It is of course essential to disclose passively accepted beliefs that inhabit and shape the roots and edges of American philosophy if the scope of our tradition is to continue to evolve to meet situations that seldom fit neatly into inherited categories. Our dialogue with Roger Fouts is an occasion for supplementing and correcting uncritical perpetuation of narrowly (vs. broadly) humanistic intellectual habits. His lecture is also an occasion for confronting complex issues of how best to comport ourselves toward other species.

With notable exceptions such as McKenna and Light’s *Animal Pragmatism* and the work of Paul Thompson, scholars working in the American grain have taken a back seat to utilitarian and Kantian philosophers in responding to the profound impact of human practices on other species and rising concern about animal use and treatment. Due to this relative neglect, the debate has been more anemic than it might have been. Yet despite this neglect, it is no longer possible for philosophers to simply presuppose that our second-order desires simply outrank the first-order needs of other animals. Despite the troublesome assumption of utilitarians and Kantians that there is a single right way to reason about morals and a single uppermost factor in moral situations, Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and others have highlighted that our prejudices toward other animals are premised on a metaphysical or ethical caste system, not ethical reflection.

Fouts’s work has found its way into many of my own courses, ranging from
environmental ethics to introductory philosophy. At first blush this may appear something of a
stretch. To see the philosophical fit, consider the oft-quoted dictum stemming from Claude
Lévi-Strauss’s work on totemism: animals are good not only to eat (bonnes à manger), but to
think with (bonnes à penser). This phrasing obviously lacks universal appeal, but it is true that
the study of animals has a broad humanistic bearing on how we understand ourselves and on
what policies we will endorse in relation to nonhuman nature. Revealingly, the subtitle of the
first edition of Fouts’s book Next of Kin was “What Chimpanzees Have Taught Me About Who
We Are.” Attention to other animals can disclose aspects of culture that implicate abiding human
interests. But these aspects of culture remain inconspicuous if we confine scholarly attention
solely to humans.

We are, for example, mostly unaware of the customs that possess us, and as Dewey
observes, this makes it difficult to intelligently evaluate and reconstruct customs in light of
circumstances. Instead, the tendency is to champion routine customs in blind conformity or to
dismiss them in reactionary defiance. This aptly characterizes several decades of academic
discourse about the appropriate relationship between humans and other animals. Fouts’s work on
chimpanzee and human communication is in this respect richly humanistic, as it enables us to
own and appraise social habits.

The persistent attempt in ethics to exclude nonhumans from moral consideration has lost
its intellectual credibility, although prevailing intellectual habits still give a bye to dismissive
attitudes. Shining Fouts’s spotlight on the classical pragmatist tradition, one would naturally
assume that the Darwinian continuity model elaborated in classical pragmatism via Peirceian
synechism would sparkle on the subject of human-animal continuity. It arguably does shine to
some degree in Peirce (see Anderson), and Dewey throughout his mature philosophy strives “to connect the higher and ideal things of experience with basic vital roots” (Art As Experience, 26).

In the first chapter of Art As Experience, for example, Dewey celebrates with verve our continuity with animals. He writes:

<EXT>To grasp the sources of esthetic experience it is, therefore, necessary to have recourse to animal life below [sic] the human scale. The activities of the fox, the dog, and the thrush may at least stand as reminders and symbols of that unity of experience which we so fractionize when work is labor, and thought withdraws us from the world. The live animal is fully present, all there, in all of its actions: in its wary glances, its sharp sniffings, its abrupt cocking of ears. All senses are equally on the qui vive. (24)

<TXT>The classical pragmatists took our shared ancestry with nonhumans seriously. “Human,” after Darwin, is an adjective for our specific animal nature, not the pinnacle of a hierarchy of final causes or something sui generis. Yet Dewey is obliged both by his 1920s audience and his own intellectual habits to worry that the principal philosophical objection to such synechism will be degradation of ideals, “betrayal of their nature and denial of their value” (Art As Experience, 26). Experience and Nature and Art as Experience can be read as Dewey’s efforts to demonstrate that Darwinian continuity implies no such betrayal. As John Herman Randall wisely observed, enlightenment proceeds slowly and in spots. Yet many among today’s philosophical audience may share a concern opposite Dewey’s, namely that we risk betrayal of the nature and denial of the value of the more-than-human world when we fail to celebrate continuity. Dewey could not have anticipated a post-Earth Day philosophical audience informed by novel fields such as environmental ethics and animal ethics.
Larry Hickman argues that, for Dewey,

the principal difference between human beings and the rest of nature is not that there is no communication elsewhere than within human communities, but that human beings are unique in their ability to exercise control over their own habit-formation and therefore to alter in deliberate ways both the course of their own evolution and the evolution of their environing conditions. (51)

Hickman’s distinction is plausible and defensible. Yet in his principal published works Dewey denies communication and all related capacities to other animals. (For a carefully cited analysis, see Appendix 1-1 and 1-2 of Fesmire. These appendices were distributed as handouts for the 2011 Coss Dialogues session.) Despite his synechism, with regard to animals Dewey holds views that are today as empirically obsolete as Ptolemaic astronomy or Aristotelian biology. He echoes the prejudice of his contemporaries that all nonhuman animals act out of blind habit. Even classical conditioning (aka the reflex arc, from which Dewey liberated humans but not other animals) is recognized in any introductory psychology text today as involving some cognitive processing. His view that “scientific men are under definite obligation to experiment upon animals” (“The Ethics of Animal Experimentation,” 98-101) was also typical of the 1920s, as was the still-common high/low evolutionary ladder metaphor.

