

The Intentionality and Animal Heritage of Moral Experience:
What We Can Learn from Dogs about Moral Theory

By Charles S. Brown

I fully subscribe to the judgment of those writers who maintain that of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is the most important.

--Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*

Besides love and sympathy, animals exhibit other qualities connected with the social instincts, which in us would be called moral; and I agree with Agassiz that dogs possess something like a conscience.

--Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*

In the agony of death a dog has been known to caress his master, and every one has heard of the dog suffering vivisection, who licked the hand of the operator; this man, unless he was fully justified by an increase of our knowledge, or unless he had a heart of stone, must have felt remorse to the last hour of his life.

--Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*

Dogs shew what may be fairly called a sense of humour, as distinct from mere play; if a bit of stick or other such object be thrown to one, he will often carry it away for a short distance; and then squatting down with it on the ground close before him, will wait until his master comes quite close to take it away. The dog will then seize it and rush away in triumph, repeating the same maneuver, and evidently enjoying the practical joke.

--Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*

Animal welfare theorists and environmental philosophers have, generally, come to reject what they see as anthropocentric assumptions limiting the power and scope of traditional moral theory to provide an adequate understanding of moral phenomena and the moral life. Eco-feminists have expanded this critique to argue that traditional moral theory is not just structured by and biased in favor of anthropocentric assumptions, but structured by and biased in favor of a series of metaphysical and epistemological assumptions resulting from an interlocking and mutually supporting series of value hierarchical dualisms which privilege reason over emotion, objectivity over subjectivity, the universal over the particular, the

human over the animal, and the masculine over the feminine. Val Plumwood argues that the resulting approach to moral philosophy is inadequate as it typically devalues “particular, emotional, and kinship-based attachments.”¹ Feminist philosophers, animal welfare theorists, and environmental philosophers have each sought to pursue ethical theory in a manner that overcomes this incompleteness or inadequacy of traditional moral philosophy.

On Plumwood’s analysis, traditional moral theory further assumes a conception of the self (human self) that is structured by these interlocking dualities in a way that renders this self excessively masculine, egoistic, as well as separate from and superior to non-human nature. Over and against this view of the self,² she considers Arne Naess’s conception of an “ecological self” which, on her reading, defines the self as “indistinguishable” from, rather than opposed to nature. Plumwood proposes a conception of the self as “self-in-relationship” as an alternative to both. She argues that such a conception of human identity, a conception of human moral subjectivity, would provide an appropriate foundation for an ethic of connectedness and caring for others.

Plumwood is correct to see the correspondence between moral theory and a conception of the moral self, i.e. the self of moral experience. Her suggestion of a relational self is surely on the right track toward developing a more sophisticated, comprehensive, and adequate moral theory. In the following pages, I will develop the outlines of a philosophical anthropology that is capable of providing the sort of foundation for an ethic of connectedness and caring for others than Plumwood seeks. This will be a conception of human self-identity informed by a Darwinian

conception of the animal heritage of moral experience and a phenomenological conception of the intrinsic rationality of moral experience. This framework for understanding moral phenomena allows us to, as Plumwood suggests, pay attention to the “rich, caring, relationships of kinship and friendship rather than increasing abstraction and detachment from relationship.”³ This approach to moral philosophy allows us a way into Plumwood’s project of “revaluing and reintegrating what rationalist culture has split apart, denied, and devalued.”⁴ The resulting conception of the self will allow for a framework in which we can find a place for emotion, subjectivity, particularity, and animality in moral philosophy.

One way to begin the project of revaluing and reintegrating what has been devalued and denied (by mainstream moral philosophy) lies in the possibilities of a naturalistically informed phenomenology of moral experience. The perspective of moral phenomena (corresponding moral subjectivity) explored here will be a bottom-up approach which begins with an examination of moral experience and will highlight the importance of animality, subjective feeling, and particularity to value experience. By describing the intentional structure that lies within the meaning and significance of value experience, we will see that ordinary value experience exhibits a *prima facie* form of rationality and cannot be dismissed as “mere” sentiment. Attention to this sort of experience undermines the mutual exclusivity within the traditionally drawn dichotomy of reason and emotion. Furthermore, the value sentiments and feelings examined here are understood to have a long natural history shaped by the process of natural selection. On this understanding, the root

phenomena of moral experience lie directly in our animality and not in the uniquely human capacity of language and abstract calculation.

