

The Vulnerability of Other Animals

Stephen Thierman¹

Human beings are vulnerable animals, naked, needy and weak...

- Martha Nussbaum, "Political Animals"

The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins here.

- Jacques Derrida, "The Animal that Therefore I Am (Following)"

The idea of vulnerability is not often directly addressed in mainstream ethics and political philosophy. Alasdair MacIntyre believes that the failure to explore the meaning of human vulnerability and dependence is rooted in the Western philosophical tradition's reluctance to attend adequately to the "animal" dimension of human life (MacIntyre, 1999). Philosophers have often been "forgetful of our bodies" (MacIntyre, 1999: 5) and, thus, they have remained inattentive to the rhythms and precarities of embodied life. In contrast, MacIntyre (and others) argue that we must acknowledge the moral importance of our vulnerabilities, afflictions and consequent dependencies.² I agree with the thrust of this critical assessment and believe that it can be developed further. More specifically, I hold that embodiment and vulnerability are also important conceptual tools for thinking about the moral status of other animals.³

¹ Stephen Thierman is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto. His research interests include Social and Political Philosophy, Bioethics, and Critical Animal Studies. He is currently interested in exploring how the work of Michel Foucault can help us to think about human interactions/relations with other animals. A portion of this research has been published as, "Apparatuses of Animality: Foucault Goes to a Slaughterhouse," in *Foucault Studies* (2010), 9: 89-100.

² MacIntyre is certainly not the only philosopher who criticizes the philosophical tradition in this fashion – many feminist theorists have also faulted this particular oversight. See *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (Price and Shildrick, 1999) for a diverse selection of essays that theorize the body from a feminist perspective.

³ In doing so, I join others who have begun to make similar arguments. Chloë Taylor's, "The Precarious Lives of Animals: Butler, Coetzee, and Animal Ethics" (Taylor, 2008) works in this direction via a very insightful critique
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Unfortunately, while a number of theorists have recognized the importance of deploying the concept of vulnerability in the service of ethical thought, there has been a reluctance to acknowledge that it might also be relevant for thinking about other animals. In this paper, I engage with three such cases in order to obtain some clarity on what vulnerability might mean, and on how it can be legitimately, and informatively, applied when it comes time to think about other creatures.

I proceed as follows. First, I begin with some remarks on how the notion of vulnerability might be situated in our thinking about other animals and I engage in some preliminary analysis of the concept itself. In the next three sections, I look critically at three authors—Michael Kottow, Margrit Shildrik, and Bryan Turner—who explicitly draw on the idea of vulnerability in their respective (bio)ethical work, but who also fail to appreciate that this term can be conceptualized in a way that encompasses other animals. I focus on these three theorists primarily because they represent a relatively broad spectrum of positions (a biomedical principlism, a deconstructive approach, and a rights theory, respectively), and because they act as good foils for the positive position that I aim to develop. None of these authors has focused on other animals, but important steps in their respective arguments invoke the idea that there is sharp line to be drawn between humans and other forms of animate life. In doing so, they make a general move that is all too familiar to the history of philosophy. It is this moment, playing itself out in particular discussions of vulnerability, that I want to focus on and call into question. Finally, I end by briefly endorsing the work of Ralph Acampora. He represents a fruitful development for those concerned with both (i) acknowledging the importance of the body in moral philosophy and (ii) ensuring that that philosophy takes a transspecific form.

of recent work by Judith Butler. Ani Satz's "Animals as Vulnerable Subjects: Beyond Interest-Convergence, Hierarchy, and Property" (2009), appeals to Martha Fineman's work (Fineman 2008) and capability theory in order to develop a critique of legal frameworks that presently affect nonhuman animals in the United States. Satz notes that vulnerability is a constant/universal condition shared between humans and other animals, and that it is intimately connected to the idea of dependence, but her analysis of the concept is quite brief (which is understandable, given her primary quarry) and she acknowledges that a "theory of animals as vulnerable subjects warrants development elsewhere" (Satz, 2009: 80). I hope to contribute to the development of that theory here. Whereas Fineman and Satz have political and legal critique as their primary objectives, my own is to contribute to the development of a "fundamental ontology," to borrow a Heideggerian turn of phrase, that makes room for nonhuman forms of animate life.

I should indicate, at the outset, that focusing on the concept of vulnerability is not necessarily intended to fully supplant other arguments that have been mounted on behalf of animals in more traditional approaches to moral philosophy, such as Peter Singer's utilitarianism (Singer, 1975) or Tom Regan's appeal to rights (Regan, 1983). Rather, it is meant to buttress these arguments by investigating the same topic from a slightly different perspective and by invoking a different idiom.

Vulnerability

Traditionally, arguments calling for changes to the ways nonhuman animals are conceived of, or treated, attempt to specify some capacity, or ability, the possession of which justifies affording those animals some form of standing in our (human) moral and/or political communities. Consciousness, intelligence, self-awareness, rationality, the ability to make generalizations and abstractions, or the use of language and tools, are just some of the characteristics that have been seen as relevant when it comes to deciding what it is about other animals that should make them "count" in our ethical deliberations and decision making.

My investigation will take a different tack. I am not concerned so much with exploring a particular ability/power, in virtue of which we can say that certain animals are owed moral consideration. I take it for granted that many other animals possess a wide variety of different capacities and that they are often expressed along spectrums that admit of gradations of degree rather than clear differences of kind. At the very least, we must bear in mind that we are in a state of infancy when it comes to our knowledge about the lives of other animals. We are, as of yet, largely ignorant as to how their unique forms of intelligence and their unique abilities are best conceptualized.⁴ Philosophers, in particular, have often been much too quick (and

⁴ Some qualifications are perhaps in order here. When I say "we," I am thinking primarily of contemporary, city dwelling individuals who don't have much direct contact with live non-human animals, and whose ignorance/infancy may be intimately connected to historical processes of urbanization and industrialization. People in other times and places may have (had) access to forms of knowledge that have been largely forgotten (or occluded). For a very interesting discussion of some of the ways that modern, "rational" farming practices work to replace an intimate knowledge of chickens with a form of deskilled ignorance, see, "Chicken Auguries" (Squier, 2006). By "ignorance" and "infancy," I also mean to invoke a failure to try to see, and understand, other animals of their own terms, apart from any instrumental utility they might possess with respect to human aims and desires. I believe that attentive, respectful ethological research is one means for addressing these lacunae.

