ATTENTION TO SUFFERING: A FEMINIST CARING ETHIC FOR THE TREATMENT OF ANIMALS

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Many feminists, including myself, have criticized contemporary animal welfare theory for its reliance upon natural rights doctrine, on the one hand, and utilitarianism on the other. The main exponent of the former approach has been Tom Regan, and of the latter, Peter Singer. However incompatible the two theories may be, they nevertheless unite in their rationalist rejection of emotion or sympathy as a legitimate base for ethical theory about animal treatment. Many feminists have urged just the opposite, claiming that sympathy, compassion, and caring are the ground upon which theory about human treatment of animals should be constructed. Here I would like to further deepen this assertion.

To do so I will argue that the terms of what constitutes the ethical must be shifted. Like many other feminists, I contend that the dominant strain in contemporary ethics reflects a male bias toward rationality, defined as the construction of abstract universals that elide not just the personal, the contextual, and the emotional, but also the political components of an ethical issue. Like other feminists, particularly those in the "caring" tradition, I believe that an alternative epistemology and ontology may be derived from women's historical social, economic, and political practice. I will develop this point further below.

In addition to recent feminist theorizing, however, there is a long and important strain in Western (male) philosophy that does not express the rationalist bias of contemporary ethical theory, that in fact seeks to root ethics in emotion—in the feelings of sympathy and compassion. Why this tradition has been overshadowed by rationalist theory is a question beyond my scope; what I would like to do here is, first, to summarize the main components of this sympathy tradition; second, extend recent feminist theorizing on the subject; and third, conclude with the idea that what we need is a refocus in our moral vision—a shift in the cultural ethical episteme—so that people will begin to see and attend to the suffering of animals, which is happening all about them. Here I will rely on theorizing about "attentive love" developed principally by Iris Murdoch (under the influence of Simone Weil), but anticipated by more
than a century of sympathy theory expounded by such major western philosophers as David Hume, Arthur Schopenhauer, Martin Buber, Edmund Husserl, and other phenomenologists, such as Max Scheler and Edith Stein. Murdoch indeed exhibits a thorough awareness of this tradition—especially of the contribution of Hume and Schopenhauer—in her latest book, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992).

It was Immanuel Kant who formulated the rationalist rights-based ethic that has dominated the contemporary field. In his Preface to the *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) Kant rejects feeling or inclination as a morally worthy motive for ethical action; rather, he stipulates, for an action to be ethically significant it must be performed out of a sense of duty. Indeed, "an action done from duty must wholly exclude the influence of inclination . . ." (Kant 279). Kant's rejection of sentiment or sympathy as a base for moral decision-making or action seems to reflect three concerns: one is that emotions are volatile (what one feels today one may not feel tomorrow [276]); two, the capacity for sentiment is not evenly distributed (and thus those who exhibit sympathy may act more morally by inclination than those who do not [277]); three, for these reasons a sentimental ethic is not universalizable—one cannot establish thereby universal ethical laws (281). The second and the third points suggest that an ethic based on sentiment or sympathy or care is incompatible with the claims of justice—that everyone be treated equally and fairly. Most defenses of and attacks on a sympathy-based ethic revolve around these points.

Kant also formulated what has become the dominant Western view of animals: that they are instrumental to human interests—are means to human ends but not ends in themselves worthy of moral consideration. Since Kant's views have been extensively criticized by animal-rights theorists, notably Tom Regan in his *Case for Animal Rights*, I will not further treat them here. Schopenhauer, however, sounded the keynote of this critique when he exclaimed: "genuine morality [is] outraged by the proposition . . . that beings devoid of reason (hence animals) are *things* and therefore should be treated merely as means" (Schopenhauer 95).

I regard such propositions as revolting and abominable. . . . Thus, because Christian morality leaves animals out of account. . . . they are at once outlawed in philosophical morals; they are mere "*things.*" . . . They can therefore be used for vivisection, hunting, coursing, bullfights, and horse racing, and can be whipped to death as they struggle along with heavy carts of stone. Shame on such a morality. . . . that fails to realize the eternal essence that exists in every living thing, and shines forth with inscrutable significance from all eyes (96).
Kant’s objection to an ethic rooted in emotional response, or sympathy, betrays a conception of emotion that construes it as irrational, uncontrollable, and erratic. Like other rationalists, Kant seems to imagine that emotional experience necessarily obliterates rational thinking. Kantian theorist Tom Regan follows in this vein when he accuses “ethic-of-care feminism” of “abjuring the use of reason” (Regan 1991, 142).

But a considered and sophisticated response to such charges has been developed by sympathy theorists. They argue that experiencing sympathy is a complex intellectual as well as emotional exercise. Philip Mercer, for example, in his very useful study, Sympathy and Ethics (1972), claims that in fact sympathy includes “a cognitive element” (8). Like Max Scheler (see below), Mercer is careful to distinguish between empathy and sympathy. Where the former may involve “losing oneself” in another’s feelings, the latter requires keeping a certain distance so as to imaginatively construct the other’s situation accurately and thereby to understand it intellectually as well as emotionally (9).

