967. *Science and the Modern World*. New York: The Free Press.

INTRODUCTION

BRIANNE DONALDSON

Our minds are finite, and yet even in these circumstances of finitude we are surrounded by possibilities that are infinite.

—Alfred North Whitehead
(Price 1956, 134)

It is now widespread to find anthropocentrism—the view that human beings are the center of the natural world—criticized. In fact, systemic environmental destruction, as well as the contemporary use and abuse of animals, seems to require that it be criticized. But once anthropocentrism is critiqued—ontologically, theoretically, or as a cultural construction—how do we continue to think and act among our planetary multiplicity?

Alfred North Whitehead’s process-relational philosophy describes the fundamental components of this multitude as “actual occasions.” These creative and responsive processes—or events—were, for Whitehead, the “final real things of which the world is made up” (PR 23). Actual occasions are characterized by becoming rather than being, feeling rather than rational thought, creativity rather than determinism, and interrelation rather than atomistic individuality. In this way, Whitehead resisted the classical bifurcations that allowed the split of mind and matter, nature and culture, human and animal, animal and plant, bodies and ideas. He sought a common world in which to approach all things in existence.

Whitehead first developed his notion of bifurcation in his early philosophical text *The Concept of Nature* ([1920] 1995), and he carried it throughout his subsequent work addressing various oppositional splits such as perceiver/perceived, God/world, and actuality/potentiality, among many others. The authors in this volume identify many crucial bifurcations, drawing inspiration from Whitehead’s work, but also pulling from other philosophical, cultural, and experiential sources. The volume itself represents an attempt to overcome a number of detrimental bifurcations. Primarily, the essays examine the violent ruptures separating humans, animals, plants, and environment. Yet, the investigation is anything but a detached academic analysis. In meaningful ways, each

author is deeply invested in mending the bifurcation between theory and practice, and between academic reflection and action in the world. These essays are not only meant to help us think differently about our creaturely entanglements, but also to provoke imaginative re/forms of personal and political action, fresh arrangements of contrast and beauty, and more risky experiments in ethical responsiveness.

Additionally, the authors here engage with many traditions and disciplines. Several authors resist any clean bifurcation of science and religion as well as the split between secular philosophy and religious insight, moving beyond straw-man arguments of reason versus faith to offer deeply empirical engagements with religious naturalism, non-theistic frameworks of relationality, immanent concepts of transcendence, as well as shamanistic, ecofeminist, and ecotheological practices of embodied exposure and co-creativity with animals, plants, and habitats.

Further, authors dissolve the bifurcation of the rational west from the mystic east through critical engagement with several Indic traditions, especially Jainism and Advaita Vedānta, in addition to the Chinese worldviews of Daoism and Confucianism. Finally, the breach between philosophical structure and experiential art is held together by several authors who examine the role of art and aesthetics in shaping past and current attitudes towards “nature,” while articulating the potential of visual art, performing art, art theory, architecture, and poetics for informing radically alternate futures.

This volume resists one additional bifurcation: the gap between teachers and students. Each essay in this collection is paired with another, and a graduate student and/or scholar-activist offers a short synthesis of the two essays, highlighting themes, productive dissonances, and adding their own evaluative twist to the pairing. Beyond their astute analyses, these respondents also contributed the titles for each of the six parts of this volume, which aids in grouping the essay pairings and synthesis-responses into six bifurcations: (1) metaphysics and morality, (2) beauty and judgment, (3) responsibility and transcendence, (4) conflict and imagination, (5) unity and divergence, and (6) solution and dissolution. The order of these six parts is flexible and I hope readers will roam freely among them. The synthesis-responses provide tempting and informative snapshots of the longer essays. Those who are new to Whitehead’s process worldview may want to start at the end where Luke Higgins offers one of the clearest introductions to process thought—and its context in the history of western science, religion, and philosophy—that I have encountered and which may prove useful for reading the other essays.

In Part I: Metaphysics and Morality, Daniel Dombrowski and Rebekah Sinclair examine the role of hierarchy from very different perspectives. Dombrowski provides a reverse approach to environmental ethics that takes the moral patiency status of nonhuman animals and organisms as its starting point. He articulates a Whiteheadian-inspired pragmatic hierarchy-with-continuity that demands greater reflection and consistency in order to negate socially-conditioned forms of gratuitous violence. Rebekah Sinclair rejects all stabilized hierarchies, drawing upon poststructural interlocutors such as Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, and Gayatri Spivak who inform her reading and critique of Whitehead, enabling her to articulate the need for multiple changing hierarchies that do not depend on the categories of species distinctions. Clinton Combs zeroes in on each author's different definition of "individual" and "species," suggesting points for clarification, and helpfully brings in Lynn Margulis's topsy-turvy account of bacterial evolution to further problematize taxonomical hierarchies.