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dogmatic) when looking at, thinking about, and making proclamations with regards to the capacities, behaviors, and moral standing of other “animate zoomorphs.”⁵

As opposed to a consideration of important abilities animals might possess, I am more interested in looking at a particular *inability*, namely, the vulnerability that is characteristic of animal existence (in both its human and nonhuman forms). I want to explore a certain powerlessness that I think is a more fundamental place for beginning to spell out the common ground that is inhabited by humans and other animals. This shift in focus gets closer, I believe, to the heart of what motivates people to think, write, and care about other animal life.

What do I mean when I call vulnerability an inability, or a form of powerlessness? A brief look at recent work by Jacques Derrida can help to flesh out this idea further (Derrida, 2008). In his own exploration of animality, Derrida is intrigued by the shift in focus that is occasioned by Jeremy Bentham’s famous (and oft quoted) challenge to the traditional, anthropocentric way of thinking about the moral standing of other animals (Bentham, 1939). The simple fact of aligning his thought with Bentham is surprising, given Derrida’s general hostility towards utilitarian approaches to moral philosophy. Bentham, as is well known amongst animal ethicists, suggests that the question, when we are trying to trace the boundaries of the moral community, is not, “Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but, *Can they suffer*?” (Bentham, 1939: 847) Derrida, for his part, notes that the “can” in the last question is importantly different as compared to the other two. Whereas the “can” in the first two questions asks after a capacity or power, that is, an ability to do something, the “can” in the new question looks to a certain receptivity, or inability. As Derrida puts it, the “question is disturbed by a certain *passivity*” (Derrida, 2008: 27, Derrida’s emphasis). This passivity points to a certain lack of control, a nakedness, which resides at the core of creaturely existence.

See Donald R. Griffin’s book *Animal Minds: Beyond Cognition to Consciousness* (Griffin, 2001) for an excellent overview of some recent research and theorizing.

⁵ I borrow this term from Ralph Acampora, whom I discuss in more detail below.

It is this passivity, understood as a vulnerability that is an essential facet of embodied life, that I want to explore in this paper. It is a shared vulnerability, and not any one active capacity, which I think ultimately opens a space for an ethical recognition of nonhuman others.⁶ In Derrida's words, mortality (which is certainly an important aspect of human vulnerability) is "the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life... to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower" (Derrida, 2008: 28).⁷ I contend that it is this non-power that should be taken as the starting point from which to begin thinking about the possibility of an expanded ethical consciousness.

The term "vulnerability" comes to us by way of the Latin word *vulnus* or "wound" and it is, no doubt, usually deployed with negative inflections. It often refers to a state of being weak—or, of not being well defended—as when we say of a particular person, place, or thing that they are vulnerable to attack or aggression. It often denotes a physical (or emotional) susceptibility to being assailable in one way or another. We often say, for example, that deep emotional attachments, like love, leave us vulnerable to being hurt, or that a weakened immune system makes us vulnerable to particular diseases. Being vulnerable is often conceived as a type of exposure, again, whether physical or emotional, to something that is potentially harmful. It might also refer to instabilities caused by social, environmental, or economic factors and may refer not just to individuals, but also to groups of people or even geographical areas. Thus, we might say that a class of people (women, say) are made vulnerable by a particular social arrangement (by having unequal status in a legal system, for example). Or, we might declare that a particular region is vulnerable to drought (or flooding) because of certain environmental factors and/or human activities.

⁶ It is likely that my discussion will resonate with approaches that privilege sentience as a criterion for moral considerability (e.g. Singer, 1975). Sentience, understood as a capacity to experience pain and pleasure, is not easily categorized as a simple, active capacity – it also involves a receptivity, or openness, to the world, that is, a capacity to be inflicted. An attentiveness to suffering, as a dimension of animal vulnerability, is definitely something I would like to include in my sketch here, thus I am happy to embrace this resonance. Perhaps one way to think of my argument is as a contribution to the development of an enriched account of certain elements of sentience.

⁷ For an in-depth engagement with Derrida's thought on the subject of animality, see Leonard Lawlor's *This is Not Sufficient* (Lawlor, 2007).

Weakness, susceptibility, exposure, openness, instability... these are all included in the cluster of notions that we typically associate with the idea of vulnerability. Furthermore, in all of these cases, vulnerability is often thought to be a bad thing. It is a state that we generally want to avoid and that we work to protect against. Ultimately, vulnerable is something that you do not want to be.

Vulnerability is also closely connected with the idea of dependence.⁸ Being dependent often means being reliant on something (or someone) for support—it implies that one thing (or state of affairs) is contingent on something else. We know, to provide one clear example, that human infants are absolutely dependent on their caregivers. They rely on older persons to provide the resources that are necessary for their survival (food, shelter, emotional nurturance, etc.) and their continued existence is contingent on receiving this type of support. Infants and children are often included on the list of those who are especially vulnerable. And the perception of this high degree of vulnerability is related, I think, to the fact that young humans are highly dependent on others and that these other, older individuals wield considerable power when it comes to determining the course of their lives. Thus, dependence, contingency, and powerlessness can be seen as further concepts that substantiate our understanding of vulnerability.

All these terms that I've associated with vulnerability (weakness, dependence, contingency, powerlessness, etc.) are usually cast in a negative light. Conversely, their antonyms (strength, independence, stability, fortification, etc.) are often thought of in positive terms. And to be sure, the capacity to display autonomy and independence is very often something to be prized, while dependence, or exposure to contingencies, is certainly often something to be mitigated. Still, I do not think that vulnerability must be necessarily thought of only in this negative way.

