

# Taking Sympathy Seriously: A Defense of Our Moral Psychology Toward Animals

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Sympathy for animals is regarded by many thinkers as theoretically disreputable. Against this I argue that sympathy appropriately underlies moral concern for animals. I offer an account of sympathy that distinguishes sympathy *with* from sympathy *for* fellow creatures, and I argue that both can be placed on an objective basis, if we differentiate enlightened from folk sympathy. Moreover, I suggest that sympathy for animals is not, as some have claimed, incompatible with environmentalism; on the contrary, it can ground environmental concern. Finally, I show that the traditional concept of anthropomorphism has no coherent basis, and I argue that the attempt to prove that animals lack thoughts is both unsuccessful and irrelevant to sympathy for languageless creatures.

*Is there a more mysterious idea for an artist than to imagine how nature is reflected in the eyes of an animal? How does a horse see the world, how does an eagle, a doe, or a dog?*

—Franz Marc<sup>1</sup>

## I. THE TROUBLE WITH SYMPATHY

The enormous growth in recent years of concern for the welfare of animals is largely a function of the sympathy that very many people feel for them, a sympathy that lies at the heart of our moral psychology regarding animals. The animal liberation movement, in particular, has been especially effective when it has educated people through films and other media about the conditions under which many animals are forced to lead their lives—in pounds, on factory farms, and in laboratories. Such demonstrations, either by creating sympathy or by engaging previously existing sympathies, lead people to do a variety of things: boycott pet shops, break into scientific labs to free the animals, cease eating meat, and so on.

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<sup>1</sup> Herschell Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 178.

Perhaps because of its emotional power, sympathy arouses skepticism in moral theorists.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, sympathy toward animals is widely regarded both by theorists and by practical people as inappropriate or weak-minded. Proponents of animal liberation, fearing this criticism, construct their theories in such a way as to distance themselves from sentimental appeals to sympathy. Even some theorists of environmental ethics have questioned the concern for animals generated by the advocates of animal liberation. In an influential article, J. Baird Callicott has argued that the animal liberation movement is incompatible with environmental ethics.<sup>3</sup> Insisting that environmental concern has principally to do with preserving unspoiled nature, Callicott attacks the animal liberationist concern for the plight of domesticated animals. Domesticated animals, for Callicott, "are living artifacts," and he implies that concern for *them* (as opposed to concern for the encroachment of technology into nature that the increase of the domesticated animal populations represents) is entirely misplaced (p. 330).

Sympathy for animals, wild or domestic, is typically thought to be problematic because it rests upon a faulty analogy between human and nonhuman animals: we feel sympathy for animals because we mistakenly think of them as humans.<sup>4</sup> Yet animals are fundamentally unlike us. Therefore, the perception of them as appropriate objects of moral concern is incorrect.

This tough-minded claim strikes at the heart of concern for animals. The arguments that undermine the validity of our sympathies for animals also tend to undermine the moral claims made on behalf of animals. If our sympathies for

<sup>2</sup> Some moral theorists may doubt the relevance of sympathy to moral theory, claiming that the relevant moral factors in any situation are entirely determined by objective factors such as justice, fairness, or utility. But sympathy may play a role in determining these factors. Moreover, many accounts of morality take moral psychology seriously, and almost any moral theory will have to find some place for our moral feelings, connected as they are to our moral intuitions. See note 5.

<sup>3</sup> J. Baird Callicott, "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," *Environmental Ethics* 2 (1980): 311-38. (All page references in this section are to this article.) More precisely, Callicott argues that the conceptual foundations of animal liberation are *incompatible* with the conceptual foundations of Leopold's land ethic, a philosophy that Callicott takes as the paradigm of environmental ethics. For a criticism of Callicott's interpretation of animal liberation see Edward Johnson, "Animal Liberation Versus the Land Ethic," *Environmental Ethics* 3 (1981): 265-73. In "Non-Anthropocentric Value Theory and Environmental Ethics," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (1984): 299-309, Callicott argues for the slightly different position, that animal liberation is *inadequate* to ground a radical environmental ethics that takes the biosphere as the ultimate repository (or object) of value. Callicott is right about this, but wrong, I argue, to suggest that without such a radical break with traditional ethics, concern for the biosphere cannot be adequately grounded.

<sup>4</sup> That *anthropomorphism* is something definite and inherently mistaken is commonly assumed without argument in discussions of animal thought. Davidson, for example, suggests that "Attributions of intentions and beliefs to dogs smack of anthropomorphism." Donald Davidson, "Thought and Talk," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 155. John Bishop claims that "one can argue validly from the similarity between a dumb creature's and a human's behaviour to the conclusion that the former as well as the latter is the outcome of practical reasoning only if one can exclude the possibility that the similarity results from anthropomorphic projection." John Bishop, "More Thought on Thought and Talk," *Mind* 89, no. 353 (January 1980): 1-16.

animals are simply inappropriate, then our moral concern for their welfare stands in danger of losing much of its practical force.

One of the most important reasons why sympathy is of interest to moral theory lies in the way that it determines the range of application of our moral intuitions. Our sympathetic response to animals makes them a part of our moral community; that is, our moral concerns and our ideas of right and wrong action extend to animals as well as to fellow humans.<sup>5</sup>

This sympathetic extension of moral reasoning to animals leads most people to two basic moral intuitions concerning animals. The first is that it is wrong to kill an animal gratuitously. The second is that it is wrong to hurt an animal gratuitously. Although it might be claimed that these intuitions are based, not on sympathy for animals, but merely on a revulsion against these human actions, this is implausible. What is wrong with the human action? Why do we feel that killing an animal differs from picking a flower or turning off a computer? The most obvious hypothesis is that we feel a kinship with animals, just as we do with humans, and that we implicitly depend upon that feeling when we elicit our moral intuitions about these cases.

