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# Spirit Unleashed

REIMAGINING HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONS

ANNE BENVENUTI

In *Spirit Unleashed*, Anne Benvenuti uses analysis of real encounters with wild animals to take us on an intellectual tour of our thinking about animals by way of biological sciences, scientific psychology, philosophy, and theology to show that we have been wrong in our understanding of ourselves amongst other animals. The good news is that we can correct our course and make ourselves happier in the process. Drawing us into encounters with a desert rattlesnake, an offended bonobo, an injured fawn, a curious whale, a determined woodpecker, and others, she gives us a glimpse of their souls. Benvenuti strongly makes the case that to change the way we think about animals—and our way of relating to them—holds the possibility of changing all life on Earth for the better.

“Benvenuti places her experiences in the grand sweep of the Western intellectual traditions that have marginalized the other animals in thought, emotion, and deed. This book blends humanistic and scientific perspectives in ways that can help heal this troubled world of ours.”

—Jaak Panksepp

author of *Affective Neuroscience* and *The Archaeology of Mind*

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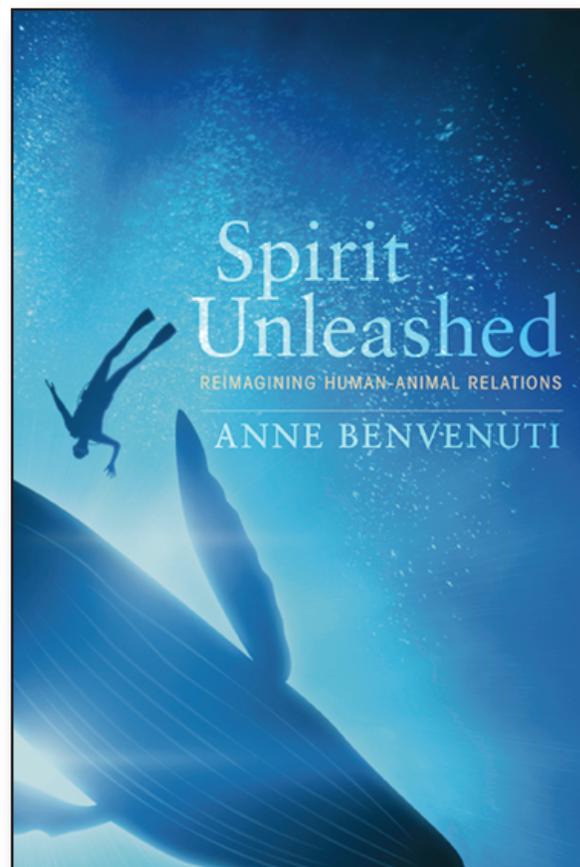
—Marc Bekoff

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—Richard Rohr

author of *Everything Belongs* and *Falling Upward*



ANNE BENVENUTI is a professor of psychology and philosophy, a licensed psychologist, an interdisciplinary scholar, and a priest of the Episcopal Church. Her scholarly work focuses on models of natural spirituality that are both scientifically grounded and accessible from religious perspectives. She is engaged in social policy work as a member of the UN NGO Committee for Mental Health and is a Trustee and UN Representative for the Parliament of the World’s Religions. She is also a published poet and naturalist.

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Reimagining Human-Animal Relations

Anne Benvenuti



CASCADE Books • Eugene, Oregon

SPIRIT UNLEASHED  
Reimagining Human-Animal Relations

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Molly Brown, Spiritual Teacher Extraordinaire  
Truly this is a Labor of Love

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## CHAPTER 1

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### The Great Western Divide, Multiplied

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out.

—ROBERT FROST, *THE MENDING WALL*<sup>1</sup>

#### Encounters with the Very Other

EVERY SUMMER MORNING I take my dogs out early, before the heat sets in, to hike up a nearby mountain into wilderness, not a nature preserve but wilderness. The dogs, Bunny and Lexi, rescued Jack Russell terriers, are trained to the command, “On the trail,” or just “Trail.” This morning’s walk was so interesting as to call for understatement. I met up with both death and danger in two separate events within thirty minutes and one mile of each other. Those last few steps back down the mountain, my dogs alive and with me, my heart didn’t know whether to sink down in quiet despair or to beat wildly in fear and joy and the clean, clear desire to live.

Death. I first noticed the beautiful lush gray fur, unusual in our dry scabble summer heat, and then I noticed the deadness of the animal and the fact that this beautifully furred dead thing was lying in the middle of the trail. This was most unusual because if a coyote or bobcat had killed this little one, it would have been carried off as dinner, and not dumped in the middle of the trail. Just as I processed this thought, I wondered about

1. Frost, *Collected Poems*, 33.

sickness and noticed that the little rodent was likely a rat, notoriously disease carrying and so perhaps disease killed. My curiosity aroused, I came in for a closer look, first noticing the exquisite round ears; then I saw the puncture on the back of the head, just at the neck juncture. But why would a hunted rat be left to die on the trail? It should have been carried off and quickly munched. I picked it up by the very tip of its long sleek tail to look for other bite marks. There were none. The puncture wound was round and clean and single. Had this little wood rat, of whom the field guide extols its virtue of cleanliness, been shot in the back of the head, executioner style, as the journalists say, for the entertainment of a human? I tossed its dead body into the tall grasses to feed the bellies of other creatures; the ants would probably have done with it before coyotes began their nightly hunt and forage. My heart sank that someone thought this was both fun and his right to do, and worse, that such a thing is considered normal by a great many people, even virtuous given that the victim was a rat.

I could not help but think about this as I walked up and up the steep part of the trail towards the mountain pass with its “singing gate” that the afternoon winds play like a flute. The temperature was in the low seventies, cool for the middle of July in the southern Sierras. I tried not to obsess about the rat and the human, so as to be there for the rest of the show, ridge upon ridge as I looked up towards the mountains, a hawk soaring in the blue bowl of sky, and at eye level oak trees and boulders and tall oat grasses gone dry weeks ago in this very dry year, some blue jays and chickadees darting from tree to tree; and at foot level, cottontail bunnies and quail in abundance, along with a variety of ground squirrels.

I was thinking to have another look at the rat on my way down, so that I could examine that wound again. It seemed so preposterous that anyone would execute a rat. I was thinking so much about that little rat that I did not notice when I reached the singing gate, when I turned back down the mountain. And I was thinking about the rat when I came around the bend to see a rattlesnake, somewhere between four and five feet in length, fat and sleek, sprawled across the trail. I watched my dog Bunny run right over the big snake, and then stop curious on the other side, looking back at me, even as my smaller dog Lexi ran towards the snake from behind me.

The snake began to coil. I had to get Bunny contained. I did not want her in a prolonged dance with this snake. She would certainly not survive multiple strikes. I had to get to her. But the snake was between us.

