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## Expanding the Sustainability Agenda Contribution to GTI Forum [Solidarity with Animals](#)

William S. Lynn

I am delighted to respond to Eileen Crist's "[Solidarity with Animals](#)." With a strong commitment to social justice, Crist has long challenged human supremacy in both theory and practice as it applies to animals and nature. In doing so, she offers a shift in how we frame issues of ethics and sustainability.

In the dominant frame of "society" and "nature," humans are the pivot around which the world turns, and both the similarities and differences between people, other animals, and nature are lost or flattened. Sustainability as an ethical and practical matter becomes about human survival, and ecological integrity is an instrument prerequisite to this end.

Here and in her other writings, Crist helps us reframe our understanding of ethics and sustainability in terms of people, animals, and nature. This reframing allows us to see anew three distinct but co-constituting domains of moral and practical concern. She thereby opens conceptual space to consider our direct social and ecological responsibilities to nonhuman animals themselves.

That the Great Transition Initiative is even asking about solidarity with animals is significant and praiseworthy. The opposition in sustainability circles to considering animals as more than parts of ecosystems or vehicles of ecosystem services is notorious. Overt opposition to contemplating the intrinsic value and moral standing of animals was the most difficult dispute in the crafting of the Earth Charter. While the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) eventually adopted the Earth Charter as a guiding ethical vision, it remains a dead letter in practice, especially when it comes to nonhuman animals.

More recent dialogues around the Rights of Nature as well as Harmony with Nature have routinely ignored animals as individual beings whose well-being is, at least in part, independent from our own. The International Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) is also a laggard, focused on the values humans attribute to species and the natural world, not the intrinsic values and well-being of other animals in and of themselves.

To welcome animals into a discussion of sustainability, we must think past the well-worn insight that humans are also animals, or that as a species we are but one thread in the tapestry of life. Humanity's manifold effects on animals as individuals and social/ecological communities must be held ethically accountable, and such accountability has enormous implications for how we understand our obligations in a great transition.

Correcting for the marginalization of animals in sustainability raises the question of what it means to stand in solidarity with them. Crist highlights resistance to ideologies and systems that exploit animals. Anthropocentrism as an axiology, speciesism as a practice, human supremacy as a worldview, all are implicated in her critique and rightly so. Solidarity in this sense is critiquing and correcting what harms animals.

Without taking anything away from this incisive analysis, at [PAN Works](#) we flip the question of harm on its head and ask, "How ought we think and act to promote the well-being of animals"? Here, I want to highlight two possibilities: ethical renewal and rewilding.

Crist's essay is an example of ethical renewal. She not only charts one path to improving our ethical reasoning per se, but also deepens our understanding of what a great transition ought to envision and address.

Much of the debate about animals circulates around the utilitarianism of Peter Singer or Tom Regan's formulation of moral rights and duties. The views of Singer and Regan, while different in details, are both part of the axiomatic family of ethical theory, an outlook that treats ethical principles as moral truths to be applied top-down when answering normative problems regarding animals.

There is, however, a historically rich family of interpretive ethical reasoning, one that can speak to animals in diverse and nuanced ways. As I see it, Crist's ideas about solidarity with animals is part of the interpretive tradition of ethics, something prefigured by John Rodman and his "The Dolphin Papers."

In this family, ethical principles are moral insights used to reveal the moral issues at stake in specific cases. This is not top-down applied ethics, but a situated ethics of praxis. We interpret our ethical positions in light of a plurality of moral concepts matched to concrete problems in the real world. Crist's detailed engagement with the materiality of structural violence against animals underscores the importance of such praxis.

In alignment with Crist's suggestions, the interpretive family offers robust alternatives to the consequentialism and deontology of Singer and Regan, respectively. Some ethical theories focus on the cognitive and social capabilities of animals (i.e., the capabilities approach) or explore the presuppositions and meaning of ethical worldviews about animals (i.e., hermeneutics). Others focus on the interlocking oppression of patriarchy over animals and nature (i.e., ecofeminism) or how theories of justice illuminate what we owe animals and nature (i.e., multispecies justice). These and other interpretive theories transcend the duopoly of consequentialism and deontology and can renew our ethical thinking about sustainability and animals.

The second possibility, rewilding, reinforces the importance of Crist's focus on justice.

Rewilding is often portrayed as a means of nature-based conservation in response to the climate emergency or the sixth extinction. Yet the early roots of rewilding emerged not as a means to save humanity, but as a practical response to the intrinsic value of wild animals and nature. Landscape-level conservation or the reintroduction of native predators and ecosystems engineers (e.g., wolves and beavers, respectively) were proactive means serving this ethical vision.

Crist's recent writing on rewilding is distinctive for its emphasis on respecting human rights and democratic institutions. In this sense, rewilding is not only a matter of enlightened self-interest, but a demand for social justice amongst those harmed by the values and practices of human supremacy.

Nonetheless, rewilding remains a direct duty humans owe as a matter of restorative justice in a more-than-human world. Our collective depredations on animals and nature (as well as other people) demands rectification if we are not only to survive but thrive together. Rewilding is thus a key means and measure by which we stand in solidarity with animals and their pursuit, if you will, of their own well-being.

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## About the Author



William S. Lynn is the founder of PAN Works, an independent nonpartisan think tank dedicated to the well-being of animals. He is also a research scientist in the Marsh Institute at Clark University and a research fellow at the social science think-tank Knology, and teaches graduate courses in the Anthrozoology program at Canisius College. He helped to found the journal *Ethics, Policy and Environment*, served as lead editor for the Political Animals section of the journal *Society and Animals*, and chaired the Ethics Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

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