



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Recovering/Uncovering Animality

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A new perspective impacting the ancient and still ever-so-vital intersection of religious traditions and the natural world is the reemergence and deepening of perhaps the oldest of human perspectives on both ourselves and the world—we are animals now, we have always been one kind of animal among many others, and we will always be animals. Noticing and taking seriously our own animality is more than a formative influence in how we encounter our shared Earth—it is the very foundation of those encounters. This acknowledgment of humanity’s past, present, and future fuels a creative fire stirring countless human individuals to explore the overwhelming mysteries we call “nature” and those complexes of caring, believing, and reacting that we name “religion.” Because re-affirmation of our animality stands to shape in decisive ways how we encounter and share earth, air, and water, such a re-affirmation will inevitably impact even the most human-centered forms of religion. This is so because *dis*-covering and *re*-covering our multifaceted human animality leads to a crucial *un*-covering of those cultural and religious narratives that have prevented modern humans from noticing and taking seriously salient features of our day-to-day life as Earth creatures. At stake is a full, health-producing embrace of the fact that each human lives unavoidably in a nested series of more-than-human communities. Embracing this most basic of human realities has the prospect of infusing each of us with a full appreciation of life, for thereby we can come home to the realization that our fellow living creatures co-inhabit every part of the Earth on which we live, populate the air we breathe and exhale, and share with us a common origin in the vital waters that nourish the land and cover three-quarters of our shared Earth home. Earth, air, water, and the living fire of shared animality are our vital heritage as each stirs within us and without us, too.

A MODERN RE-EMERGENCE

The return of a concern to engage honestly the plain truth of humans’ animality is what drives a forthright question used by a pre-eminent primatologist as the title of a 2016 book—*Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?*¹ This question is begged by multiple human claims. It follows, for example, from our species’ exaggerated claims of superiority. Protagoras’ well-known assertion that “Of all things the measure is Man”² and the Abrahamic traditions’ claim that humankind is the created world’s *raison d’être* suggest that “we” can easily understand “them,” that is, less exalted creatures.

Importantly, though, the same question is also begged by altogether humbler claims made by our species—it follows from, for example, Aldo Leopold’s 1949 exhortation that the human community should alter its self-evaluation “from conqueror of the land-community to a plain member and citizen of it.”³ Most industrialized human communities have ignored such advice in favor of self-serving claims to moral self-righteousness as our allegedly “higher civilizations” harmed their own natural environments and at the same time colonized, pillaged, and enslaved less “developed” indigenous human communities in newly conquered lands. Leopold’s assertion that humans should aspire to act as “plain members and citizens” of a shared Earth amounted to an exhortation to adjust our self-evaluation in ways that nurture our ability to co-exist with, even actively protect, all animals, human and nonhuman alike.

Such a change would be radical in the original sense of that term, namely, “going to the root” (*radix* is Latin for “root”)—alternatively, such a claim can be a flame that sheds light on the many inherited claims that humans are separate from the rest of the Earth. Such flames have been lit all around the world today in many human precincts, only a fraction of which can be spotlighted here.

INTO THE REALM OF OTHER ANIMALS—COMPANION ANIMALS ON FIRE

Most humans know little, if anything at all, of the vast realm of nonhuman life on Earth. This is true for many reasons, not the least of which is that there are tens of millions of species in this realm (this domain thus being a great deal vaster than the admittedly diverse realm of human life, of which most contemporary humans are also astonishingly uninformed). One subdomain of the nonhuman realm is, however, today much better known than in previous centuries—this is the group commonly designated by humans as “companion animals” (humans are, of course, equally “companion animals” for the nonhumans we place in this category, but our linguistic habits remain inattentive to this fact).

Domesticated dogs, cats, horses, **many**, and dozens of more “exotic” animals today might find themselves categorized as “companion animals.” But many members of even the most familiar “domesticated” species live beyond human control and are not claimed by any humans as their property—such animals are often referred to as “feral” animals. Owned dogs, cats, and horses are, then, only a fraction of these familiar species. Of the roughly one billion dogs alive today, only about one quarter fit into the common paradigm of an owned animal living with a human family.⁴ The dog–human relationship is ancient, although precisely how ancient is a continuing subject of debate—many scientists suggest that the current consensus is that dogs were domesticated (or as many researchers now observe, dogs and humans co-domesticated each other) sometime between 32,000 and 18,800 years ago.⁵

Companion animals are interesting for many other reasons as well. In some industrialized countries, it has been the case since the 1990s that the number of households with companion animals has outnumbered the households with children.⁶ A related phenomenon is that in some legal systems around the world, companion animals that are owned have received innovative legal protections.⁷ Yet the fact that un-owned companion animals (statistically, the majority of dogs and cats alive today) only rarely receive such innovative protections (overwhelmingly because of heroic efforts by volunteer animal



protectionists) reveals that legal protections for companion animals still are dominated by unmistakable vestiges of human-centeredness. The pattern of actual legal protections reveals, then, that even though some human communities now utilize legal systems to protect favored nonhumans, human-centered values overwhelmingly remain the norm. The upshot is that the long history of basic harms done by human societies to all other nonhuman animals remains largely unchanged.