As Lexi catches up to me, I scoop her up into my right arm, looking, assessing, strategizing, thinking fast. A steeply descending drainage to the right of the trail, a steeply ascending boulder field to the left. There is no way around the snake. Bunny is looking from the snake to me, from me to the snake, trying to decide if she should hunt it. In an instant, I make the decision and I call to her as sharply as I can. "Bunny! Come! Bunny! Come!" Yes, I call her right back over the snake who has not yet rattled but who has moved his head into the air, tongue flicking. I know his little heat sensors will make his aim precise. I know he can move a distance the length of his body in a flash of scales and teeth and venom. I know he is a diamond backed western rattlesnake, responsible for more deaths than any other snake in America, easily agitated and very aggressive. Bunny comes running to me, here she comes flying in the air as the snake's tongue flicks. I am thinking that I will have to get her past the snake again to get her to the vet immediately, knowing she has been vaccinated for just this moment, wondering if she will survive it.

I watch my dog catapult through the air. The snake is alert, head up and tongue flicking, the several rattles on his tail telling me that he has lived years enough to shed that many skins. My heart is pounding in my chest like the desperate pump that it is, sending adrenaline out to every capillary. But the snake does not strike. He senses the heat of her body as she flies overhead, smells me as I scoop her up with my free arm.

Now I have a dog in each arm and am backing away, heart pounding, thinking, thinking. The snake appears healthy and normal. I have seen enough of his motion to know that he does not have a broken spine, but he is not striking, nor rattling, nor going anywhere, just watching and flicking, still half coiled and half looped across the trail. He is alert and ready, but not agitated, just the boss. And the boss is stretched across my only way out. One thing I know about rattlesnakes is that they like to be shown a little respect, make that a lot. I attempt to go through the high grasses and over the boulders on my left, but quickly see that it will be an impossible climb with a dog in each arm, and I will lose sight of the snake while still being very near to it, not to mention that there might well be more snakes in those rocks, given that snakes like to den together. I return to the trail, assessing, waiting. I finally decide that I have to walk on the trail, even though it is not wide enough to bypass sir snake. I move slowly toward him, telling him that I have no choice, asking him to make a way for us. I am desperately but calmly and intently thinking,

and saying, "Come on, let us through, snake; mister snake, I need you *to let us through*."

He reaches his head higher, flicks that tongue one more time, and then slowly glides off towards the boulders, not leaving the trail entirely but giving us leave to pass. Yes, the snake gave us leave to pass; and pass we did, respectfully.

For a two full minutes I was 100 percent engaged with the world around me, mindfully present indeed, gift of a snake. Go ahead: try now to stay mindfully present for two full minutes. You see? It is no small gift.

### The Great Western Divide

Going beneath the surface of what happened to the four of us, the encounter leads me to a simple but far from easy question: how shall we conceptualize it? Was it a story of a human controlling three animals? Was it a human, two domesticated mammals, and a reptile? How about one western diamond backed rattlesnake, two Jack Russell terriers, and me? Was it four animals who inhabit the same world yet are utterly alien to one another? Or four sets of mechanical operations, with preset instructions? The questions each represent common ways of conceptualizing what happened on the trail, some of them more common than others.

At first glance, the cognitive framing may not seem to matter so long as I get out alive, with my living dogs. However, I think that the cognitive framing makes all the difference in the world, both to me in that specific situation, and to us as humans who share the planet with other animals, and of course it makes a difference to those other animals.

I have gradually come to see that almost everything I was taught about animals, and a great deal of what I was taught about humans, is wrong: wrong as in incorrect, and wrong as in morally wrong, having deleterious consequences for the animals and for the humans. Another thing I have learned is how easy it is to be wrong. A human did not execute that exceptionally pretty and very clean wood rat that I had found a mile before the rattlesnake on the way up; the punctured rat was the abandoned breakfast of the first snake I might have encountered but did not. I did not understand this until after I got home, then it was the light bulb with the "Aha!" sign. I was relieved to have been wrong.

I live in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California, home of the famous giant Sequoia trees. Very near to the magnificent Sequoia groves

is another magnificent feature, enhanced for tourists with pull-over stations and signs that point them to the view: the Great Western Divide, a sub-range of 13,000-foot peaks that separate the river drainages and cause the waters to flow in opposite directions.

These peaks come to mind as I consider the conceptual great divide between humans and other animals in the Western world. It is a pun, of course, a kind of mental Great Western Divide; but it too has causal effects, channeling the waters of thought and behavior in culturally specific directions. From the earliest writings of Western civilization onward is found the idea that humans are the apex of creation, different from and superior to all the other animals, and that all the other animals are somehow like each other in their difference from us and also in their inferiority to humans. The idea is there in the book of Genesis, thought to have been completed in the sixth century BCE from the much earlier oral tradition, and it is there in the writings of Aristotle in the fourth century BCE.<sup>2</sup> It is a concept that has more than stood the test of time, seeming to increase the psychological distance between humans and other animals with the passing millennia.

Even as I have become convinced of its incorrectness, on the basis of both scientific evidence and personal experience, I am fascinated by the way this fundamental concept continues on so broadly unquestioned. It seems to emerge again and again over the centuries. It is expressed in several distinct lines of philosophic and religious metaphysics and the lines all seem to converge on this one idea about the distinctiveness and superiority of humans compared to other animals, while disregarding all the supporting details of the context and lineage from whence the ideas came. It is as though we need to get to this conclusion, regardless of the path by which it is achieved. It appears, in other words, to be a meme.

Richard Dawkins first proposed the concept of meme, in his 1976 classic *The Selfish Gene*, to suggest a kind of cultural version of a gene, some bit of culture that gets imitated, generation after generation, because of its psychological appeal: “Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or building arches.”<sup>3</sup> Dawkins goes on to discuss the question of whether memes must have biological value, or whether psychological appeal is sufficient to make their repetition sufficiently compelling; he asserts that psychological appeal

2. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Part II, paragraph 2.

3. Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 192.

alone is sufficient to explain the success of a meme. In this he perhaps unwittingly pointed to the tremendous importance of the psychological dimension in human living.

The psychological appeal of the idea that humans are superior and entitled to “use” all other animals is immediately apparent. It allows us to feel good about ourselves by way of downward social comparison, a term used by social psychologists to describe a cognitive strategy commonly used to boost self-esteem.<sup>4</sup> A downward social comparison is some version of this kind of reasoning: “I may be bad off, but at least I am not as bad off as this other, who. . . in the case of animals, is not as smart as me, doesn’t use language like I do, is not God’s favorite, as I am; doesn’t have moral sensibility, or technology, as I do.” In the case of the idea that humans are on the superior and entitled side of a biological great divide and all the other animals together on the inferior and unentitled side, the meme also has biological value because it works to allow us to use animals as we like; and using other animals for food, clothing, shelter, research, and entertainment has been a basic building block of the human habitation of this planet. Further, we return to an obvious psychological value of this particular meme: we do not have to feel the pain of these alien others when we use them in ways that cause them to suffer if we believe that such is our destiny, and theirs. Given our dependence upon other animals and the vulnerability we might feel in empathizing with them, a capacity for which we are biologically wired, the psychological appeal cannot be overstated, even as the biological value cannot be denied. It is no wonder the idea has satisfied the three criteria that Dawkins established for high survival value in a meme: longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity.<sup>5</sup> The idea is old, it is virtually everywhere, and it is virtually the same in its content everywhere.