In Part II: Beauty and Judgment, Sandra Lubarsky and Meijun Fan explore the role of beauty as an ethical perspective rooted in deep attentiveness to the inviolable creativity of ecological individuals and environmental systems. Lubarsky examines Whitehead's claim that the universe aims at the production of beauty, alongside Leopold's conservation ethic. From there, she quickly dispenses with sustainability paradigms that aim merely to "sustain" first-world standards or to sustain the split between scientific fact and aesthetic value, by crafting a vision of sustainability that pursues well-being in the forms of vitality, freedom, and intensity for wider communities of life. Fan offers a comprehensive analysis of the classical Chinese view of plants and its relevance for cultivating ecologically sensitive societies. Fan's explanation of key Chinese terms and texts enlivens an alternative cultural perspective regarding the intrinsic value and beauty of all entities who pursue their own aims and ends. Brian Orser neatly distills several distinct perspectives on beauty within each author's work, and focuses on two particular forms, namely "beauty-ugly," meaning the fluctuations of aversion/attraction based on subjective assessment, and "beauty-as-wholeness," meaning a tranquil appreciation of beauty as an entity's development in relation to its own path and potential.

In Part III: Responsibility and Transcendence, Brian Henning and Brianne Donaldson differently attempt to undermine frameworks of domination and violence. Henning contrasts the prescriptive hierarchy of Aristotle's "great chain of being" with the more nuanced descriptive hierarchies of Whitehead and ecofeminist author Karen J. Warren in order to defend crucial differences of degree among life forms while also

undermining any normative logic of domination. Donaldson shows how both the process worldview and the Indic tradition of Jainism posit ultimate perspectives such as immortality and omniscience respectively that function as immanent lures to be integrated within each entity's self-development toward wider modes of co-feeling, while minimizing obstructive violence and loss. Rob Overy-Brown highlights overlapping themes of welcome and responsibility in both authors' work, and brings in Emmanuel Levinas and Slavoj Žižek to propose a mediating "Third" that may be necessary to arbitrate between conflicting interests when ideals of responsibility fail.

In Part IV: Conflict and Imagination, Susan Armstrong and George Shields identify specific weaknesses in dominant ethical theories by positing more comprehensive commitments to the natural world. Like Henning, Armstrong leans on Whitehead and Warren to explore the value in certain hierarchical approaches, and she puts these authors into conversation with Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of species in order to affirm "species-neutral ethical judgments." Shields engages the work of environmental philosopher Clare Palmer alongside process theologian Charles Hartshorne to excavate process resources that extend inviolable rights-of-existence to the "nonhuman" community. Justin Heinzekehr concisely pinpoints each author's revolt against ethical irrelevance, while simultaneously asserting a strong case for relational value that must push beyond the adjudication of conflicting interests to imagine scenarios that transcend conflict.

In Part V: Unity and Divergence, Donald Crosby and Jeffery Long examine fundamental principles of creativity and multiplicity that support radical nonviolence within the planetary community. Crosby relies upon Whitehead's "creativity" as well as the Daoist concept of *ch'i* to articulate an empirically-grounded, non-theistic "Religion of Nature" that places humans squarely in their earth home without recourse to oppositional bifurcations that isolate our experience or action from Nature. Long focuses on crucial differences between Cartesian dualism and Indian dualisms. While the former has supported widescale degradation of the environment, the latter has supported extreme practices of nonharm toward creatures and plants, especially in the Jain tradition. Long utilizes the concept of *māyā* in Advaita Vedānta to investigate whether Jainism, too, has a dynamic unifying principle that undergirds its productive dualisms and commitment to nonviolence. Sheri Kling highlights the oppositional tensions that are essential to each author's relational worldview—such as individual/multiplicity, freedom from/freedom for, unity/distinction,

matter/energy—suggesting transdisciplinary and transcultural conversation partners who also emphasize resonant paradox.

In Part VI: Solution and Dissolution, Luke Higgins and Adam Wolpa press beyond paradigms of modernity and scientific knowledge toward deeper empirical-experiential practices. Higgins pulls from Whitehead, Bruno Latour, and Isabelle Stengers to move from stagnant abstractions to imaginative actions, crafting conceptual tools that enliven diverse disciplines such as biology, political science, and cultural theory. He envisions an ecotheology that is neither purely subjective nor supernatural, but rather connects empirical-religious practice with new relational expressions of adventurous scientific knowledge. Adam Wolpa examines representation of animals in visual culture, paying special attention to images that not only subordinate animals (as well as other people), but also place them in scenarios of humiliation, degradation, and socially-sanctioned brutality. Wolpa identifies several oppressive ideologies contributing to this phenomenon, and counters these strains with examples of visual artists whose work opens up lines of communication and fosters creative participation between artist, creatures, ecosystems and viewers, allowing for productive alienation from current knowledge regimes. Jon Ivan Gill responds with his own poetic contribution that interrupts straight theoretical analysis. He advocates an aesthetic approach to religious experience that destabilizes dominant claims to truth and helpfully elucidates both Higgins' and Wolpa's reference to the shaman/shawoman as a dissembling figure that reorganizes conditioned modes of thought and response within a dynamic planetary multiplicity.