The work of scientists and historians continues to expand the already well-developed corpus of knowledge about the complexities of humans' long-standing relationship with companion animals. Historians have for decades provided perspectives on the mixed motives and deep symbolic significance of "pet-keeping."⁸ Social scientists and media have for decades regularly reported on the diverse attitudes and practices involving companion animals in dozens of societies worldwide.⁹ Specialists in the human–nonhuman bond now provide best-selling accounts that offer insights into the unique features of the most familiar companion animals.¹⁰ Cognitive science research on dogs in particular is, relatedly, increasing exponentially. As suggested in 2013, "We have learned more about how dogs think in the past decade than we have in the previous century."¹¹ What is at stake is, to be sure, more than a better grasp of companion animals.

Thinking about dog genius will not only help us enrich their lives but also broaden how we think about human intelligence. Many of the same concepts used to study dog intelligence are being applied to humans. Perhaps the greatest gift our dogs will give us is a better understanding of ourselves.¹² The combination of science-based research with public policy work pursued today by animal protectionists (whether companion animal owners or nonprofit organizations) has the prospect of increasing public awareness about the actual realities and abilities of certain nonhuman animals. This in turn exposes the public, the scientific establishment, educational institutions, and policy-makers to the possibility of implementing changes that could benefit not only non-owned companion animals but also those other categories of nonhuman animals that suffer the most harmful practices permitted by existing public policy.

Because protective attitudes toward companion animals, while admittedly co-existing today with certain abuses (such as convenience euthanasia¹³), are presently sustained by the daily efforts of, literally, tens of millions of humans, it is natural to wonder if such attitudes will lead to changes that might benefit not only non-owned members of the companion animal group, but also wildlife, food animals, and nonhuman animals used in research and entertainment. In addition, there may be much more development of humane education for a wider group of young humans, and thereby all of us may enjoy more informed social ethics and religious values in on-the-ground communities as they work locally to be responsible citizens.

Such developments have the potential to ignite a commitment to confront the moral contradictions inherent in humans' mistreatment of so many nonhuman animals. At stake, then, are humans taking full responsibility for disturbing falsehoods, self-serving evasions and the double standards long used by human societies to justify subjugation of the more-than-human world and other-than-human life forms.

COMPANIONS MADE FOR EACH OTHER?

In her 2009 book *Made for Each Other: The Biology of the Human-Animal Bond*,¹⁴ Meg Olmert offered constructive insights into humans' own animality as she examined how human development took a fascinating turn in our ancient past. Olmert's framing builds

an account of our past which clearly identifies us as eminently one animal among others in a multispecies world.

Thousands and thousands of years ago, our ancestors dreamed of unions with animals that would make them stronger, braver, faster, and wiser. In their dreams they surrendered their humanity and took on the shape and power of wild beasts. It was these mergers with the animal form and spirit that humans believed to be their ultimate achievement. They knew it was only with the help of animals that they could navigate this life and cross over into the next.¹⁵

Although Olmert adds immediately that for our earliest ancient forebears, “The dream of animals as protectors and allies was just . . . a dream. Waking relationships with animals were more of a nightmare,”¹⁶ she then says of more recent forbears and us, “But the dream did come true. This book is about the science behind that miracle—the miraculous but decidedly natural story of how and why animals and humans can stop being enemies and even fall in love.”¹⁷ This account goes a long way in revealing why the companion animal relationship, which in its best features is often referred to in contemporary literature as “the human–animal bond,” receives so much attention. “Our” preoccupation with “them” takes place for what can only be called “very animal reasons.” Our abilities to care about and protect others are, eminently, abilities developed by a wide range of mammals, birds, fish, and other living beings.