H.B. Acton in “The Ethical Importance of Sympathy” (1955) similarly argues that sympathy is a “form” of rationality (66). It is not “as partial and impulsive” as critics have claimed (65); it is “not a primitive animal feeling but an exercise of the imagination requiring self-consciousness and comparison” (66). In his phenomenological exploration of empathy Husserl identifies it as an imaginative exercise that requires judgment and evaluation: “I try to picture to myself, standing here, how I would look, how I would feel, and how the world would appear if I were there—in the place of that body which resembles mine and acts as I might. My imaginative projection into the place of another, conjoined with the two types of data given by the senses [appearance and behavior] makes empathy possible” (Elliston 223). Mercer describes a similar imaginative construction but specifies that as a basis for ethical judgment and action sympathy (again not empathy) should involve not projecting oneself into another’s situation but rather figuring out how the other is feeling: “it is not enough that I should imagine how I should feel if I were in the other person’s place; I have to imagine how [the other] feels” (9).

The most developed analysis of sympathy remains phenomenologist Max Scheler’s The Nature of Sympathy (1st ed., 1913; 3rd rev. ed., 1926). Scheler elevates sympathy into a form of knowledge (Verstehen or understanding) which he proposes as an epistemological alternative to the objectification of the Cartesian scientific mode. Scheler indeed was a founder of the phenomenological school in the social sciences, which relies upon a method of “psychological sympathy” where the researcher attempts to imaginatively construct the reality of the subject, rather than objectifying him or her as data to fit mathematical paradigms. (See
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Matson 240; Hughes 187-88, 311.) Scheler proposed his method not just for the social sciences, however, and not just for humans. Rather, he contends, “understanding and fellow-feeling [Mitgefühl] are able to range throughout the entire animal universe... The mortal terror of a bird, its sprightly or dispirited moods, are intelligible to us and awaken our fellow-feeling” (48).

Scheler argues that humans need to develop (or re-develop) their sympathetic intellectual capacities in order to decode the symbolic language of nature. Humans need to learn to read this language in order to truly understand natural life, including animals. “[W]e can understand the experience of animals,” he notes, by attending to their behavioral and expressive signs: these have as their referent the animal’s emotional and psychological state. “[F]or instance when a dog expresses its joy by barking and wagging its tail... we have here a universal grammar valid for all languages of expression” (11).

Similarly, other forms of natural life have a “grammar of expression” that humans can learn to understand; this understanding is both intellectual and emotional. “[T]he fullness of Nature in its phenomenological aspect still presents a vast number of fields in which the life of the cosmos may find expression; fields wherein all appearances have an intelligible coherence which is other and more than mechanical, and which, once disclosed by means of the universal mime, pantomime and grammar of expression is found to mirror the stirrings of universal life within” (104). Thus, Scheler proposes that animals and other natural forms have a “language” that is accessible if humans attend to it, one that is elided by the mathematizing pretensions of modern science.

[W]e must rid ourselves henceforward of our one-sided conception of Nature as a mere instrument of human domination. ... [W]e must learn once more “to look upon Nature as into the heart of a friend” [Faust I. 3220]. ... Hence the first task of our educational practice must be to revive the capacity for identification with the life of the universe, and awaken it anew from its condition of dormancy in the capitalist social outlook of Western man (with its characteristic picture of the world as an aggregation of movable quantities). (105)

Thus, Scheler proposes an epistemological mode of sympathetic understanding as a valid tool of knowledge, which will reveal realities that are not seen or understood by the Cartesian mathematizing mode of science. St. Francis of Assisi is presented as exemplary; in his “emotional relationship to Nature... natural objects and processes take on an
expressive significance of their own, without any parabolic reference to . . . human relationships” (87). Humans must develop this kind of sympathetic understanding (Verstehen) as a cognitive mode to decipher nature’s own language, to see organic life as it is, not as translated into manipulable objects for human use. Scheler does not, therefore, see sympathy as a whimsical, erratic, and irrational response, but rather as a systematic investigatory tool, a form of knowledge.

An interesting recent exploration of how such an approach might work in practice is to be found in Kenneth Shapiro’s “Understanding Dogs through Kinesthetic Empathy, Social Construction and History” (1989). Shapiro (following Paul Ricoeur as well as Scheler) suggests that we need a new “interpretive science in which the object of study is an autonomous subject, more textlike than thinglike, and, hence, to be understood rather than explained” (184). By use of what he calls “kinesthetic empathy” Shapiro attempts to understand his dog Sabaka. He does this by imaginatively entering into the dog’s bodily movements and reactions, thus deciphering the realities of the dog’s “life-world” (to borrow a term from Husserl). Edith Stein, who studied with Husserl, developed a similar concept, which she called “sensual empathy” (a “sensing-in” of the body of another) (54-55). Such an effort yields knowledge of another’s suffering. “Should I perhaps consider a dog’s paw in comparison with my hand. I do not have a mere physical body . . . but a physical limb of a living body. . . . I may sense-in pain when the animal is injured” (55).