In closing, I would like to mention that I began editing these essays during a time of considerable personal and professional uncertainty. I had recently resigned my first teaching position, had returned to India in a half-hearted attempt to do research and nurse my bruised expectations, and my existential proclivities—which are never too far from the surface—had enveloped me like a backyard swimming pool. In reading and re-reading these essays, I felt somehow buoyed by a balm of distant friendship, kept afloat by the increasing awareness that each of these authors was writing for their life in a way—and for the life of others—and doing the difficult work of considering and reconsidering not only inherited assumptions, but even their own inclinations. I was reminded also that, in our time of buffet-style academics and social commentary—where students and the public regularly take only a haphazard bite of a text or idea before going on to the next dish—a close and attentive reading is an act of friendship and self-care that bears its own illuminating rewards.

When taken together, I believe this collection of essays uniquely emphasizes action *and* thought, indeterminacy *and* practical decision-making, difference *and* relationality, limits *and* boundlessness. It accepts a role for strategic anthropocentrism while also attempting to dismantle anthropocentrism altogether; it highlights the function of daily hierarchies, and simultaneously defends a wild proliferation of shifting hierarchies; it resists dualisms even as it integrates dualist concepts in dissonant collisions toward unforeseen relational futures.

We, like all creaturely entities, create our present moments between what has been, what is available, and the possibilities of what might be—between the real and ideal, the now and not yet, the practical and implausible. By enfolding these essays together, readers need not land on one perspective, but can creatively integrate these manifold insights in their own navigation between the individual and the multitude, between habit and experimentation, between the inevitable cost of existence and the persuasive invitation toward abundant co-flourishing with the elemental and creaturely life of plants, animals, organisms, systems, and neighbors which are strange refractions and homecomings of our very Self.

Claremont, California
April 2014

BIFURCATION I
METAPHYSICS AND MORALITY

CHAPTER ONE

“FROM NONHUMAN ANIMALS TO THE ENVIRONMENT”

DANIEL A. DOMBROWSKI

Historians of philosophy have sometimes noted how crucial it is to one's interpretive stance in the present to be as clear as possible regarding the “from . . . to . . .” perspective that one is adopting in one's scholarly work. For example, the Descartes that one would study in a book with the title *From Aquinas to Descartes* would presumably be quite different from the Descartes one would study in a book titled *From Descartes to Kant*. In the first case one would probably be considering the medieval sources of Descartes' thought and in the second case one would probably be viewing Descartes as preparing the way for Kantian dualism (Collins 1972, 165-177).

In the present paper I will be exploring the possible benefits for environmental ethics, in general, and for environmental ethics in the process tradition, in particular, of approaching questions in environmental ethics by way of nonhuman animals. We will see that there are significant differences between my “from nonhuman animals to the environment” approach and the more popular “from the environment to nonhuman animals” approach. It is often assumed that in order to deal adequately with the current environmental crisis one must first develop a reticulative, or network-oriented, vision of the whole and, as a consequence, develop a version of deep ecology wherein our primary ethical obligations are to ecosystems rather than to individual human beings or to individual nonhuman animals.

There are obvious benefits to the deep ecology or ecologist positions as characterized above in terms of primary ethical obligations to ecosystems rather than to individuals. I am not so sure, however, that the ecologist that is thought to be necessary solves as many problems as its defenders assume; and I also think that ecologist, if unchecked, creates serious moral problems. Tom Regan has famously (or infamously) argued that the

idea that our primary ethical obligations are not directed to individual human beings or to individual nonhuman animals but to ecosystems amounts to a sort of environmental fascism wherein individuals are for the sake of the whole (1983, 245).¹ Although Regan’s language here might seem hyperbolic, the legitimate concern he has for sentient individuals (whether human or nonhuman) should not be ignored. By contrast, one persuasive way to read Aldo Leopold’s ecologist classic *A Sand County Almanac* is that it basically contains a hunter’s ethic that attempts to justify with equanimity culling members of overpopulated herds (1987, viii, xviii).² The odious Malthusian implications of this view for the overpopulated human species are not usually noted. For example, Leopold’s famous characterization of the land ethic states “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (1987, 224-225). This would seem to counterintuitively imply, even if Leopold did not realize this, that war, disease, and malnutrition in human beings are actually *good* things.