Olmert’s analysis that humans built relationships by learning from and partnering with other animals, models something truly remarkable about humans’ ability to become “plain members and citizens” of a far-more-than-human world. To be sure, Olmert’s account does not purport to be a definitive account of all of humans’ relationship possibilities with any and all nonhuman animals—we still struggle with many living organisms that can threaten us, make us sick, and even kill us if we do not protect ourselves and our loved ones (including the nonhumans whom we choose to protect). Olmert’s account does, however, affirm unequivocally a number of key benefits and insights that flow from recognizing humans as gifted animals working with other, differently gifted nonhuman animals. In this regard, Olmert reveals that in the past, some humans had already achieved lives that exhibited a pattern that was far more communal than it was “exceptionalist” (an influential and prevalent notion today asserting that humans alone are morally significant—more on this claim below).

While Olmert at times describes this process in lyrical terms, as in her opening lines quoted above when talking of our ancestors “dreaming of unions,” the foundation on which her claims stand is a combination of scientific observation, historical reflection, and assessment of current lifestyles that have led significant numbers of people to speak confidently of certain nonhuman animals as “family members.” While such an attribution is not meant in a strictly biological sense, it is fully accurate as an ethical affirmation.

The benefits of this connection are many—Olmert contends that our human ancestors’ brains developed during thousands of years because our type of animal worked to observe, then ultimately bond with, certain of our neighbor animals. The biological bases of her claims touch on multiple topics, such as her references to mirror neurons, which humans have in common with many other mammals, that likely were involved as our human ancestors began to pattern themselves after other mammals. As centuries and eventually millennia passed, humans continued to watch and learn patterns of life that improved humans’ self-care, made more efficient our migrations when needed, helped us create a safer world for our lives in local communities that included other animals, and honed our

awareness of advanced hunting techniques by other animals that could be emulated by human individuals and groups.

Olmert focuses on wolves in particular, arguing that in some manner members of this social mammal group worked in concert with their neighboring humans in ways that, over time, promoted a *modus vivendi*. The key players on both sides were likely individuals of each species who experienced high levels of a powerful hormone that acts, in technical terms, as a “neurotransmitter” in many vertebrates’ brains. The biology and chemistry are extraordinarily complex, involving many other key substances such as vasopressin, and contemporary scientists now know that oxytocin affects many animal functions and thereby plays a special and powerful role in a variety of bonding situations, such as that of mammalian mothers to their own offspring or that which takes place in certain pair bonding. The intra-animality aspects of these complex, oxytocin-related features is evident in the fact that new mothers are attentive to their own baby, of course, but also to other babies, including those of other species. The connection of humans’ animality to that of other vertebrates could hardly be more apparent than these shared underlying biochemical realities that prompt connections between members of different species. Further, these connections reveal that sharing is an animal reality that goes beyond species membership to other kinds of beings that have comparable anatomy and shared chemistry and brain architecture.

As our human ancestors’ brains increased in size, our ancestors began other cognitive work involving nonhuman animals—“In all of art since the cave paintings, it is probable that animals are represented more often than any other class of things in nature.”¹⁸ Relatedly, the origins of music are integrally tied to human fascination with nonhuman animals. As with dance, the perceived realities of other animals’ lives greatly impacted early music. Animal imitation was a highly practiced art through both voice and instrument, and early musical instruments were made from animal parts and often carved into animal shapes.¹⁹

CHALLENGING THE SEPARATION NARRATIVE

Despite humans’ early fascination with and imitation of other animals, and despite the connection described by Olmert and the prevalence of nonhuman animal themes in early humans’ arts and narratives, separation has long been a dominant claim. In a very real way, this separation narrative was anchored in the element described by Olmert’s words “waking relationships with animals were more of a nightmare. . . .” An example of a separation narrative from the first century of the Common Era is the distorting overstatement by Philo of Alexandria of a *continuous* war between, on the one hand, humans and, on the other hand, other animals “whose hatred is directed . . . towards . . . mankind as a whole and endures . . . without bound and limit of time.”²⁰

Given the human species’ evident fascination in ancient times and again in modern times with our fellow animals, there is no longer a need to be dominated by a separation/enemies narrative. It is noteworthy that many contemporary animal protection efforts, and even Olmert’s imaginative framing of issues, retain relics of the dominant language used about human animals’ relationship to nonhuman animals. For example, Olmert talks of “mergers with the animal form,” when in fact humans are now and have always been as fully “an animal form” as have wolves, or elephants, or fish. Humans’ dreams were, in Olmert’s account, of other animal forms which were imagined as more powerful than the human animal form, just as ancient humans perhaps imagined other animals to be more spiritual than those ancient humans felt themselves to be.²¹ These intuitions had practical

value and supported potential connections precisely because all the living beings involved (that is, both the humans and nonhumans) were *animals* with a partial overlap in abilities and awareness.