Rather than thinking of vulnerability as an intrinsically negative designation, I would suggest that it might also be useful to think of it more broadly, as what I'll call—

⁸ MacIntyre (1999) also emphasizes this connection. His work is noteworthy because he highlights the “animal” dimension of human vulnerability and argues for the inclusion of certain other animals (dolphins, most specifically) within the sphere of dependent, rational animals.

following Margrit Shildrik—an “existential state.” Understood in this way, we can see vulnerability as a term that highlights a fundamental (and inexorable) feature of human ontology. From this vantage point, the idea of vulnerability can be situated at the very core of what it means to be a human being and—as I will show—an animal.

Vulnerability as *Conditio Humana* (or, Other Animals are not Vulnerable)

In his commentary on the four principles that have been highlighted as foundational in European bioethics (autonomy, dignity, integrity, and vulnerability), Michael Kottow (2004) calls vulnerability a *conditio humana*. He argues that it is best understood as a descriptive/anthropological fact of human existence. Being vulnerable is not just something that we are sometimes, in some places, in virtue of certain contingent relations or factors; rather, it is something that we are at all times, in every place – an inescapable feature of our temporal and fleshy lives. Omnipotent, immortal beings, by way of contrast, are not vulnerable. Human beings live lives that can go better or worse, and which can fair ill or well. We are open and exposed to the ecstasy of delectable pleasure and to the sorrow of horrific suffering. Our mortal, embodied existence is always already characterized by a deep vulnerability. We can (and do) respond to this vulnerability in a variety of ways (we buy insurance, we build walls, we lift weights, we search for the fountain of youth, we form political coalitions, we look for salvation, etc.), but it can never be left behind (or, at least it can’t be left behind yet); it stalks us, in a sense, from the moment of birth until our last breath. In Kottow’s words, “it describes a constitutive condition of individuality” (Kottow, 2004: 282) and, thus, a deep feature of the human condition.

Kottow thinks it is important to distinguish between, on the one hand, vulnerability understood as a descriptive feature of human existence and, on the other hand, those “accidental anomalies like a physical defect, disease or some sort of deprivation as befalls the life of many human beings” (Kottow, 2004: 283). This is the (negative) sense in which the term vulnerability is usually used. He uses the term “susceptible” to try to capture this particular way of understanding vulnerability. While “vulnerability” is reserved to characterize an essential feature of human being, “susceptibility” is used to name “a specific and accidental condition to be diagnosed

and treated” (Kottow, 2004: 284). So, while all human beings are vulnerable, in virtue of being human, not all human beings are susceptible in the same ways, in virtue of the fact that we find ourselves in different types of circumstances at different times in our lives. For example, while elderly populations are just as vulnerable, in the “existential” sense, as younger populations, they may be more susceptible to the harms of particular ailments (influenza, say). Similarly, while men and women are equally vulnerable *qua* their humanity, women may be more susceptible (to violence, poverty, etc.) in virtue of particular social/economic contingencies. Following Onora O’Neil, Kottow thinks that these two forms of vulnerability must be addressed in different ways. He holds that “deep” vulnerability elicits an “obligation of basic justice that rejects injury and defends from it,” while susceptibility “creates obligations of social virtue that reject indifference and neglect in the wake of harm, increasing awareness when harm has occurred, and recognizing when it needs to be treated” (Kottow, 2004: 284).

Given my own concerns, it is important to ask how (or whether) the concept of vulnerability can be extended to other animals. Kottow, for his part, denies that it can be usefully employed to describe an existential state that is shared between humans and other animals. Kottow responds to the suggestion that vulnerability creates the foundation for an ethical response to nonhuman animals in the following passage:

It becomes difficult to understand that vulnerability should “appeal to protection of both animals and the teleological auto-organisation of the world,” for the nature of human vulnerability differs from other living beings in that humans are vulnerable to defeat in the complex process of becoming, whereas nonhumans are vulnerable to the more simple and radical dichotomy of being or ceasing to be. (Kottow, 2004: 283)

Kottow simply asserts that there is a difference in kind between the way that human beings are vulnerable and any way that other animals could be said to be vulnerable. For him, human vulnerability is grounded in our relation to a “complex process of becoming.” Invoking many philosophical authorities (e.g. Hobbes, Heidegger, Levinas, etc.), he sketches a picture of human vulnerability as somehow intimately intertwined with our pursuit of the good, to the planning and realization of life

projects, and to the fact that we are/become practical reasoners. Humans are vulnerable because our pursuit of the good is precarious and fraught with difficulty. Our life projects can be frustrated (by a variety of external and internal factors) and the development of our practical reasoning skills cannot be taken for granted (that is, they must be fostered and cultivated). By way of contrast, other animals are presented as not being vulnerable in these uniquely human ways. Their lives are not complex processes of becoming. Rather, those lives are simply a question of “being or ceasing to be.” Human vulnerability is expressed in the fact that our lives can be better or worse, that we must confront and navigate around a variety of obstacles, and that we must always negotiate the inescapable fact of our own mortality. Mere animal vulnerability, on the other hand, is limited to the question of life or death—to being or not being.

My first criticism of this passage is that Kottow’s treatment is much too flattening and homogenizing—a proclamation about the vulnerability of *all* nonhumans strikes me as dogmatic.⁹ Given the wide variety of animals that inhabit this category, it would seem prudent that we allow room for more finely graded distinctions. While it might make sense to see a bivalve (such as an oyster or a mussel) as having their vulnerability encapsulated in the radical dichotomy of life or death (and even this is likely too flattening), is this as plausible once we get to the echidna or the otter? What about the dogs and cats that accompany us along that complex road of becoming that we travel, or our closest phylogenetic neighbours (chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans)? Are all of these creatures only vulnerable in the sense that they can either be or not be? I would push us towards a negative response to this question—the lives of many other animals can “matter” in more nuanced and complex ways than Kottow’s brief assertion wants to allow.

Kottow has touched on the way that we might characterize the vulnerability of a nonliving physical object, that is, as something that can merely be altered, damaged, or destroyed. It seems as though the vulnerability of a vase (to being broken, say) is

⁹ In making this type of claim, Kottow follows in the footsteps of many other thinkers in the history of philosophy. As Derrida observes, there has been a strong tendency amongst philosophers to treat other animals as a homogenous mass that can be lumped together under, and be represented by, the general term “animal” (Derrida, 2008: 40).

best captured in the radical dichotomy of being or ceasing to be. But I do not think that this is an adequate understanding of the vulnerability that is displayed by other animate forms of life. We might say that a particular physical structure is vulnerable to earthquakes, for example, in that a seismic tremor can reduce it to rubble, but other animals are not only vulnerable in this very basic sense.