The “from the environment to nonhuman animals” approach starts with a legitimate concern for ecosystems and almost as an afterthought then considers the implications of this view for individual human beings and individual nonhuman animals. My alternative “from nonhuman animals to the environment” approach, (a) starts with the assumption that individual human beings are moral patients worthy of moral respect, then (b) moves to a consideration of those beings who are closest to us in moral patiency status (nonhuman animals with central nervous systems) so as to see if we have moral duties to them as well, then (c) considers a crucial distinction between domestic and wild nonhuman animals, with the latter pointing us toward (d) a consideration of ecosystems and the natural world in general. Further, I will explore these steps with a Whiteheadian framework in mind so as to further enrich the process tradition’s already significant contributions in environmental ethics.³ The ultimate hope is that the “from nonhuman animals to the environment” and the “from the environment to nonhuman animals” approaches can mutually benefit each other by keeping each other honest, as it were, in a friendly dialectical tension.

¹ See also: Regan (1983), 361-362, 396.

² See also: Leopold (1987), 34, 37, 40, 54-58, 62-66, 71-77, 110, 117, 120-122, 129-130, 132-134, 139, 144-146, 149-154, 166-177, 187.

³ See also: Cobb and Birch (1981); and Henning (2005).

Whitehead's Revolt against Dualism

Throughout his career Whitehead was, for various reasons, an opponent of dualism. Not least among these reasons was the fear that dualism could easily lead to reductionist materialism once it was realized that mind (or life or self-motion) is, as a result of dualism, an irrelevant ghost in the machine. The materialist merely exorcizes the ghost (SMW Ch 5).

Whitehead's response was to advocate a fusion of mind (or life or self-motion) and physical nature in the composition of the "really real things" (MT 150). This revolt against dualism has the following implication for nonhuman animals: in abstraction from its animal body, a "living nexus" (PR 104), the term Whitehead assigns to nonhuman animals, is not understandable at all (and vice versa). Indeed, each actual occasion is a bipolar fusion of the physical and the appetitive or mental.⁴

Scale of Becoming

This fusion (or better, *interfusion*) between the physical and the mental is spread throughout nature in something like a scale of becoming, which is the process version of the traditional scale of being, for example Aristotle's "great chain of being." At one point, Whitehead distinguishes among six types of occurrences in nature. In descending order, these are human existence, the kind of life found in vertebrate animals generally, vegetable life, living cells, large-scale inorganic aggregates, and finally the happenings on an infinitesimally small scale as disclosed by physicists (MT 156-157).⁵ At another point, he distinguishes in an analogous way among four grades of reality, with the highest level exhibiting a reorganization of experience characteristic of reason (PR 177-178).

Whitehead makes it clear that these are not airtight boundaries, but are rather heuristic and explanatory devices. That is, different types of existence shade off into each other. By implication, there is no absolute difference between human beings and nonhuman animals; indeed human beings *are* animals. Likewise, the most primitive plants fade into the lives of a cluster of living cells. There is not even an absolute gap between living and nonliving societies. Ours is a "buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures" (PR 50).⁶

The problem for Nature, a term Whitehead capitalizes, is the production of complex societies that are unspecialized; in this way "intensity is mated

⁴ See also: PR 108; and AI 210-213, 253, 259.

⁵ See also: PR 98.

⁶ See also: PR 102 and MT 157.

with survival” (PR 101). This problem is solved by the enhancement of the mental pole. It should be noted that Whitehead does not restrict such enhancement to human beings (as does Kant); rather, he extends it to “higher organisms.” These are organisms that “think,” at the very least in the sense that they do not thoughtlessly adjust to causal factors affecting them (PR 101-103). I will return to nonhuman animal mentality momentarily.

Nonhuman animal bodies are living societies that contain both living cells as well as supposedly inorganic subservient apparatuses at the level studied by physicists. In a famous turn of phrase, Whitehead describes life as “the clutch at vivid immediacy” (PR 103-105). We will see that this immediacy is noteworthy from an ethical point of view if what is vividly experienced is pain, especially if it is unnecessary pain.

Nonhuman animals clearly exhibit modes of behavior that are directed not only toward the avoidance of pain, but also toward “self-preservation” (PR 176), according to Whitehead. In fact, nonhuman animals give every indication of having some sort of feeling of causal relationship with the natural world. Even a jellyfish advances and withdraws in response to causal influence; and plants reach down to find water and nutrients with their roots (PR 176). Although feeling of some minimal sort is spread throughout nature, in that there are “throbs of pulsation” (PR 176-178) in molecules, plant cells, and the lives of nonhuman animals, it is only with nonhuman animals that we find sense perception *per se*. It is probably true that nonhuman animal perception does not rise to the level of presentational immediacy found in human beings. In human beings there can be immediate absorption in the projected present, as opposed to being (largely but not exclusively) a vehicle for receiving the past. But whereas the laws of nature are constituted by large average effects that are impersonal, those beings capable of both sense perception and “expression” (MT 21, 86) exhibit a significant degree of personal individuality.