A somewhat similar approach is proposed by John A. Fisher in “Taking Sympathy Seriously: A Defense of Our Moral Psychology Toward Animals” (1987). Fisher notes that “the sympathetic experience of . . . animals entails some understanding of what it is like to be them—for example, of what it is like to be huge and to walk on four legs, to have a large trunk, and so forth” (233). (Here the terms empathy and sympathy are used somewhat interchangeably, and Stein and Shapiro tend to see the experience as a kind of visceral emotion, as opposed to Fisher; but what is important is that they all maintain that a sympathetic imaginative construction of an other’s reality is what is required for an appropriate moral response.)

Environmental ethicist Paul Taylor argues that such knowledge must be the basis of any environmental ethic. It is only by close study and observation of organisms that one can come to understand their reality, their telos, their needs. “As one becomes more and more familiar with the organism and its behavior, one becomes fully sensitive to the particular way it is living out its life cycle. . . . the final culmination of this process is the achievement of a genuine understanding of its point of view and
... and ability to ‘take’ that point of view” (1992, 109-110). Such a process is not anthropomorphic, nor need it deny the separate and different reality of the other organism. Rather, it is a process of learning—through careful attention and observation—what the other’s reality really is, respecting that different reality, and developing an ethical response that is appropriate to that creature’s reality (110). (See also Taylor 1986, 17, 66-67.)

In answer to Kantian charges that sympathy is irrational, these theorists are saying on the contrary that it involves an exercise of the moral imagination, an intense attentiveness to another’s reality, which requires strong powers of observation and concentration, as well as faculties of evaluation and judgment. It is a matter of trying to see fairly another’s world, to understand what another’s experience is. It is a cognitive as well as emotional exercise.

The ability to extend the moral imagination in this way is not, they argue, necessarily a natural gift (though some, notably Scheler and Schopenhauer, assert that women are more able to exercise sympathetic understanding than men); rather, it is an intellectual and emotional practice that can be learned. Scheler contends that “the first task of our educational practice must be to revive the capacity for identification with the life of the universe” (105). Mercer, too, believes that people can and should be trained in emotional knowledge (105). Feminist theorist Rosemarie Tong even suggests that a Kantian mechanistic rules-based ethic may lead to a deadening of the moral imagination (64). Perhaps the most extensive recent plea for a reinstatement of sympathy education into the school system comes from Nel Noddings, who believes that “the maintenance and enhancement of caring [should be] the primary aim of education” and advocates instituting such practices as “caring apprenticeships,” for example (1984, 174, 188).

Sympathy theorists argue, moreover, that one can in fact have no morality, no justice even, without first having sympathy. Acton, for example, observes that “a certain amount of sympathy is required if anyone is even to notice that someone else is in need of help” (62). And without such attention, there would be no morality, “for without [sympathy] there would be no helping, and hence no beneficence, and help and beneficence are necessary for morality” (66). (See also Kekes, “Moral Sensitivity,” 8-9.)

In arguing therefore that sympathy is the sine qua non of ethical decision-making and action, sympathy theorists contend that sympathy precedes justice. Such precedence obtains ontogenetically, some claim; logically, others claim; and metaphysically, yet others contend.

Scheler maintains that one’s feelings of sympathy are rooted in earliest childhood, or in what Freudians call the preoedipal phase. One’s
first feelings are "the instinctive identification of mother-love" (98). Only gradually is this "replaced, in the later stages of childhood, by merely vicarious feeling," which remains as the undergirding of "fellow-feeling [Mitgefühl]" (98). In his introduction to Scheler’s work, W. Stark amplifies this idea: "originally, the experience of self and the experience of others is in no way differentiated: the child feels the feelings and thinks the thoughts of those who form [her] social environment. It takes a long time before [perceptions are sorted out] as ‘mine’ and ‘others’ “ (xxxix). Others, thus, “live in us” (xl), which forms the basis of sympathetic identification, preceding the emergence of egocentricity.

Brian Luke in “Justice, Caring, and Animal Liberation” (1992) claims that sympathy for animals is indeed a deep, primary disposition that is only obscured and repressed by a process of intense social conditioning. Noting the extensive guilt expiation ceremonies that attend animal killing in traditional cultures, Luke suggests that the existence of such guilt (along with other social practices) is testimony to “the depth of the human-animal connection” (106). The fact that laboratory experiments and slaughterhouse practices are kept hidden from the public suggests, once again, shame or guilt over the violation of the human-animal bond. "Enormous amounts of social energy are expended to forestall, undermine, and override our sympathies for animals, so that vivisection, animal farming, and sport hunting can continue" (106).

A number of eighteenth-century theorists—including Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith—claimed that humans have an innate sense of sympathy and that this is the basis for moral awareness. The Third Earl of Shaftesbury maintained that there is an innate "moral sense" that is rooted in one’s sense of kinship with others. Francis Hutcheson extended Shaftesbury’s idea that there is an innate moral faculty, contributing further to what Keith Thomas has labeled the “new sensibilities” that developed during the century, including sensitivities to animal cruelty (many of the humane societies originated as a result of this new emphasis on the feelings as a guide to moral action) (Thomas 175-76).

