

Relations, Places,
and Practices

Self-Realization in Mixed Communities of Humans, Bears, Sheep, and Wolves

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The paper assumes as a general abstract norm that the specific potentialities of living beings be fulfilled. No being has a priority in principle in realizing its possibilities, but norms of increasing diversity or richness of potentialities put limits on the development of destructive life-styles. Norm application is made to the mixed Norwegian communities of certain mammals and humans. A kind of *modus vivendi* is established that is firmly based on cultural tradition. It is unimportant whether the term “rights (of animals)” is or is not used in the work for peaceful human coexistence with a rich fauna.

1

In recent years academic philosophers have paid increasing attention to the relations between humans and other living beings. One of the reasons for this is a tragic paradox. In the industrialized states the average material standard of living (measured conventionally) has reached a fabulously high level, the highest in the history of humankind. At the same time the number of animals, especially mammals, subjected to suffering and a severely restricted life-style in the richest countries has increased exponentially. Never have so many highly sensitive beings been cruelty treated for such flimsy reasons. The main effort to change this trend has been organized by people professionally engaged in trying to mitigate the economic crisis in Scandinavia (in 1979), that makes it even more difficult than usual to make an impact on a political level. It is to be expected that cruel practices supported through economic considerations will flourish in spite of mounting public concern.

2

The way animals are treated is determined not only economically and politically, but also through sets of general attitudes and beliefs, some of which are philosophically relevant. Academic philosophers have here a great variety of problems to choose from. “Do animals have rights?” is one that has been at the forefront.

In what follows I shall outline the skeleton of a pattern of argument, T, which concludes with a version of the maxim, “Every living being should have an equal right to live and flourish.” In order to avoid too expensive an egalitarianism, the phrase “equal right” might be replaced by “equal right in principle.” The argument starts with some such sentence as “potential ought to be maximally realized.” Relying on various uses and connotations of “self,” we can also use an expression like “maximal self-realization!” These formulations are (of course imperfectly) expressive of the single normative premise needed in T.

3

The potentialities of human beings in the form of achievements and life-styles, and in other ways, are more complex and therefore greater than those of any other living beings on earth, at least at the present time. The maximal realization of these potentialities depends, however, on a vast number of conditions. Ecology (and especially human ecology) teaches us daily more about certain kinds of decencies. The manifestations of the capacity of sympathy and symbiosis teach us that there is a vast variety of ways of living together without destroying others’ potentials of realization.

Maximal realization of potentials implies the utilization of the existing *diversity* of life-forms and capacities. Among the factors reducing diversity are the relations of “exclusivity,” the dependence of the maximal realization of the potentials of one life-form on the non-maximal realization of potentials of some other forms. Clearly a policy of restraining certain forms and life-styles in favour of others is called for—in favour of those with high levels of symbiosis, or more generally, good potentialities of coexistence.

This seems to suggest a very active interference in nature: defending the hunted against the hunters, the oppressed against the oppressors. But here ecology has taught us a very brutal lesson: our vast ignorance of the interdependence of life-forms and the often tragic consequences, for the hunted and the oppressed, of the elimination of the hunters and the oppressors. Interference has to be carried out with the utmost care.

There are various concepts of “diversity” in ecological literature. Here I shall rely on a fairly narrow concept such that one may assert, “Maximal realization of potentials implies maximal diversity.”

4

Complexity, in the qualitative sense of many-sidedness of life-style and of manifestations of life in general, may be safely said to increase from protozoa to vertebrates. Increase of complexity makes increase of diversity possible. Maximal realization of potentials thus implies maximal development of levels of complexity and maximal diversity at each level.

In the argumentation pattern, T, “Maximal complexity!” is derived either directly from the basic norm or indirectly through asserting “Maximization of diversity implies maximization of complexity.”

Among the classes of joint-legged animals (*arthropoda*), insects may safely be said to show the most pronounced diversity. Scolopanders are on roughly the same level of complexity but do not show comparable diversity.