To be “vulnerable” in a morally weighted sense, is to be open to suffering and to having one’s engagement with the world frustrated. Other animals are centers of “needs, value and striving on [their] own account” (Plumwood, 1993: 60); that is, they are beings whose life trajectories take them through various stages of development, and which involve the negotiation of a variety of obstacles and contingencies in order to ensure self-preservation. Many animals—most certainly the domesticated animals with which we interact most frequently—are creatures with a welfare, that is, they are beings whose lives can go ill or well in a very subjective way (subjective in a way that the “welfare” of a building, or a vase, cannot be an embodied experience). And this is not just a “physical” welfare, beginning and ending with the health, or continued functioning, of a body. We need only consider the anxiety and boredom that are experienced by a variety of animals when kept in captivity to realize that animal well-being involves something more than just persisting in existence. It seems clear that other animals are involved in their own complex processes of becoming and that these processes can, and often are, frustrated.

I believe that the perception of a wide gap between the way human and animal vulnerability should be conceptualized is the result of a hermeneutic lens that attends primarily to the temporal and narrative dimensions of human existence and which, at the same time, backgrounds a serious consideration of our fleshy locatedness. Our awareness of the fact that our lives are a procession towards death, and the way in which this knowledge is thought to motivate and structure our activity, is often thought to be a uniquely human form of relationship to the self. It is this orientation (which Kottow is clearly supporting) that led Martin Heidegger to assert that only *Dasein* actually dies (Heidegger, 1996: 229). In contrast, according to Heidegger, other animals simply perish. It is the care and concern that we can direct at our own lives and our own histories that are thought to mark the uniqueness of human vulnerability. It seems to me that there is a problematic mind/body dualism at work in this strand of

thought. Human vulnerability is seen as minded in a way that makes it a “complex process,” whereas animals are thought to be captivated in the dumb, mute vulnerability of their physical bodies. The human being is “world-forming,” whereas the animal is assumed to be “poor-in-world” (Heidegger, 1995: 185-200).

Two observations can help to narrow the chasm that Kottow (and Heidegger) attempt to establish between humans and other animals.¹⁰ First, it may very well be the case that some other animals are aware of their own “being-unto-death.” Some may have an awareness of death which structures their activities, behaviors and relations with others. It is possible that certain animals might also relate to their own finitude and, thus, that they too could be said to be vulnerable in a more complex way than Kottow wants to allow. Elephant and chimpanzee rituals surrounding death are two possible examples.¹¹ Second, if we bring the situated, embodied aspects of human vulnerability into sharper relief, then we set the stage for a recognition of the way in which humans and other animals share in a precarious and vulnerable existence. The vicissitudes of the flesh, the arc of ageing that we follow from birth to death and decay, the experience of pain and suffering, our dependence on the world for nutrition and shelter, the joys of the sun on our skins and the other textures of perception—these are all ways in which the fragility of human becoming can be understood as fundamentally an “animal” vulnerability. The point is to allow, on the one hand, for the possibility that other animal lives are more temporal, narratively mediated, and self-aware than we generally allow and to acknowledge, on the other hand, that human life is more “animal” in its lived manifestations than we generally recognize. These observations narrow the gap between the vulnerability of humans and other animals, and consequently, lay the groundwork for a less segregated understanding of the world we inhabit, and share, with other forms of life.

¹⁰ Complimenting my brief remarks here, Derrida offers further insightful critique of Heidegger’s attempts to institute a sharp division between human beings and other animals. He focuses centrally on Heidegger’s insistence that other animals do not have access to things “as such” (i.e. that a dog lacks the conceptual capacities to encounter stairs *as* stairs). See especially the fourth chapter of *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Derrida, 2008: 141-160). MacIntyre and Acampora also criticize Heidegger on this front. See the fifth chapter of MacIntyre’s *Dependent Rational Animals* (MacIntyre, 1999) and the first chapter of Acampora’s *Corporal Compassion* (Acampora, 2006). For an extensive commentary on Derrida’s critique of Heidegger, see (Lawlor, 2007: 45-70).

¹¹ For an interesting piece, which proposes that chimpanzees’ awareness of death has been underestimated, see “*Pan Thanatology*” (Anderson, Gillies, and Lock, 2010). For some discussion of elephants and death, see *Elephants on the Edge* (Bradshaw, 2009: 10-14).

Notice that I just said, “narrow the gap,” and not, “obliterate it.” Many will still want to insist that there is something unique about human vulnerability and about the awareness of death that our species displays. And I want to be clear that I am not saying that all other animals are exactly the same as human beings.¹² But, I do believe that, despite important differences, there is also a significant existential commonality, namely, our vulnerable, corporeal being.

A much more nuanced development of a Heideggerian style of approach can be found in the work of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone. She acknowledges that our primary vulnerability is corporeal, and that this basic vulnerability is shared by all forms of animate life. But she also believes that human vulnerability is unique in certain ways. She follows Heidegger (and Kottow) in asserting that other animals lack a conceptual awareness of death, but, for her, this awareness of death is “not lacking because there is no awareness of, and no feelings about, the disappearance or permanent inanimation of a friend, for example, or a baby [she cites Jane Goodall’s research on chimpanzees here]” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2008: 38). Thus, we see that she acknowledges that other animals are aware, and that they have feelings, which takes us happily beyond Kottow’s radical dichotomy of being or not-being.