David Hume, picking up on his predecessors, insists that there is a "natural sympathy," (146) "implanted in our nature" (67). "Would any man, who is walking along, tread as willingly on another’s toes, whom he has no quarrel with, as on the hard flint and pavement?" (61). From such examples, Hume maintains,
good, what tends to their misery is evil, without any further regard or consideration. (65)

"Morality," he concludes, "is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation; and vice the contrary" (129). Moreover, "the approbation or blame... cannot be the work of our judgment, but of the heart; and is not a speculative proposition or affirmation, but an active feeling or sentiment" (131).

Scientific credibility has been added to eighteenth-century theorists' claims for innate, natural sympathy by Charles Darwin and, more recently, the sociobiologists. They argue that natural selection has resulted in the phenomenon of "kin altruism," which is an innate concern about the survival of one's kin (and thus one's genes) found in most animals (see Rachels, Created from Animals, 77, 147-57; also Cronin). Darwin in fact claimed in The Descent of Man (1871) that in higher mammals such altruism was extended to non-kin (Rachels 157).

In a recent and interesting extension of this view, "Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics" (1988), J. Baird Callicott suggests that since domestic animals have historically been part of the immediate human community (and thus in a sense "kin"), "kin altruism" establishes a natural base for human concern and emotional attachment. There is, he claims, a kind of "evolved and unspoken social contract" between these animals and humans (156).

Writing in direct confutation of Kant's ethical theory, Schopenhauer, like Hume, also contends that morality is rooted in sympathy: "only insofar as an action has sprung from compassion does it have moral value" (144). And compassion, he maintains, requires a kind of empathetic identification so that one can understand the other's situation. "I suffer directly with him, I feel his woe just as I ordinarily feel only my own... . But this requires that I am in some way identified with him, in other words that this difference between me and everyone else, which is the very basis of my egoism, is eliminated" (144). (It should be noted that later sympathy theorists, such as Scheler and Mercer, criticized Schopenhauer and Hume, respectively, for relying on empathy rather than sympathy, and thus sanctioning a loss of self in the identificatory process, which Scheler and Mercer reject.)

Schopenhauer, however, emphasizes the emotional component of compassion. One understands another's pain through "the everyday phenomenon of compassion, of the immediate participation... in the suffering of another... . It is simply and solely this compassion that is the real basis of all voluntary justice and genuine loving-kindness" (144).
“Boundless compassion for all living things is the firmest and surest guarantee of pure moral conduct” (172). Schopenhauer specifically includes animals in this moral community. In a compassion-based ethic “the animals are also taken under its protection. In the European systems of morality they are badly provided for, which is most inexcusable. They are said to have no rights . . . [and be] without moral significance. All of this is revoltingly crude, a barbarism of the West” (175).

Schopenhauer’s ethical theory is rooted in his metaphysics, which entails the Indian distinction between what he called (in his magnum opus) the “Will” and the “Idea.” The will is a kind of undifferentiated pool of Being to which all living creatures belong. It underlies the screen of appearances, of separate individuals, the Māyā or the Idea. It is through the pool of Being that we are linked to all other creatures, and it is through compassion that we know that connection; it breaks through the barriers of individuation and egoism (210).

Like Schopenhauer and Hume, succeeding sympathy theorists claim that sympathy logically precedes justice; that is, there must first be the experience of sympathy before there can be any justice claims. Indeed, it is sympathy that determines who is to be included under the umbrella of justice. As environmentalist Fisher notes, “sympathy is fundamental to moral theory in that it determines the range of individuals to which moral principles apply” (245 n.5). And it is “our sympathetic response to animals [that] makes them a part of our moral community” (228).

Mercer also explains: if we take as the fundamental maxim of justice that one “treat everyone alike,” then it becomes a question of who counts as “everyone.” That decision is determined by the extent to which one can sympathize with the entity (132). In elaborating, Mercer specifies that sympathy only occurs between creatures who can feel. “‘Sympathy’ has regard for ‘the other’ solely in respect of his [or her] capacity to feel and to suffer” (4). The sympathetic agent must be “a thinking and feeling being” and the object of sympathy must be “at least a feeling being” (5). The awareness that the other has feelings, or is a subject of feelings, means that one can no longer see that creature as an object. “If we actively sympathize with someone then we cannot treat him as an object, as an instrument for our own self-satisfaction; on the contrary we see him as a being possessing individual worth and existing in his own right” (124). In other words, sympathy engenders moral respect, and thus determines who deserves to be treated on equal terms. Justice, therefore, according to Mercer, applies only to sentient beings (133).

Acton also maintains that sympathy establishes claims for equal treatment, or justice. This is because sympathy requires treating another’s needs as comparable with one’s own. It leads one to realize that “the
other’s distress is at least comparable with one’s own, and the road has been opened up . . . to the demand for equal treatment of equal needs. Sympathy requires that every sentient being shall count” (66). Scheler, like Schopenhauer, agrees that sympathy frees us from the “illusion” of “‘egocentricity’ . . . the illusion of taking one’s own environment to be the world itself” (58). “The dissipation of this illusion . . . [enables] us to grasp how a [person], or living creature . . . is our equal in worth” (60). Thus, again, sympathy is seen as opening up and determining notions of justice.