It is particularly difficult for any moral theorist to give an adequate account of the harm of death. This is because no individual (human or animal) exists after death to suffer the harm.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, even though we may lack a satisfactory theoretical account of the harm of death, our *intuitions* assure us that death is a harm to humans. We extend that intuition to animals on the basis of our felt sympathies, and we think of an animal's death as analogous to a person's death.

In this way, our intuitions about the rightness or wrongness of killing and hurting animals are conditioned by our sympathies. This is not to say that such intuitions cannot be countered by self-interest or by tough-minded attitudes. The tough-minded do not try to justify the routine killing of animals by claiming that it is necessary; rather, they argue that to give credence to sympathy in such cases is simply naive and intellectually mistaken.

Before we can determine the plausibility of the tough-minded position, however, we have to get clear about what sympathy is. In what follows I explore the character of sympathy and argue that it does constitute an appropriate mode of feeling toward animals. Moreover, far from being incompatible with environ-

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<sup>5</sup> Sympathy is fundamental to moral theory in that it determines the range of individuals to which moral principles apply. This is illustrated by Robert Elliot's argument that Rawls is wrong to exclude nonhuman animals from the principles of justice developed in *A Theory of Justice*. The issue turns on whether the participants in the original position could turn out to be nonhuman animals in the real world. To make sense out of this possibility, Elliot argues that "The idea of judging how things are from an animal's point of view makes sense. Indeed we do make such judgments. We are capable of empathetic understanding with regard to animals and we can make comparative judgments about different lifestyles based on our understanding of the propensities, desires, interests and preferences that they have." Robert Elliot, "Rawlsian Justice and Non-Human Animals," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1984): 103.

<sup>6</sup> See Dale Jamieson, "Utilitarianism and the Morality of Killing," *Philosophical Studies* 45 (1984): 209-21.

mental concerns—as argued by Callicott—I argue that sympathy for animals, wild as well as domesticated, can provide a partial basis for environmental ethics.

## II. TWO LEVELS OF SYMPATHY

We speak about sympathy in a variety of ways. We *give* sympathy to persons, we *feel* sympathy for someone, our sympathies are *engaged*, we *are* sympathetic to you, your plight, your line of thought. These are not just linguistic artifacts, but neither are they to be taken literally. Sympathy is, I believe, a real part of our psychology, but our linguistic expressions are not invariable guides as to how to theorize about it.

To begin with, we should contrast sympathy with mere concern. The threatened destruction of a valuable historical building might upset certain citizens, and even move them to do whatever they can to prevent its demolition. But unless they are mentally aberrant they will not literally feel *sympathy* for the building. By contrast, suppose that a family is to be evicted and their home destroyed. Here, too, our concerned citizens may try to prevent the destruction of the house, but they are likely also to feel sympathy for the family. Sympathy, then, is not merely caring about what happens. Nor, when we feel sympathy, are we merely intellectually drawing the conclusion of a practical syllogism that tells us what we *ought* to do given moral principles and the conditions true of the case in question. Sympathy is something we *feel* toward particular individuals—say, a dog in a pound or a child being abused—or toward groups of individual creatures—say, elk or cattle which are starving as a result of a blizzard, or humans who are starving as a result of a famine.

Some environmentalist thinkers (for example, Callicott) have implied that we have a very different relationship to wild animals than we do to domesticated species.<sup>7</sup> Do we in fact relate sympathetically to wild animals (elk) as well as to domesticated animals (cows)? I think we do. By definition we have a different *relationship* with wild animals, but it does not follow that we do not feel the same sympathetic concern for similar animals under similar conditions. Consider the case of animal experimentation. Animal liberationists have shown strong concern for the animals used in such experiments whether they are wild (chimps, baboons, apes) or domesticated (cats, dogs). Perhaps the claim is that animal

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<sup>7</sup> Callicott, "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair." He repeats this claim without argument in "Non-Anthropocentric Value Theory and Environmental Ethics," where he criticizes animal liberation because "it makes no distinction between wild and domestic organisms. A Pekinese lap dog and a 'bobby calf' have the same moral status as a wild timber wolf and a wild otter" (p. 300f). In my view, if we consider these animals independently of the conditions under which they may be living, it is perfectly appropriate that each can engage our sympathies. On the other hand, each of these animals makes a very different contribution to different ecosystems, and these systems may have nonequivalent worth. See sec. 3 below.

lovers have a double standard concerning animals *in the wild*: we typically do not care about deer starving, but we do care about cattle starving. I do not think there is any reason to believe that this double standard exists. To be sure, most of us do not know the conditions under which most wild animals live their lives, but when misfortunes to wild animals are brought to public attention—e.g., extinction of species—it appears that people show just as much concern.<sup>8</sup> If anything, the more obvious problem is that people show an inappropriate concern for wild animals, a concern that fails to respect the nature of the animals and their lives. (I return to this matter in section three.)

Sympathy, as we see, involves empathy. To feel sympathetic toward someone, or to feel sympathy for some creature, involves being moved by that creature's condition. What is distinctive about sympathy is that this response is mediated by a recognition of a sort of kinship with the object of sympathy. We think of what it would be like to be in those circumstances, to have that happen, to suffer like that, to be like that. If we have no sympathy for the criminal who is to be executed, it is either because we will not put ourselves in his position—we reject him as an appropriate object of empathy—or because we can put ourselves in his position and think we would deserve to be executed.

