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# Solidarity with Animals

## Opening Essay for a GTI Forum

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### **Violence and Love**

The animal economy, wherein animals routinely suffer truncated and brutalized lives, weaves massively through the global economy. Billions of animals are utilized each year, with virtually no compunction, in industries of food, feed, supplements, clothing, furnishings, textiles, footwear, accessories, luxury products, entertainment, traditional medicine, and pharmaceuticals.<sup>1</sup>

The normalization of mass killing, exploitation, and displacement of animals exhibits the ingrained assumption that animals are legitimately subject to absolute human power and that humanity is entitled to repurpose natural habitats without consideration of their being animal homes. Indeed, the animal economy is pervaded by *structural violence*, meaning institutionalized and established forms of violence disavowed as being violent or kept hidden from view. In our time, violence against animals is opposed by increasing numbers of people from all walks of life. Yet the balance of power continues to favor a Conventional Worlds scenario within which the domination of nature is regarded as human prerogative—whether God-given, biologically endowed, or just taken for granted.<sup>2</sup>

Structural violence against animals has intensified in the “[Anthropocene](#),” with a growing global economy motivated by profit, designed with shortcuts for efficiency, ever expanding its commodity chains, and serving a rising modernized population. The growing global economy also possesses a technological arsenal with colossal power to slaughter, exterminate, and experiment on animals; manufacture and transport animal-based products; appropriate wildlife habitats; and fish out the ocean.

The odd flip side of this violent state of affairs is that love for animals is a tangible dimension of human life. To be sure, this sentiment varies among people and is often qualified in different ways.<sup>3</sup> Yet it remains true as a general statement: We recognize it in the rise of nature conservation and ecotourism, the popularity of animal shows and documentaries, the lavish lives of companion species, burgeoning animal shelters and sanctuaries, as well as storytelling and picture sharing on social media. We can even recognize love for animals in their commodification in lucrative industries (e.g., stuffed toys) and in marketing (e.g., the Exxon tiger), which lean into the human soft spot for the animal kingdom.

Affection for animals is sometimes tagged as a privilege of modern lifestyles. This view overlooks the ways that animals have been exalted from time immemorial, in arenas of work, companionship, art, literature, music, mythology, ceremony, and spirituality.<sup>4</sup> The parable of the good shepherd, as an example, whose ninety-nine sheep returned safely but who nonetheless went searching for the missing one, is emblematic. It is not a story about “efficiency and economy” or “feeding the world.” It is a story about love: the heart connection of the good shepherd with each one of her sheep.

The heartfelt affinity for animals stands in tension with the violence inflicted upon them. Jürgen Habermas’s framework of the societal spheres of *system* versus *lifeworld* sheds light on this contradiction.<sup>5</sup> Structural violence against animals overwhelmingly adheres to systems (economic, political, and legal), while love for animals resides in uncountable expressions within lifeworlds. Of course, system and lifeworld are far from hermetically sealed, yet they encompass differentiated spheres of human experience. The lifeworld pertains to shared sensibilities and norms of care in everyday life, while systems are governed by power relations and special interests.

The concurrence of violence against animals and affection for them articulates a contradiction. Societal contradiction fosters conflict and instability that eventually precipitate transformation(s). Indeed, the stark incongruity at the core of human-animal relations is the game-changing lever of animal justice activism. Here, I interrogate the conundrum of violence and love with questions of moral purpose: Which of these realities best reflects who we are and aspire to be? And what is the

interplay between animal solidarity, human well-being, and a Great Transition to an ecologically vibrant and just future?

### **The Heritage of the “Differential Imperative”**

To unravel the contradiction in our relations with animals, we can start by dissecting the assumption undergirding structural violence: that humans legitimately possess the prerogative of life and death over animals and that humanity is the entitled owner of all geographical space. Through these direct and indirect incursions, the domination of animals is virtually total.