Scheler also maintains that an individual encounter with suffering should make us aware of suffering in general; thus, “the pure sentiment of fellow-feeling is released as a permanent disposition, spreading far beyond the occasion which first inspired it, towards everybody and every good thing” (60). This brings us to the third issue Kantian theorists hold against sympathy-based ethics, that it is nonuniversalizable.

In his recent book The Thee Generation (1991) Tom Regan criticizes “ethic-of-care” feminism for its failure to provide a means of universalizing the individual experience of caring and sympathy. “What are the resources within the ethic of care that can move people to consider the ethics of their dealings with individuals who stand outside the existing circle of their valued interpersonal relationships?” (95). In fact, he argues, “most people do not care very much about what happens to [nonhuman animals] . . . their care seems to be . . . limited to ‘pet’ animals, or to cuddly or rare specimens of wildlife. What, then, becomes of the animals toward whom people are indifferent, given the ethic of care?” (96). In short, how does one generalize beyond the individual particular instance of caring or compassion to include all creatures within an ethic of care?

Regan argues that such extension can only come through logic. One extends one’s care for one’s own children to one’s neighbors’ children because it is illogical and inconsistent not to do so. “Whether I care or not [emotionally for the neighbors’ children], I ought to and it is logic that leads me to the realization of this ‘ought’ “ (140). Regan’s characteristic rejection of emotion or sympathy as a base for moral decision-making is apparent here. Isn’t it also likely that if one’s neighbors’ children were in harm, one would sympathize with them and care enough to help them? And isn’t it unlikely that one would stop to figure out principles of logic and consistency to determine an appropriate moral action, if say, those children were crying in pain? (Of course, one can conjure up qualifying circumstances that will affect one’s decision whether to help the children or not, but that is irrelevant to the question at hand—which is whether one responds on a rational or emotional basis to the suffering
It is clear in fact that one can and often does feel sympathy for complete strangers. If I watch on TV children starving in Somalia or hear about the brutal rape of women in Bosnia, people I know little about and certainly do not know personally, I nevertheless feel sympathy; I care about their plight and am moved to try to help them. Thus, I contend—along with Hume and other sympathy theorists—that sympathy is easily universalized.

Virginia Held argues in a recent critique of rationalist ethics that in its reliance on theory based on universal, abstract “persons,” it neglects the experience of the “particular other,” the personal emotional relationship one has with a real person. But, she contends, “particular others” need not be individual people one knows personally; rather, they can be “actual starving children in Africa with whom one feels empathy . . . not just those we are close to in any traditional context of family, neighbors, or friends. But particular others are still not ‘all rational beings’ or ‘the greatest number’”—the later allusions to Kantian and utilitarian abstractions, respectively. It is a particular qualitative experience that is missing in contemporary rationalist theory, the emotional sympathetic understanding of another creature. It is this “personalist” dimension that sympathy theorists would restore to ethical theory.

We see now that sympathy theorists refute Kant by arguing that sympathy is in fact a form of knowledge that includes a cognitive dimension. It is not, therefore, whimsical and erratic; nor does it entail obliteration of the thinking or feeling self. It is easily universalized, although, as Luke points out, such extensions are often muted by powerful social and political institutions.

A number of feminists, including myself, have asserted that ethical theory about animal treatment should be grounded in what these earlier theorists called sympathy. In an important 1985 article Marti Kheel called for “a recognition of the importance of feeling and emotion and personal experience in moral decision making” about animals. Noting that much evil is obfuscated through abstract rationalization, which serves to distance one from its actuality, Kheel suggests that personal experience of evil might bring its reality home. For example, those who “think . . . that there is nothing morally wrong with eating meat . . . ought, perhaps to visit a factory farm or slaughter house to see if [they] still feel the same way.” (See also Vance 136.)

Some feminists have developed Carol Gilligan’s “ethic of care” as a base for animal welfare theory. See especially Deane Curtin’s “Toward an Ecological Ethic of Care” (1991). Though it has received much criticism and amplification (see especially Larabee and Kittay and
Meyers), Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982) remains the classic statement of the care ethic. In this framework

the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract. The conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules (19).

Thus, Gilligan identifies an ethic that is rooted in the kind of sympathetic understanding proposed by the sympathy theorists introduced above. Such an ethic, historically, has been confined largely to the domestic sphere and to women. Leaving aside the question of whether as mothers women are biologically predisposed toward caring for their young (I leave it aside because biological determinism is simply an inadequate explanation of human [and indeed much nonhuman animal] behavior), it is apparent that much of women’s historical social and economic practice has been of a caring nature. In addition to maternal practice (see Sara Ruddick 1989 on this), women have nearly universally engaged in use-value production as their primary economic experience. Use-value production means the creation of products for immediate use or consumption by members of the household (clothes, food, etc.). It is a “caring labor,” to use Hilary Rose’s term (83). A number of theorists (particularly Nancy Hartsock, Linda Nicholson, and Eli Zaretsky) have shown how in the West a division of moral labor accompanied the historical division between the public and private spheres with their divergent economic practices. In an interesting recent exploration of the subject, “Eco-Feminism and Deep Ecology” (1987), Jim Cheney ties Gilligan’s caring ethic to the gift-exchange economy characteristic of preindustrial societies. “[I]f we were to describe the ethical voices characteristic of people living within the two economies, they would be the two ethical voices described by Carol Gilligan, the (gendered) male voice associated with the market economy and the very different (gendered) female voices associated with the gift economy” (121). Cheney proceeds to argue that the Gilligan caring ethic should form the basis of environmental ethical theory.