We must, then, distinguish further between two senses of sympathy: sympathy *for* an individual in a certain condition and sympathy *with* that individual. The former occurs, for example, when we are sympathetic *to* someone's problems, or when we lack sympathy *for* the criminal who is executed. It occurs also in our response to animals, as when we feel great sympathy for the wildebeest calf that we see killed by wild dogs after a courageous defense by its mother. Such sympathy is frequently predicated on the attribution of value-laden human characteristics such as innocence, courage, cleverness, parental protectiveness, etc. Detecting these characteristics in the behavior of animals or humans, we are moved emotionally; we feel sorrow, anger, protectiveness. I call this sense "sympathy for."

There is a wider and more basic sort of sympathy that one being may have *with* another. To feel sympathy with another, in this sense, is to feel akin to the other and thus able to understand that being. This is what is happening when we detect "human" characteristics, such as innocence, courage, and anger, in animals. In

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<sup>8</sup> This only shows that animal liberationists, and many ordinary people, do not make a sharp distinction between wild and domesticated animals. Some environmentalists may hold that this is a mistake and that a sharp distinction *ought* to be made between the two classes of animals; we *ought* to care much more about wild creatures of all sorts than we do about domestic animals, and we *ought not* to feel "sympathy" for wild animals (because this is merely sentimental), nor for domestic animals (because they interfere with the wild ecosystem). It is sufficient to note that this is a theoretically motivated position that follows from valuing "wild" ecosystems over mixed or human-altered ecosystems. In other words, this position expresses a commitment to an abstract set of values (the beauty, integrity, and stability of certain biosystems) and is not a report of our moral psychology toward animals. Our sympathies, I contend, appropriately extend to all sorts of creatures living in all sorts of conditions.

this sense, other persons can often feel sympathy *with* a criminal; they know what it is like to be him. To have sympathy with an individual is to be able to project oneself in such a way as to partially encompass the inner life of the other. Hume's well-known conception of sympathy is, in fact, a conception of "sympathy with," expressed in extreme mechanistic terms:

The minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations, nor can anyone be actuated by an affection of which all others are not in some degree, susceptible. As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest, so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature.<sup>9</sup>

The notion of sympathy with can be generalized plausibly to include animals. One can understand, i.e., explain, why the animal acts as it does because its behavior is similar to human behavior. In this way one projects oneself into the inner life of nonhuman animals. Although sympathy *for* beings presupposes some sympathy *with* them, it does not always work the other way around. Farmers must inevitably have a great deal of sympathy with their livestock, and trout fishermen with trout, but such persons may lack sympathy *for* their victims.

Sympathy with and sympathy for are both quasicognitive states in the sense that they can be more or less adequate to their object. Take sympathy for: if I feel sympathy for a victim of an accident, my emotions are engaged by a perception of someone as (say) innocent and harmed by the accident—surely a complex cognition.

The Humean model of sympathy I have sketched suggests that empathy, and in turn a sort of kinship, is central.<sup>10</sup> I have also implied that sympathy for

<sup>9</sup> David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, bk. 3, pt. 3, sec. 1. Hume's notion of a sentiment of humanity is a natural sympathy based on "common humanity." That which is the common basis of this sentiment seems clearly to be distributed more widely than just to our species.

<sup>10</sup> J. Baird Callicott, "Hume's *Is/Ought* Dichotomy and the Relation of Ecology to Leopold's Land Ethic," *Environmental Ethics* 4 (1982): 163–74. According to Callicott, Leopold would concur in this extension of our sympathies to nonhuman animals: "Leopold tries to excite our sympathy and fellow feeling by portraying animal behaviour as in many ways similar to our own and as motivated by similar psychological experiences" (p. 172). The consequence of Leopold's argument is that "we should feel and thus behave . . . toward other living things in ways similar to the way we feel and thus behave toward our human kin" (ibid.). From Callicott's perspective, however, this extension of a feeling of kinship is not radical enough. He claims to find in Hume that we have "not only . . . sympathy for our fellows, we are also naturally endowed with a sentiment, the proper object of which is society itself" (p. 173). Then, arguing that ecology shows that the biotic community as a whole is a society of which humans are members, he attempts to derive a more radical holistic environmental ethics based on Humean sentiments. This argument is repeated in "Non-Anthropocentric Value Theory" and in "Intrinsic Value, Quantum Theory, and Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 7 (1985): 257–75. However, I doubt: (a) that there really is a sentiment for society as a whole—as opposed to an interacting collection of individuals; (b) that it makes sense to extend the notion of society to include "soils and waters"; (c) that the existence of such an extendable sentiment could have any implications concerning the value of a wild biotic society over a tame one.

depends upon first feeling sympathy with someone, and, finally, feeling sympathy with a wide variety of creatures. There is tension in this explanation. We must have some idea of what it would be like to be that creature, *W*. Moreover, our emotions are engaged, so I am hypothesizing, by an exercise in which we consider how *we* would feel in *W*'s circumstances. But if *W* is a different *kind* of creature, this exercise could go wrong or be impossible to perform.<sup>11</sup>

The solution to this difficulty is not to discount empathy, but to note two features of our ability to empathize with other creatures. The first is that our lives are part of a larger biological life full of common characteristics and needs. Animals have needs for nourishment, water, air; they have life cycles, a sort of family life, a sort of social life with other members of their species; they suffer and flourish; many of them engage in exploratory and playful behavior. While I think such characteristics of our common biological life support and explain sympathy *with* other creatures, they do not guarantee that we correctly put ourselves in the animal's place, that is, that we correctly perceive what we have in common with the other creature. We may very well go wrong, then, when we feel sympathy *for* the creature. If an emperor penguin sits on an egg for many months, never moving through the black Antarctic winter, we may feel empathy, comparing that sort of devotion to similar behavior by other animals, including humans, who make sacrifices for their offspring. But would I be justified in feeling sympathy *for* the emperor penguin because it has to sit so miserably on the egg in the cold? It is difficult to say; I must think of what is good for a penguin, and whether the penguin really suffers, and whether its suffering is avoidable.