The concept of death is lacking in other animals, in Sheets-Johnstone’s view, because “it is contingent on the objectification of one’s own body and because nonhuman animals do not have physical bodies *as such*” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2008: 38). What she means by not being able to objectify, or have a physical body “as such,” is that other animals lack the conceptual ability to abstract away from the immediate experience of the lived body and to perceive bodies (their own and those of others) as entities that are comprised of many different, distinguishable components. She believes that other animals experience the world “dynamically and physiognomically” and that they do not experience a “material body abstractly separated or analytically separable from the animate and animated body that the individual is” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2008: 38). Still, she does believe that there is a certain sense of vulnerability that other animals

¹² As Derrida puts it, to insist on this kind of homogeneity “would be worse than sleepwalking, it would simply be too asinine [*bête*]” (Derrida, 2008: 30).

have with respect to their own bodies (and to those of others), but that this is experienced/enacted “in a wholly living, here-now context” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2008: 299). An example of what she is describing might be found when I (lovingly!) tussle with my cat and he nibbles at me in a way that clearly shows restraint. He is playing with me and his actions display an awareness of my corporeal vulnerability in the immediate context of our interactions.

Nonetheless, Sheets-Johnstone holds that the concept of death, and the fear of death, are absent in my cat and that, as a consequence, his sense of vulnerability is not as expansive as my own. In essence, she believes that humans are unique because we know ourselves to be vulnerable and we can consider our vulnerability from an abstracted, conceptual distance. For example, I know that my body will age, that these eyes I use to see might one day fail me, and that this heart, which I feel beating in my chest as I type with these fingers, will one day fall silent.

For the moment, I am happy to acknowledge that there may be important differences in the ways that humans and other animals can relate to their bodily vulnerability, but I do not believe that these differences amount to much when we are thinking about the contours of the moral community. There is a basic, embodied vulnerability that human beings share with other animate life thanks to our corporeal nature. In so far as she acknowledges this, I count Sheets-Johnstone as an ally.

Returning to Kottow’s remarks, I would now like to criticize the implications he immediately draws from the difference he perceives between human and animal vulnerability:

This difference implies that human vulnerability requires active protection against negative forces and prevention from harm, whereas the biosphere merits respect and support for its continued being, and is best served by non-interference or, to be less drastic, it is required that only morally sustainable interference be allowed. (Kottow, 2004: 283)

Here, Kottow derives some normative prescriptions from the (supposed) fact that the vulnerability of humans and other animals is fundamentally different. On the one

hand, the complex process of human becoming, with its unique form of vulnerability, calls for protection and the prevention of harm. On the other hand—and here nonhuman animals have been further flattened by being equated with “the biosphere”—a more brute form of vulnerability calls only for respect, support, and non-interference. Respect, support, and non-interference may very well be important virtues to enact in relation to other animals and the environment more generally, but this dichotomization is problematic once we recognize that animal vulnerability may not be so different from its human counterpart. A less anthropocentric rendering of the idea of vulnerability, *pace* Kottow, enjoins us to see both protection and the prevention of harm as virtues to be developed in our interactions with other animals. At the very least, a better understanding of the vulnerabilities shared by humans and other animals will seriously challenge the argument Kottow is seeking to develop.

Encounters with Vulnerability

In the context of Margrit Shildrick’s deconstructive approach to (bio)ethics, the project of developing an “ontology of human being” is closely connected to her attempts to reposition the body as a central category, and to revalue the concept of vulnerability (Shildrick, 2002). Shildrick, in a way that echoes Kottow’s usage, privileges the idea of “becoming,” a term that is meant to capture the always dynamic and evolving character of our embodied subjectivity, as opposed to relying on the term “being,” which she thinks carries more static resonances. Asserting the importance of embodiment is meant to displace more “logocentric” ontologies—namely, those accounts which privilege rationality over and above our corporeal nature—and it is meant to show that the body is “not incidental to the ontological and ethical processes on the self, but intrinsic to their operation” (Shildrick, 2002: 1).

Shildrick challenges these traditional conceptions because she believes that approaches that privilege reason, and which deny or denigrate the body, have also often supported sexist and racist ontologies that value certain groups (men, whites, etc.) and degrade others (women, non-whites, etc.). She also focuses on embodiment in her work in order to explore the ways that certain normative conceptions of the body have been deployed to mark and exclude not just those who embody sexual and

racial difference, but also “those who are physically disabled or whose bodies radically disrupt morphological expectations” (Shildrick, 2002: 2).

It is with these goals in mind that Shildrick explicates the notion of monstrosity. She thinks that reflection on what we consider monstrous provides an occasion for rethinking the nature of embodiment itself. Monstrous bodies, for her, include all those bodies that are feared, or which cause reactions of anxiety, because of their gross failure to approximate dominant corporeal norms. Amongst these bodies, she includes hybrid creatures (chimeras), conjoined twins, human clones, and cyborgs. The normative conception of embodiment that Shildrick has in mind is one that imagines the individual to be an autonomous, bounded, and relatively stable entity whose sex/gender is easily determinable and whose body parts conform to certain expectations. The monstrous shatters this conception in so far as it “disrupts the notions of separation and distinction that underlie such claims” (Shildrick, 2002: 2). She thinks that because monstrous beings can be recognized as like the self in some important way (they are not wholly “other”), and because they reflect back aspects of ourselves that are repressed (our own vulnerability, for example), they can become deeply disturbing.

Shildrick believes this disturbance can occasion the insight that it is not just some “other” bodies that fail to conform to certain norms, while “our” bodies can be seen as normal, but that in a certain sense all bodies are involved in a perpetual, anxiety-ridden process of attempting, and always failing, to approximate an impossible ideal. Closely tied to this valorization of the monstrous is her revaluation of the notion of vulnerability. An ethical and ontological orientation that embraces the ambiguity and unpredictability of “an openness towards the monstrous other” is one that also “acknowledges both vulnerability to the other, and the vulnerability of the self” (Shildrick, 2002: 3). Recognizing this vulnerability means recognizing that our existence as human beings often involves contingencies and dependence, that the boundaries of the body are permeable, and that we must constantly deal with the possibility of instability and uncertainty. Thus, it is clear that in Shildrick’s ontology of human being, the interrelated concepts of body, monstrosity, and vulnerability, are all given foundational roles to play.