In fact, Dawkins himself seems possessed of this meme, dressed in its scientific garments, in his suggestion at the end of the chapter on cultural replication: “One unique feature of man, which may or may not have evolved memically, is his capacity for conscious foresight. . . . It is possible that yet another unique quality of man is a capacity for genuine, disinterested, true altruism.”<sup>6</sup> He of the decidedly mechanistic and reductionistic selfish gene model seems compelled to searching for

4. Taylor and Lobel, “Social Comparison Activity Under Threat”; cf. Benvenuti, “Self Esteem.”

5. Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 194.

6. *Ibid.*, 200.

that necessary elevation of humans above all the others, though we all be equally the product of those selfish genes. Of course, a great deal of the scientific evidence about the mental and emotional lives of animals has been amassed since Dawkins wrote those words. We did not know then that chimpanzees sit and think about how to solve a problem, nor that hippopotami altruistically rescue members of other species, much less that even rats put aside their own self-interest for the well-being of others.<sup>7</sup>

Dawkins further suggests that, while memes are transmitted through imitation, they are especially likely to be imitated when they are co-adapted to a stable set of mutually assisting memes. He uses the example of a church with its associated architecture, music, art, ritual, laws, and traditions as such a set of mutually assisting memes.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the idea of human superiority over other animals, it has been deeply incorporated into religion with its complex structure, and into the broadly influential structures of philosophy and science, all three cultural institutions with co-adapted mutually assisting memes.

### The Meme of Interest

In the world of philosophy, the concept of the human/animal divide goes back almost two and a half millennia. We find its most significant philosophical origin in Aristotle's systematic description of the nature of reality and the hierarchical organization of beings within that reality, his metaphysics and ontology respectively. Aristotle observed that the human being is the only creature endowed with the capacity for abstract thought and for this reason is most like the completely abstract and non-material God. Because the human mind transcends the bonds of time and space, that mind bears likeness to God. Yet humans are also material beings whose bodies are bound by time and space, and so humans have the highest placement of any material being within Aristotle's ontological framework.<sup>9</sup>

Aristotle's set of propositions is one that most of us accept today, a series of interlinked ideas that still operates as a foundation for thought and decision making in everyday life. The primary building block is the

7. Bartal et al., "Empathy and Prosocial Behavior in Rats."

8. Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 197.

9. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Part II, paragraph 2.

idea that we can divide the world into living and non-living things. We do this routinely and perhaps would have difficulty imagining a world not divided into living and non-living categories. Without such a division, we would conceivably think of everything as living, as in animist belief systems. In this case, I would have to greet my coffee cup in the morning, and thank the coffee maker too. Alternatively, we could recognize intentional liveliness in nothing. In this scenario I might use operant conditioning on my spouse by incrementally rewarding what I like and ignoring or punishing what I do not like: a cold clean analysis is all that is called for, one smart machine to another (and while this idea may be even more difficult to imagine than the animist worldview, it is the undergirding of much of twentieth-century psychological science).<sup>10</sup> In reality, we tend to assume, most often unconsciously, that we can use things but must interactively engage persons. This guideline for behavior is perhaps the most practical implication of the distinction between persons and things.

Even in writing this chapter, I find myself on the wrong side of this person and thing “divide.” That snake on the trail, where does he fit? I will give you a hint by sharing that the grammar correction function on my word processor and I disagree; every time I say “he,” I am prompted to change that word to “it.” When this happens, I recall that Jane Goodall often speaks of a similar clash of practice with her professors at Cambridge who disapproved her giving names to her research subjects rather than numbers.<sup>11</sup> She insisted that the chimpanzees demonstrated personality and lived in family groups, and that giving them names was a way of designating as much. Goodall prevailed and changed a whole scientific norm by doing so. In fact, I believe this to have been a pivotal moment in bringing about a paradigm change in the biological sciences. But can I make that “person” case for a snake, a reptile? For the moment, let us live with the question and return to it later.

There are certain qualities that we simply think of as “alive.” In his essay *On the Soul*, Aristotle wrote “what has soul in it differs from what has not, in that the former displays life.”<sup>12</sup> For him, “soul” is the word that describes the quality of being alive. Most of us also accept the way that Aristotle organized living things by the qualities of their souls, even if we no longer think of living things, even ourselves, as having souls. But

10. Cf. Skinner, *Walden II* and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*.

11. Robin McKie, “Chimps with Everything: Jane Goodall’s 50 Years in the Jungle,” *The Observer*, June 26, 2010.

12. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Part II, paragraph 2.

without the word *soul*, there is broad acceptance for the related ideas that plants are alive but not as alive as animals, and that animals are alive but not as alive as human beings. This “alive and more alive” is the essence of Aristotle’s definition of the word “soul” and of his hierarchical distinctions amongst kinds of souls.

Aristotle described the most elemental souls, those of plants, this way: “Hence we think of plants also as living, for they are observed to possess in themselves an originative power through which they increase or decrease in spatial directions . . . and continue to live so long as they can absorb nutriment.”<sup>13</sup> He concludes that the power to self-organize and to grow into a unique set of potentials through absorbing nutrients is the definitive quality of plant souls, and the most basic quality of all embodied souls. We may not typically think of plants as souls, but we do think of them as being alive. For Aristotle, aliveness is the same as soulfulness.

We move easily from plants to Aristotle’s next category of souled beings, that of animals. Of animals he wrote: “for even those beings which possess no power of local movement but do possess the power of sensation we call animals and not merely living things.” Aristotle further developed his description of animal sensation in the direction of motivation, saying that all animals share what he perceived to be the most basic sense, that of touch. He described the relationship amongst the capacities of animal souls in this way, that “where there is sensation, there is also pleasure and pain, and where these, necessarily also desire,” or what we today might call motivation.<sup>14</sup> His formulation of ethics begins with the notion that natural self-interest serves to organize the capacity of living things to realize their potential. This realizing of one’s unique potential by staying alive and fed and by reproducing is the most basic value or good of living things. Thus all animals, including humans, move toward that which will enhance their lives.

These complex qualities of animal soul are built upon that more elemental quality of plants, the capacity to obtain nutriment. Of animal souls, Aristotle says further: “it is the soul which is the actuality of a certain kind of body.”<sup>15</sup> He means two things by this, that both body and soul are inseparable *and* that soul is the unique expression of a type of body’s

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., Part II, paragraph 6.