While many ancient humans were sufficiently in touch with our own animal capabilities **to nurture** fine-tuned talents to notice other animals and to take them seriously, it is pertinent that today contemporary humans often lack these abilities but yet again look to expanding our native sensibilities along these lines. Discussion of this matter is helped immensely if one speaks in science-based terms rather than the anti-science themes usually associated with use of the word “animal” to mean “all other living beings, but not humans.” Recognition of humans as animals, of course, fosters awareness of a key feature of the etymology of “animal”—*anima* is Latin for “breath”, and *animalis* means “having breath.” In light of the fact that these terms came also to mean “spirit” and “life,” humans can illuminate, especially through an embrace of other lives and other spirits, that human life lived fully in terms of our own animality can become a constructive, communal and ethical force. Ethics is now, and has always been, clearly an eminently animal ability, just as belonging to a community is fully natural and “animal” as well.



OUT OF THE FIRE AND INTO THE FRYING PAN— DOMESTICATED FOOD ANIMALS

Rivaling the power that flows from recognition of humans’ shared animality is the intentional eclipsing of this reality that is the essence of modern food production. One prominent voice observed, “What is perhaps most troubling, and sad, about industrial eating is how thoroughly it obscures all these relationships and connections.” Discussing the transformation of living chickens to the commercial product known as the Chicken McNugget®, the same author observes that buying this consumer product requires the purchaser

to leave this world in a journey of forgetting that could hardly be more costly . . . in terms of the animal’s pain. . . . But forgetting, or not knowing in the first place, is what the industrial food chain is all about, the principal reason it is so opaque, for if we could see what lies on the far side of the increasingly high walls of our industrial agriculture, we would surely change the way we eat.²²

Such a view contends with major claims about the human species, such as the opening line of Aristotle’s profoundly influential *Metaphysics* that “All men by nature desire to know.”²³ For modern consumers, such a claim is far more ideology than truth given that careful consideration of how humans have oppressed each other, and of late have been handling their impacts on nonhuman animal individuals and communities, suggests that Aristotle’s claim is an extraordinary overstatement. At the level of ordinary citizens, many consumers turn away from harsh production realities by declaring in un-Aristotelian fashion, “I don’t want to know.” At the level of political, religious, scientific, education, or business leaders, uncaring attitudes about matters beyond the species line are rampant as well.

HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM—“USING THEM AS WE SEE FIT”

Such self-inflicted ignorance and the justification of profound but avoidable, clearly unnecessary harms on nonhuman animals are regular features in modern societies. The

ground on which defenders of such harms stand is “the claim that humans are, merely by virtue of their species membership, so qualitatively different from any and all other forms of life that humans rightfully enjoy privileges over all of the Earth’s other life forms.”²⁴ This exceptionalist claim’s corollary that it is morally justifiable to draw a sharp contrast between human life and non-human life is premised upon two companion ideas—first, “human life is regarded as sacred, or at least as having a special importance” such that therefore “the central concern of our morality must be the protection and care of human beings.”²⁵ Non-human lives, then, do not deserve the important moral protections afforded human lives, and the upshot is that nonhuman lives thus have no moral standing at all whenever human privilege is at stake. Privileges for humans thus fall like ripe apples from the tree of morality—“Therefore, we may use them as we see fit.”²⁶

The exclusion of nonhuman animals from moral protections is a central feature of modern economies because modern policymakers, educators, and even religious community leaders, with little or no reflection, hold domination over any and all nonhuman animals to be the unassailable prerogative of humans and even the order of nature.²⁷ Such claims are as unreflective as they are virulent and harmful—they are an exclusionary ideology that goes far beyond simple human-centeredness. In fact, challenging human exceptionalism in no way requires condemning healthy forms of human-centeredness, for as is evident in everyday life, humans can, with great generosity, focus on our own species in healthy and productive ways even as we respect and coexist with nonhuman animals.

There are, however, forms of human-centeredness that without question destroy the interests and lives of nonhuman individuals and their communities on the basis of an exceptionalist claim that all humans, but only humans, deserve fundamental protections of a moral or legal nature. Human exceptionalism of this ilk is, ironically, also responsible for the destruction of many human individuals’ and human cultures’ relationship with the more-than-human world. Especially problematic are those extremely virulent forms of human-centeredness that create obvious harms to nonhuman individuals and communities such as the factory farming example included below. There are, tragically, additional hidden effects from human exceptionalism because this exclusivist attitude so characteristically promotes a virulent mix of self-inflicted ignorance and many different failures to notice or care about the harms we create for nonhuman animals.