I would like to begin to sketch out my own preliminary “ontology of human being” by way of a critique of Shildrick’s discussion. I agree with Shildrick that the body and its always already vulnerable nature must be central in any conception of human existence, and I agree that it is also very important (in ethics and ontology) to acknowledge/recognize our own vulnerability and the vulnerability of others. Where I want to expand on Shildrick’s position is by also suggesting that we need an expanded sense of those others who might be vulnerable. Shildrick sees herself as directly critiquing the assumptions and values of liberal humanism, but the others she is concerned with seem always to be “all too human.” An adequate human ontology will have to give the body a place of central importance, but it will also have to recognize that humans are not the only embodied beings. It must recognize that human beings exist in complex and dynamic interactions with a variety of nonhuman others.

Let me expand on this criticism by looking at a particular passage. While discussing the anxiety that can be induced by monsters (which mirror some aspect of the self), Shildrick writes: “So long as the monstrous remains the absolute other in its corporeal difference it poses few problems; in other words it is so distanced in its difference that it can clearly be put into the oppositional category of not-me” (Shildrick, 2002: 3). Thus, it is something *familiar* about the monster that is supposed to make us anxious, that is, there is a recognition that unsettles us. If there is nothing recognizable, then the monster does not incite any fear or trembling, or at least it does not occasion the ethical self-reflection that Shildrick thinks is possible/necessary. It is clearly “not-me.” Later, she goes on to write:

Although the purely animal monster might also be an object of curiosity or fear, and has a similar history of heralding events to come, of providing a material marker of divine affect, or later of signifying evolutionary diversity, it does not thereby unsettle the security of human being. The animal is the other in the comforting guise of absolute difference, but its lack of humanity cannot appeal directly to the heart of our own being. Those monsters that are at least in an ambivalent relationship to our humanity, however, are always too close for comfort. They invoke vulnerability. (Shildrick, 2002: 20)

Here, “the animal” is presented as not unsettling the “security of human being.”¹³ It is conceived as an absolute difference, as an entity that does not reflect anything recognizable back towards the human spectator, that is, as something utterly unfamiliar. Some form of recognition is needed, according to Shildrick, in order to lay bare both our own vulnerability and the vulnerability of the other. The (purported) unfamiliarity of the purely animal other cannot occasion an awareness of our own vulnerable, embodied becoming. A troubling implication of this passage is that, due to their failure to invoke vulnerability (or to speak “directly to the heart of our own being”) animals might also fall outside of the ethical domain that the appeal to vulnerability was meant to establish. I contend that an ontology focused on the body and the vulnerable nature of human becoming must recognize the world-bound nature of that becoming as well as the fact that human lives unfold in an “environment” of becoming that is home to a variety of different types of bodies, including nonhuman bodies, that might be understood as vulnerable in their own ways. To claim that “the animal” cannot unsettle the security of human being is to engender the very type of closure that Shildrick’s deconstructive approach seeks to hold in perpetual abeyance. Thus, if this is her position with regards to animal others, then it must be seen as deeply problematic from the perspective of her overall project.

Vulnerability and Human Rights

In his work on human rights, Brian Turner challenges the relativism and the positivism of the human sciences (i.e. sociology and anthropology), by appealing to the related notions of embodiment and human vulnerability (Turner, 2006). He believes that human rights (i.e. rights enjoyed by individuals in virtue of being human) can “be defined as universal principles, because human beings share a common ontology that is grounded in a shared vulnerability” (Turner, 2006: 6). Turner acknowledges that human groups display many cultural differences, and that “human

¹³ Obviously, many thinkers, and I include myself amongst them, do believe that the security of human being can be unsettled by encounters with other creatures. With respect to his interactions with his cat, and their effects on his thinking about the otherness of the other, Derrida declares that “nothing will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbor than these moments when I see myself naked under the gaze of a cat” (Derrida, 2008: 11). Donna Haraway is another notable theorist who highlights how human being is shot through with the non-human, declaring that “[t]o be one [i.e. a self or individual] is always *to become* with many [i.e. “companion species”]” (Haraway, 2008: 4).

happiness is diverse,” but he also believes that we are bound together by the “risks and perturbations” that arise from our shared vulnerability and that our human miseries are often “common and uniform” (Turner, 2006: 9).

Turner is primarily interested in how human vulnerability is related to the creation (and perpetuation) of various social and political institutions. He does not spend a lot of time defining the notion of vulnerability, nor does he have much to say about other animals (with an important exception that I will discuss below), though an implicit characterization can be discerned. In what appears to be an inversion of the value-laden terminology employed by Heidegger, Turner embraces an understanding of human vulnerability which pictures it as a kind of poverty—an “instinctual deprivation”—which forces us into the situation where we must build various institutions (i.e. religion, the family, etc.) in order to compensate for the lack of “ready-made instinctual responses” (Turner, 2006: 28). In his account, the “world openness” of human being is purchased at a cost of not being adequately instinctively equipped for a specific environment. Turner implicitly endorses the idea that the human’s world is “open” (read: the nonhuman animal’s world is “closed”), and that other animals function primarily based on “instincts.” As I have suggested, these positions, which assume a difference in kind between humans and other animals, need to be called into question. This calling into question needs to happen not because we must deny that human life is unique or different in many interesting ways, nor because we must assert that other animals are exactly the same as humans, but, rather, it must be done to recognize a particular layer of commonality that we share with other animals with respect to our vulnerable natures.

Turner does discuss other animals briefly when he considers some possible objections to his thesis, namely, that vulnerability is the best basis for developing a theory of human rights. The imagined interlocutor holds that by using the notion of embodied vulnerability to ground the ascription of rights we make it impossible to distinguish between human rights and the rights that will be possessed by other embodied creatures: “a critic might complain reasonably that one cannot distinguish between animal rights and human rights” (Turner, 2006: 37). Turner’s response is short and not fully developed, but he seems to suggest two possible responses to this line of criticism.