15. Ibid., Part II, paragraph 8.

potential. I might translate it as: “This turtle is a unique animal soul of the turtle type.” Aristotle attributes internal experience and intention to animals as the definition of what makes an animal an animal, with the understanding that when the animal dies, its soul, which is the organizing principle of its body, dies too.

While we may not protest what Aristotle describes as obvious and observable by anyone, and we often do use his system of organization, most often without realizing that we do, we also may not protest ideas that are counter to it. A common example of this would be to think that it is permissible to do things to animals that it would not be permissible to do to humans because animals do not have internal experiences, such as pleasure and pain, in the ways that we do. The latter reasoning is often expressed in terms of the conditioned or programmed behavior of the animal; “it” is acting according to its experience of reward and punishment on automatic pilot, if you will, or according to its genetic mandate, another kind of automatic pilot. It is, in other words, a mechanism or series of mechanisms, and therefore does not act in response to its thoughts, feelings, or desires. But Aristotle would have said of my drama on the mountain trail that there was a human soul and three animal souls in the encounter, all having internal experience of emotions, all seeking to realize their potential, all motivated by natural self-interest, but only one of them a thinker.

Moving toward the qualitatively distinct human soul, Aristotle wrote: “We have no evidence yet about the mind or the power to think; it seems a widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers.”<sup>16</sup> And it is the power of thinking that he attributes to humanity that causes him to place humans in their unique and superior category, having all the qualities of other living souls: self-organizing and nutritive capacity, like plants; and like animals, sensation and the experience of pleasure and pain from whence comes desire or motivation, and the capacity to move towards that which we desire. “Certain kinds of animals possess in addition the power of locomotion, and still another order of animate beings, i.e., man, and possible another order like man or superior to him, the power or thinking, or mind.”<sup>17</sup>

16. *Ibid.*, Part II, paragraph 7.

17. *Ibid.*, Part III, paragraph 1.

Imagine an illustration of the suggested hierarchy of beings that informs our thinking and behavior in everyday life, a triangle enclosing four levels of earthly matter. The lowest level has the greatest volume and represents inert matter. The next level up is the second greatest in volume and contains the plants. A third level up from the base is smaller yet in volume and contains all the animals, and the top segment is the smallest, reserved for humans alone. Outside the triangle may be non-material beings and, according to Aristotle, must be God, the transcendent cause. First there is the distinction between living and non-living, then the plants, then the animals, and then those with mind, humans, and perhaps angels existing outside the realm of the material forms entirely.

I recommend to the reader a simple thought experiment: select another species, learn something about it, and then construct a hierarchy of beings as it might be expressed by a bright and creative member of that species. What reason might the elephant give to support the conviction that his way of being is superior to that of all other creatures? Perhaps it would be the infamous big-heartedness or long memory of elephants. Might the whales invoke their planetary awareness as creatures who migrate thousands of miles in the great oceans every year, or their ancient lineage as a species that is at least fifty million years old? It is easy to see the potential for exercising that self-serving bias that allows us individually and collectively to take credit for the good things that happen and to place blame for bad things outside of ourselves. It might well determine who is at the top from any species' point of view, were that species to be found to share in what is for humans a pervasive cognitive bias.<sup>18</sup>

Though he elevated humans above all other animals, Aristotle did not in fact conclude that we are the highest order of beings, but only the highest order of beings in the material domain. Not only did he suggest that there might be another order of beings even superior to humanity, but he asserted that that there must be a God whose transcendence was complete, the rationally necessary Uncaused Cause.<sup>19</sup> Aristotle reasoned that something had to be self-existent at the start of the world and that something started everything else in a great series of cause and effect interactions, that something being God. But well before Aristotle's careful philosophical analysis, religious systems had already attributed authority to God and human knowledge to God's revelations to humans. I am

18. Sheppard et al., "Self-serving Bias."

19. Aristotle, *Physics*, Book VIII, 1.

compelled to wonder whether Aristotle did not begin with the conviction of God, if a God meme was already established, and then make the analysis to prove that conviction.

The creation stories of the biblical book of Genesis suggest that the notion of God making humans as the supreme act of creation lies somewhere in our human consciousness from a date long before that of Aristotle. In the first of the two creation stories that appear in the first two chapters of Genesis, it is explicitly stated that God gave humans rule over all the varieties of the other animals, and in the second that God gave humans the power to name all other creatures. For the purpose of grounding this popular image in its sources, I offer the two quotations. From the first account: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’”<sup>20</sup> And from the second: “Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.”<sup>21</sup>

In fact, these passages are broadly descriptive of two facts about humans: first, that humans have acquired (and thus had the capacity to acquire) power over nature, power sufficient to alter planetary systems, such as the weather; and second, that humans categorize and name things, equating this activity with knowledge and power.<sup>22</sup> My point is not to grant authority to these verses but to acknowledge them as one of the key sources of the widely held Western notion that by divine design humans are distinctive, superior, and even godlike compared to all other animals. Historian Lynn White cites this biblical conception of “right relationships” as a core influence related to ecological degradation due to its underlying suggestion of divinely mandated human disregard for the ecological well-being of other creatures and subsequently of the earth.<sup>23</sup>

But there are other biblical passages that give quite a different picture of the relationships amongst God, humans, and the other animals, perhaps most notably Psalm 104, with its list of the glories of the created world, each kind of thing having a special relationship with the Creator.<sup>24</sup>

20. Gen 1:26.

21. Gen 2:19.

22. Vitousek et al., “Human Domination of Earth’s Ecosystems.”

23. Cf. White, “Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.”

24. Ps 104.

Culminating the list of creatures is Leviathan, who was created for the purpose not of serving humanity but for sporting in the ocean. And the psalmist concludes by drawing an image of every kind of animal having a unique and special relationship to a creator whose creative (and destructive) power is ongoing: “These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.”<sup>25</sup>

The quotations from Genesis and from Psalm 104 represent two very different ways of conceptualizing the biblical relationship between God, humans, and other animals. One might suppose that believers consider each to be divine revelation. Why then has one of them been “selected” into popular thought and the other left virtually unknown? I suggest that the interpretation selected and replicated is the one that has both the psychological appeal and biological value to repeat and maintain a powerful meme. So pervasive is the religious form of the meme, rooted in these verses from Genesis, that Lynn White described modern science itself with its intention to name and to control nature as an “extrapolation of natural theology,” and modern technology in terms of its “realization of the Christian dogma of man’s transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature.”<sup>26</sup>

While these ancient philosophical and religious notions persist into contemporary times in their own right, a third version of the meme, based on a combination of both ancient philosophical and religious streams of thought but with a new mathematical element added, was developed by the seventeenth century French philosopher René Descartes. Descartes proposed a creative, profoundly influential, and more modern form of the “great divide” between humans and other animals.<sup>27</sup> Almost 2,000 years after Aristotle devised his hierarchy of souls, Descartes imagined a mechanical universe in which humans alone have internal experience as evidenced by capacity for rational thought expressed in language.<sup>28</sup> He removed “souls” from everything except humans, and defined the quality

25. Ps 104:27–30.

26. White, “Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” 1206.

27. Descartes, *Meditation VI*.

28. Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 22.

of human soul by abstract rationality alone. Notably, he also took the heart, that is, the emotions or “passions,” out of human souls, leaving unfeeling minds somehow to inhabit mechanical human bodies. Everything in the universe except for these rational human minds he conceived of as one great machine operating on a few universal laws.