Phenomenology's distinctive method of describing the subjective realities of human experience has always been proceeded a by refusal to reduce subjectivity, and more importantly, meaning, to the bare facts of nature. This traditional methodological restraint will not be violated here. What will be violated is phenomenology's insistence that description of the subjective and the meaningful (i.e. the intentional) must be strictly independent of any natural sciences or natural facts. This methodological limitation, which is responsible for much of phenomenology's success for the last one hundred years, now stands as a barrier to a more comprehensive account of subjectivity and meaning. By placing the subjectivity of and meaningful realities of human existence in a natural context (i.e. a Darwinian account of human nature) while not reducing them to the bare facts of nature it may be possible to establish a pragmatic middle ground between moral objectivity and the subjectivity of "mere" sentiment. This will, in turn, allow us to consider a naturalistic/phenomenological alternative to, or perhaps version of, the feminist conception of a relational self. This inquiry is a first step in that direction.

In the *Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin attempts to show that humanity's "moral sense" follows from "the enduring and ever present nature of the social instincts." Darwin writes that, "Animals endowed with the social instincts take pleasure in one another's company, warn one another of danger, defend and aid one another in many ways...As they (social instincts) are highly beneficial to the species, they have in all probability been acquired through natural selection."⁵ A few natural scientists and

philosophers are currently exploring the implications of Darwin's speculations on the origin of morality. Common to this general line of thought is the idea that the distinctly human "moral sense" is made possible by the combination of these social instincts with the faculty of reason or language. The claim that morality is made possible by the linguistic conceptualization of inherited social feelings is on the right track but overlooks an important phenomenological fact about moral experience. Moral experience or moral phenomena display an intentional structure not captured by the view of morality as instinct plus language (*logos*). What is missing from the received view concerning a Darwinian account of morality is a theory of intentionality.

Our basic dispositional ways of being open to the world, our basic possibilities are, no doubt, pre-figured in our genes and thus in our kinship with other animals. The fundamentals of our moral psychology may start off as gut instinct but these basic proto moral sentiments are not just reactions to outside stimuli but have the quality of being directed to something or being about something. Empathy is always empathy about something. Altruism is aimed at the other. Moral sentiments are experienced by humans not as "raw feels," or unstructured qualia, but as referring to the other in an attitude of empathy. These are psychological/somatological moments which exhibit a pre-discursive intelligibility and a *prima facie* rationality. These social instincts, as Darwin refers to them, i.e. compassion, sympathy, and feeling, are not simply Humean impressions (as Darwin seems to think) but display an intentional structure that provides or denies justification of the lived sense of that experience.⁶ To experience life within a community of living beings as good is to

interpret and impose the sense of good upon life within a community of living beings, but it is also to expect to continue to find goodness in that life and to have such expectations meet. It is precisely here that we may begin to find a measure of rationality within our moral experiences.

Moral theory and moral philosophy may be a uniquely human activity, but humans are not alone in their basic capacity to respond to the world in an attitude of concern. Social mammals are very much like humans in this respect and share with us, at least in some basic way, a moral or proto moral openness to the world. Dogs, as well as cats, horses, and some others, have been “taken out of the wild” and bred to fit into human community more smoothly. The result has been a human/canine symbiosis in which dogs and humans are emotionally in tune because our concerns often overlap as we (humans and dogs) care about many of the same things. The following moral fable will focus on the emotionality and particularity of moral experience while illustrating the moral openness to the world shared by humans and dogs. This, in turns, locates the roots of our moral nature in our animal nature.