On the one hand, he seems to meet the objection by suggesting that there is a relevant difference between humans and other animals that would block the ascription of the same set of rights to members in each group. This difference appears to boil down to a lack of moral agency—“unlike humans, animals cannot exercise these rights directly without our intervention. Animals cannot represent themselves” (Turner, 2006: 38). Turner allows that we may protect certain animals, but that this protection will be part of the human endeavor to protect the natural environment and that “animal rights” must be seen as an aspect of an environmental politics which sees “protecting animals as important for protecting human beings” (Turner, 2006: 38). On this response, other animals are embodied and vulnerable, but not in a way that can matter intrinsically; at most, other animals warrant protection for instrumental reasons stemming from human concerns. This answer risks shifting Turner’s focus away from embodied vulnerability as the basis for the ascription of rights and redirecting it towards the ability to “exercise” rights and “represent” oneself as the most relevant determining factors. These particular abilities are reminiscent of a more disembodied (i.e. Kantian) approach to the ascription of moral worth which may run counter to the course Turner wants to chart. He would do better, I think, to expand upon and enrich his understanding of the vulnerability of other animals.

On the other hand, Turner’s second response does seem to gesture in this other direction. He suggests that ascribing rights to other animals may not undermine his vulnerability argument because animal rights may be similar to the rights that are enjoyed by human beings who are not full moral agents (e.g. children, brain-dead patients, etc.) and who cannot fully exercise those rights, nor represent themselves. In what is essentially a “marginal cases” style of argument, Turner appears to be indicating that we can extend certain rights to other animals who lack various capacities because we already extend rights to many human beings who lack those same capacities. Possession of those particular abilities, it turns out, may not be necessary for the ascription of rights, and, thus, it may be possible to get other animals into the community of rights bearers’ on other grounds (say, because they are vulnerable, sentient beings). But Turner does not pursue this line of thought very far. He is content to conclude by putting the problem aside, suggesting that the question of

animal rights “might therefore turn out to be part of a more complex philosophical problem about agency” (Turner, 2006: 38).

At this point, I should note that I am not sure that the language of “rights” is the best conceptual framework for understanding the moral entitlements of other animals. But I do think that it makes sense to think of them as beings that are vulnerable in morally significant ways and that an expanded understanding of the notion of vulnerability can help to expand the perimeters of the moral community. It is interesting that Turner connects his vulnerability argument to the development of a cosmopolitan virtue ethic. This ethic is founded on the idea that our human frailty can be taken as the basis for developing a sense of common “humanity” or a wider sense of shared community. One of the components of this ethic, as Turner develops it, is a duty to care, both for particular others and for other cultures. As far as my argument is concerned, I would say that a cosmopolitan ethic based on shared vulnerability can go further, and that the duty to care must also be extended to other creatures.¹⁴

To summarize, it is not so much that I disagree with the directions taken by Kottow, Shildrick, and Turner, in their respective analyses. I think that their attention to vulnerability, and to the importance of the body, are important developments in ethical thought. However, I think that each of them is too quick when it comes to a consideration of how other animals will fit (or will fail to fit) into their frameworks. In line with Shildrick, Kottow and Turner, any adequate ethical framework will have to attend to vulnerability and to the body, however, *pace* Shildrick, Kottow and Turner, it will also have to spend more time considering how other animals will be conceived of and accommodated in its conceptual space.

¹⁴ Obviously, I am not alone in calling for this type of extension. Over the last couple of decades, a growing body of literature has been concerned to bring the feminist care tradition to bear on debates in animal ethics. *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics* (Donovan and Adams 2007) and *Beyond Animal Rights: A Feminist Caring Ethic for the Treatment of Animals* (Donovan and Adams 1996) are two excellent sources for tracking these developments.

A “Symphysic” of Transpecific Morality

I would like to end by briefly presenting the work of Ralph Acampora as one example of how such a framework might be developed. For his part, Acampora engages with the phenomenological tradition in his recent work on animal ethics (Acampora 1995 and 2006). He works insightfully, and critically, with the thought of Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and many others, to “describe, explain, and interpret” what he calls a “transhuman morality” (Acampora, 2006: 1). As Acampora presents it, a transhuman moral theory is one that rejects the anthropocentric norms that have been dominant in traditional approaches to ethics and political philosophy, and which attempts to enable an expanded understanding of the moral community. He develops his own position by critically situating it with respect to the dominant forms that transhuman moral theories have taken thus far. He sees utilitarian appeals to sentience (found in Singer’s work, for example) and deontological definitions of subjectivity (found in Regan’s animal rights argument, for example) stipulating standards of moral significance by appealing to human exemplars of consciousness. These theories work to “elevate” other animals into spheres of moral concern by appealing to “higher” mental capacities that are constitutive of human mental life. In contrast, Acampora favors an approach that sheds “anthropocentric hierarchy altogether... and [which] place[s] our moral thought and political activity behind the truly post-humanist task of reappreciating bodily animacy as such” (Acampora, 1995: 25).¹⁵ For my part, I am interested in how this project of reappreciating bodily animacy connects with my discussion of vulnerability.

Acampora believes that we can extend the range of caring regard in the “very gesture” of recognizing that we (humans, that is) are also “animate zoomorphs.” His idea seems to be that rather than trying to bring other animals “up” to a particular level by appealing to the “higher” human-like capacities that they might possess—a level where they can begin to be valued as subjects of moral concern—we should instead try to bring human beings “down,” so to speak, to the level of other animals. The question becomes not, how do we get other animals into the moral community, but

¹⁵ I am not entirely convinced that appeals to sentience, or Regan’s subject-of-a-life criterion, are not themselves important attempts to reappreciate bodily animacy, but at this point, I put that criticism to the side.

rather, how did they get excluded from it in the first place, given that human beings are also animals with their own receptive capacities and vulnerabilities? For Acampora, where we begin our ethical thinking and deliberations “is always already caught up in the experience of being a live body thoroughly involved in a plethora of ecological and social interrelationships with other living bodies and people,” thus it is the “movement toward dissociation and nonaffiliation [with other animals] that needs to be justified against a background of relatedness and interconnectivity” (Acampora 2006: 5). If we interpret phenomenal embodiment along these lines—that is, if we acknowledge the vulnerability and locatedness inherent in human existence—then we enable a mode of philosophizing that is conducive to constructing a transhuman ethic. In Acampora’s words, “the live body is the primary locus of existential commonality between human animals and other organisms, and the appreciation of commonality undergirding differentiation enables the growth of moral relationships” (Acampora 1995: 26).