Because he was unable to articulate an explanation of the relationship between the rational minds and mechanical bodies of humans, Descartes’s description of the nature of reality is generally considered a metaphysical failure. Despite this, however, the image of a measurable mechanical universe has infused and suffused the scientific project for centuries.

Descartes was of course thoroughly familiar with Aristotle’s concept of the soul and of his categorization of types of soul. Indeed, Christian scholastic theology, a “baptized” version of Aristotelian philosophy, was the established model of metaphysics taught in the universities of his day (and Descartes studied law at the University of Poitiers, a Catholic university). But Descartes’s desire was to describe the universe and its functions in mathematical terms. To accomplish this, he sought to explain the functions that Aristotle attributed to soul in terms of mechanical operations, devoid of intention or interior life except in the case of humans, for whom abstract thought, bound by neither space nor time, was definitive.

Descartes, most famous for the singular quotation *Cogito ergo sum*, commonly translated as “I think therefore I am,” argued that we can rationally doubt the existence of our bodies, but that we cannot doubt the existence of the doubting mind.<sup>29</sup> The basis for his separation of humans from all the other animals was our use of language; and language became his criteria for determining rationality and the presence of mind. This is of course a somewhat circular justification of the relationship of reason and language. Not only is it circular but it also presumes that the utterances of other animals, not to mention their gestures, are not language. But we now know that the animal world is full of language: that even honeybees have true language, and that prairie dogs have a sophisticated vocabulary for communicating knowledge about their environment.<sup>30</sup> Suffice it for now to say that in Descartes’s time people did not think animals used language, an assumption that might easily be driven by the meme of interest, that meme that requires evidence of human superiority.

29. *Ibid.*, 14–18.

30. Slobodchikoff, *Language of Animals*, 52–62; Balcombe, *Second Nature*, 89–91.

Despite Descartes's complete separation of minds and bodies, and despite his method of doubt, or the requirement that every proposition that cannot be logically proved must be doubted, he asserted that human sensation and knowledge are accurate because God created humans and endowed them with minds, and "God is not a deceiver."<sup>31</sup> As for the animals, Descartes described them as machines, incapable of language and therefore incapable also of internal experience. He further asserted that animal cries of pain or distress were mere mechanical warning sirens and not true expressions of the felt experience of pain.<sup>32</sup>

Descartes's separation of bodies and minds into completely different kinds of things incapable of interacting with one another is problematic on multiple grounds, but especially for neuroscientists, the very essence of whose work is in describing how the brain (a bodily structure) is related to thought and feeling (functions of mind or soul).<sup>33</sup> But his equation of language with rationality has persisted and it has been used to bolster the great divide between humans and all other animals, despite accumulating evidence to the contrary.<sup>34</sup> Descartes's definition of animals as machine has, by default, placed them in the category of things to be used. Whether or not he intended to grant permission to hurt animals in the name of science is the subject of debate.<sup>35</sup> But it is certainly fair to attribute to him that he expressed the ideas upon which the maltreatment of animals and all of "inert" nature came to be rationalized in modern scientific thought.

Having looked at three different pervasive culture systems in which the meme of the great divide between humans and all other animals is supported in complex systems of the kind described by Dawkins, let me now revisit the configuration of beings that encountered one another up on my mountain trail. We have already established that Aristotle would say that there was a meeting of one human and three animals, all motivated by natural self-interest. The book of Genesis, compendium of religious understanding that underlies so much Western thought, says clearly that the animals are intended by God to be under human dominion, no explanation beyond divine revelation needed. The dogs in my scenario are as God intended, putatively under the control of the human. The human is

31. Descartes, *Meditation IV*.

32. Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 22.

33. Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, xi–xix.

34. Slobodchikoff, *Language of Animals*, 9.

35. Cottingham, *Descartes' Treatment of Animals*, 551–59.

God's agent. As for the indomitable snake, he becomes the living symbol of all that might undermine humanity's place as God's favorite. No mention of souls or machines, only favorites and villains. From Descartes's perspective, the whole point is to create a certain stark simplicity, if not clarity: the group interacting on my mountain included one disembodied soul and four machines.

Animal behavior scientists and animal activists cite Cartesian dualism, particularly Descartes's assertion that animals are machines that lack true internal experience, as the broadly accepted basis for the commonly held idea that non-human animals, because they do not think, are things to be used, as contrasted with the category of persons who require ethical consideration.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, a United States court recently heard a challenge to this with regard to the keeping of orca whales in captivity for purposes of human entertainment: "For the first time in our nation's history, a federal court heard arguments as to whether living, breathing, feeling beings have rights and can be enslaved simply because they happen to not have been born human."<sup>37</sup> The judge's ruling cited the fact that animals are not persons under the law: "The only reasonable interpretation of the 13th amendment's plain language is that it applies to persons and not to non-persons such as orcas. . . . Both historic and contemporary sources reveal that the terms 'slavery' and 'involuntary servitude' refer only to persons."<sup>38</sup>

Following Descartes, then, we ask: if the judge denies the orcas' personhood, does he then think of them as things? It is certainly implied in the reaffirmed human right to capture and own them. Yet the category of thing remains deeply unsatisfying in this context. Surely, whatever their legal status in human courts, these beings are not things. And I note that one of the whales in question had been implicated in the deaths of humans on three separate occasions and so his "in between" status, neither person nor thing, is probably to his benefit in that he cannot be tried for murder. While the possibility of trying a whale for murder may seem far-fetched to contemporary minds, it was only a little more than a century ago that elephants were executed for murdering humans.<sup>39</sup>

36. Balcombe, *Second Nature*, 44.

37. BBC News, "SeaWorld sued over 'enslaved' killer whales."

38. *The Guardian*, "Whales not slaves."