John Rodman coined the term *Differential Imperative* to illuminate the sociohistorical groundwork of animal domination, summarized in the all-too-familiar, loaded question: “How are humans Different from animals?”<sup>6</sup> This tenaciously rehearsed question in the Western canon (and beyond) sought to expound the qualities that ostensibly distinguish humans from beasts. The gist of the socially constructed human-animal divide became roughly this: to the human realm belong reason, language, and all things cultural; to the animal realm belong instinct, corporeality, and all things biological. While this iron curtain is falling, it long defined the creed of an unbridgeable divide.

Reruns of the Differential Imperative (from Aristotle to Heidegger) contributed to the crystallization of the categories “human” and “animal” as hierarchically ordered domains.<sup>7</sup> The success of this framing solidified a foundation not only for the subjugation of animals but also for inequality and oppression among humans. Certain groups—women, children, slaves, Blacks, “savages”—were conveniently positioned *below* the supreme (typically white, male, educated) human and above the animals.<sup>8</sup> The subjugation of animals has thus arguably served as the foundation for the entire edifice of social stratification.

The social construction of *human distinction* carved out a lofty purview, brazenly authorizing humans to dominate animals. Rendering animals as deficient by comparison, the distinguished human could “bask in the reflection of a negatively constituted other.”<sup>9</sup> The human-animal divide removed (or attenuated) moral consideration for animal well-being and suffering; divested animals of inherent value and dignity; made animals facilely killable; and preempted stigma from attaching to human dignity for violent behavior against animals.<sup>10</sup>

Hierarchy between humans and animals remains embedded within the animal economy and Conventional Worlds scenarios, where animals (dead, live, and enslaved) are treated as property, breeding machines, commodities, experimental tools, spectacles, and expendable others. The human-animal divide has been aptly described as “a condition of modernity as a form of order and indispensable to its continued coherence and authority.”<sup>11</sup> Yet without the ideological authorization of the Differential Imperative, the proverbial emperor is naked: The domination of animals is exposed as an exercise of sheer force upon animal bodies and animal habitats premised on the fiat of human distinction.

### **Challenging the Differential Imperative**

In history’s course, various thinkers pushed back against the Differential Imperative. Our time, however, is unprecedented in strength of opposition to the human-animal hierarchy: pro-animal discourses and activism seek to free animals and restore them to their natural environments, lives, and destinies. In the quest for animal liberation, two approaches are prevalent.<sup>12</sup>

The first, drawing especially on contemporary science, refutes the Differential Imperative by presenting innumerable physiological, behavioral, cognitive, and experiential similarities between humans and animals. Cognitive ethological studies are a powerful ally in this approach, revealing (in scientific register) that subjectivity, agency, intentionality, culture, and individuality are ubiquitous in animal worlds, and that we are deeply bound with animals in shared sentience and evolutionary descent.<sup>13</sup>

The second approach challenges our received understanding of *difference* itself: it reconfigures difference, now with lower case “d,” as a nonfinite spread of body plans, sensory modalities, forms of awareness, and ways of life among all animals, humans included. This deconstruction divests the Differential Imperative of authority to structure hierarchy and legitimize domination. The hunt for an unbridgeable gap between “human” and “animal” is unmasked as empirically unjustified—a move serving *power over*.<sup>14</sup>

The deconstructive approach also highlights how the human-animal hierarchy is transmitted to the social collective through language.<sup>15</sup> The category “animal” gathers innumerable, highly diverse beings into a catchall bag that functions to flaunt the standalone, elevated category of “human.”<sup>16</sup>

Linguistic messaging thus covertly re-inscribes the divide—a divide not even remotely innocent but ordered through unequal status, privilege, and power. So while human-animal inequality is violently exercised within *systems* (for example, CAFOs, biomedical labs, experimental breeding facilities, industrial fishing regimes, and governmental extermination programs), the ideology that undergirds structural violence has also seeped into and partially hijacked human *lifeworlds*.<sup>17</sup>

The approaches championed by the animal justice movement are rebelling against the rigid binary that underpins the misery of animals. By the same token, undoing that binary endeavors to free humans from the strange “forgetting” that we are, ourselves, animals.<sup>18</sup> The first approach (emphasizing similarity) reveals the inner lives and lifeways of animals and the ample overlap with those of humans. The second approach (Vive la différence!) discloses the diversified tapestries of animal being as incommensurable realities unamenable to “higher” and “lower” classifications.

