Ways of Being, Kinds of Minds: the Value of the Nonhuman Animal Other

I sometimes wish that philosophers would pay more attention to the pissing of beagles, for there's much to be learned there. When I take walks with my nonhuman animal companion of some ten years, Beauregarde, he likes to start off with a good, long whiz, at the end of which the muscles of his buttocks and legs stiffen a bit, and he does a little shake from the hips down. At the same time, Beau's eyes close and reopen, and then his mouth opens briefly in an involuntary exhalation: It's not quite an "Ahhhh. . . ," but it might as well be.

Sound familiar? Beau's waggle is what happens when you've been, as we say, "holding it" too long. Yes, I should take walks with Beauregarde more often. I understand that. But Beauregarde usually doesn't have to wait too long for me to get my act together to take a walk, and I suspect that the relative intensity of that "Ahhh. . . " is some compensation for my occasional lapses in care. I hope that Beauregarde would agree.

Admittedly, a good whiz is not one of life's greatest pleasures, but it is a pleasure nonetheless, one that involves, in a minor way, some of the same physiological mechanisms involved in orgasm (a slight curling of the toes) and even in states of religious ecstasy (those closed eyes). Nature is economical. She makes multiple use of her intricate designs. An elderly friend of mine, the poet James Worley, captured this multiplicity wonderfully in the following poem:

Urinal

Old man's prayer stall
where, with gut gravid,
eyes closed,

all blessings flow.

Praise God.

Beau's whizzing is a reminder that in many respects, he and I are designed in the same ways. We are two members of a great family of living things, and we share many commonalities. Both of us, for example, share some 30 percent of our non-junk DNA with blades of grass. Were I a better physiologist than I am, I could detail for you, in many volumes of excruciatingly detailed work, the intricacies of the interactions of the "systems" of literally trillions of cells (I'm not exaggerating) that Beauregarde and you and I share in common, that cause us to react in the same way when we take a whiz—systems that work together to create a small portion of what we might call the extended, **embodied minds** that we animals all have. (Dualities such as body and mind are often just convenient fictions.)

Does Beauregarde feel pleasure at relieving himself? We now have the scientific wherewithal to answer this question definitively. Of course he does. His brain gets from the act the same little dose of dopamine that you and I do. Voltaire had it absolutely right when he wrote, "Answer me, mechanist, has Nature arranged all the springs of feeling in this animal to the end that he might not feel?"[1]

Only in our time have we come to learn and appreciate just how similar and how complex those "springs of feeling" are. At the smallest of things in nature, any human designer can only marvel, as did Michel de Montaigne when he wrote, in "Of the Caniballes," that "All our

[1] See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals.* New York: Avon, 1975. P. 210.

endeavour or wit cannot so much as reach to represent the nest of the least birdlet, its contexture, beautie, profit and use, no nor the web of a seely spider."[2]

So, we and other living things share these commonalities, bought by nature over millions of years through considerable trial and error. There is, as Charles Darwin so beautifully captured in the concluding lines of *On the Origin of Species,* much "grandeur" in recognition of the commonalities among living things, commonalities that we in the West had forgotten until Darwin reminded us of them. People from tribal cultures, of course, never needed such a reminder. My own Welsh and Cherokee ancestors did not have to be reminded that they were brothers and sisters to ravens and wolves, panthers and coyotes. But we Westerners had to rediscover this. In the West, studies in animal morphology (many of them astonishingly and needlessly cruel) gave us the first clues regarding this great commonality of creatures. Then, in very recent times, DNA sequencing added a whole additional body of indisputable evidence paralleling the evidence from morphological studies. We're all family. There's no longer any question but what other creatures of the complexity of pigs, for example, share such similarities with us that they undoubtedly feel just as we would feel if say, someone were to drive us with electric prods up a ramp, shackle us by one leg, hoist us in the air, stick us in the neck with a knife, let us bleed out for a few moments, and then dump us, still alive, in a vat of scalding water to remove our hair.