This brings us to the second mitigating feature. We frequently feel sympathy for a creature when we believe it to be suffering. The obvious marks of suffering, and of flourishing, are widespread throughout the animal kingdom. Although I may have it wrong when I think that a penguin suffers to hatch its egg, I plausibly have it right when I think that a young ape is suffering if it appears to pine over its mother's death and dies a few days later. We can often detect the direct signs of suffering (and flourishing) even if we get their causes wrong, and even if we misperceive the contexts of suffering because we are ignorant of the nature of the animal.<sup>12</sup>

There are those who would reject all such cases, claiming that we feel sympathy for animals because we suppose that they are just like us: because I would feel cold at sub-zero temperatures, I assume that a penguin also feels cold.

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<sup>11</sup> Nagel has argued that we cannot really understand the experience of alien creatures with very different bodies. I believe that he overstates the case. Moreover, a partial understanding will do for what I am arguing. See Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like To Be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 435-50.

<sup>12</sup> For more details about the problems of detecting animal suffering see Marian Stamp Dawkins, *Animal Suffering: The Science of Animal Welfare* (London and New York: Chapman and Hall, 1980).

There is no reason, however, to believe that all, or even most, feelings of sympathy for animals involve such an obvious mistake. All we need suppose is that animals are like us in important ways, and this surely is true. Those who charge that sympathy is based on mistaken assumptions of similarity sometimes assume that there is a radical gulf between humans and other animals, and that humans cannot transcend that gulf intuitively. Thus, if we feel sympathy for animals it *must* be because we are illicitly projecting a thoroughly human psychology upon them. The assumption of an unbridgeable gulf is, however, implausible. Humans are members of a larger biological family, and the common life shared by members of that family enables us to respond intuitively to animals.

Our sympathy with various creatures does not necessarily entail projecting onto them specifically human characteristics. We often empathize with animals that we experience as very different from us. Animals have all sorts of forms and powers that humans do not have and though we have sympathy with them, we do not suppose that they resemble us closely. Consider such favorite animals as the large whales, the polar bear, the kangaroo, the lion, the elephant, and the eagle. We love, admire, or fear these animals because their special powers are so different from our own. Yet the sympathetic experience of these animals entails some understanding of what it is like to be them—for example, of what it is like to be huge and to walk on four legs, to have a large trunk, and so forth.

As a quasicognitive state, sympathy (both for and with) is subject to a sort of reflective equilibrium. It can be criticized and improved; it can be more or less appropriately grounded upon the empirical facts of the case. Moreover, being based on a perception of similarity, feelings of sympathy with can be a matter of degree. For example, having studied an octopus, I may begin to care for its well-being, developing a modest sympathy with its fears and interests, even though much about its mental life remains alien. Hypothesizing a particular psychology for the animal I am able to explain and understand its behavior; this hypothesis suggests further observations, which, of course, are themselves far from uninfected by my hypothesis of the animal's psychology. The observations will support the hypothesis and vice versa, until the explanation breaks down or until I find a simpler explanation that does not invoke a life (including a mental life) analogous to my own (e.g., involving consciousness, pleasure, pain, beliefs, and desires).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Thus, rational sympathy is closely related to Daniel Dennett's notion that we explain (and understand) humans or computers by taking up the *intentional stance*. Cf. Daniel Dennett, *Brainstorms* (Montgomery, Vt.: Bradford, 1978).

### III. SPECIES, CHARACTER, AND THE ENVIRONMENT: TWO OBJECTIONS

Far from experiencing animals as approximating us, we experience them, from the sympathetic point of view, as in many ways larger than we are, as more purely embodying various character traits that have a moral dimension. This is particularly true of animals considered as members of a species. The polar bear, for instance, may appear to be extremely noble, powerful, and dangerous. More broadly, we find animals of many species apparently displaying such virtues as extreme courage, fortitude, patience, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and so forth. Sympathy with animals is thus typically correlated with the attribution of character traits to them. It may be possible to avoid such attribution, but this seems doubtful. Certainly, when we experience other persons we habitually attribute character traits to them.

The tendency to attribute character traits to animals elicits two objections to taking sympathy seriously. The first is that the traits that appear to us to accompany the object with which we sympathize, traits like innocence, courage, and patience, are illusory in the case of animals. Why? Two reasons might be offered for this claim. First, attributions of such traits cannot be objectively *demonstrated* to be appropriate. Innocence, for example, can never be established or refuted by a scientific description of animals and their behavior. But it is doubtful that such proof exists in the human case either. We think people exhibit virtues in their behavior, but we do not expect such virtues to be logically inferable from objective descriptions of that behavior.

The deeper reason for denying that animals have character traits is the claim that the presuppositions of attributing such traits to humans cannot be satisfied in the case of animals. I believe that this is a correct claim about many but not all human traits. Many character traits ascribed to humans—for example, fairness—may presuppose motivations, thoughts, and concepts that nonhuman animals cannot be thought to have. But even if we deny these “higher” traits to an animal, we might still value the animal because it exhibits an analogue of a valuable human trait or because it exhibits traits that strike us as valuable even though they are different from human traits. The penguin sitting on its egg through the dead of winter may be considered to show an analogue of patience, even though the penguin does not exhibit strictly human patience (the penguin is not as cold as a human would be, and it does not have the same mental life while sitting). It is also an exhibition of such extreme “self-sacrifice” as to go beyond human models. Thus, it is a trait that we may find valuable, though alien.