5

The development of the nervous system is generally taken as proof of development of a capacity of joy and suffering, from vague feelings of lust or pain to extremely *complex* sentiments of positive, negative, or mixed kinds.

The relation of joy and suffering to self-realization is differently conceived with different philosophies. Our argument-pattern makes use of Spinoza’s theories, asserting an inner relation between joy (*laetitia*) and increase of power of realization (*potentia*). Joy is not felt *because* of the realization of a potential, but is part of the very process of its realization.

Spinozist theories are important when linking utilitarianism to self-realization conceptions of ethics.¹

6

In spite of what has been said about the elimination of hunters and oppressors, we may safely assert as general maxims, “Exploitation reduces realization potentials” and “Subjection reduces realization potentials,” and derive “No exploitation!” and “No subjection!”

7

Strict application of such slogans is of course Utopian in the worst senses of the term. The formulation of the slogans may be said both to point to possibilities of argumentation and to suggest impasses and absurdities.

8

Diversity implies self-determination in one important way: The more each particular being acts out of its own particular *conatus*—to use Spinoza's term—the greater is potential diversity. On the other hand, self-determination at high levels of complexity implies complex societies with complex relations. (I presuppose that the ecological difference between complexity and complication is taken into account. Complicated social relations reduce many-sidedness.)

To the maxims already introduced we now tentatively add "Maximum self-determination!"

9

The way in which I have talked about life-forms and life-styles suggests that it is species and other collective units, not particular living beings, which realize potentialities. I do not rule out the possibility of self-realization of collectivities but prefer to think only of particular beings, particular humans, frogs, hookworms.

Many ecologists lament the preoccupation of ethics with particular specimens instead of populations. They demand a greater ethical concern with populations and animal and human societies, less preoccupation with the fate of individuals. Some add that the highest concern should be for ecosystems, not individuals, societies, or species. What is most needed is system ethics, especially strict ethical norms concerning the destruction of ecosystems. I presuppose in what follows that the arguments of these ecologists are taken seriously, but nevertheless persist in thinking of the realization of the potentials of *particular* living beings.

So much for argument-pattern T. Many contemporary authors reason along similar lines, as, for instance, the author of "The Right Not to Be Eaten" in evaluating diversity, symbiosis, and other factors. One of his conclusions is that

the natural *telos* is a diversified environment in which organic beings are capable of symbiosis as well as spontaneity (localized autonomy) and . . . any practice which inhibits the development of this type of environment ought to be discontinued. Since meat-eating is a conspicuous example of a human practice

which has this effect, it should be discontinued, and a right not to be eaten should be *ascribed* to animals.²

The ought-sentence may be derived from the basic norm of argument pattern T. The general ascription today, e.g., by a resolution of the United Nations Assembly, of a right not to be eaten would, I think, elicit considerable mirth and some ire. Our author surely did not, however, have such a possibility in mind. More informal declarations of animal rights might well contain the ascription.

The assertion that is “wasteful to sacrifice a more highly organized being when a lesser being will do” might be taken as a guideline indirectly derivable from the slogan, “Maximize complexity!” Completely to destroy a highly organized being’s possibilities of realization is to eliminate greater possibilities than when a less organized, and therefore on the whole less complex, being is sacrificed.

If the highly organized specimen is old and sick, people would tend to sacrifice it rather than the young, healthy, but somewhat less complex specimen. At this point I hope most readers would feel a certain disgust suddenly seeing the implication of a rigid application of such “measurements” of possibilities within the framework of human societies. Social Darwinism is just around the corner!

The relations of the “potentialities of realization” guideline to Van DeVeer’s criterion of “two factor egalitarianism” are rather complicated.”³ Let us, for instance, take the relation of bears to sheep and to humans. The eating of sheep-flesh is not taken to be of high “level or importance of interest” to bears in general. But to some bears it clearly is. Unfortunately we are not able to help a bear give up that interest. Sheep-owners, on the other hand, have a strong economic *interest* in keeping their sheep alive. Even if the compensation they receive for the loss of a sheep is enough to buy two new sheep, and they thus make a profit out of the killing, sheep-owners have an *interest* in avoiding the killing. This has to do with local sheep-owners’ personal relations to their sheep, their rejection of cruelty, and many other factors. They also attribute intrinsic value to bears, and thus letting bears live is an *interest* in favour of maintaining intrinsic values. So much for adapting the terminology of “interest” to my own analysis. The transition to “potentialities of realization” terminology is not very problematic. Damage to interests corresponds to reduction of potentialities. Thus severe threats to economic interests correspond to possibilities of severely reduced self-realization.