Imagine that my canine companion, Lily,⁷ and I are playing in my backyard which is separated from my neighbor’s back yard by a large privacy fence. Because of this fence, Lily and I cannot see into the neighbor’s yard where another dog lives. Further imagine that one day the dog in the adjacent yard is terribly injured and Lily and I hear the dog’s screams and howls but we cannot see him. Lily and I share a common response to the other dog’s suffering. We hear and understand his pain and suffering in his howls. We both experience a considerable anxiety and an empathetic concern directed toward the injured dog. We both experience a sense of dread over

what will happen next. We know something is wrong. We share the immediacy and urgency of the situation. She feels she needs to do something but she doesn't know what. She feels frustration on top an anguished concern for the dog. I know Lily feels that because I feel it as well. In fact, we feel it together. This is a shared experience; in this moment of intersubjectivity my anxieties and concerns are reinforced by Lily's and hers by mine. I see her behave very nervously, running to the fence, pawing at it, running back and forth and around in circles, she looks at me and seems to be frightened, she whines and barks. I can hear the agitation and concern in Lily's sounds and she can hear it in mine. She and I are co-witnesses to vulnerability, tragedy, and suffering.

Skeptics will claim that my interpretations of Lily's experience are mere projections, yet I believe Lily and I share a feeling with a similar intentional structure, a similar cognitive directedness toward the injured dog with similar anticipations. One large difference is that I interpret my anguish at the dog's pain through numerous millennia of linguistic history and the metaphysical categories that dominate those worldviews. But the basic way of experiencing the suffering of the wounded dog is not so different between me and Lily. We do not have direct access to the dog's pain but we seem to have something close to, if not identical to, direct access to the dog's suffering, just as we have with humans. Both of us experience a sense of urgency, that something is wrong now, and a sense that something must be done now, as well as the frustration of not knowing what to do. This sense of urgency, experienced as vague and diffused imperative to act, is intimately tied up with the immediacy, the particularity, of the situation. I believe this kind of response

is a part of human moral psychology that we share with many mammals and primates.

Both Lily and I share an attitude of concern and empathy toward the other's suffering. We share an immediate intuition that something is wrong. This intuition is as much somatic as it is cognitive. We feel, as Hume would say, in our "breast" as much as we project it toward the howling dog. My own human response to the howls of the hurt dog: the somatic anxiety dreadfully directed to the suffering dog, a gut reaction that something is wrong, a vague and diffuse feeling that something should be done (I think I share all this with Lily) is integrated into my own linguistically based conceptual system and worldview. The pre-linguistic intentional comportment of my felt sentiment is conceptualized in ways that Lily's is not. I suspect that Lily's pre-linguistic intentional comportments, in this case, an empathetic openness to the suffering of others, come and go, and play themselves out quickly. In my own case, the symbolic power of language extends these sentiments by binding them to longer term projects.

While I think that Lily and I begin at a similar place, from a mammalian response to suffering, my own intentional comportment toward the injured dog goes far beyond what I suspect Lily is capable. Both Lily and I try to get past the fence to access more closely what is happening. The original experience of hearing those howls has been extended into a seeking out of more information, we both look to see what is wrong, we both anticipate and project. These anticipations and projections may be confirmed or disconfirmed in future experience. If we managed to come face to face with the injured dog and I see that the dog is caught in a non-humane wolf

trap I will search for a way to release the dog. My recognition of the trap as human artifact opens my experience into new conceptual domains and worlds and these worlds bleed into my understanding. I don't think Lili would understand the wolf trap. Her projections are more immediate. If we got through the fence and saw the dog was being eaten by a lion, Lily would, I think, understand this. For Lily, all this would unfold into projections of her immediate future. She would run from the lion, anticipating trouble if she stays put, but her power to extend her experience into the future or into other symbolic domains is cut short by her lack of language.

The structure and content of human cognition, moral or otherwise, is distinguished from other pre-linguistic animals by the temporal range and symbolic worlds that language gives to our immediate sentiments. As our moral instincts are folded into our conceptual systems they take on new meanings. I can imagine that if I came through the fence and found the dog in an old and carelessly discarded wolf trap my empathetic anxiety of shared suffering would begin to take on air of moral disapproval as the trapped animal opens up the world of animal trapping and that, in turn, opens up the world of human domination of nature. This sense of disapproval is largely cultural and conceptual but it is made possible and sustained over time by the gut feeling, the moral instinct, that something is wrong. Lily and I can hear that in the howls.