39. Peterson, *Moral Lives of Animals*, 8–11.

Whatever the legal status of orcas in captivity, the machine model of animals has been widely disputed and roundly disproved by contemporary animal scientists in both natural and laboratory settings. The scientific study of animals has repeatedly demonstrated not only the interiority but also the intentionally communicated and acted upon interiority of many species of animals.<sup>40</sup> Simultaneously, Aristotle's hierarchical organization of beings has been replaced in the scientific world by the "tree of life" image that illustrates the relationship of every living thing to every other living thing, growing out of the earth in a branching configuration, organic and changing, rather than a solid pyramid suspended eternally in abstract space. This tree of life image suggests a more contemporary scientific understanding of the relationships amongst animals (including humans): that of kin who exist in a context of evolutionary continuity.<sup>41</sup>

The explosion of knowledge in the biological sciences since James D. Watson and Francis Crick's 1953 discovery of the structure of DNA, and especially in animal studies since Jane Goodall's first published reports in 1963 on the chimpanzees at Gombe, has overturned the long held assumption that there is a great divide between humans and other animals.<sup>42</sup> The new model in the biological sciences is one of evolutionary continuity and it calls for a new way of thinking about and relating to non-human animals.<sup>43</sup> However, despite powerful scientific evidence that overturns the meme of the divide between humans and other animals, belief in human distinctness and superiority persists. Perhaps it is the case that the categories of persons and things cannot do justice to a reality as multifaceted as animal life on earth. If this is the case, we will need to cast our intellectual nets more broadly to find a way of thinking that can work meaningfully with the complexity we have discovered.

## A Natural Spirituality

Rather than taking the traditional route of analytic philosophy, that of trying to redefine "person," I will make the case in this book that there is a broad category of natural spirituality, essentially seen in the

40. Cf. Bekoff, *Emotional Lives of Animals*; Peterson, *Moral Lives of Animals*; Balcombe, *Second Nature*.

41. Bekoff, *Emotional Lives of Animals*, 36–37.

42. Goodall, "My Life Among Wild Chimpanzees."

43. Cf. Shubin, *Inner Fish*.

intersubjective nature of life and the evolutionary quality of Life itself, in the context of which both humans and non-human animals can be better understood. I will suggest that animal “spirituality” on earth is an evolutionary emergent based in the emotional lives of animals, and is especially evidenced in their capacities to perceive the “insides” of self and others, or to use the more limited terminology of cognitive science, to have a “theory of mind,” meaning that they have an understanding that knowing the mind of other animals is important for living.

There is neuroscientific evidence that to understand the inner experience of others does not necessarily require us to have a theory of mind, but only mirror neurons and the capacity for subtle muscle mimicry whereby we create in our own bodies the feeling that is in the other’s body.<sup>44</sup> It is this intersubjective space in which the thoughts and feelings, intentions, and desires of beings are shared in a variety of ways that is the location of natural spirituality: the bees’ dance, the human symphony or mathematical equation, pheromones, facial expressions, mating displays, gestures, sounds that represent semantic content (or words). Natural spirituality, then, might be defined as the creative “conversation” that occurs within the psychological or “soul” space in which all the lives on earth share the experience of living, albeit by way of myriad kinds of experience. And this creative conversation is not abstract but embodied, so I would prefer to say that all animal bodies are in this Soul, rather than to say each body “has a soul.” Each body participates in the intersubjective space of life on earth and this interactive participation, especially the capacity to receive and to reflect the insides of self and others in ongoing conversation, is the natural spirituality that I propose. Further, I suggest that we humans can benefit from reimagining both animal others and ourselves in light of such natural spirituality.

While it may at first seem a bold or even a wild claim to say that animals are spiritual beings, it may not be so intellectually bold as it first appears, and its wildness (or being “out of bounds”) may be explained by its defiance of a powerful meme. The human-animal meme, however, is one whose death knoll is already sounding because the bigger idea of which it is a subset, that of conflict between of “man” and “nature” has run its course and left us deposited in a field of ecological collapse brought about by our very successes. Describing this human domination of earth’s ecosystems, Peter Vitousek states that “Even on the grandest

44. Rizzolatti and Craighero, “The Mirror-Neuron System”; and Neal and Chartrand, “Embodied Emotion Perception.”

scale, most aspects of the structure and functioning of Earth's ecosystems cannot be understood without accounting for the strong, often dominant influence of humanity."<sup>45</sup>

Even in the context of powerful, natural, and legitimate self-interest, our easy acceptance of the divide between humans and all other animals is cracking under pressures from several directions. New information about animal experience from the biological sciences calls for a new theoretical framework for human and non-human animal relations. At the same time, rapid extinction of animal species and loss of biodiversity threatens the health of planetary ecosystems. Vitousek cites this as one of the two large-scale consequences of human domination, saying of it, "These relatively well documented changes in turn entrain further alterations to the functioning of the earth system, most notably by driving global climate change and causing irreversible losses of biological diversity."<sup>46</sup> I interpret this to mean that we must at the bare minimum change our thinking to see animals as renewable resources rather than simple "materials" for our immediate human purposes. However, established facts of evolution, especially the generalization that all life on earth is related, go much further in suggesting a kind of earthly ethos that necessarily moves us beyond that minimum with its suggestion of kinship as the basis for natural spirituality. Finally, at the level of day-to-day experience, many people feel discomfort with the discrepancy between what they have been taught about animals and their own experiences and perceptions, most poignantly seen in the common human experience of longing for and being delighted by communion with other animals as companions or pets.

Social neuroscientist John Cacioppo holds that human attachment to animals is a "better than nothing" substitute for human attachments, but I think it more likely that our attachment to animals fulfills different needs than do human attachments.<sup>47</sup> The common experience of longing for and taking pleasure in animal companionship is, I believe, indicative of natural spiritual kinship, and not necessarily an indicator of social alienation from other humans. It may well be that attachment to animals allows us to connect to our own bodies in a more immediate way. Supporting this idea is one study that showed the presence of a pet to have

45. Vitousek et al., "Human domination of Earth's ecosystems," 494.

46. Ibid.

47. Cacioppo and Patrick, *Loneliness*, 256.

a more calming influence than the presence of a spouse.<sup>48</sup> Industrialized nations have large populations in which most people no longer have regular contact with farm animals, much less wild animals; and pets may fill this absence rather than the absence of human company.

The intellectual credibility of the claim that there exists a kind of natural spirituality that is continuous amongst humans and other animals also may not be quite so bold as it first appears. Two different broad areas of interdisciplinary scholarship have been moving steadily towards such a claim, if from very different directions. The fields of religious studies, cognitive sciences, and theology have in recent years developed a strong tradition of naturalism, rejecting supernatural explanations while claiming the vital and adaptive qualities of religion and spirituality.<sup>49</sup> As a general interpretation, the intent of these scholars is to unpack the heavy baggage of religious traditions, so that a vision of the natural framework of spirituality might be both more contemporary in its easy embrace of scientific knowledge, and less encumbered with the weight of cultural conflicts embedded in religions.