I believe that people are potentially compassionate, that the sort of cruelty and willful blindness that allows 101 million pigs a year, in the United States, to experience the horror of

[2] The quotation from Montaigne's *Essais* is given in the beautiful English translation by John Florio published in 1603. See http://ebooks.gutenberg.us/Renascence_Editions/montaigne/index.htm.

the factory slaughterhouse is due, simply, to lack of knowledge. Things would change if people got to know some pigs personally. Things would change, for example, if they knew that pigs are good mothers, that they call one another by name and have a sense of personal identity, that they have complex social relationships and emotional and cognitive lives of a degree of sophistication that strongly suggests consciousness awareness equivalent to that of a three-year-old child. If people really knew these things, I think that most of them would never again speak of "bringing home the bacon." An educated populous would, I think, raise a cry that would bring to an end the holocaust against these, our evolutionary first cousins.[3]

Certain practices that follow from what Peter Singer calls *speciesism,* which is simply a variety of *racism,* are possible only because people are ignorant of, or choose not to think about, the facts, and so one of the primary means by which those in the animal liberation movement work to bring about change is simply to educate people, to explain to them how similar many of the nonhuman animals whom we treat as food are to us. The widespread use of the expression *dirty as a pig,* for example, is possible only because of sheer ignorance. Pigs like cleanliness. They no more enjoy rooting in their own shit and urine in an enclosure with thousand of their fellows than you or I would.[4]

The rediscovery by the West of the commonalities between human and nonhuman animals has much potential for helping to end the "eternal Treblinka," as Isaac Bashevis Singer called it, of human meat eating. With regard to the so-called "higher vertebrates," such as dogs, cats, pigs, sheep, rabbits, chickens, turkeys, and monkeys, the argument that eating them is eating

[3] See Marchant-Forde, Jeremy N. *The Welfare of Pigs.* New York: Springer, 2009.
[4] About that mud-wallowing. Don't knock it 'til you've tried it. And, by the way, dirt is not dirty.

something very like one's self is unassailable. Of course, that doesn't mean that people don't make arguments to the contrary. Anyone who has sat at a table or stood on a corner distributing vegan or vegetarian literature knows that people have plenty of arguments for continuing to eat meat, arguments that they express with a bellicosity and belligerence equal to their own suppressed moral uncertainties.

Fortunately, the standard arguments for eating the corpses of other animals are all easily dealt with. "Eating meat is natural. Animals in the wild do it." Well, yes. So is shit-eating. Most nonhuman animals, from bacteria to dung beetles and flies, are coprophagic, and many higher [sic] vertebrates will eat the feces of herbivores to extract from them the remaining nutrients, but the obvious naturalness and even nutritional benefits of coprophagy do not recommend the practice to humans. The other common arguments for the kind of subjugation of animals known as meat-eating—"I like it," "Cows turn an unusable resource, grass, into something useable by humans, meat," "Animals aren't consciously aware," "Animals don't suffer as we do," "One needs to eat animals in order to get complete nutrition," "Humans are omnivores by nature," "Humans were given dominion over creation," "What, then, would we have to eat?" and so on—are equally easily dispensed with, and none of them holds up against the undeniable similarities that our [sic] food animals [sic] have with us. The fact that higher [sic] vertebrates have minds similar in important ways with ours is considered by vegans, with justification, I think, the "killer app" against arguments for eating meat, vivisection, expropriation of habitat, and other outrages against our near cousins on the evolutionary tree. But caring for and stopping the exploitation of our evolutionary relatives doesn't go far enough, for reasons I hope to make clear below.

For years, I myself unthinkingly assumed that the eating of meat was more or less justifiable based upon the closeness of the minds of the animals consumed to human minds. So, eating the corpse of a cow or pig seemed more objectionable than eating the corpse of a chicken or turkey, which was more objectionable than eating the corpse of a fish or octopus or squid, which was more objectionable than eating the corpse of a lobster, oyster, crab, crayfish, shrimp, abalone, conch, or snail. After all, doesn't the very existence of the evolutionary tree tell us that some animals are lower and some are higher? And doesn't the existence of "lower" animals justify corpsophagia?

I now think that my rationalizations for occasionally partaking of the corpses of "lower creatures" like shellfish were entirely mistaken, and not simply because of the environmentally unconscionable ways in which these creatures are harvested [sic]. Let me be clear about this: evolutionarily, there are no lower creatures. Every creature alive today, from the simplest to the most complex, is the end result of an incredibly long evolutionary process. Each is an exquisitely fine-tuned collection of adaptations to its ecological niche or niches. Each is an **end product of evolution to this point in time,** not an intermediate or lower form. In other words, there are no "lower creatures." The common housefly, *Musca domestica,* for example, is one such evolutionary end product, a being of more complexity, with far, far more parts and functions than can be found in any of our flying machines (despite the billions that we spend, annually, on creating ever-more-complex flying machines with which to kill our fellow human beings).