Indeed, for many people, it is the *difference* between animals and humans, the straightforwardness of animal character, that marks off animals as worthy objects of admiration. Montaigne has been described, for example, as regarding animals,

as our moral superiors, in every significant way. . . . They seek only 'tangible' and 'attainable' goods, while we have only 'wind and smoke' as our portion. They have an unimpaired sense of reality, seeking only repose, security, health, and peace, while we pursue reason, knowledge, and renown, which brings us nothing but grief.<sup>14</sup>

The second major objection to taking sympathy seriously can be formulated as an implication about the relative worthiness of various species: because of the mental and character traits we discern through the eye of sympathy in various species of animals, we like or dislike or are neutral toward those species, and we rank them accordingly in a hierarchy. But, the objection continues, surely if all species of animals are equal in value, then such a hierarchy would be implausible, and it would have untoward consequences if applied to environmental issues. Our sympathies thus conflict with a larger environmental concern for *all* species of animals and plants. For example, the public controversy over preserving the snail darter fish clearly showed the conflict between environmentalism and normal, untutored sympathy, which finds nothing to mourn about the extinction of the snail darter.

Although sympathy for animals overlaps with environmentalism, there is a distinction between them. Environmental concern focuses on the integrity of an ecosystem, and may spring from a variety of sources, from aesthetics to self-interest. By contrast, sympathetic concern focuses on individuals (and derivatively on species), who are to some degree like us, and whom we therefore care about, and who therefore seem to us to deserve a good life.<sup>15</sup> The objection seeks to drive a wedge between these two points of view, and suggests that sympathy will give us the wrong answer about the value of species.

The objection loses some of its force if we distinguish "folk sympathy" from "enlightened sympathy." Folk sympathy is based on a culturally bound set of ideas about animals. Our own folk wisdom, for example, portrays some animals as noble, others as sneaky—the lion is kingly, the fox is full of tricks. Enlightened sympathy, on the other hand, is based on the far more adequate descriptions of animals by ethologists and biologists. Such descriptions are not going to lead us to think that the lion has traits like nobility and courage, whereas the African dog does not. Both lions and dogs will be treated neutrally, i.e., free from folk

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<sup>14</sup> Judith Shklar, "Putting Cruelty First," *Daedalus* 3, no. 3 (Summer 1982): 17–27, 20.

<sup>15</sup> This is why we cannot literally have sympathy for an ecosystem. The kind of sympathy most people feel for cars, machines, and perhaps ecosystems is an as-if or pretend sympathy. We pretend, or perhaps cannot quite escape the idea, that the object, say a machine that is being dismantled, is suffering just as a living, conscious being would. But as far as we know this belief is false. For sympathy for to be truly appropriate, the object I feel sympathy *with* must be at the least a conscious being.

prejudices. Each species, for example, has an interesting, but different, large family structure—and to speak of “family structure” is to indicate how sympathy still finds a foothold within these more objective concepts.

Yet, to give substantive weight even to enlightened sympathy has implications for the value of species. On the assumption suggested above that sympathy generates a hierarchy of value, it seems reasonable to suggest the following two principles: first, with regard to *species value*, species are valuable if and only if they have valuable traits (character, mental, behavioral) that we discern through enlightened empathetic perception; second, with regard to the *hierarchy of value*, species are more valuable the more closely they approximate to human traits.<sup>16</sup>

This second principle captures the fact that sympathy with is a matter of degree, and if it yields value in our eyes, then it must yield less value as sympathy with lessens. The two principles together, however, do not appear adequate to ground concern for the environment as a whole, nor concern for important species within the environment. What of the snail darter and the shark, one a species we do not care about, the other a species we positively fear?

Sympathy for animals clearly plays an important role in generating concern for the environment. It is desirable, therefore, to show that the implications of sympathy are not anti-environmental. The first way to bring sympathy for animals into line with concern for the environment is to adjust the claim of the species value principle so that it states merely a *sufficient* condition of value. While sympathy is probably the most important source of value, it is not the only one. We might, for example, attribute aesthetic value both to unsympathetic kinds of creatures and to the total environment. In addition, we must allow that the ecosystem is an interactive whole in which unsympathetic species of animals and plants can have an instrumental value insofar as they support the ecosystem and in so doing directly or indirectly support the animals we especially care about. On this view, plankton are important because, among other reasons, they provide food for whales. The dung beetle has value, not only by virtue of the biological aesthetics of its design and function, but also because it supports the large animals and herds of the African plains. If there should be a species—the mosquito, for example—that has no positive characteristics from the point of view of sympathy, and that does the ecosystem no good, then its extinction would be no loss.

Sympathy for animals thus explains the harm of extinction for some species,

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<sup>16</sup> The notion of approximating to human traits should not be taken in the superficial sense of approximating to human physical appearance. What is involved is, rather, an approximation to the general features of human life, largely biological in nature, as well as to human mental life. An organism from outer space might look nothing like us and yet be very like us. Conversely, an organism might look like us but be so alien in its mental, biological and social life that it would be nothing like us in reality.

and it also helps to explain the value of the larger ecosystems in which such species have their lives. Indeed, it is the existence of sympathetic animals that creates ecosystems that we care about. In this way sympathy with animals helps to resolve one of the central puzzles of environmentalist positions that favor the *whole* biotic community: why should we favor some wholes over other wholes?<sup>17</sup> As Johnson puts it: "Why isn't *whatever* happens integral, stable, and beautiful?"<sup>18</sup> The environments that we seek to protect, that we find beautiful, I suggest, are just those in which sympathetic creatures live.