Consider the masking of problems implied by a summary of current attitudes penned by a prominent American political commentator who was the senior speechwriter of President George W. Bush. Matthew Scully observed at the beginning of a bestselling 2002 book, “no age has ever inflicted upon animals such massive punishments with such complete disregard, as witness scenes to be found on any given day at any modern industrial farm.”²⁸ Factory farming is a hellish kind of fire, such that several prominent Jewish and non-Jewish voices have taken the controversial step of comparing such practices to the Nazi murder of millions which today serves as a paradigmatic example of human-on-human oppression.²⁹ Contemporary industrialized uses of living beings as mere resources sits at the hellish center of the concentric rings formed by the astonishingly diverse harms and insults to the more-than-human world perpetrated by humans who practice human exceptionalism. Also at this hellish center one finds that arrogance and insensitivity are an inevitable by-product of human exceptionalism as it dominates modern humans’ identity. Such an exclusivist view is the cornerstone of public policy and political rhetoric in most industrialized countries, just as it is the linchpin of modern legal systems and *raison d’être* of the narrow focus of much institutionalized education on humans

alone. The consequence has been that, based on centuries of tradition, modern institutions continue to perpetuate a lack of awareness of the more-than-human world, and thereby many humans have come to expect, and thus demand, complete power over nonhuman animals as a corollary of being human.

REIMAGINING BIOLOGY

Many sciences using undreamed of technological advances are experiencing a golden age currently, the upshot of which is that interested individuals can see much further into the realities surrounding us and within each of us than could any human in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. Olmert's use of the biochemical overlaps in vertebrate lives is a fine example of the power of new discoveries, but consider as well how other fields have opened up perspectives that rival the revolution in humans' awareness of our similarities to other animals. Astronomy has helped us see unimagined worlds—as recently as 1923, it was the overwhelming consensus in modern societies that the galaxy in which we are located (and that which our human societies have universally noted in the night sky and variously called “the milky way,” “way of birds,” “the way of the white elephant” and much more) was the entire universe. But in that year the nearby Andromeda galaxy was identified as a separate galaxy—today, scientists estimate that there are hundreds of *billions* of galaxies, each of which has hundreds of billions of stars.³⁰

The microscopic world has “expanded,” so to speak, just as exponentially. It is now suspected that the number of microorganism *species* is in the trillions, which dwarfs **that** estimated 10 million species of “macro” animals visible to the unaided human eye (of which fewer than 5,000 are mammal species, fewer than 10,000 are bird species, and another 7,600+ are amphibian species and 10,000+ more are reptile species). So biology, too, is experiencing a golden age of discovery.

This is particularly relevant to human lives because, for the reasons Olmert suggests and many more, humans have multiple reasons to be fascinated with other animals. As members of one species sharing evolutionary descent with hundreds of other eminently social primate species, each human is heir to primates' special abilities in communication, intelligence, learning by imitation, and general conceptual abilities. As mammals, too, humans' biological realities naturally blossom into a series of special abilities like familial loyalty and caring. We mobilize these intellectual and emotional abilities inherited from primates and mammals whenever we connect with other mammals such as dogs, cats, and horses.

Beyond these deep heritages, there is yet another reason biology intrigues us. Biological realities are inherently complex, for they include the complexities of the merely physical world *and more*.

. . . living beings have been affected for . . . billions of years by historical processes. . . . The results of those processes are systems different in kind from any nonliving systems and almost incomparably more complicated. They are not for that reason necessarily any less material or less physical in nature. The point is that all known material processes and explanatory principles apply to organisms, while only a limited number of them apply to nonliving systems. . . .³¹

Not only are the material processes analyzed by physics and chemistry evident in biological phenomena, but these material processes have undergone historical development (evolution) that has produced processes that are qualitatively more complex than the



physical realities studied by physics, chemistry, astronomy, geology, or mathematics. Nonhuman animals, then, incite particular fascination for any curious being, for our own animal realities and those of other animals feature complexities that go beyond the many complexities we notice in the parts of our world that are inanimate. Biological phenomena, then, have a particularly rich and inviting diversity and complexity.³²

In *The Biology of Wonder*, Andreas Weber stirs a creative fire that flares up as we recover our multifaceted human animality and use our shared animality to discover all that we and other animals are. Weber marshals great detail as he argues that humans and their fellow living beings must be recognized as truly creative, evolutionary forces whose lives and significance do not—and cannot—exist apart from nature. Weber's work illuminates why human experience must be seen as but one example of how all living beings are interconnected and part of Earth's complex, dynamic relationships. The upshot is a foundation for an ecological ethos. In this encompassing vision, Weber helps one see why wild animals are such an intriguing experience for human animals. Further, such an affirmation helps us understand why humans are reimagining, and thereby re-stoking the fires that drive, our sciences, our ethics, and our holistic senses that nurture a sense of communion with not only the natural world but also the multifaceted spiritual dimensions so evident when one looks at humans as a collective over time and place. Burning into the human imagination such a multispecies appreciation of human and nonhuman animals alike opens up greatly an important human front as well, for it increases greatly reasons for taking the views and lifeways of indigenous peoples seriously as a full form of humanity to be celebrated. In all this, there is the bracing realization that long before human exceptionalism held sway, human cultures were attuned to the natural world in ways that we are only beginning to appreciate.