Ongoing revelations of undeniable similarities and fascinating differences among all animals are spreading globally. Citizen science and the “infinite conversation” on the worldwide web are amplifying the *animal turn*—the turn demanding justice. The pleas are proliferating: Mercy for farm animals! Freedom for wild ones! Tolerance and hospitality for urban and rural neighbors! Animal justice demands are a *cri de coeur* to *remember* the love for animals that has always suffused human lifeworlds. None remember better than those who did not forget.

### **“All our Relations”: Indigenous People and Animal Worlds**

Indigenous people never posited a Differential Imperative to order human and animal worlds.<sup>19</sup> Animals (alongside other nonhumans) held a place of esteem in indigenous lives. Native peoples’ subsistence practices, origin stories, naming conventions, spiritual beliefs, and ceremonial expressions enunciate a lived paradigm of kinship among all beings. Human and animal realms are rife with reciprocal transformations and communications. Animals feature in intimate bonds with humans as ancestors, teachers, friends, and allies, as well as co-voyagers in earthly life, persons in themselves, and attentive observers of human beings.

In his classic essay “Why Look at Animals?” John Berger noted that “animals are always observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance.”<sup>20</sup> His comment does not pertain to indigenous people who have been cognizant of the ways animals watch and listen to humans

attentively, and even reach out. “One should pay attention to even the smallest crawling creature,” Black Elk advised. “Even the smallest ant may wish to communicate with a man.”<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, Black Elk wrote about a little red-breasted bird who came to him during a vision quest. Sitting on a post before him, the little bird spoke: “Friend, be attentive as you walk!”<sup>22</sup>

Socioeconomic orders founded on a gaping chasm between “human” and “animal” stripped animals of the faculty to observe human beings with discernment. Denying animals their wakeful being is integral to their debasement and mandatory for the actualities of structural violence. When chickens are tightly piled in cages, sows crammed in crates, bulls forced to deliver their semen, wolves fumigated out of dens or gunned down from aircraft, sharks finned and tossed, bears caged and “milked,” cetaceans trapped and massacred, fish trawled by tonnage, and so on—none of these actions are regarded as experienced and witnessed by subjects. Violence can be exercised without qualms, for the discerning presence of animals has been erased. That erasure shields human *conscience*—the most universal and powerful force of transformation in human life—from seeing human brutality. Denying animals their awake presence in the world, tragically yet fittingly, lets humans sleepwalk through the unseemly and the egregious.

Native people utilized animals for their livelihoods in a variety of ways. Yet such uses, especially when involving killing and suffering, were accompanied by ritual expressions of gratitude, appeasement, and remorse. Moreover, using animals was counterbalanced by deliberate endeavors to make good every part of their bodies and to eschew waste. In such gestures of reverence, indigenous people model integrity in our relations with animals, honoring the dignity of both animal and human worlds.<sup>23</sup>

### **Our Deepest Reality and Highest Aspiration**

Facing the dissonance of violence and love in human-animal relations, we may circle back to the question: Which of these realities best reflects who we are and aspire to be? Threading the explored themes suggests an answer.

In recognizing the sociohistorical production of the human-animal hierarchy, we see that the domination of animals is neither a biological nor a God-given order. There is no natural nor ordained fact of the matter, only a socially constructed unjust arrangement that begs to be undone.