Acampora believes that an appreciation of the carnal vulnerability that is shared between humans and other animals can be the basis for the extension of moral compassion to other forms of animate life. The experience of compassionate concern that he is interested in describing is based on sensing one’s bodily vulnerability to be similar to another’s. This experience of a lived carnal vulnerability is held to provide the “experientially primordial basis of what we sometimes refer to as the ‘moral sense’” (Acampora 1995: 27). For Acampora, “moral sense” signifies a more physically oriented pattern than does the more psychic notions, such as sympathy, that were referred to by early moral sense theorists, such as David Hume. This is an important point: Acampora contends that moral life (especially the transspecific) is primarily rooted—“as a matter of phenomenal fact”—“in corporal symphysis rather than in mental maneuvers in the direction of sympathy” (Acampora 1995: 27). Acampora’s neologism—symphysis—is intended to connote a more dense, physically grounded notion than “sympathy.” It designates the felt sense of sharing with somebody else, “a live nexus as experienced in a somatic setting of direct or systemic (inter)relationship” (Acampora 1995: 27). An experience of symphysis, then, is not based on any attempt to imagine what another is going through, but rather it is felt in the body as an awareness of the vulnerability that I share with an embodied other.

Acampora describes an encounter with squirrels in a park, and of the distress he feels at seeing that their tails have been docked, to flesh out the phenomenal character (and progression) of the symphysical experience he is trying to capture. For him, observing the molting of the squirrels' fur bespeaks a sense of shared climatic and environmental horizons; listening to their calls countenances a shared auditory world; simultaneous eating indicates similar needs for sustenance; while the sight of a squirrel, who has been harmed by human hands, causes Acampora to recoil in a visceral recognition of shared susceptibilities to pain and wounding. Similar experiences of symphysis might also be possible with the animal companions who reside in our homes. My ethical concern for the well-being of my cat is based less in any attempt to mentally imagine what life might be like for him—that is, in an attempt to sympathize—and more in the embodied life we share together. The warmth of his body next to mine, the rhythmic rise and fall of his breathing, his soft wheeze as he sleeps—these things help to shape the embodied, world-bound texture of our sphere of interaction. It is his vulnerability that I feel compelled to respect and which guides my actions.

Acampora opens the door for moral considerability not by appealing to mental powers and human-like capacities, but by describing a (proto-ethical) feeling based in the experience of a shared vulnerability. We discover what we owe to other animals by recognizing the vulnerabilities that are constitutive of a shared world of flesh and we become aware of this sensitivity by recognizing that we are also bodily participants as animals ourselves in the carnal life-world. What Acampora seems to be suggesting is that we do not need a metaphysics of morals, that is, we do not need a transcendent system that would underwrite and specify our obligations, duties, rights, etc., with respect to other animals. Instead, we need to foreground the body in our ethical thinking, to recognize that we are vulnerable, animate beings. Ethics is not a matter of metaphysical justification, rather it is a field of symphysical openness, of recognizing the shared vulnerability of humans and other creatures.

Conclusion

A number of philosophers have recognized the importance of discussing vulnerability in moral and political philosophy. Still, a number of those thinkers—I have discussed three—try to understand the vulnerability of human beings by differentiating it from the vulnerability of other animals in an absolute way. Kottow, Shildrick, and Turner all seem to endorse a position that presents the vulnerability of other animals as vastly different from the vulnerability that is characteristic of human existence. I have suggested that this tack is misguided. While their attentiveness to the importance of the body is laudable, these theorists all display an inadequate understanding of “the animal” and they effectively reinstall problematic assumptions about speciated difference that we would do better to actively question. Acampora helps us to get a sense of the direction we will be led to by this questioning. His analysis acknowledges the importance of thinking about vulnerability (and the body) while also insisting that this acknowledgement has implications for how we are going to think about other animals. This, I have argued, is the right way to proceed.

This essay does not advance any specific prescriptions with respect to the treatment of other animals, nor does it offer any specific directives for future activism. My primary goals have been critique and an expansion of the moral imagination. As far as my understanding of critique is concerned, I will invoke the words of Michel Foucault, who claimed that “[t]o do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy” (Foucault 2000: 456). The act I would like to make harder is the philosophical move that aims to have something important turn on the presumption of a sharp division between humans and other animals. As evidenced by the theorists I have considered in this discussion of vulnerability, this is still a move that is all too easy to make. With respect to an expansion of the moral imagination, I believe that this is a crucial prelude to prescriptions and directives. Fostering a sense of kinship with other animals is an essential springboard for transformations of the self and of the institutions that permeate our social lives. To echo Sheets-Johnstone, I would assert that a “rationally unadorned and unadornable existential awareness of oneself and other living beings as exposed and open to pain, suffering, and death, as quintessentially vulnerable by the mere fact of being alive, of being first and foremost

a physical body” is extremely important, and that this awareness holds within it the “possibility of opening upon ever deepening understandings of the vast world of Nature and awakening the attitudinal affect of caring” (Sheets-Johnstone 2008: 299). The readers of this journal may not need to be convinced, or reminded, of these facts. But they cannot be taken for granted and, thus, we must continue to encourage their promulgation.

In order to advance ethical theories that will adequately respond to the “multiplicity of embodied difference” (to use Shildrick’s words) manifested in our worlds we need to focus on the propensities and possibilities of those different bodies. Theories that rely too heavily on the possession of particular (human) mental powers for the ascription of moral status, or personhood, will be inadequate for accommodating concerns about other animals and the natural environment more generally. We must emphasize the embodied/world-bound existence that humans share with a variety of other animals and organisms, and recognize that all of these different bodies develop in rich, complex, and mutually constitutive ways. Human beings are not the only vulnerable beings that inhabit the world. Recognizing this is essential for sustaining a continued critique of a variety of human values and practices.¹⁶

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¹⁶ A substantial portion of this paper was presented at the *Animal and Animality Across the Humanities and Social Sciences* conference at Queen’s University in June, 2010. I would like to thank members of the audience for their questions and feedback. I would also like to thank the two anonymous readers who reviewed my work prior to publication. Their comments and suggestions were very insightful and helpful.

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