But the real problem with my long-held position is that the argument from similarity boils down to this: If it's like us, we should treat it with care and kindness. If not, well. . . anything goes.

What my argument failed to recognize was **the value inherent in minds of kinds that are not like ours.**

To get some idea just how different some of the other minds on this planet are from ours, let's consider, for a bit, the sensory apparatuses of some of our animal cohabitants of planet Earth. Humans have about twelve million olfactory receptor cells, but the lowly bloodhound has four billion of these and so lives in a world very different from ours, one very much richer, deeper, in its smells. Let me repeat that: the bloodhound lives in a different world, one that is, in respects, richer in its phenomena.

Another example: In 1984, Katy Payne, who had studied music as an undergraduate but is now a renowned naturalist, was hanging with the baby elephants at an Oregon zoo when she noticed something unusual. "I felt a throbbing in the air near the elephants," she recounts. The throbbing was like "how the air used to throb . . . when I sang in the choir . . . near the church organ." Returning with some recording equipment, Payne made an amazing discovery: The elephants were conversing with one another, continually, in frequencies of sound too low for people to hear. Now, people have been working with elephants for millennia, but they had never before figured that out. Ms. Payne went on to make an exceptional career for herself as

an elephant researcher and author.[5] It was Payne who documented, movingly, the rites by which elephants mourn their dead.

Not only do some creatures have senses that are more or differently sensitive than ours, but some have senses that we lack entirely. Let's talk about the birds and the bees: Both have sensory mechanisms, still poorly understood, for detecting fluctuations in magnetic fields. Or spiders: They have special detectors for mechanical strain on their exoskeletons. Or fish: Some have dedicated detectors of buoyancy, water currents, and electric fields. Or ants: An ant colony, a single one of which can cover several hundred thousand square kilometers, is not so much a collection of individuals as it is a single organism, the cells of which, the individual ants, communicate with one another via chemical signals called pheromones, as our cells communicate with one another via enzymes and other chemical signals. And all these creatures have centralized executive mechanisms for "making sense" of these inputs.

The American philosopher Thomas Nagel pointed out in a justly famous essay called "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" that there is likely to be **something that it is like** to be a bat, but whatever it is to be like that, it is very, very alien. In his *Philosophical Investigations* Ludwig Wittgenstein similarly observed that if we could talk to a lion, we wouldn't have any idea what he or she was saying. Now, I ask you: What is it like to be a bird, bee, spider, fish, or a colony of ants? You don't know, and neither do I, but it is, in fact, **like something to be that creature.** There is a way-of-being there, perhaps something very different from our variety of conscious awareness, but a way-of-being nonetheless.

[5] See her book *Silent Thunder: In the Presence of Elephants.* New York: Penguin, 1999.

The consequences of some of these alien sensory abilities of other animals can be astonishing. As you probably know, sea water has about the same density as the bodies of animals and plants. That's why we float in sea water. As you almost certainly also know, most bats and some cetaceans (such as sperm whales and dolphins) echolocate. They bounce sound waves off objects, and the returning waves enable them to construct mental maps of their environments. But in the case of the cetaceans, the interactions of their environments and their sensory apparatuses lead to some interesting consequences. Because most of the objects in a sperm whale's environment have about the same density as sea water through which the sound waves they send out penetrate, those sound waves also partially penetrate the things in their environments, the other creatures. So to some extent, a sperm whale "sees" the world not just on the surface but **all the way through,** or, at least**, at varying degrees of depth.** What is it like to see the world, routinely, all the way through? It's impossible, even, for us to imagine, as impossible as trying to visualize a five-dimensional space. **Alien enthusiasts, take note: If you want to find interesting alien intelligences to study, you need look no further than the oceans or certain caves.**

I submit that when we survey the vast landscape of other creatures with whom we share life on this planet, we find commonalities, to be sure, and these commonalities should check our cruelties. **But we also find alien ways of being that are valuable in and of themselves, for their own sakes.** Furthermore, it is likely that the Earth is but one tiny tide pool in the vast ocean of life in the universe. Suppose that an utterly alien life form were to stumble upon our fragile blue planet. Suppose, further, that this life form were of an intelligence as beyond our comprehension as our intelligence is beyond the comprehension of a colony of *Escherichia coli.*