Continuity with Nonhuman Animals

We have seen in the previous section both that Whitehead defends a hierarchy of becoming in nature *and* asserts that there are no wide gaps. Instead he posits continuity and shades of difference between each hierarchical stage. There is no sharp division between mentality and nature. Likewise, there is no sharp division among the levels of mentality found in nature; we live *within* nature (AI 186).⁷ Like us, nonhuman animals have minds that are temporally ordered in a continuous way. Further, their minds are incorporated in bodies that are constituted by a vast number of

⁷ See also: MT 156.

occasions of experience that are spatially and temporally coordinated. Such coordination is a major factor in the activities of the parts (PR 106). In addition, vertebrate animals with central nervous systems, at the very least, have their social systems dominated by mentality to such a significant extent that it is fair to say that their lives are *personally ordered*. Although a dog does not rise to the height of human mentality (and hence, in a sense, is not a person in the commonsensical version of personhood), a dog nonetheless has a mental life that is temporally coordinated, with continuity among its occasions of experience (and hence, in a different and technical sense, *is* a person). To take a simple example, if a dog is kicked by a particular human being on Tuesday, then when the same human being approaches the dog on Wednesday the dog either cowers or growls because she *remembers* what happened the previous day and *has good reason* to be afraid. Lower animals and vegetation, by way of partial contrast, lack the dominance provided by a (quasi-monarchical) personal society of occasions. As Whitehead puts the point, “a tree is a democracy” (AI 205-206).⁸

In technical language, personal order characterizes a society when “the genetic relatedness of its members orders these members ‘serially’” or when a society “sustains a character” (PR 34-35). Immediately we think of human persons, and rightfully so. In some sense we think of human persons as the same realities from birth to death, but the issue of personal identity is complex in process philosophy, as is well known, due to the belief that the primary, concrete realities are momentary experiences. There is something more abstract involved in attributing identity to these experiences when they are strung together over long stretches of time. My vivid experience of a particular shade of red at this time is more concrete than “Dan’s existence” spread across sixty years. As a result, the abstract identity of a human being or of a nonhuman animal should not be overemphasized. This is because if, as Whitehead thinks, “life is a bid for freedom” (PR 104), then human identity cannot be seen as a strictly enduring substance. Both we and nonhuman animals change from moment to moment. That is, human beings and nonhuman animals are living organisms that exhibit self-motion in their reactions to any tradition (PR 90, 104).

One way of putting the issue is to speak of personal identity in terms of temporal asymmetry: we are internally related to our pasts, which are already settled (I cannot change the fact that I was born in Philadelphia), but externally related to our futures, which are partially open to our plastic control (Who knows what city I will be in when I die?). According to

⁸ See also: AI 215, 291.

Whitehead, “Life is a passage from physical order to pure mental originality” (PR 107). Whitehead’s use of “pure” here is misleading, however, in so far as purity may suggest complete central control or strictly mental activity without the body. Rather, Whitehead seems to think that we are somewhat more decentralized than this in that our hearts beat and our hormones secrete largely in ways outside of our control (PR 106-108).

The key point here is that primitive feeling is to be found at lower levels of reality. As Whitehead states, “The Rubicon has been crossed” (MT 27) when sense perception is acquired; here “we” refers to *both* human beings and other sentient animals. Sentient nonhuman animals (albeit to a lesser degree than most human beings) use sense perception to learn from their mistakes; they “profit by error without being slaughtered by it” (PR 168). And in our own upward evolution we proceed not only by way of error-elimination, but also by a positive, confident “animal faith” (PR 142), per Santayana, that the world is intelligible.⁹ Donald Griffin has us notice here that the aforementioned Whiteheadian “Rubicon” is not crossed when human rationality comes on the scene, but when sense perception is acquired by nonhuman animals (1976, 37).

It is because human beings have animal bodies capable of sense perception that we can use these bodies as “the great central ground underlying” (PR 170) more intellectual pursuits. This central ground makes possible the inflow into ourselves of feelings from nature, an inflow that sometimes overwhelms us such that it is only gradually, after much thought and experimentation, that we can understand it. In Whiteheadian terms, the supposedly more exalted perception in the mode of presentational immediacy is dependent on perception in the mode of causal efficacy. Hume and other modern epistemologists erroneously invert this relationship (and thereby obliterate causal efficacy); hence they misunderstand the nature of the continuity between nonhuman animals and human ones. We, as with nonhuman animals, feel *with* our bodies in terms of a “vector transmission of emotional feeling” (PR 315), with such feeling being not only transmitted but also modified along the way.¹⁰

Even in *Modes of Thought*, where a human being’s partial transcendence of animality is a major theme, Whitehead notes that the rise of human genius and of human civilization has a long history that stretches back to nonhuman animals. That is, the highest reaches of the human psyche cannot be dissociated from our animal physiology. Indeed, sense perception already involves abstraction in the sense that it encourages (in

⁹ See also: PR 113; AI 4, 20, 177-178, 214, 247.

