



February 2023

## Steps to a Moral Revolution

Contribution to GTI Forum [Solidarity with Animals](#)

Alexander Lautensach

### **Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents**

The ways in which most human societies regard and treat animals are primarily informed by the ethics of anthropocentrism. It dominates mainstream environmental ethics that inform international practices and norms today. In a previous post, I argued that anthropocentrism presents a major cultural obstacle on the way to a Great Transition.<sup>1</sup> It imposes a fatal bias on our views on human procreation and progress; it espouses a self-defeating notion of human flourishing; it instrumentalizes all non-humans and our ecological relationships with them, which not only sets us up for ecological suicide but prevents us from feeling solidarity with animals. In her impassioned [introductory essay](#), Crist criticized the anthropocentric “differential imperative” for its self-defeating and logically flawed rationale.

Beyond Western civilization, and throughout many centuries, anthropocentric value priorities—especially under strong anthropocentrism, which recognizes no intrinsic value for non-humans—have shaped the ways in which animals were treated in many cultures. This galvanized permissive attitudes towards the casual mistreatment, abuse, mutilation, murder, and extinction of animals for the sake of cheap resources, recreation, entertainment and rituals, economic growth, and the continuous expansion of our living space.

The growth of our numbers also contributes to the problem. The gravity of suffering depends on the degree of cruelty in our treatment of animals, and on the number of people engaging in such cruelty—meaning that a CAFO, or an entire boatful of live sheep crossing the Indian Ocean, are more objectionable than one mistreated animal. By the same token, millions of hunters worldwide devastating wildlife with no worse intention than to feed their families amount to a

veritable scourge on the animal kingdom. This collective dimension must be considered when we evaluate present-day society. Almost fifty times as much biomass is tied up in our single species plus our livestock as is found in all the remaining wild terrestrial mammals.<sup>2</sup>

As several contributors have noted, the general mistreatment of animals and the ways in which proponents attempt to morally justify it causes harm elsewhere. “Othering” and devaluing animals makes it easy to devalue non-human life, with all the problematic consequences of ecocide and environmental deterioration that confront humanity in the Anthropocene. Discrimination and mistreatment of ethnic or cultural minorities and medically disadvantaged people seem permissible once they are defined as sub-human outgroups, akin to “animals,” with the help of misguided theories of anthropology or religion. Also, cruelty towards animals is often accompanied by, or paves the way towards, cruelty towards humans. Blindness to Peter Singer’s accusations of speciesism, or to Jeremy Bentham’s appeal to capacities for suffering, opens the door to justifications of cruelty towards virtually anyone, supported by widespread immoral consensus. In Western cultures, the legal foundation of such neglectful and abusive behavior derives from Roman property law, which enshrined patriarchal domination over all family members and which reduced slaves and animals to chattel.<sup>3</sup>

### **A Call for Moral Revolution**

From the preceding, it seems likely that the persistent worldwide presence of racism, bigotry, and violence could not be effectively reduced unless greater efforts are made towards compassion for animals. Reaching beyond that goal towards a GT, abandoning anthropocentrism appears as a precondition. Solidarity with animals would emerge conjointly, for the reasons stated above. A GT requires a wider solidarity with non-human nature, which is essential for any effective course change towards a sustainable, secure future. Thus, solidarity with animals would develop both as a consequence of, and a prerequisite for, the kind of fundamental revolution in mainstream moralities that would render a GT of any sort possible.

In order to have that effect, this moral revolution must move people to abandon the exploitative ethics that have driven us into ecological overshoot, and to embrace biocentric and ecocentric values instead. It must extend globally, affecting major cultures and religions to the extent that leaders and followers consent to the new norms and their cultural enforcement.

Throughout human history, cultures have changed their dominant ethics.<sup>4</sup> Yet, it seems difficult to imagine a set of circumstances that might trigger a moral revolution of the magnitude required for solidarity with animals. Value changes imposed in a top-down manner seldom pass the test of time unless they are also supported from below by popular consensus. A case in point is contemporary Iran. Moral revolutions are not the outcome of strategizing, although they may be influenced by political strategies for a time. They also don't occur randomly, but are brought about by coalescences of human agency.