Two further points temper the alleged conflict between sympathy and environmentalism. First, we have *some* sympathy even with snail darters and sharks, and they must therefore have *some* characteristics that have a slight value. All things being equal, the extinction even of very primitive creatures would then be a slight loss. Second, our antipathy for creatures like the shark is, I assume, compounded largely of ignorance and self-interest. Our sympathies, therefore, can be enlightened by further knowledge of the shark. Self-interest, on the other hand, always has the potential to rob sympathy of its psychological force. Whether sharks are totally unsympathetic could be truly determined only under conditions in which humans could interact safely with sharks.

Taking our animal sympathies seriously entails real consequences for environmental issues, but these consequences are not implausible. Far from being in conflict with a concern for the whole environment, our sympathies can help ground such a concern.

#### IV. FURTHER OBJECTIONS: THE VARIABILITY OF SYMPATHY

Let us now turn to a further salient reason for skepticism about sympathy *for* animals. While natural, sympathy for animals is far from universal. Nor are we consistent in our sympathies; a hunter may love his dog, yet gleefully kill his game. Moreover, responses to animals are diverse and vary from culture to culture. This relativity of responses makes it appear that our sympathy for animals is not a cognitive state in the sense that it corresponds to any objective condition of the animal.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> By contrast, Callicott's extension of Humean sentiments to the biosphere *per se* fails to give any clear answer to this central value question. Even accepting the idea that we have a sentiment for society as a whole, and that this sentiment endows society with value, nothing follows about *which* form of society is to be preferred from the many possible forms it has taken and could take. The extension of such a sentiment to the biosphere (see "Non-Anthropocentric Value Theory," p. 305) stumbles over the same logical point. Nothing follows from our "biophilia" *per se* about how we should prefer a wild biosphere to a domesticated biosphere.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Johnson, "Animal Liberation," p. 270 (his emphasis).

<sup>19</sup> The widespread use of animals in scientific experiments reinforces the idea that sympathy is mistaken from the scientific point of view. This conclusion, however, doesn't follow: (a) it is in scientists' self-interest to bracket the sympathy they might naturally feel for the animals they experiment upon; (b) most scientists undoubtedly accept the need for guidelines on the care and use of laboratory animals, and such need implies that animals should not be made to suffer gratuitously.

A different explanation of these points is that sympathy is not a simple perception, but more like a way of perceiving some object. Sympathy is very strongly influenced by particular beliefs about the object, as well as by more general values and attitudes. The fact that people vary widely in their sympathy, or lack of sympathy, for animals can be explained as a result of a difference in background cognitive states. Moreover, sympathy can be cultivated or suppressed. These factors easily account for the fact that many people can be indifferent and even cruel to animals.

People are notoriously capable of great cruelty to other humans. But we do not take it to follow from the variability of human sympathy for humans that we are morally free to feel sympathy or not independently of the facts of the case. In war, soldiers sometimes commit atrocities; those soldiers who feel sympathy for the victims are displaying a sane and rational response. If one believes either that the individual in question is not suffering or that the individual deserves to suffer, it is not irrational to feel no sympathy for him or her. Barring these beliefs, it seems obvious that it is more rational to feel sympathy than to be indifferent. It is psychologically possible to be indifferent without these background beliefs, but such indifference borders on a psychological disorder.

This kind of example reminds us that we do not consider sympathy for people to be largely irrational, nor to be ungrounded in facts. Sympathy for animals is constructed, and can be justified, on a similar basis.<sup>20</sup> If the facts in a given case, facts about suffering and innocence, for example, are such as to justify a certain response toward humans, then they justify a similar response if the individuals involved are animals. For instance, the sympathy that an ethologist may develop for an old animal that is weak and losing its place in the family group may be informed by the best available knowledge of the mentality of the animals in question, knowledge that may make it just as appropriate to feel sad for this creature as for a human under roughly similar circumstances.

Indeed, on the minimal assumption that sympathy for humans is appropriate, we can argue that there is no way to logically limit such sympathy to humans. Other species of creatures are imaginable, even if none in fact exist, that would merit a sympathetic response. Imagine, for example, that we discover a previously unknown primate species that is approximately halfway between the orangutan and *Homo sapiens* in development (or imagine that we create such a species through gene splicing). Imagine that this species has the mental development of a very retarded human, and has a rudimentary language. Surely such

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<sup>20</sup> I believe that this claim for animals can be defended even in the face of the evidence from history of culturally validated cruelty to animals. For such an example, see Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). The background beliefs and attitudes in other societies may be very different, especially concerning the two criteria just mentioned, harm and innocence. Nor is it implausible to suggest that these societies were simply ignorant by our standards about the animals to which they were cruel.

creatures would merit a sympathetic response; it would be appropriate to be sad if they suffered, and impressed if they struggled and conquered some obstacle. Sympathetic responses, then, cannot be logically restricted to one species. The limits of appropriate sympathy are an open question. Once we see there is no species barrier, however, the empirical facts about animals appear to justify wide application of our sympathies to them.

### V. ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND ANIMAL THOUGHT

At bottom, it is the traditional charge of anthropomorphism that undoubtedly underlies tough-minded claims that sympathy for animals is mistaken.<sup>21</sup> I have already rejected the claim that sympathy presupposes an assumption of close similarity between a given animal and humans. Even if people often do assume a false similarity between human mental life and that of animals, when these mistakes are corrected there still is a broad objective basis for feeling sympathy for animals. To justify the rejection of sympathy for animals, the charge of anthropomorphism has to be made in a more radical way. One way to do this would be to claim, as supporters of the traditional charge of anthropomorphism do, that animals simply lack any mental life that we can sympathize with. However, it is difficult to accept the argument once advanced for this: that animals are mere machines, and humans are not. Humans are, after all, a species of animal. We need some other grounds to show that our sympathy *with* animals is entirely mistaken.