It belongs to the special capacities of humans to recognize similarities and differences between humans and other life-forms. Some differences elicit feelings of strangeness, fear, or dislike, and favour attitudes of hostility, avoidance, or indifference. Similarities, live sensitivity to pain or to behaviour as if in pain, elicit sympathy and attitudes of identification. Relying on accounts of human nature, like those of Spinoza, especially his account of free humans in the later parts of Part 4 of the *Ethics*, I maintain that high levels of realization of human potentialities in their intrinsic values and their equal right (in principle) to live and flourish. Upon this general attitude, however, is superimposed a vast differentiation according to which form of life or which life-style is under consideration or—better—met with in action.

Remaining at the rather abstract level, I assert as part of argument-pattern T: “The higher the level of realization of the potentials of a living being, the greater the dependence of further increase in level upon the increase of the level of other living beings.”

What this says is, in its extreme form, that the absolutely highest level of self-realization cannot be reached by anybody without all others also reaching that level. (A kind of parallel to *Mahayana* theories of highest levels of freedom.)

The view that human nature is such as ultimately to demand a sort of egalitarianism of life-forms in the biosphere may of course be judged simply wrong without disturbing the other arguments of the argument-pattern. The view is mentioned here simply because, if tenable, it lends support to the ultimate normative premise stated at the beginning of this article.

11

How, if the above is accepted, are we to implement or give expression to the norms stated? How are our policies towards animals to be stated and carried out in particular cases?

There are many ways of approaching these vast problems. I shall confine myself to mentioning, in order just to illustrate one approach, the procedures of wild-animal “management” in Scandinavia, particularly in Norway, and I shall limit myself to considering two not very important species, the brown bear and the wolf.⁴

12

Bears and humans live in overlapping territories in southern Norway. Conflicts arise because some bears develop a habit of killing sheep. No

sheep-owner thinks that all bears in his area should be killed. The cultural pattern is such that bears are considered to have a right to live and flourish. They are considered to have a value in themselves. The problem is one of co-existence with humans and with sheep.

When sheep are killed in southern Norway and a bear seems to have been responsible, an expert is called in. He investigates closely the way the sheep has been killed and notes all the signs of the presence of the bear. Knowing the various habits of practically all the bears of the area—even if he has not actually seen them—he is generally able to tell not only whether a bear has been there, but also which bear.

The sheep-owner is paid an indemnity if the expert arrives at the conclusion that a bear is responsible. If that bear has been guilty of similar “crimes,” a verdict may be reached that it has forfeited its right to existence. An expert bear-hunter is given license to kill it, but if he does not succeed, a whole team of hunters is mobilized. (Somewhat inexplicably, bears are able under such circumstances to hide for years, which is deeply embarrassing, as well as mystifying for the hunters.)

13

Many factors are considered before a bear is condemned to death. What is his or her total record of misdeeds? How many sheep have been killed? Does he or she mainly kill to eat, or does he or she maim or hurt sheep without eating? Is particular cruelty shown? Is it a bear mother who will probably influence her cubs in a bad way? Did the sheep enter the heart of a bear area or did the bear stray far into established sheep territory?

Even if the terminology of the argumentation for or against the death warrant differs from that of human trials, the social and ethical norms invoked are similar. One may speak of the area’s life community, a community comprising wild animals, domesticated animals, and humans.

The use of the term “community” in this way does not satisfy the strong requirement proposed by Passmore, but it satisfies that of Clark in his article “The Rights of Wild Things.”⁵ I myself accept broader senses of the term as perfectly legitimate.