Because value experiences are intentional they bring with them their own procedure for confirmation grounded in the temporal structure of anticipation and either satisfaction or frustration of such anticipation. Value experiences are structured by an intrinsic temporality (a reference to the future) which provides or

denies a justification for the lived sense of that experience. If I experience friendship or marriage to be good for me, it is not simply that I enjoy friendship and marriage, it is because I have a sense, even if unarticulated, of how and why they are good. Even if we cannot express it, we know that friendship and marriage extend our sphere of concern while comforting us in ways that provide our lives with meaning. To experience friendship and marriage as good is to interpret and impose the sense of good on these relations but it is also to expect to continue to find these relations as goodness in these relations and to have such expectations fulfilled. The very experience of positive values like marriage and friendship is bound up with an implicit understanding of the meaning of marriage and friendship. Our experience of these as good is also subject to the possibility of breakdown as the final test of value is the test of time.

Lily would not understand marriage, as it is subject to complex social rules, but friendship is a different story. Whether we wish to call it friendship is another matter, but Lily does experience an emotional connection to her human family that provides her life with some kind of meaning. Experiences of positive value that we call good involves knowing what to expect. It is this anticipatory structure that provides an ongoing validation of our experiences of the good. If we initially find friendship and marriage to be bad and fraud to be good, openness to further experience will almost always correct this. Finding value in friendship and disvalue in fraud is not arbitrary. Rarely do these things disappoint us. Our experience continues to establish these as goods in an ever evolving process of being open to the good.

The approach to moral philosophy sketched here differs considerably from the traditional and mainstream approach to moral theory critiqued by Plumwood. The Darwinian assumptions concerning the animal heritage of humanity's social instincts/moral sentiments disrupt the anthropocentrism of traditional moral theory while the phenomenological description of the intentionality inherent in these sentiments disrupts the primacy of objectivity, universality, and rationality characteristic of traditional moral theory. Traditional moral theory is a top-down and monistic affair which typically begins by assuming that moral phenomena can be reduced to some single essential criterion; for Kant, it is a good will, for Bentham, consequences, for the Egoist, self-interest, and for the contract theorist, shared agreements. Once these essential insights are in place, moral philosophy becomes a matter of unpacking the implications inherent in the first principles or master rules based on those essential insights. Each of the historically influential modern moral theories admirably makes the case for the moral relevancy of the feature it picks out as the essential nature of moral phenomena. Each theory does a better job than its rivals at explaining its carefully chosen set of core examples, but each does a poor job of making philosophical sense out of others. These theories provide us with deep and rich insights into moral phenomena but fail to provide the single and universal criteria of all moral phenomena as they claim. They highlight certain aspects of moral phenomena at the expense of others.

The approach to moral philosophy that begins with the description of lived moral experience assumes an attitude of respect for pre-theoretical experience and is open to a kind of moral pluralism in which a duty to tell the truth may be grounded, in one

case, in utility, and in another case, grounded in respect for persons. In any case, a phenomenological approach to moral philosophy does not rule out, in an a priori manner, the moral relevance of subjectivity, emotion, animality, or particularity, but seeks to find a place for these elements of moral experience dismissed by the excessive rationalism of traditional moral theory. By taking a phenomenological approach and returning to the moral “things themselves,” i.e. our actual experiences, we are in a position to rethink the dualities structuring and silently colonizing traditional moral thinking. Here we, like Plumwood, find the human/animal or reason/emotion distinctions to be inadequately characterized by that tradition. The *prima facie* form of rationality found within moral experience is not separate or discontinuous from subjectivity, emotion, animality, or particularity.

Traditional moral theory is monistic in another way that differs from a phenomenological approach, i.e. it assumes a monistic criterion for whom or what morally matters. To the extent that traditional moral philosophy is anthropocentric, it typically assumes that moral considerability results from either being made in the image of God, or being rational, or simply human. The relevant criterion for moral considerability is objective, determinately specifiable, and independent of particular beliefs or sentiments. Traditional attempts to establish a single criterion of moral essence and moral considerability, once again, run counter to ordinary experience. In everyday experience we intuitively find that both the consequences of our actions and respect for the subjective integrity of the other are morally relevant, we also regularly find both humans and nonhumans as being worthy of moral regard.