Several theorists (in addition to Cheney, especially Virginia Held and Annette Baier) have pointed out that rights theory is rooted in the contractual relationships of a market economy. Baier in fact notes that
rights theory and the Kantian rationalist ethic were developed for an elite of white property-holding males. Kant himself excluded women from the moral community of “rights-holders” (along with animals). Women, in fact, formed a kind of “moral proletariat” who carried on the necessary caring labor in the home, while men enjoyed the privileges and rights of public citizenship (50). This is not to say that the notion of equal rights should be abolished or that ideas of justice are automatically specious; it is to say that, historically, Western women came out of a different ethical tradition than men, one that has been identified by Gilligan as the “caring ethic.” It makes sense then that because there is much that is valuable in this ethic, feminists who are concerned about animal welfare would seek to locate an animal treatment ethic within this tradition.

To do so, however, feminists must insist that it be framed within a political perspective. Caring is an important ethical point of departure, but to be effective it must be informed by an accurate political view. A number of theorists (including especially Ruddick [1992] and Curtin; see also my own discussion in Feminist Theory, 199-200) have made this point. As a good example of how the caring perspective is enriched by a political framework, consider Marilyn Friedman’s discussion of the famous Heinz hypothetical (that Gilligan among others discusses). Here the issue concerns a man, Heinz, whose dying wife can only be saved by a particular drug. The druggist’s prices are unfairly high, so that Heinz cannot afford the drug. The ethical question posed in the hypothetical is what is the proper moral course for Heinz: to obey the law (and presumably let his wife die) or to steal the drug and save his wife? Friedman points out that the real answer to this question lies in a political analysis of a system that denies health care to people who cannot afford it and that “allows most health care resources to be privately owned, privately sold for profit in the market place, and privately withheld from people who cannot afford the market price” (202). While the traditional Kantian response to the Heinz dilemma is that he should not steal (Kant: “I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” [281]), and the ethic-of-care response is that he should steal because in this particular context his responsibility is to his wife and because stealing is a lesser evil than death, a political ethic-of-care response would include the larger dimension of looking to the political and economic context within which people must make moral decisions. Thus, the corporate-controlled health-care system becomes the primary villain in the piece, and the incident should serve to motivate action to change the system. This is the real ethical act that should emerge from the Heinz dilemma. On the other hand, a political ethic-of-care would not abandon Heinz in the abstractions of a political critique;
it would also support him in obtaining the drug (by stealing, if indeed that is the only way to secure it, and if indeed the drug is as miraculous as it is supposed to be—ecofeminists are also skeptical of drug industry claims of efficacy—see Kheel's "From Healing Herbs to Deadly Drugs" [1989]).

Carol Adams' recent *Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990) is a good example of a work that lays out the political (in this case, patriarchal) context of meat-eating. So, while a caring ethic focuses on the suffering of the animal, it is enlarged by an understanding of the symbolic cultural significances of meat-eating, which Adams explains (see also Jeremy Rifkin, *Beyond Beef*). Such awareness of cultural ideologies enables the formation of appropriate ethical actions because it helps to explain who profits from certain practices, such as meat-eating, and who therefore continues to promulgate propaganda on their behalf. It is important to understand the role of the meat lobby or the National Rifle Association (in promoting hunting, for example) in furthering institutionalized sanctions of these practices. Indeed, as Luke points out, massive institutional strategies have been mobilized on a national level to obscure the reality of animal suffering. Part of any ethical response must therefore be to counter these lies, to lift the veil on animal agony.

In addition to assessing power relations, a political perspective also involves a consideration of needs. On the individual level, the caring response must include a determination of a person or animal's needs. As Rita Manning notes, caring requires "a willingness to give. . .lucid attention to the needs of others" (45). This attitude, which others have labeled "attentive love" (see below), goes beyond just respecting the rights of another.

Within a political perspective needs assessment has a wider scope. While relatively undeveloped in liberal political theory, some Marxist theorists have focused on this issue (see Braybrooke). Agnes Heller has analyzed the social construction of the artificial consumer needs that fuel a capitalist society in her *Theory of Need in Marx* (1974). She proposes the concept of "radical needs" as a revolutionary force whereby people become aware of their qualitative, spiritual needs beyond reified manufactured needs, and demand their satisfaction.

In her analysis of the Gilligan ethic Seyla Benhabib proposes (following Jürgen Habermas) a "communicative ethic of need interpretation" (168). This means an ethic where the oppressed have an opportunity to voice their needs and where ethical decision-making is conducted in a dialogic process. Unlike universalistic rights-based theories, such an ethic would not elide the reality of the "concrete other," which remains "the unthought, the unseen, and the unheard in such theories" (168). "One
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consequence of this ethic . . . is that . . . moral theory is enlarged so that not only rights but needs" are addressed (169). An assessment of animal needs must therefore be a part of any caring ethic for the treatment of animals. Indeed, further extension of needs theory into the area of animal welfare should be developed.