Indigenous societies did not espouse human-animal segregation but dwelt with animals in kinship. To be sure, native people were not above the capacity for cruelty nor beyond cooptation by settler-colonialist impositions. Yet the ways, stories, and animist perspectives they have bequeathed embody a subject-to-subject relationship with animals that is aspirational for all humankind.

This aspiration may be closer to realization than we imagine. For the indigenous ethos of relatedness echoes broadly in the cherishing of animals in human lifeworlds. Solidarity with animals, nurtured in ancient wisdom ways, endures as *immanent* within the social body where varieties of affection for animals flourish. While the Differential Imperative has been weaponized by systems—sanctioning all manner of violence against animals—the myth of a human-animal hierarchy never fully colonized human lifeworlds wherein ties of community reside. Thus, fortified institutions and narrow interests that subjugate animals have no existential upper hand vis-à-vis the timeless manifestations of caring alignment with animals that is universal to human experience. Our deepest reality and highest aspiration lie with the latter.

### **Transforming Human-Animal Relations Is Key**

The violence pervading the animal economy is unleashing pandemonium across the planet, as dominating animals has become coextensive with global environmental destruction. Most especially, large-scale animal agriculture (particularly CAFOs and feed monocultures) and defaunation (notably, industrial fishing and bushmeat for remote markets) are lead causes of tropical deforestation, species extinctions, ecological impoverishment, agrochemical and factory-farm pollution, pollinator declines, rapid climate change, freshwater depletion, soil degradation, and infectious epidemic disease.<sup>24</sup> These dire trends and their synergies—driven to a considerable extent by the overpopulation of livestock and the depopulation of wild animals—are mounting. Structural violence against animal bodies and animal habitats is drawing all complex life into peril. The only thing that remains unclear—should present trends continue—is the timing and exact nature of the coming Barbarization.<sup>25</sup>

The liberation of animals will not only end their unnecessary suffering, free them toward authentic being and becoming, and align with humanity's abiding reality and aspirations. It will also go a long way toward restoring a thriving Earth ecosystem. Honoring our animal kin would have us, first and foremost, abolishing CAFOs and protecting wild animals and their homes.<sup>26</sup> How can we attain

these aims in tandem? We must gradually reduce the global population of livestock while allowing the populations of wild animals to rebound toward the abundances that safeguard their long-term viability.<sup>27</sup> One needed societal transformation to achieve this is clear: By embracing mostly plant-based eating, we help support the well-being of both farm and wild animals, swerve our planetary course away from disaster, and open the way toward multispecies flourishing.<sup>28</sup>

In the Modern Era, the violent subjugation of animals is a substantial driver of the ecological trends that are jeopardizing humanity's long-term well-being and even survival. The domination of animals also goes hand-in-hand with the exploitation of powerless human subgroups and the unequal burden of disease and mortality among classes of people. Thus, superseding systems that exercise violence over animals is urgently needed for the equity and healing of both animal and human worlds. Solidarity with animals and solidarity with humans are entangled imperatives and strategies in the search for a Great Transition.

## Endnotes

1. See Jody Emel and Jennifer Wolch, "Witnessing the Animal Moment," in Jennifer Wolch and Jody Emel, eds., *Animal Geographies: Place, Politics, and Identity in the Nature-Culture Borderlands* (New York: Verso, 1998), 1–24; Steven McMullen, *Animals and the Economy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Jo-Anne McArthur and Keith Wilson, eds., *Hidden: Animals in the Anthropocene* (New York: We Animals Media, 2021).
2. The scenario terminology comes from Paul Raskin et al., *The Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead* (Boston: Stockholm Environment Institute, 2002).
3. Hal Herzog, *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard to Think Straight about Animals* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010).
4. See, for example, Paul Shepard, *Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1996).
5. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).
6. John Rodman, "Paradigm Change in Political Science: An Ecological Perspective," *American Behavioral Scientist* 24, no. 1 (1980): 49–78.
7. Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).
8. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1944; 1972); Matthew Calarco, *Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).
9. James Valentine quoted in Arran Stibbe, *Animals Erased: Discourse, Ecology, and Reconnection with the Natural World* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 39.