### **Enacting Change**

If the foundation of relentless human exceptionalism could somehow be removed or weakened, current practices towards animals would be questioned by most people and become culturally unsustainable. The greatest upheavals in dominant values correlate with the emergence of a new religion, or with the fundamental reformation of an existing religion. Next on the list are surges of cultural innovation, such as the ones that led to abolitions of slavery or the empowerment of women. Severe catastrophes such as famines or epidemics can also lead to rapid changes in dominant moral norms, such as proscriptions against the wasting of food or social proximity.

I fear that the mere presence of logical contradictions in the differential imperative is not sufficiently strong to trigger such a transformation. Too many other, intra-human double standards raise our outrage, such as the one between genders. Neither the scientific evidence suggesting a continuum of sentience nor the emphasis on universally shared qualities in the animal kingdom seems likely to conscientize most of humanity against our collective brutality. Even in the midst of famine, disasters, conflict, and chaos, humanity may only become more paranoid and again identify nature as the enemy who denies us our precious human rights.

Yet, there is opportunity for decisive action. Linda McCartney's famous dictum "If abattoirs had glass walls, we would all be vegetarians" is confirmed daily by numerous examples of schoolchildren who were exposed to the atrocities of a CAFO or meat processing plant—much to the consternation of morally hardened parents. It seems that the practical perpetuation of the differential imperative is becoming increasingly difficult without deception and obfuscation. The opportunity for action lies in their exposure. Intensifying educational efforts and exposing moral double standards in conventional schooling hold promise in that regard. I love Melanie Joy's idea of a "retriever burger"!

As a complementary strategy, the motives and excuses for animal abuse can be eroded. Non-essential motives, such as the pet trade, production of aphrodisiacs or cosmetics, or training in circuses, make for relatively easy targets. Freeing up bioproductive areas from agriculture in the course of "rewilding" programs, combined with decisive efforts to slow down further growth of our numbers and our ecological overshoot, could ease the pressure on wildlife. As our numbers finally decrease towards a sustainable level, the motives for intensified corporatized production of animal protein to "feed the world" will wane.

A likely precondition for a GT is the adoption of plant-based diets by most of humanity. Such appeals rest on our deep evolutionary kinship and commonalities with non-humans, and on the comfort and moral support that solidarity with non-humans can provide at times of crisis. Even in medical research, appeals to kinship are driving the extension of existing moral codes to include animals. One way or another, our brutal "War against Nature" and its impact on animals will one day come to an end—hopefully a Great Transition will be the occasion.<sup>5</sup>

## Endnotes

1. The post was entitled "Beyond Anthropocentric Solidarity," (August 2021), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/global-solidarity-lautensach>. See also Alexander Lautensach, "Learning for Biosphere Security in a Crowded, Warming World," *The Ecological Citizen* 1(2): 171–178. <https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/pdfs/v01n2-10.pdf>
2. Yinon M. Bar-On, Rob Phillips, and Ron Milo, "The Biomass Distribution on Earth," *PNAS* (2018): 115 (25): 6506–6511. <https://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1711842115>. They reported the ratio of Homo sapiens to domesticated food animals to wild ones as 36:60:4. A more recent estimate including pets states 34:62:4.
3. David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2021), 508 ff.
4. Slavery was most likely abolished multiple times in history in multiple places; very possibly, the same is true for war. See Graeber and Wengrow (op. cit.), 523.
5. Ronnie Hawkins, "Our War Against Nature," in *Human Security in World Affairs: Problems and Opportunities*, eds. Alexander and Sabina Lautensach, 2nd edition (Prince George, Canada: University of Northern British Columbia, 2020), ch11 and 12, <https://opentextbc.ca/humansecurity/>

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## About the Author



Alexander Lautensach is an Associate Professor at the School of Education at the University of Northern British Columbia. His current research focuses on human ecology, cross-cultural education, and environmental ethics. He is the author of *Environmental Ethics for the Future: Rethinking Education to Achieve Sustainability and Survival How?: Education, Crisis, Diachronicity and the Transition to a Sustainable Future*, as well as associate editor of the *Journal of Human Security*. He holds a PhD from the University of Otago.

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Cite as Alexander Lautensach, "Steps to a Moral Revolution," contribution to GTI Forum "Solidarity with Animals," *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2023), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/solidarity-animals-lautensach>.

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