Moreover, Dewey’s approach to defining some key cognitive concepts is suspect. As the primatologist Frans de Waal observes, we have historically defined terms like communication or culture in a way that excludes other animals in advance of empirical scrutiny. For example, if we derive the meaning of “flying” from a songbird’s flight, then chickens cannot fly (de Waal). Yet chickens do take wing and, to the annoyance of farmers, end up perched in tree limbs.
The beauty of Dewey’s naturalistic empiricism is that his own perspectives must be run through its threshing machine:

Only chaff goes, though perhaps the chaff had once been treasured. An empirical method which remains true to nature does not “save”; it is not an insurance device nor a mechanical antiseptic. But it inspires the mind with courage and vitality to create new ideals and values in the face of the perplexities of a new world. (Experience and Nature, 4).

On Dewey’s groundmap of generic traits of existence (i.e., his metaphysics), humans live alone on a third plateau (Experience and Nature, 208), a field of interaction that includes all mental life and all individuating factors.2 Careful analysis of Dewey’s view of animals across his published work (see Fesmire) reveals residual traces of philosophies he elsewhere discredited, such as an echo of the hierarchical great-chain-of-being (absent Aristotle’s teleological anthropocentrism) as well as a vestige of Cartesianism in which animals are mindless automatons. For Dewey the body is in the mind, but only human bodies have minds. Moreover, when demarcating the “human plane,” Dewey’s picture surprisingly recalls planes of freedom and necessity in Kant’s metaphysics of morals. To this degree, Dewey’s is a Darwinian landscape that retains some Cartesian features. The irony of all of this from the pen of the most anti-Cartesian and radically empirical of philosophers is itself a powerful reminder of the inescapably cultural and historical nature of inquiry. Scholars of classical pragmatism are only beginning to look out of the corner of their eyes to scrutinize this part of Dewey’s horizon.

Nonetheless, despite his explicit utterances about animals, Dewey’s work is incredibly congenial to Professor Fouts’ work on animal cognition, in part because Dewey prioritizes the fullness of embodied experience over narrowly conceptual experience and thereby perceives a
fundamentally relational world. Dewey had gotten over the things that many mainstream analytic
philosophies still have not gotten over, such as the assumption that knowing is the essential
activity of the human being, or that meaning is restricted to truth-conditions and that concepts do
no more than pick out objects (see Johnson).

A focus on imagination is perhaps the best way to reveal what is redemptive in Dewey’s
type of the animal plane. He was calling us to establish social and material conditions that
liberate our energies from enslavement to mechanized habits, toward a life of critical inquiry,
social responsiveness, emotional engagement, and artful consummations. By casting animals in
their circa-1920s role of unintelligent and unemotional brutes driven by the inertia of habit, he
attempts to throw into relief the human potential: Aristotle’s rational animal becomes Dewey’s
imaginative animal.

There is no single, self-evident moral upshot to rooting out Dewey’s prejudices regarding
animal cognition in light of the work of Professor Fouts and many others. It may suffice here
simply to conclude that we cannot logically exclude any form of cruelty or subjugation from our
moral frameworks. This is no less true if our primary commitment is to ameliorate our own
plight. If our treatment of those who are vulnerable and dependent may be taken as a test for our
values, then there is, to paraphrase Steinbeck, a failure that topples all our success exhibited by
much of our treatment of disadvantaged humans and animals. Expanding our sphere of care to
include direct concern for other animals can supplement, reinforce, and render more rationally
coherent our exertions to deal with the atrocities humans commit against each other.

<Notes>
1. I am grateful to Indiana University Press for permission to draw here from some material in “Dewey and Animal Ethics.” (Fesmire).

2. Dewey distinguishes the human plane, the animal plane, and the vegetative plane. All three “planes” or “plateaus” involve the “interaction of a living being with an environment” (Art Aas Experience, 276). Operations of the “higher” include the “lower,” but not vice versa. Here, as with Peirce’s doctrine of synechism, there are no ontological barriers to continuity between human and other forms of life, although of course developmental constraints in the other direction exist. For Dewey, these are descriptive categories for “fields of interaction,” so unlike Aristotle’s parallel categories (thinking, appetitive/sensitive, nutritive), they do not support a fundamental ontology, hierarchy of final causes, or fixed teleology of any sort. Thus he fully understands that this categorization is fallible and revisable in light of new evidence (such as that available today). He says of the categories: “They stick to empirical facts noting and denoting characteristic qualities and consequences peculiar to various levels of interaction” (Experience and Nature, 208).

References


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