GOING WILD


Although many contemporary members of our species today pass along the view that the Earth was designed for humans or that today the Earth is rightly dominated by humans as the most intelligent and moral species, it is clear that both secular and religious realms can contribute to our species' understanding of other animals. One secular vision that has ignited an enriched, holistic approach to humans as integral parts of the larger biological community is found in a 2014 book entitled *Go Wild*.³³ While the title makes obvious the book's potential connection to nature, its subtitle signals the human health and psychological dimensions of what is at issue—*Free Your Body and Mind from the Afflictions of Civilization*.

But there is much more in this book than human-centeredness. Its authors—John Ratey, a medical doctor, and Richard Manning, an environmental journalist—discuss the importance of eating a natural diet and honoring the natural rhythms of the human body promoted by sleep, deep awareness, and biophilia. Their wide-ranging book touches as well on how the architecture of the human brain and the biochemistry of the human body overlap fundamentally with the architecture and biochemistry of many of our animal cousins.³⁴



Of the greatest relevance to the question of humans' relationship to other animals, Ratey and Manning cite a proverb stating a profound insight available in a great variety of indigenous cultures—"every animal knows way more than you do."³⁵ The source for this intriguing claim is Richard Nelson's respected 1983 work *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest*,³⁶ which is cited by Ratey and Manning in the

moving chapter on the importance of meditation for human health. These authors connect the attentiveness of a meditation tradition to the awareness patterns of those who have been raised in a healthy small-scale society—benefits flow to the human individuals who notice details and fellow travelers in the more-than-human world that every living being occupies. The implication is that noticing other animals and taking their lives seriously has health benefits for humans attuned in this way to their surroundings.

Thus, while it is true that human civilization has brought achievements that have enabled members of certain societies, and that such benefits should be honored forthrightly, the “progress” of the human species toward today’s “civilizations” has been framed in ways that *also* mislead and harm us, making us sick in ways that Ratey and Manning describe in great detail.³⁷ Of particular significance is the medical/health view taken of the importance of exercise, especially that performed in the natural world. Not only are health benefits available, but also **awareness how** becoming aware of a local part of the world matters to so much that makes us human. 

For any animal, humans included, there never was, and never can be, an “is” without a where.³⁸ And yet, as most of us know, modern humans are in several senses of the word “dis-placed.” Being rooted in a particular place is an animal need, and modern science reveals well how humans’ inattentivenesses to place and, more generally, the natural world risk **becoming unhealthy unless humans** re-establish this key dimension of our irrevocably animal lives. Ratey and Manning’s book has a fire theme, as it were, for we create hells for ourselves and children when we ignore the power of place.³⁹ 

Surely, then, if one wants to understand humanity, human abilities, and the world of which we are a part, one needs to see place, local worlds, and our special abilities tied directly to them. An undeniable implication of this fundamental human need is that our learning requires immersion, which of course challenges the institutions and environment that we call “education.” Humans, as animals who are unavoidably and irrevocably relational, related and immersed in a specific “there” (place), getting in touch with these deep-seated needs requires getting into parts of the world about which we hope to be educated.

Ratey and Manning’s seemingly human-focused treatise can stand for two propositions, although these are not its primary focus by any means. By talking about the conditions of human thriving, these authors suggest that (i) a living fire we ought to tend is recognition **the** we share animality with many other creatures, and (ii) our explorations must have elements that are cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, and even interfaith in nature if they hope to feature responsible acknowledgement of multiple views (including respect for the eminently human and diverse achievements of indigenous peoples). Indeed, it is worth considering whether, just as “every animal knows way more than you do,” so too every other culture “knows” **way** more than your own birth culture does. 


BRINGING TOGETHER TWO PATHS

In the spirit of the above humilities, consider how issues of human self-understanding are not separate from, but actually a subdivision of, the generousities that we call “animal protection.” Creating a “humans versus animals” approach to “human rights versus animal rights” is a radically misleading dichotomy, for animal protection is, given humans’ undeniable animality, a path to human self-understanding. So, in the spirit of the affirmation “there is no path to peace” because, in the matter of choosing a full human

life, peace is the path,⁴⁰ we can also affirm that there is no path to humans' recognition of the importance of animality—recognition of our animality is the path itself.