10. See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement*, updated edition (New York: Harper Perennial, 1975; 2009); Martha Nussbaum, "The Moral Status of Animals," *Chronicle of Higher Education* February 3, 2006, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-moral-status-of-animals/>; Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Lori Gruen, *The Ethics of Captivity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
11. Richie Nimmo, "The Making of the Human: Anthropocentrism in Modern Social Thought," in Rob Boddice, ed., *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environment* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).
12. Calarco, op. cit.
13. Marc Bekoff, *The Animal Manifesto: Six Reasons for Expanding our Compassion Footprint* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2010); Carl Safina, *Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015); Andrew Rowan et al., "Animal Sentience: History, Science, and Politics," *Animal Sentience* 31, no. 1 (2021).
14. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).
15. There are many ways in which the human-animal hierarchy is transmitted and inculcated; here I call attention to language.
16. Derrida, op. cit.
17. CAFOs is the acronym for Confined Animal Feeding Operations, otherwise known as factory farms. For expositions of CAFO conditions see, for example, Daniel Imhoff, ed., *The CAFO Reader: The Tragedy of Industrial Animal Factories* (Berkeley: Watershed Media, 2010); McArthur and Wilson eds., op. cit.
18. Melanie Challenger, *How to Be Animal: A New History of What it Means to be Human* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021).
19. Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency among Humans and Non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European World Tour!)," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): 20–34.
20. John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald, eds., *The Animals Reader* (Oxford, UK: 1980; 2007), 257.
21. Black Elk quoted in Linda Hogan, *The Radiant Lives of Animals* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020): 84.
22. Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953; 1989), 64.
23. Kekuhi Kealiikanakaoleohaililani and Christian Giardina, "Embracing the Sacred: An Indigenous Framework for Tomorrow's Sustainability Science," *Sustainability Science* 11 (2016): 57–67.
24. See Sean Maxwell et al., "Biodiversity: The Ravages of Guns, Nets and Bulldozers," *Nature* 536 (2016): 143–145; Bruce Campbell et al., "Agriculture as a Major Driver of the Earth System Exceeding Planetary Boundaries," *Ecology and Society* 22, no. 4 (2017): 8; Walter Willett et al., "Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT-Lancet Commission on Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems," *The Lancet Commissions* 393, no. 10170 (2019): 447–492; Eileen Crist, "COVID-19, the Industrial Food System, and Inclusive Justice," in P. Clayton et al., eds., *The New Possible: Visions of Our World Beyond Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).
25. Raskin et al., op. cit.

26. See Eileen Crist, "Shutter the Factory Farms," *Earth Tongues*, February 26, 2021, <https://blog.ecologicalcitizen.net/2021/02/26/shutter-the-factory-farms/>; Callum Roberts et al., "Marine Reserves Can Mitigate and Promote Adaptation to Climate Change," *PNAS* 114, no. 24 (2017): 61677–6175, <http://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/early/2017/05/31/1701262114.full.pdf>; Global Rewilding Alliance "Animate the Carbon Cycle," 2021, accessed November 1, 2022, <https://rewildingglobal.org/animate-the-carbon-cycle>.

27. See Freya Mathews, "From Biodiversity-Based Conservation to an Ethic of Bio-proportionality," *Biological Conservation* 200 (2016): 140–148.

28. Brian Machovina, Kenneth Feeley, and William Ripple, "Biodiversity Conservation: The Key is Reducing Meat Consumption," *Science of the Total Environment* 536 (2015): 419–431; Hannah Ritchie, "If the World Adopted a Plant-Based Diet We Would Reduce Agricultural Land Use from 4 Billion to 1 Billion Hectares," OurWorldInData.org, 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/land-use-diets>.

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