14

The interaction between the members of the community is not systematically codified. How to do that, and in what terminology, is an interesting philosophical problem.

Sheep-owners and others are interested in clarifying the norms because of an increasing friction between bears and humans: for economic reasons sheep are no longer tended, the norm that sheep be protected against wild animals by the presence of a shepherd is invalidated through higher norms of profitability. The economy is capital—not labour—intensive.

From the norm to make Norway more “self-reliant,” there is also now a government-supported norm to increase the number of sheep and the area of their grazing. Very old, established bear territories are invaded. Added to this is the further complication that the number of bears is increasing.

If our present economic crisis (1979) does not grow worse, a *modus vivendi* comparatively favourable to bears may ensue. But if it deepens the bear territories will probably be “developed.” It will be found “necessary” to introduce more sheep. Bears will meet sheep more often—with bad consequences for both.

Ecologists who assess the destruction by bears and who give advice both to sheep-owners and representatives of the public, try to fulfill the wishes of sheep-owners fully enough to ensure that they do not begin breaking the law: killing bears without a warrant. As professional students of bears and of impressive, old ecosystems, the ecologists think it wise of the public to give greater support to the interests of the bears than at present. Such a policy presupposes that the public become better informed and that the economic crisis is not deepening.

Comparing Regan’s approach⁶ to my own, mine seems more *aposteriori* and less élitist. The ascription of rights to animals frequently occurs among “ordinary” people, that is, people without special formal education. It is their use, rather than that of people versed in law or philosophy, that guides my own. Philosophers might find inconsistencies and obscurities in ordinary ways of using “rights” and similar terms, but I think that this is mostly because *they do not acknowledge the intricacies of everyday usages*.

A widely read Norwegian book and pamphlet in favour of Declaration of Rights of Animals elicited counter-arguments, not complaints that the key terms (*rett, rettighet*) were meaningless when applied to animals.⁷ Thousands subscribed to the declaration contained in the pamphlet. Others found its sweeping character Utopian in the sense of

completely unrealistic. *Empirical semantic analysis* would, I think, make it plausible that “rett” as used in the texts and debates had fairly definite connotations. On the basis of such empirical work, I think philosophers may tentatively introduce conceptual frameworks incorporating the concept of animal rights.

It may be wiser, however, not to introduce the term “right” in codifications of norms covering animal/human interaction, or only to assert conditionals: “If we recognize that there are rights (at all), then . . .” (cf. Regan).⁸

15

We will mention wolves only very briefly. Their cultural setting is very different from that of bears. There is a great *respect* for bears, whereas wolves are more dreaded than respected. A bear’s character traits are considered more sympathetic. Some consider wolves dangerous: hungry wolves may attack people. (Most or all stories of such attacks in the last hundred years, however, are falsified or extremely doubtful.)

The very *right to live* is brought into the debate. In recent years, however, wolves have not been guilty of a single verified misdeed. They are rarely seen and very careful to keep out of trouble. There is therefore a reasonable chance that the live communities comprising a (fairly small) number of wolves will persist.

16

In referring to animals here I have used the terms “responsible,” “guilty,” “misdeed,” “crime,” “cruelty,” and “careful.” They belong, together with the term “right,” to the vast number of words with connotations mostly found in debates on purely human behaviour, but which are also found in fairly precise argumentation involving the attitudes and behaviours of different species. It is sometimes important to be strict in keeping the two uses apart, but never wise to try to eradicate the wider ones.

People speak of the right of certain animals to hunt within certain territories, and to drink at certain places along rivers. Further, to use certain trails. Thus, if the human use of those trails or their cutting by a road prevents the animal from using them, these actions are forbidden. There is also talk about the right to light and to movement, to free air, etc. in mechanized agriculture. Instead of rejecting the possibilities of there being such rights, I would recommend arguing for the same goals without using the terminology of rights.

McCloskey argues very carefully that animals cannot have rights if they do not have the relevant *moral* capacities.