¹⁰ See also: PR 178, 181, 312.

fact, requires) selective emphasis. Thus, when a human being tries to be as clear as possible regarding sense perception, he or she “sinks to an animal level” (MT 113). Nonhuman animals, too, in a certain sense specialize their perceptions, as when a pig picks up a scent for food when hungry and then will not let it go. Our “triumph of specialization” (MT 121), although distinctive, is continuous with nonhuman animals’ transmission and modification of massive and vague experiences in the mode of causal efficacy.¹¹

To put the aforementioned point in a phenomenological way, the sharp distinction between mentality and nature is not what we experience. In a courtroom trial we are skittish about merely circumstantial evidence; we also want to know what the accused’s *motive* was. Likewise, a lost dog that exerts great effort to get home is believed to have *aimed* to do so. Despite the fact, rightly noticed by George Lucas, that Whitehead does not explicate the thoughts of Darwin or other major evolutionary biologists with the same attention that he gives to major figures in the history of physics, nevertheless everything that he says about nonhuman animals presupposes a worldview thoroughly consistent with the theory of evolution (Lucas 1989, 58-59). Consider the capacity for sight: we are obviously not the only animals who can see, even though vision is considered by some scholars to be the most intellectual sense because of its abstract, impartial spectator quality (in contrast, say, to the concreteness of touch). In fact, some nonhuman animals such as eagles see better than we do. Hence, Whitehead sees evidence of “flashes of mentality” (MT 156-159, 167-68) in nonhuman animals.

Partial Transcendence of Animality

Despite the considerable continuity between human beings and nonhuman animals detailed in the previous section, Whitehead nonetheless is committed to the contrast between the high-grade functioning of human beings and “mere animal savagery” (AI 48). The contrast is a subtle one, however, despite the startling language regarding savagery. For example, the high-grade functioning of human beings in Whitehead is quite different from the traditional anthropocentric, essentialist claim that human beings are rational. “This is palpably false: they are only intermittently rational” (PR 79); and only some of them are intermittently rational, as we will see. The higher nonhuman animals such as vertebrates with central nervous systems are persons, in the sense specified above, but they are not necessarily aware of themselves as such, as we *at times* are. Our intermittent

¹¹ See also: MT 65, 73.

self-consciousness allows us a partial transcendence of animality (PR 107, 109).

Much of our lives is spent aesthetically appreciating the world in ways continuous with those of the nonhuman animals. Thus, Whitehead thinks that Kant’s “Transcendental Aesthetic” is a distorted fragment of what should have been his main topic. When Whitehead says that “intensity is the reward of narrowness” (PR 112-113), he seems to be referring to those relatively rare moments of self-consciousness when we reflect on our lives as conscious animals. We pay a price for this narrowness, however. That is, we pay a price for our partial transcendence of animality. This is because it is precisely narrowness in the selection of evidence that is the chief danger to philosophy, especially when such narrowness is confused with synoptic vision of all aspects of a problem (PR 319, 337). It seems that narrowness of focus (and the intensity of experience it brings) is both necessary to, and destructive of, systematic philosophy.

A human being’s partial transcendence of animality is found in most of Whitehead’s major philosophical works, but it is especially prominent in *Modes of Thought*. Here he makes it clear that he thinks that although songbirds such as the hermit thrush and the nightingale can produce real beauty, they are not civilized beings. Note in the quotation below, however, evidence of both the partial transcendence of animality *as well as* the seeds of a Whiteheadian ethic of nonhuman animal rights:

The hermit thrush and the nightingale can produce sound of the utmost beauty. But they are not civilized beings. They lack ideas of adequate generality respecting their own actions and the world around them. Without doubt the higher animals entertain notions, hopes, and fears. And yet they lack civilization by reason of the deficient generality of their mental functionings. Their love, their devotion, their beauty of performance, *rightly claim our love and tenderness in return* . . . Civilized beings are those who survey the world with some large generality of understanding. (MT 3-4; emphasis added)

Along with many other twentieth century philosophers, Whitehead sees language as the key to our advanced mental functioning, but even the most articulate among us often find it difficult to speak with learned precision about what we feel *as animals* (MT 5).