Mary Midgley suggests that the worry about anthropomorphism rests on the skeptical problem of other minds.<sup>22</sup> Yet there appears to be no way to formulate the other minds problem so that it applies to animals but not to fellow humans. Indeed, some ways of formulating the problem apply to humans and *not* to animals. For instance, one classic way to generate the problem involves the possibility of deception.<sup>23</sup> People sometimes pretend to have mental states that in fact they do not have. They can pretend to be in pain when they are not, and vice versa; they can dissemble about their beliefs, and so forth. Hence, so the argument goes, there is always in every particular case a logical gap between behavior and mental state, and thus we cannot tell what mental state, if any, underlies a person's behavior. This way of formulating the other minds worry appears to have little application to animals. Skeptics about animals do not suppose that they are capable of this sort of deception, and to suppose that they

<sup>21</sup> Not the *original* charge of anthropomorphism, which was attributing human characteristics to God. Cf. Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1983), chap. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Midgley, *Animals*, p. 129–38.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the well-known version of the other minds argument by V. C. Chappell in his introduction to *The Philosophy of Mind* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962).

are capable of deception would automatically undermine the charge of anthropomorphism. Creatures capable of higher order intentionality, such as the intention to deceive, would be comparable to humans in mentality.

The main mechanism for deception between humans is language. The lack of language has traditionally been used to deny animals a mental life; the same lack can also be turned in their favor. In lacking language animals lack that which makes other persons potentially alien.<sup>24</sup> In many respects the mind of another person is potentially more unknown to me than the mind of my dog.

Can more be made out of animals' lack of language? The most influential recent attempt to establish a Cartesian-like gap between humans and nonhuman animals on the basis of language has been made by Donald Davidson. In "Thought and Talk" Davidson argues for the thesis "that a creature cannot have thoughts unless it is an interpreter of the speech of another."<sup>25</sup> Having a language is a necessary condition for thoughts, by which Davidson means the whole array of propositional attitudes, both states and events, such as are reported by "believes," "wants," and "intends," on the one hand, and by "came to believe," "forgot," "noticed," on the other. Since as far as we know no animals have anything that Davidson would count as a true language, we may conclude that no animals have any thoughts.<sup>26</sup> Davidson's argument sounds devastating to the validity of sympathy for animals. Is it?

To answer this question we must first distinguish two stages of Davidson's skepticism about the thoughts of languageless creatures. The first stage follows from the plausible claim that it is inaccurate to attribute to creatures without language thoughts that contain the distinctions embodied in our linguistic expressions:

It is much harder to say, when speech is not present, how to distinguish universal thoughts from conjunctions of thoughts, or how to attribute conditional thoughts, or thoughts with, so to speak, mixed quantification. . . . unless there is behavior that can be interpreted as speech, the evidence will not be adequate to justify the fine distinctions we are used to making in the attribution of thoughts. (p. 163f)

It follows that we must be cautious when we attribute thoughts to animals, and that our attributions will always be fundamentally misleading. This caution comes as no surprise, for we typically block the usual implications of such

<sup>24</sup> This is denied by Jonathan Bennett in *Linguistic Behaviour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976): "On the face of it, a language seems to offer an extra way of revealing intentions rather than an indispensable means of concealing and disguising them" (p. 31).

<sup>25</sup> Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 157. Subsequent parenthetical page references are to this edition.

<sup>26</sup> The opposite position is vigorously defended by D. M. Armstrong, *Belief, Truth and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), chap. 3, and by Jonathan Bennett, *Linguistic Behaviour*, sec. 9.

attributions when we apply them to animals. We credit the dog who barks up the wrong tree with the belief that the squirrel he was chasing is in the tree, but we do not comfortably connect that belief attribution to other related beliefs that would require human concepts. What does not follow, even for Davidson, is that animals do not have thoughts, for he does not suppose that every thought can be correctly formulated in words.

Davidson's more controversial position goes well beyond this first stage of skepticism to deny thought entirely to nonlinguistic creatures. He argues that beliefs are required for thoughts of all sorts: "It is necessary that there be endless interlocked beliefs. The system of such beliefs identifies a thought by locating it in a logical and epistemic space" (p. 157). He then argues that languageless creatures cannot have beliefs. Hence, they cannot have thoughts. It is not that we cannot adequately formulate their beliefs, but that belief can arise only in the process of interpreting the utterances of a linguistic community.

The argument for these claims appears incomplete, however, because it moves from an analysis of beliefs that arise in connection with assertion, to the claim that belief arises *only* in this connection. Davidson claims, "The concept of belief thus stands ready to take up the slack between objective truth and the held true, and we come to understand it *just* in this connection" (p. 170, my emphasis). His argument, however, best supports the weaker claim that this connection is one way we come to understand and attribute beliefs. To move from the claim that belief is required for the interpretation of speech to the conclusion that the interpretation of speech is required for belief does not appear to take seriously the possibility of languageless belief.

Davidson partially fills this gap by further arguing that languageless creatures cannot have the *concept of belief*, and hence cannot have beliefs:

Someone cannot have a belief unless he understands the possibility of being mistaken, and this requires grasping the contrast between truth and error—true belief and false belief. But this contrast, I have argued, can emerge only in the context of interpretation, which alone forces us to the idea of an objective public truth. (p. 170)

This claim seems stronger than any argument Davidson explicitly presents. It is plausible that languageless creatures cannot have a self-conscious concept of error, but it is not self-evident that they cannot have some behavioral analogue of such a concept. At issue is what it is to "understand the possibility of being mistaken." If a polar bear mother searches for her cubs in one spot and then gives up and goes to another place, apparently continuing her search, is it mistaken to attribute to her in some sense the realization that her first thought was wrong? To take another example, it is very natural to attribute false beliefs, and some understanding of being mistaken, to primates in experiments in which they learn to solve puzzles by trial and error.