Ethics, therefore, do not exist in a political vacuum, and thus while it is important to ground them in a personal sympathetic response, it is also important to take a larger view, placing the individual instance within a political understanding of the cause and an assessment of the needs of the suffering. The individual response is thus generalized not in a Kantian sense but within the framework of political analysis.

No ethic can therefore be apolitical; nor can any epistemology. The way we see the world—what in fact we see—is shaped by our understanding of its power relations and by our values. Much of this is taught, passed on through the mechanisms that reproduce cultural ideology, such as the schools, the churches, the media. It therefore often reflects uncritically the viewpoint and interests of the dominant powers in society.

Some feminists, notably Alison Jaggar and Nancy Hartsock, have argued that marginalized people may have an alternative perspective or standpoint that is more valid than the dominant view because it sees realities—pain and need—that are elided by controlling ideologies which are motivated to distort the truth to perpetuate the status quo (Jaggar 1983, 1989; Hartsock; Donovan, 1992, 89-90, 198-200). Women may be seen therefore as providing an alternative perspective, that codified in the "caring ethic," which is rooted, as noted, in women's historical social and economic practices.

In a recent article entitled "Moral Understandings: Alternative 'Epistemology' for a Feminist Ethics" (1992), Margaret Urban Walker calls for "a profound and original rebellion against the regnant [ethical] paradigm" (166), which she labels the "universalist/impersonalist tradition" (168)—that is, the Kantian rationalist/rights tradition noted here. In its stead she proposes "an alternative moral epistemology, a very different way of identifying and appreciating the forms of intelligence which define moral consideration" (166). Components of this alternative epistemology include those elements of feminist ethics identified here, such as paying "attention to the particular," constructing moral issues in "contextual and narrative" (Gilligan 19) frames, and using a conversational or dialogical mode in moral decision-making (166). In an earlier article I argued that an ethic for the treatment of animals must be grounded "in an emotional and spiritual conversation with nonhuman life forms" (1990, 375). Such a conversation can emerge only when attentive love is
Attentive love is an exercise of the moral imagination, as urged by the numerous sympathy theorists cited above. The term derives, however, specifically from Simone Weil, who in 1942 stated:

The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him [or her]: ‘What are you going through?’ It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled ‘unfortunate,’ but as [an individual], exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him [or her] in a certain way.

This way of looking is first of all attentive. (51)

But it is Iris Murdoch who elaborated Weil’s insight into a central moral idea, one that numerous feminists have seized upon as establishing the necessary epistemology for a caring ethic (see Walker, Fox, Ruddick, Dillon, Michaels). Murdoch developed the idea in several articles and in her book, The Sovereignty of Good (1971). “Attentive love” is a moral reorientation that requires developing one’s powers of attention; it is a discipline similar to that exercised by great artists and scholars (Weil used the idea originally in an essay on the discipline of scholarly study). As other sympathy theorists remarked, this reorientation breaks down solipsistic barriers; it forces attention without, to others and to what they are experiencing. Murdoch notes, “The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, toward the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability to so direct attention is love” (1971, 66). In acknowledging Weil’s coinage of the term, Murdoch says she meant by it “the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality” (34). Such attention, Murdoch urges, is “the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent” (34).

Like Mercer, Murdoch recognizes that actually seeing another’s reality means constituting him or her as a subject with separate needs from one’s own: “The more . . . [it is] seen that another . . . has needs and wishes as demanding as one’s own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing” (66).

Recognizing the other as a subject means constituting the other as a Thou, not an It, to use Martin Buber’s celebrated distinction. While Buber’s moral epistemology (which is rooted in the phenomenological
existentialism of some of the sympathy theorists noted above) is usually assumed to apply only to humans, promoting a kind of moral humanism, in fact Buber himself applies it to animals and other living beings.

In a moving meditation on a tree Buber writes:

I contemplate a tree.
I can accept it as a picture.
I can feel it as a movement.
I can assign it to a species.
But it can also happen, if grace and will are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It.

Does the tree have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that.

What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself. (57-59)

In his theory of environmental ethics Paul Taylor calls for a similar attentiveness to the particular reality of individual organisms as the basis for a human relationship to nonhuman life forms.

As one becomes more and more familiar with the organism being observed, one acquires a sharpened awareness of the particular way it is living its life. One may become fascinated by it and even get to be involved in its good and bad fortunes. The organism comes to mean something to one as a unique, irreplaceable individual. This progressive development from objective, detached knowledge to the recognition of individuality to a full awareness of an organism's standpoint, is a process of heightening our consciousness of what it means to be an individual living thing.

(Taylor, 1986, 120-21)

Taylor further maintains that we must be "open' to the full existence and nature of the organism... let the individuality of the organism come before us, undistorted by our likes and dislikes, our hopes and fears, our interests, wants, and needs. As far as it is humanly possible to do so, we comprehend the organism as it is in itself, not as we want it to be" (120).