In Whitehead’s terms, nonhuman animals as well as human ones have intense “interest” in various particular things as well as some inchoate sense of the “importance” (MT 11-12) of the whole environment. Further, Whitehead thinks that it is importance that generates interest and that such generation gives rise to discrimination among interests and hence gives

rise to language and advanced consciousness. Once again, there is continuity with nonhuman animals here. They can clearly engage in both signaling and emotional expression, but Whitehead thinks that nonhuman animals are limited in the degree to which they can engage in abstraction from the immediate situation. The biblical metaphor used by Whitehead to make the point is that on the sixth day God gave human beings speech and they thereby became souls (MT 20-41).¹²

At one end of the continuum of nature there are human beings with a profound experience of disclosure of nature's secrets; at the other end there is supposedly inorganic nature (MT 62). Toward the upper end of this continuum there are nonhuman animal satisfactions as well as a certain degree of clarity found in human understanding. Or again, nonhuman animals enjoy the structure of the world, but human beings can study it. We can see form within fact. By way of contrast, Whitehead cites an example from personal experience of seeing a mother squirrel remove her young from a dangerous place one by one until all three were safe, but she returned a fourth time to the old place because she could not count (MT 76-78).

We can try to understand nature in terms of concepts like "space," "time," and "deity." Nonhuman animals only anticipate this understanding when they sometimes pass beyond the enjoyment of immediate fact. The aforementioned mother squirrel, for example, presumably stored up acorns for the winter. In Whitehead's strongest statement in favor of partial human transcendence of nonhuman nature, however, he suggests that "when all analogies between animal life and human nature have been stressed, there remains a vast gap in respect to the influence of reflective experience" (MT 102-103). Or again, "take the subtle beauty of a flower in some isolated glade of a primeval forest. No animal has ever had the subtlety of experience to enjoy its full beauty. And yet this beauty is a grand fact in the universe" (MT 120). Even less capable of experiencing such beauty are the living cells in the flower.

Yet Whitehead nonetheless thinks it is an example of "holiness" that one notices the "sacredness" (MT 120) of natural beauty in both flowers and nonhuman animals. Partial transcendence of animality depends on the level of abstraction at which we (some of us, some of the time) can think. Granted, nonhuman animals live at a much more abstract level than cells, but we emphasize and are explicit about such abstraction (MT 123).

¹² See also: MT 44, 52-53, 57.

Two Arguments in Favor of Nonhuman Animal Rights

In the last thirty years, there has been an explosion of interest in philosophy regarding our current environmental crisis, in general, and regarding the moral status of nonhuman animals, in particular. This interest often intersects with philosophical arguments in favor of nonhuman animal rights. The purpose of the present section is to present two such arguments and to eventually argue for their philosophical soundness on a Whiteheadian basis.

The first of these two arguments is called the argument from sentience and it is the simpler of the two:

- A. Any being that can experience pain or suffer has, at the very least, the right not to be forced to experience pain or suffer (or be killed) unnecessarily or gratuitously.
- B. It is not necessary that we inflict pain or suffering (or death) on sentient nonhuman animals in order for us to have a healthy diet.
- C. Therefore, eating sentient nonhuman animals is an example of unnecessary infliction of pain or suffering (or death) and ought to be avoided.

The intuitive appeal of the argument from sentience is enough to convince many philosophical vegetarians. Whiteheadians who are convinced by it might speak in terms of tragic loss of life and of the possibility to make further contributions to the beauty of the world. However, the realization that it is not necessarily rationality that is the criterion that must be met in order to deserve moral respect leads to further considerations that are treated in the second argument, which is often called the argument from marginal cases.

Defenders of the argument from marginal cases (hereafter AMC) agree with almost everyone else regarding the criterion that must be met in order to be a moral *agent*, meaning someone who can perform moral or immoral actions and who can be held morally responsible for his/her actions: rationality. At times it might be difficult to apply this criterion if the alleged moral agent is not obviously rational, but almost everyone agrees that rationality is the property that would be required in order to hold someone morally accountable for his/her actions.

The key question, however, is the following: what property needs to be possessed in order to be a moral *patient* or a moral beneficiary, meaning someone who can receive immoral treatment from others, or who can have his/her rights violated, or who can be treated cruelly? Here the issue is

quite complicated and contentious. One of the complicating factors is that to speak without qualification of “properties” of “subjects” is both to run the risk of remaining within the subject-predicate mode of thought and to continue the fiction of a substantial self, which Whitehead legitimately wants to criticize. The proper task is to temporalize moral patiency status so as to avoid both of these defects, as we will see, while nonetheless paying sufficient attention to the infliction of unnecessary suffering or death that understandably results in a Whiteheadian sense of tragic loss (Dombrowski 1997, 189-193).

The most parsimonious response to the question regarding moral patiency status leads to a type of symmetry that some find attractive: make *the criterion of rationality* do double-duty by serving as the criterion for moral patiency status as well as for moral agency. But this response leads to disastrous consequences in that on its basis many human beings—the marginal cases of humanity—would not be moral patients and hence would not deserve moral respect.