Although there is limited evidence in respect of certain animals of a capacity for seeming “self-sacrificing,” “disinterested,” “benevolent,” actions in limited, somewhat arbitrary areas, there is no real evidence of a capacity to make moral judgments, morally to discriminate when self-sacrifice, gratitude, loyalty, benevolence is morally appropriate, and more relevantly, to assess their moral rights and to exercise them within their moral limits. However, further research on animals such as whales and dolphins, although seemingly not in respect of monkeys, apes, chimpanzees, may yet reveal that man is not the only animal capable of being a bearer of rights.⁹

What seems to be lacking is a non-circular, convincing argument for the conclusion that animals must have certain moral capacities in order to have rights. In fact I do not find any pro-arguments in McCloskey’s paper. Here, as in the case of Regan, I would study occurrences of the term “right” among ordinary people and inspect with interest its possible connotations, some of which seem non-contradictory and useful within certain limits.

Favouring a Spinozan ethics without a separate realm of morals, *I would adhere to views expressed by ordinary people who ascribe rights to bears without attributing moral capacities to them.*

17

I do not see any inconsistency in maintaining both the general maxim of species egalitarianism in principle (“the equal right in principle of all species to live and flourish”) and the norms which make it more difficult for a wolf than for a bear to be accepted as a member of a mixed community. The general maxim is a vague abstract guideline that has to be embedded in a philosophy of culture. This philosophy is again to be embedded in a social (including economic) framework connecting philosophy with daily life.

The codification of interrelationships between large, wild mammals and humans is an interdisciplinary task that calls for intimate co-operation between people from many walks of life. The same holds good for other areas of present-day conflict between animals and humans. Sprigge stresses that “the details of an acceptable code” of a certain kind “cannot be worked out solely on the basis of philosophical first principles,” and requires the “combination of appropriate expertise with a developed moral sense . . .”¹⁰ I too would like to underline the importance of layman participation.

It is a good sign for those of us who represent academic philosophy that people seek an opportunity to talk the problems over from a wide perspective, including the religious and the philosophical.

Notes

¹ From the above use of the expression “realization of potentialities” it is clear that the concept is wider than most concepts of self-realization in Western philosophy and psychology, for instance that of Abraham Maslow. It is more closely linked to concepts of life-fulfillment and Eastern conceptions, as for instance Gandhi’s concept of self-realization. For more about this see A. Naess, *Gandhi and Group Conflict. An Exploration of Satyagraha*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 1974 (now SWAN 5), and *Økologi samfunn og livsstil. Utkast til en Økosofi*, Universitetsforlaget, 5th ed., 1976. The concept used in T is also close to Spinoza’s “increase in power,” where *potentia* is linked to capability (*posse*), that is, capacity to act with *oneself* as adequate cause. I do not pretend that these remarks are more than initial formulations in a dialogue on self-realization.

² Thomas Auxter, 1979, “The Right Not to be Eaten,” *Inquiry*:22: p. 227.

³ “Two Factor Egalitarianism assumes the relevance of two matters: (1) level or importance of interests to each being in a conflict of interests, and (2) the psychological capacities of the parties whose interests conflict.” Donald Van DeVeer, 1979, “Interspecific Justice,” *Inquiry* 22, p. 68.

⁴ What follows is inspired by the practical work of the bear inspector, and eco-philosopher, Ivar Mysterud.

⁵ Stephen R. L. Clark, 1979, “The Rights of Wild Things,” *Inquiry* 22, pp. 183–4.

⁶ Tom Regan, 1979, “An Examination and Defense of One Argument Concerning Animal Rights,” *Inquiry* 22, pp. 189–219.

⁷ *The Rights of Animals (Dyrenes rettigheter*, Oslo 1974) and *Declaration of Rights of Animals* (1972).

⁸ Regan, op. cit.

⁹ H. J. McCloskey, 1979, “Moral Rights and Animals,” *Inquiry* 22, p. 42.

¹⁰ T. L. S. Sprigge, 1979, “Metaphysics, Physicalism, and Animal Rights,” *Inquiry* 22, p. 134.