A feminist moral epistemology calls for the just and loving attention seen in these examples. Rooting ethics in right seeing is nothing new. As
Rosemarie Tong remarks, "even Aristotle said that ethical decisions rest in perception—in perceiving, in seeing through one's experiences to the moral truth beneath appearances" (228). But in the past, she argues, the great philosophers of the western tradition "failed in their abstract moral vision because they failed in their daily moral vision. Not seeing the oppression that surrounded them, they shaped an abstract ethics that may have served to protect the interests of those in power" (229).

Sympathy theory of the past, long eclipsed, is now reinforced by a powerful new wave of ethical theory proposed by "ethic-of-care" feminists, who derive their ethic from the experience of the oppressed, urging that ethics be rooted in caring practice and an epistemology of attentive love. Such a focus need not—indeed must not—lose sight of the political context in which our moral awareness develops and our moral actions take place. But it also does not lose sight of the individual case. Contrary to Kantian rationalism, it envisages both the personal and the political.

Like Buber, people exercising attentive love see the tree; but they also see the logging industry. They see the downed cow in the slaughterhouse pen; but they also see the farming and dairy industry. They see the Silver Spring monkey; but they also see the drug corporations and university collaboration.

A political analysis is thus essential—particularly for formulating an effective and appropriate ethical response. But the motivation for that response remains the primary experience of sympathy. By redirecting the national focus to the suffering reality of individual animals, I believe we can reawaken the sympathetic response and reactivate the moral imagination, as outlined in this article. The animal welfare movement need no longer rely solely on abstract utilitarian and rights-based claims of equal justice for animals; rather it should recognize that a viable ethic for the treatment of animals can be rooted in sympathy, a passionate caring about their well-being.

Notes


1 Scheler erroneously sees the Western dominative attitude toward nature as "a legacy of Judaism" (105). While the Hebrew Bible does sanction human domination, the Christian tradition heavily reinforced this thesis, and the Cartesian epistemological basis for modern science can hardly be seen as Judaic in origin. (Scheler also, of course, strongly criticizes Christianity.) Schopenhauer also—in even more offensive terms—attributed the Western derogation of animals to Judaism (the "foetor Judaicus") (On
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the Basis of Morality, 175, 178, 187). Schopenhauer's anti-Semitism, as well as his sexism, is, of course, abominable.

Noddings seems ambivalent on whether or to what extent human caring should be extended to animals. See Caring, chap. 7; Comment on Donovan's "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory," and Donovan, "Reply to Noddings."

See Filonowicz, "Ethical Sentimentalism Revisited" (1989) for a recent reassertion of Shaftesbury's system as "a genuine and live option for contemporary ethical theory" (189).

Callicott offers a two-communities theory here, claiming that human treatment of domestic animals should operate according to one ethic, and of wild animals, to another. Less successfully, he attempts to argue that a Humean sympathy ethic also undergirds deep ecology theory, in particular the "land ethic" of Aldo Leopold—a thesis he develops in "Conceptual Foundation" (1987)—but such an abstract use of the term sympathy would seem to rob it of meaning. Sympathy must be rooted in feelings for the particular, the concrete other.

Karen Warren extends the idea of care to mean intense appreciation of nature. In a celebrated passage she explains how in rock-climbing she developed an emotional, respectful—indeed caring—attitude for the rock: "At that moment I was bathed in serenity. I began to talk to the rock in an almost inaudible, child-like way, as if the rock were my friend. . . . Gone was the determination to conquer the rock. I wanted simply to work respectfully with the rock as I climbed. . . . I felt myself caring for this rock" (134-35). Greta Gaard points out, however, that later in the same article Warren blithely sanctions the killing of a deer, to which she does not seem to extend the same caring attitude (Gaard 296-97). The reason for Warren's inconsistency, I suggest, is that she is coming out of deep ecology theory, which notoriously elides the suffering of individual animals in its rush to embrace "ecoholism." Feminists Marti Kheel and Ariel Kay Salleh have criticized deep ecology theory (see Kheel 1990 and Salleh), and I will not review these critiques here except to reaffirm that a feminist caring ethic for the treatment of animals must be rooted in appreciation, understanding, and sympathy for the animals as individuals. Following Mercer, I contend that sympathy or caring obtains between feeling beings: "Sympathy" has regard for 'the other' solely in respect of his [or her] capacity to feel and to suffer" (Mercer 4). Thus, Warren's use of the term caring is inappropriate. One can appreciate or respect a rock but one cannot feel sympathetic concern for it: Such compassion is appropriate only for sentient or at least living creatures.

I elaborated these ideas earlier in "Beyond the Net" (1983).

See also Buber's discussion of his exchange of glances with a cat (144-46) and his treatment of a horse as "thou" in Between Man and Man (23). Another important work that argues for the "Thou-ness" of animals is Gary A. Kowalski, The Souls of Animals (1991).

Taylor, a rationalist, would probably resist the term loving here, even though his description comes very close to the Murdoch/Weil notion of attentive love, applied to natural life. In his book, Respect for Nature, Taylor insists upon the Kantian distinction between acting out of rational duty and acting out of emotional inclination. He rejects the latter on familiar Kantian grounds (85, 90-91, 126-27).

Works Cited


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