An understandable reaction to the difficulties involved in demanding a very high criterion for moral patiency status like rationality is to lower it significantly. For example, some religious believers—such as Albert Schweitzer and other “pro-life” proponents in Christianity wish to make life itself the criterion for moral patiency status. All life, we are told, deserves moral respect. But this response also leads to disastrous consequences in that on its basis we would not be morally permitted to mow, or even walk on, grass because living insects would be killed; cut out cancerous tumors because cancer cells are (unfortunately) quite alive and well; or even breathe if perchance we would suck in living organisms that would be killed. What would we be able to eat on a consistent pro-life basis? Schweitzer's own writings indicate what some of the absurd consequences would be. That is, AMC forces us to be a bit more specific than we have been thus far regarding moral patiency status.

Defenders of AMC work their way, both theoretically and practically, to a place in between these two extremes so as to find a defensible criterion for moral patiency status in *sentientcy*. On this basis, all human beings deserve respect (even the most marginal of marginal cases still have a functioning central nervous system and hence are sentient), but nonhuman animals with central nervous systems, and hence sentientcy, are also protected.

Before moving to the connection between AMC, on the one hand, and Whitehead on the other, an ordinary language statement of the AMC argument might be helpful:

- A. It is undeniable that members of many species other than our own have "interests," at least in the minimal sense that they feel and try to avoid pain, and feel and seek various sorts of pleasure and satisfaction.
- B. It is equally undeniable that human infants and some of the profoundly mentally impaired have interests in only the sense that members of these other species have them and not in the sense that normal adult humans have them. That is, human infants and some of the profoundly mentally impaired—the marginal cases of humanity—lack the normal adult qualities of purposiveness, self-consciousness, memory, imagination, and anticipation to the same extent that members of some other species of animals lack those qualities.
- C. Thus, in terms of the morally relevant characteristic of having interests, some humans must be equated with members of other species rather than with normal adult human beings.
- D. Yet predominant moral judgments about conduct toward these humans are dramatically different from judgments about conduct toward the comparable nonhuman animals. It is customary to raise the nonhuman animals for food, to subject them to lethal scientific experiments, to treat them as chattels, and so forth. It is not customary—indeed it is abhorrent to most people even to consider—the same practices for human infants and the mentally impaired.
- E. But lacking a finding of some morally relevant characteristic (other than having interests) that distinguishes these humans and nonhuman animals, we must conclude that the predominant moral judgments about them are inconsistent. To be consistent, and to that extent rational, we must either treat the humans the same way we now treat the nonhuman animals, or treat the nonhuman animals the same way we now treat the humans.
- F. And there does not seem to be a morally relevant characteristic that distinguishes all humans from all other animals. Sentience and rationality both fail in this regard. The assertion that the difference lies in the *potential* to develop interests analogous to those of normal adult humans should also be dismissed. After all, it is easily shown that some humans—whom we nonetheless refuse to treat as nonhuman animals—lack the relevant potential. In short, the standard candidates for a morally relevant differentiating characteristic can be rejected.

- G. The conclusion is, therefore, that we cannot give a reasoned justification for the differences in ordinary conduct toward some humans against some nonhuman animals (loosely based on Becker 1983).

In one sense, the point of AMC is to ask for a more responsible use of apparently harmless terms like “all” and “only.” Any morally relevant characteristic that is possessed *only* by human beings will not be possessed by *all* human beings. To try to escape from the ramifications of this observation by claiming, as many philosophers do, that all humans deserve moral respect because they *are* human, is clearly to beg the question: exactly what morally relevant property is it that all humans, but only humans, possess that nonhuman animals do not possess?

I should note here my willingness to adjust any language I have used in this section that might be offensive. For example, to speak as I have of the “mental impairment” of some human beings is in one sense quite accurate, I think (other things being equal, we would wish our children to have brains and/or mental lives that function well), but it could be interpreted by some to imply a rational essence to humanity. Along with Whitehead, however, I am a critic of essentialism. Or again, to refer to the argument in question as that from “marginal cases” is a concession to standard usage among philosophers and it is not meant to imply that those who are different should be pushed to the margins. Actually, my obvious intent is quite the opposite. This is why “argument for moral consistency” or “argument from species overlap” might be better.

Reflective Equilibrium

A defense of AMC does not have to be based on the idea that there are independently existing facts out there that dictate our morality, as in some versions of natural law theory. Rather, our values and obligations can legitimately be derived from facts if the facts to which they refer are intelligibly seen as the relevant ones, and if the values derived from these facts are defensible ones. Or again, a defender of AMC need not commit to the naive view that facts wear their relevance on their face and that values can be immediately derived from them. That is, AMC is indeed an *argument* that gives reasons for the defensibility of the claims that nonhuman animals have basic rights due to their sentience and that species membership is irrelevant when considering moral patiency status itself.

By way of contrast, critics of AMC like Elizabeth Anderson (2004) and Cora Diamond (2004) seem to move illegitimately from the claim that