Even granting that languageless creatures cannot have beliefs, it can be argued that this has no damaging implications for sympathy with animals. Consider the claim that beliefs are central to other thoughts. Davidson argues persuasively that thoughts need to be located somehow: "Even to wonder whether the gun is loaded, or to speculate on the possibility that the gun is loaded, requires the belief, for example, that a gun is a weapon, that it is a more or less enduring physical object, and so on" (p. 157). What this shows is that for a creature to have thoughts it must have some conceptual scheme, some picture of the world. The dog that barks up the wrong tree must in some sense have a conception of squirrels, of trees, of objects being up in trees, and so on. No doubt a dog's conceptual scheme is extremely different from our own. Lacking language or other means of self-conscious analysis, the dog cannot scrutinize its own conceptual scheme, and it therefore lacks Davidsonian beliefs. But it is not clear that the dog thereby lacks a scheme to locate thoughts with respect to the world.

As Davidson admits, "Adverting to beliefs and desires to explain action is therefore a way of fitting an action into a pattern of behavior made coherent by the [common-sense theory of action]" (p. 159). It is far from clear that such appeal to beliefs, or something very like beliefs, to explain both human and animal action, even where no verbal expression of thought is in question, is any less fundamental to the concept of belief than is the use of belief to explain utterances. Furthermore, if we are not to explain animal behavior within the strict terms of this model, it can be plausibly urged that we will be forced to appeal to a very similar model to explain why animals do what they do. If they do not strictly have beliefs, desires, and intentions, then they certainly appear to have cognitive states that are closely analogous to beliefs, desires, and intentions. When a pride of lions steals up on a herd of antelope they surely have something remarkably analogous to the intention to catch and kill one of the antelope, something very analogous to the desire to do so, and something very analogous to a set of beliefs about the location of the antelope.

More generally, it does not follow that animals do not have a mental life just because they do not have Davidsonian thoughts. They appear to "remember," to "identify" objects, to "recognize" individuals, and so on. Whales, lions, wolves, and many other social animals engage in flexible, interactive group behavior that does a good job of imitating consciously coordinated activity. All of this is cognitive behavior that is at least analogous to human cognitive behavior.<sup>27</sup>

This suggests that the presupposition of sympathy, namely a mental life analogous to our own, is not undermined by Davidson's thesis. We can support

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<sup>27</sup> I take for granted that we may properly attribute some sort of perceptual life and sensations to animals. If a Davidsonian held that seeing, hearing, etc., are propositional in nature, then it would follow that animals do not even see or hear things. This is so implausible that we ought to conclude either that perception is not a thought in Davidson's sense or that Davidson's argument against languageless thought must be wrong.

this conclusion further by noting that Davidson's thesis applies perfectly to nonlinguistic humans. If his argument is correct, a child learning language will have neither beliefs nor thoughts. Even if the child has "names" for objects, it will not yet have anything like a theory of interpretation, and so nothing like Davidsonian beliefs. Nor would feral children or the prelinguistic Mr. Ballard, reported by William James, have Davidsonian beliefs or thoughts. But surely all such individuals have a mental life of significant proportions. And just as we appropriately feel sympathy for prelinguistic children, similar grounds justify sympathy for animals that have an equal cognitive development. We can even imagine cases of highly intelligent humans, capable of solving complex problems, who might be languageless for one reason or another. We would surely attribute to such persons many mental states analogous to our own, even though it could not be said that they have Davidsonian thoughts.

I have been arguing in defense of sympathy *with* animals in the face of Davidson's thesis. Although earlier I claimed that sympathy *for* animals presupposes sympathy *with* them, it is not obvious that the requisite sympathy with amounts to requiring analogous *cognitive* states, such as belief. Suffering, for example, may require only the ability to feel pain, which Davidson has given us no reason to question in animals. If, quite implausibly, it is claimed that suffering worthy of sympathy requires more than this ability, then we can advert to the argument of the preceding paragraph. Whatever is required for real suffering, nonlinguistic humans can suffer, and so can animals in analogous situations.

## VI. CONCLUSION

I conclude that in spite of a bad press, sympathy for animals is as appropriate and justified as sympathy for humans. Although feelings of sympathy may sometimes be based on mistaken assumptions of similarity between humans and animals, sympathy does not logically require such misinformation and inappropriate projections. There appears to be no very cogent set of ideas underlying the frequent and casually made charge of anthropomorphism. There are no plausible grounds that establish the sort of gulf between humans and animals that is required to refute the application of our sympathies to animals. Moreover, it appears that the concept of sympathy for animals is coherent and its implications both substantive and not absurd.

Hence, it appears that something has to give way in our usual views about the difference between sympathy for fellow humans and sympathy for animals. One familiar aspect of sympathy is compassion. Those who have compassion for persons who suffer are considered to be morally conscientious, especially if they act on that compassion. On the other hand, those who have compassion for animals who suffer are thought to be a bit eccentric, especially if they act on that

compassion. Even if humans suffer much more than animals can, the difference does not appear to warrant praising one response while dismissing the other. The same moral psychology is being applied in both cases, and it is equally likely to be based on objective conditions of suffering in both cases. And just as people *ought* to respond sympathetically to the plight of certain humans, they *ought* to respond to the plight of certain nonhuman animals. We can, of course, propose giving up compassion and other aspects of sympathy for humans; what we cannot do coherently is to draw a line sharply limiting sympathy to our fellow humans.

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