Approaching the possibility of a natural spirituality from a different direction are the biological sciences. Ethological studies of animals in natural settings and animal behavior studies in laboratories, along with molecular biology, neuroscience, and evolutionary theory have now established a strong model for animal interiority, defined as the thinking, feeling, “personally” motivated, and intentionally communicated space driving at least some of the behaviors of many species of non-human animals.<sup>50</sup>

Each of these areas of study has been developed through intensive interdisciplinary effort. As a consequence, I am attempting here a vastly integrative endeavor, and as such it will be necessarily exploratory in nature. My thoughts on natural spirituality grow out of work in the fields of evolutionary biology, neuroscience, scientific and clinical psychology, animal behavioral sciences, and philosophy and religious studies, and I will refer to these throughout this work, attempting to bring together the implications of one field of endeavor for others.

The death of the powerful old meme calls for the birth of a new one, and I suggest that the new meme is already forming in a sense of

48. Allen et al., “Cardiovascular reactivity and the presence of pets.”

49. Cf. Benvenuti and Davenport, “New Archaic,” 204–9.

50. Balcombe, *Second Nature*, 13–44.

biospiritual kinship that can allow us to find new ways of relating to other animals and with them to “nature,” our shared origin and context for living. The biospiritual kinship to which I refer is likely not only a human experience but like other features of animal life, naturally distributed and continuous amongst animals, with variations by species and individuals within species. The experience of spirituality then is likely not only human but includes other animals in their various ways.

So far, I have presented an overview of the argument that recent decades of scientific research in various disciplines have together overturned the multi-millennial meme that humans are an entirely distinct kind of being. Conversely, and at least as mistaken, is the idea that all other animals together are alike in their differences from us and inferior with respect to that difference.

To say that we are distinctive from other animals is a fact, as is also the fact that each species is by definition distinct from every other species. The questions, then, are not about our distinctness but about our superiority over all the other animals, and about their similarities to one another in being different from us. With reference to these two ideas, that each species is distinct yet related, I would like to suggest that a better grasp of the distinctions amongst us animals is likely to annul the question of superiority by placing it in the context of each species’ specialization within its niche. To paraphrase J. M. Coetzee, why should the crucial test always be intelligence of the kind that enables one to construct machines or philosophical theories?<sup>51</sup> Why should it not be any number of specialized capacities, such as the ability to smell the presence of cancer or explosives, a capacity that dogs whose capacity for smell is measured in parts per trillions possess.<sup>52</sup>

In a collection of Jacques Derrida’s reflections on the deconstruction of classical philosophy with regard to animals, Marie-Louise Mallet asserts that Derrida’s first objection is, not surprisingly, to the word “animal” itself because it represents a false separation of humans from other animals and the lumping of other animals into an other, “as though everything from earthworms to the chimpanzee constituted a homogeneous set to which the human could be radically opposed.”<sup>53</sup> She further suggests, referencing Derrida, that the solution is not in restoring to

51. Coetzee, in Balcombe, *Second Nature*, xi.

52. *Science Daily*, “Dogs Smell Cancer,” and “Dogs’ ability to detect explosives.”

53. Mallet, Preface to Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, x.

animals all those presumed human traits, like thought and feeling and language that were conceptually taken from them, so as to make them more like us. The point is not to restore them to their humanity but to restore them to themselves: “Far from substituting for the classical opposition the confusion of a no less deceptive failure to differentiate, such a deconstruction patiently multiplies the differences.”<sup>54</sup> It is as though we must surrender the feeling of knowledge we attain when we categorize and then recognize the categories we have created, and in place of that experience awaken our actual sentient awareness of specifics, all the way from species to individuals. In order to be more truthful, we have to be willing to replace the classical division between ourselves and all other animals, and instead do the multiplication, allowing all the forms of animal life to have their own conceptual space even as they have their own biological spaces.

Jonathan Balcombe begins his book *Second Nature: The Inner Lives of Animals* by introducing the term *umwelt*, coined by early-twentieth-century ethologist Jakob von Uexkull, to signify the inner world of a species: “The idea is that variations in brains, sensory equipment, and lifestyles of different kinds of animals likely result in their having different mental and perceptual experiences.”<sup>55</sup> My dogs have a “smell brain” that causes them to run to the backyard every morning and to sit holding their noses in the air, sniffing the morning news. In this way, they know more than I ever will about what happened overnight in my yard. The snake has poor vision but exquisite smell and extremely sensitive heat sensors that allow him to locate prey with precision, and his moods are even more influenced by the weather than are mine. The dogs and the snake smell each other and me, including our immediate emotions, better than I smell any of them. I stand on two legs and look at what is on the other side of the snake. We inhabit the same few yards of dusty trail very differently.

The classical philosophy that comes down as culturally received “fact” puts me on one side of a great divide and the dogs and the snake together on the other. I am the one who learns, thinks, develops strategies, makes plans (and tools), achieves goals, and is so self-aware that I anticipate how badly I will feel if I fail to resolve this dangerous situation. And I have a story about who I am, and this “narrative self” guides my

54. Ibid.

55. Balcombe, *Second Nature*, 18.

perceptions and actions. Some psychologists consider this narrative self to be the apex of animal life, but I find it problematic in a species-specific way; our self-stories *are stories*, stories that require us to be unconscious of competing information that might tell a different story. I suggest that keeping attentive company with other animals may help to mitigate the problems of human narrative.<sup>56</sup>

Of the options I listed for conceptualizing the encounter on the trail, I choose multiplication, the option that is constituted as “me, two Jack Russell terriers (Bunny and Lexi, to be even more precise), and a western diamond back rattlesnake,” this particular snake in fact. Paying attention to the specifics matters because it is paying attention to the real material world and not just to ideas about the world. For example, I understand that a rattlesnake can be dangerous, and I also understand that this is because they are incredibly fragile creatures. Anyone who has ever seen a snake with broken vertebrae knows how pathetic is that stepped-on snake.

It was evident that this particular snake had lived a while and was more confident and relaxed than a younger or smaller snake might have been. This breed enjoys a lazy sunning in seventy degree weather but becomes very excitable as temperatures go up, so his choosing not to strike was related to his pleasure in the mild sunny weather. No doubt, the snake’s “happy” mood was an important factor in the social negotiations that took place on the trail. This particular human has encountered rattlesnakes before and is less excitable and more knowledgeable than she was on her first encounter with one. She knows, for example, to express respect to the snake by taking him seriously, backing away while maintaining contact. Lexi is a wizened terrier who, having gotten into serious trouble in her youth, adheres to me at the slightest sign of danger, is completely cooperative when she needs to be, and knows by my demeanor when that is. Bunny is younger and more impulsive and only partially voice-trained; the more excited she is, the less attention she pays. In fact, she has been gaining confidence by trying more and more new things, and each confidence makes her bolder and more willing to try the next thing, so there is a good chance she will try to engage the snake. Each of us varies by species and by individual history and by context, and yet all four of us have sensory impressions of the same world, and an amygdala in our brains that alerts us to danger. Additionally, the three mammals

56. McAdams, “Redemptive Self,” xiii.

share the neuroarchitecture for attachment to each other. We are alike and we are different each from the other, and therein is the frontier to be explored.