The First Path—Animal Protection

When today's humans transcend the tradition of separating humans from other animals (for this is the thrust of acknowledging that humans are now animals, have always been animals, and will always be animals), humans self-actualize. The implications of this go beyond Viktor Frankl's classic observation that "self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence,"⁴¹ as this comment has long been taken to apply to individuals. To be sure, Frankl's insight is a most valuable insight for each of us as an individual. But there is an additional sense in which this claim is also true for the human species as a whole. This has in fact been the message of many religions, many ethical systems, and various wisdom traditions anchored in small-scale societies.

Both the individual-level of self-actualization and the parallel species-level actualization are needed to ignite our species-wide exploration of the overwhelming and elemental mysteries we call "nature." The worldwide animal protection movement advocates for much more than other animals—it also re-homes humans, inviting us to return to one of our most natural communities, namely, the larger community of all life.

Concern to notice and take seriously, then, the denizens of the more-than-human world within and out beyond human-dominated precincts is, along with caring for human animals, one of the most generative and vivacious elements in our ethical lives—it spurs education of both the learning and unlearning kinds.⁴² Noticing other animals and recognizing that many kinds of living beings excite humans has long been a core feature of the many kinds of caring, believing, and reacting that we name with our generic noun "religion." In this vein, one can easily comprehend the fact that each religion is today uniquely alive in each place where its adherents live fully. Religious sensibilities are, of course, diverse around the world but such differences (from earlier forms of the same religion, or from other contemporary religious claims) confer on individuals within that religion a chance to be alive and responsive in each and every moment and place.

Claims that humans are animals are supported widely and firmly today by countless lines of evidence developed in not only our sciences, but also in our critically thought out ethics, in our non-speciesist forms of ecological awareness, and in our spiritual lives pursued in ways responsive to local places and presences. It is the combination of such affirmations of humans' embeddedness in a far-more-than-human world that vivifies the broad communal commitments so aptly summarized by two seminal comments from Thomas Berry.

Indeed we cannot be truly ourselves in any adequate manner without all our companion beings throughout the earth. The larger community constitutes our greater self.⁴³

Indeed we must say that the universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects.⁴⁴

The Second Path—Recovering, Discovering, Uncovering Human Self-Recognition

Consider the power again of de Waal's simple question: are we smart enough to know how smart animals are? While de Waal meant to phrase the question so as to direct attention to human animals' knowledge of nonhuman animals (a purpose evident in the framing of the question with non-scientific terminology whereby "animals" means only

nonhuman animals), the question, if taken literally and scientifically, has power well before we answer it. The question on its face literally pertains to our knowledge of ourselves (human animals) as fully as it pertains our knowledge of other animals' intelligence. If understood in this way, the question reveals how a second path converges with the first path of animal protection. Along this second path, we, as human animals, recover our animality and discover that human animality overlaps greatly in many cases with other-than-human animals. We thereby uncover a possibility of self-recognition for each of us that is available only when we acknowledge the many nested communities to which we belong and which, together, comprise our larger community.

What fires might we light to illuminate this convergence? How do we begin to grapple with the basic thrust of de Waal's question? A first step is to see human exceptionalism as a disconnecting and dysfunctional narrative, for through its many dismissals of nonhuman animals it presumes the question before us to be a minor question. For the most reactionary of exceptionalists, the question as posed is, further, basically irrelevant and even irreverent, for such humans contend that humans alone can be understood as made in the image of a deity.

But realism about more than science—realism about religious traditions broadly, about ethics, about humility and honesty **about** our everyday lives—already drives our own species' contemporary recovery of humans' long-repudiated animality. And in the recovery is discovery. And in the discovery is the key to un-covering the full story of how our species' recent claims of separation have been nothing short of naked self-interest, and often merely one subgroup of humans elevating itself over others—as when men have claimed they alone are the paradigm of humanity and rationality, or when one religious subgroup in a religious tradition claims it *alone* is the true answer while the claims of all other subgroups and all other religions are false and blasphemous.

Along the second path, such dysfunctional assertions of self-interest are seen to drive the thin reasoning and selfishnesses that have always driven human exceptionalism and the denial of our own animality. Also along this second path, one learns that “recover” has many meanings. One of these meanings is embodied in phrases like “she began to lose her balance, but then recovered.” Another distinct, but altogether relevant sense to the harms done by human exceptionalism can be sensed in the phrase “he’s a recovering alcoholic.” These nuances of “recover” can be detected in Ratey and Manning’s manifesto about recovering human health by *Free[ing] Your Body and Mind from the Afflictions of Civilization*.