Suppose, finally, that this life form found us tasty or useful for experimentation. Should not this life form see that **even our lowly existence is a way of being that, by virtue of that fact, has intrinsic merit?**

I see a possible objection to my argument: Surely, plants, as well, have "ways of being." Surely, then, we should abstain from eating them as well. I would be the first to say that we should, for independent reasons, avoid wanton and needless destruction of plants. We've already just about eliminated from the Earth the former dominion of the trees, much to the detriment of everyone, human and nonhuman. But I'm not willing to go so far as to make the same argument for plants that I've been making for animals. Here's why: Even the lowly [sic?] oyster has a nervous system (a decentralized one—what is that like?) and reacts to touch, and such is the poor state of our understanding of the mystery of awareness that we simply cannot know whether an oyster suffers in a sense that we a) could now understand if we were to learn more, b) can eventually come to understand as we expand our capabilities, or c) can never come to understand because of insurmountable limitations of our own minds and sensory apparatuses. (It is not necessarily the case that our ape minds, brought up in and adapted to life on the savannah, are sufficient to the task of understanding, completely, the secrets of the universe or all of those parts of the universe that are the minds and ways of being of our fellow creatures. The weirdness of quantum mechanics and of string theory may be a symptom that we are pushing up against some of our cognitive limitations.)

In short, I believe that the strongest argument for veganism or vegetarianism **is the intrinsic value or possible value of other ways of being**. Think about this: The basic ontological position that we find ourselves in is that your mind is over there and mine is over here. There's a gulf

between your being and mine, and those actions that are most engaging to us and therefore meaningful are all more or less successful attempts to bridge that gulf. It is in our attempts to bridge the gulf between the Self (or, more properly, the Selves) and the Other that we love, teach, communicate, have sex, create culture, and so on. The alternative to respectful engagement with the Other is a nasty solipsism that flies in the face of, undercuts, or negates all that we hold dear.

Furthermore, we creatures with big brains have an astonishing plasticity of mind that enables us to develop toward that which is not us, and that which is not us, that which is alien and other, is what has the most potential to teach us, to enable us to expand beyond our current emotional, intellectual, and spiritual confines. We build machines to extend our senses and peer into vast distances and at the very, very small, and we are enriched, immeasurably, by these extensions of our capabilities. Those other, alien minds among us constitute a great bank of **diversity of being** that we are only now beginning to get glimpses of, that we are only now beginning, dimly, to understand. From our nonhuman animal brothers and sisters, we should be able, in time, to learn astonishing nuances of and variations upon this thing called being, ones that we can apply to expand who and what we are. But that's a science and art that we've barely begun to explore.

The precautionary principle alone should be sufficient to keep us from destroying creatures with minds and ways of being that we understand only dimly, that may turn out to be interesting and wonderful beyond any current imagining. An oyster may not have an idea of an evening, but it may well have a way of being of which I am entirely ignorant and that is, in its

way, immeasurably valuable, as your way of being is, to you, immeasurably valuable. A squeamish human squashes a spider. To the human, the spider's life might not seem like much, **but to the spider, it is everything.** And the fact is that we humans have at present, at best, only vague suppositions about what that spider-way-of-being is. At most, at present, we can get some hints about spider ways-of-being by doing field studies of spiders and by familiarizing ourselves with the better-informed characterizations of spiders in the traditions of indigenous peoples. The precautionary principle would say, don't kill what you don't understand simply because you don't understand it. "Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do," says the central figure in one of the world's more fanciful mythological systems. My sentiments exactly.

> **Postscript:** Claude Levi-Strauss, the great anthropologist and ethnologist, died in October of this year (2009). He died a bitter man. This gentle genius, who championed the "other ways of knowing" of indigenous peoples, despaired, in the end, of the potential of "civilized" cultures to recognize and reverse the relentless extirpation of that which is not them. I wish I could have had a beer with Claude before he died.[6] I would have told Claude that some of us get it—that some of us understand that embracing the Other is the root, stem, bud, and leaf of all that is good and that destroying the Other is the first, middle, and last resort of the ignorant and truly savage.

[6] Yes, I know, the yeast—what about the yeast? I'm not sure that it makes sense to talk about yeast ways-of-being.