The long reign of the great divide meme is understandable in that it expresses natural human self-interest by justifying the use of other animals without requiring complicated consideration in every instance. Rather than vilify humans for such self-interest, and also rather than glibly use natural self-interest as an excuse to adopt convenient but incorrect concepts, I recognize that self-interest is a common feature of animal life. In fact, our self-interest is no longer served by the old meme and any new meme that would be successful had best serve our self-interest. It is in our interest, for example, to refrain from dominating the planet to such an extent that it is thrown hopelessly out of ecological balance. And I think it is in our self-interest to develop the capacity to escape from our abstract thought and verbal constructions enough to experience directly the motivations that are expressed moment by moment in our body states and also to experience directly our sentience of the actual material world around us.

Not only do we humans think but we think to the detriment of our selves and our kind. Our uniquely human problem may lie in the rational justifications that hide from us our real motives and in the abstract thought that minimally interrupts and more commonly cuts us off from our immediate sentience, our awareness of the material world that we inhabit. Part of the human *umwelt*, I think, is that our capacity for abstract thought creates layers of unconsciousness of a particularly human kind, causing us to be confused by deception or literally lost in thought when, for example, our actual perceptions and experiences are in conflict with our preconceptions, or with the particular conditioning of our familial and cultural context.

Keeping company with animals may help us to understand ourselves at vital levels below abstract thought. More than one generation of Westerners has now been exposed to Disney's animated film in which Bambi's mother espouses human moral lessons: "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." I have to admit that I might first be startled and then both saddened and dismayed to receive little lessons in human social mores from a doe. But this is not to say that I would not expect the possibility of a very real connection with a doe. I have sung to mule deer in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California, to white-tailed deer in the Illinois forest, even to springboks in South Africa. They stop, and turn

their ears like satellite dishes, and most often they stay still and attentive until I have finished singing. I interpret this as pleasure, but perhaps they are only being polite.

Am I anthropomorphizing to say that the deer like to be the audience to my song? Yes, I am; but it turns out that, when paired with awareness, to anthropomorphize can be a good tool for understanding other animals because we share so much in common with them.<sup>57</sup> We share with many of them not only sensory information about the real and shared world but neurological mechanisms for understanding the internal experience of others. This is social intelligence, and it routinely operates amongst members of a species.<sup>58</sup>

When I first began to think about animal spirituality, having worked substantially to understand human spirituality as an evolutionary and natural occurrence, I prepared myself to meet with ridicule.<sup>59</sup> However, not only has the idea most often been met with great enthusiasm, but I have experienced responses of the kind that psychologists call “pressured.” There is the feeling of a pressing need to talk about it. When I begin to explain that I am thinking about the possibility of animal spirituality, whether in lecture halls or at dinner parties, among scientists and among students, I find that people need to tell stories about things that they have seen and heard and experienced with animals. In telling their stories, there seems to be a need to have their experience affirmed so that they can legitimately change their beliefs.

Why is it so compelling for us to want to talk about relating with non-human animals? We are in relationship with animals, and we are often in wonder about the simple fact that we sense mutuality of connection, inside of us to inside of them. Our confoundedness about sharing our insides with other animals results from having been taught that animals are prohibitively other, that we cannot communicate with them, nor them with us because we are so vastly different, and different in a vastly superior way. It should be like trying to pour the ocean into a thimble, our capacities into their much smaller capacities. But this does not fit what we experience when our pets calm us more than do our partners.

We need animals as companions and teachers because they are both like us and different from us. They are like us because they think,

57. Bekoff, *Emotional Lives of Animals*, 131.

58. Peterson, *Moral Lives of Animals*, 59.

59. Cf. Benvenuti and Davenport, “New Archaic,” 209.

and feel, and have fundamental moral and even political concern.<sup>60</sup> But they are different in that they have no need to navigate their days literally or metaphorically by the global positioning system on some hand-held device. They know where they are, not in an abstract conceptual way, but in a sensory and embodied way. Non-human animals are frequently more aware than we are of the material world, and amongst that large group of beings lumped under the heading of “animal” are myriad ways of experiencing the physical reality of the world. In spite of our much-glorified capacity for abstract reason, the material world retains its reality and sustains us, despite our lack of awareness of our dependence upon it. And the other animals seem to be more attuned to their own bodies and the emotions that flow from those bodies than we are of our own bodies and basic emotions; perhaps our capacity to occupy abstract space hinders our capacity to occupy material space.

I have many times been in the company of people who hear about Descartes’s description of animals as machines without internal experience, and invariably someone interjects: “Obviously, he didn’t have a dog!” But Descartes did have a canid companion, a small dog, Monsieur Grat, who often accompanied him.<sup>61</sup> It was not lack of exposure to dogs that prevented his making the same observational conclusions that most of us make about their insides and intentions, even their profound love for us. Perhaps it was that Descartes was quite literally lost in thought, so busy trying to make his mental model of a universe composed of two entirely distinct kinds of things, machines and minds, that he lost contact with what was soft and warm and right before his material eyes. He lost contact too with what was apparent in his actual behavior. As a clinical psychologist and trained observer of human behavior, I conjecture that Descartes’s behavior indicates that he was emotionally dependent upon his dog. There is a hint of the deep tragedy of human unconsciousness in the image of Descartes going around with his dog as companion, yet insisting that animals are machines. This dissociation between mind and body, thought and sensation, emotion and motivation is, I have suggested elsewhere, a dangerous and distinctly human dilemma.<sup>62</sup> This species-specific dilemma of ours might be improved by spending time communing with other animals who, though they think, do not generally

60. Peterson, *Moral Lives of Animals*, 7; and de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics*, xiv.

61. Harrison, “Descartes on Animals,” 219–27.

62. Benvenuti and Davenport, “New Archaic,” 215.

become dissociated from sensation and emotion because of that thinking. Indeed, I might restate Descartes's *Cogito ergo sum* to something like this: "I think so much that I am utterly lost in thought, lost to myself and to you." Maybe he too would have benefited from the wake-up call of a sudden encounter with a rattlesnake.

But even if Descartes had merely let the dog take him for a walk into the dog's world, if he had awakened to the dog in his company, we today might not be quite so lost these several centuries later to our own bodies, emotions, and souls. For the fact is that we are not simply abstract thinking things, convenient though it may be to dis-identify with the mortal body, but that we are beings of body, feeling, mind, relationship, and spirit, all thoroughly entangled within us, and entangling us thoroughly within the world. This is home. Waking up to our thoroughly entangled lives is the natural spirituality in which we can reconsider what it means to be human.

Even now, if we let our dogs take us for a walk, perhaps they can help us find a way home. And that is the walk on which I propose that we go: a walk in which we both examine our assumptions and stretch our imaginations to listen to other animals about their experience of living in relationship to the greater wholes of which they, and we, are a part.

Now where did I put the leash?