A third sense of “re-cover” applies as well—consider what is at issue in the phrase “We re-covered the dead body after the funeral shroud slipped off.” We want to bury the dysfunction that is human exceptionalism—to immolate it in the fire of our zeal for connecting to nature, to replace it with a conscious, integrating choice to fully actualize human ethical capabilities by transcending any dysfunctional forms of human-centeredness. Thereby, the two paths mentioned above converge and full self-actualization for our species and its remarkable individuals becomes possible again. Through such possibilities, each of us can “re-cover” in all senses, and allow the Earth to heal (recover) as well.

EXHORTATIONS TO SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Once one notices the dysfunctional features of human exceptionalism, one begins to notice how often others have begged us to acknowledge that self-transcendence is



necessary for not only individuals, but our species as well, if we are to surmount arrogance and embark on an integrated attempt to full-actualization of the human spirit. An example from Plato's dialogue "Statesman" reveals that challenges to humans' arrogant claims regarding their status over other animals have had a high profile in many traditions.

Suppose now . . . that some wise and understanding creature, such as a crane is reputed to be, were, in imitation of you, to make a similar division, and set up cranes against all other animals to their own special glorification, at the same time jumbling together all the others, including man, under the appellation of brutes,—here would be the sort of error which we must try to avoid.⁴⁵

Such caveats abounded in ancient Greece,⁴⁶ and in one sense modeled aspects of the skills today often referred to as "critical thinking."⁴⁷ As a twentieth-century British ethicist observed, "we are always comparing our ignorant conception of animal being with an overdrawn picture of a very cultivated man."⁴⁸ The same ethicist suggested, "one's ethical, as well as one's ontological framework is determined by what entities one is prepared to notice or take seriously. . . ."⁴⁹ If one has been "prepared" by education dominated by human exceptionalism, one fails to grasp why it is a serious matter to notice that humans are but one type of living being in a larger community that is truly mixed and fascinating. But as this ethicist's comment reveals, each individual human's ethical abilities are malleable. We are challenged again today to allow ourselves and our children to notice and take seriously the living beings around us.

Exceptionalist education has also blinded contemporary humans to the fallacies that compromise exceptionalist logic. A contemporary anthropologist has argued, "I aim to show that the story we tell in the West about the human exploitation and eventual domestication of animals is part of a more encompassing story about how humans have risen above, and have sought to bring under control, a world of nature that includes their own animality."⁵⁰ This researcher has worked hard to help modern humans notice and take seriously, and thereby honor, small-scale societies as offering insightful wisdom traditions whose voice and perspectives enrich humans' self-understanding.

Finally, an American philosopher and ecologist has recently written forthrightly about the value of coming home to our own animality.

Owning up to being an animal, a creature of earth. Tuning our animal senses to the sensible terrain: blending our skin with the rain-rippled surface of rivers, mingling our ears with the thunder and the thrumming of frogs, and our eyes with the molten gray sky. Feeling the polyrhythmic pulse of this place—this huge windswept body of water and stone. This vexed being in whose flesh we're entangled. Becoming earth. Becoming animal. Becoming, in this manner, fully human.⁵¹

CONSTRUCTIVELY CHALLENGING HUMAN-EXCEPTIONALISM

Given that human-exceptionalism imprisons us, deadening awareness of our membership in the larger community of life, we need to remove the funeral shroud covering our animality and thereby re-vivify our deadened awareness caused by language choices like "humans and animals." If we speak plainly, honestly, and with acceptance of our own animality, we come home to a truly salient fact—humans' achievements are those of an animal. The good news is that this achievement has often been attained by the many

humans who have often broken through to the realization that we belong to the larger community of life and that our species can again thrive, if each of us so chooses as an individual to push our human group to be responsible, plain citizens of our larger community.

Much is at stake, of course, yet in an embrace of our own animality is a glimmer of what is to come. We can finally acknowledge that the heritage of modern citizens has been impoverished due to the prevalence of education in the key of human exceptionalism—this has been a dual tragedy (one for humans, another for nonhumans) that justifies Helvetius' quip that humans are born ignorant, not stupid, but they can be made stupid by education.⁵²

For many reasons, then, re-covering and then un-covering our animality offers each of us a key to understanding the elements of religion and nature. Such work is more than a formative influence in how we encounter our shared Earth and its air and water—such work and the encounters it actualizes are, in fact, the foundation on which we stand as we actualize as fully as possible our life on Earth.