When metaphysical theories, such as anthropocentrism (rooted in value-hierarchical dualities and structured by a logic of domination), are at odds with ordinary experience it is often the meaning or significance of the direct experiences which get played down or dismissed to protect the theory. Darwin's story of the dog suffering vivisection reminds us the power of worldviews to guide and interpret experience. Darwin seems to assume that if the vivisector "was fully justified" by an increase in knowledge, he could, quite properly dismiss his feelings, stirred by the dog's behavior, as mere sentiment. Is it really possible that scientists, under the sway of Cartesian dualism, could perform vivisection on animals while interpreting their screams and howls, not as genuine expressions of suffering and distress, but as mere unmeaning mechanical responses? Lily would never make this kind of mistake although it seems that humans often do. On the other hand, Darwin's story hints at how difficult this dismissal can be. His story hints at the power of sentiments. Surely, if we look at and listen to such screams and howls, not through the distorting lenses of anthropocentric metaphysics, we are immediately confronted not with mechanically produced sound and motion, but with the immediate and natural expression of pain and suffering.

In the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center a news report covered the funeral of a working dog killed in those attacks. This was a massive public tribute given by the New York K-9 community. The national media reported the dog's trainer and companion as saying, "To many people he was a dog, but to me he was a friend." We all understand such an expression even if we dismiss it as sentiment. We dismiss such experience when we do not claim it as our own. We let

such experiences float freely as mere epiphenomena. We enjoy the content of such experiences but let it go before the import and implication of such experience makes its way to the center of our lives and experience. This kind of dismissed experience never gains the authenticity needed to serve as a ground of a more generalized non-anthropocentric thinking. The sharp boundaries imposed by anthropocentrism keep this from happening. Although our companion animals are regularly experienced as having their own good, the significance of this sort of experience is frequently denied or dismissed in moments of bad faith as we systematically overlook the import of such moments and interpret these experiences as mere subjective sentiment.

When thinking is dominated by metaphysical assumptions inherent in the dualities structuring our thought, such as the idea that only humans possess intrinsic value, our natural and spontaneous openness to non-anthropocentric goods and values is often dismissed or even falsified. And yet, the basic tenor and feel of much of everyday moral experience is decidedly not anthropocentric. Dogs lie in our laps and cats rub against our ankles. Their flesh, their vulnerability, and their mortality concern us. We feed them when they are hungry and comfort them when distressed. We recognize the dignity and integrity of their lives as we take up their good as our own. Many humans are deeply and empathetically intertwined with the lives of our companion animals. These relationships, not only support the idea or the feeling that these non-human animals are worthy of our moral regard, they demand it. And yet, we dismiss and disrespect these experiences as mere sentiment even while they help to structure our lives.

In the preceding pages, I have tried to sketch an approach to moral philosophy and moral theory that allows us to revalue and reintegrate “what rationalist culture has split apart, denied, and devalued.”⁸ This approach begins to make the case that emotion, animality, and particularity are important features of moral experience and that to understand the complexities of the moral life it is necessary to find a place for these aspects of moral experience in our moral philosophy. This approach also results in a philosophical anthropology that is capable of supporting a sophisticated model of the “ecological self,” discussed by both feminists and environmental philosophers. This philosophical anthropology provides a foundation for an approach to moral philosophy rooted in caring and connectedness and provides a theoretical platform from which we can reconceptualize the mutually exclusive value hierarchical dualities structuring our thought and silently colonizing traditional moral theory.

Let me close with two quick examples of how this Darwinian and phenomenological (i.e. empirical and experiential) approach to moral theory would further differ from traditional moral theory. On the conception of moral phenomena articulated and defended here, moral experience and the moral life are made possible, not only by our personal and private felt responses to the world, but by the empathetic intersubjectivity with others that these responses engender. Moral subjectivity is not the subjectivity of an isolated ego but the subjectivity of shared feelings and responses; it emerges from a “being-with-others.” This empathetic, shared, being-with-others has a deep causal history in our kinship with all living beings and is accessible, in part, to phenomenological description. The shared

feelings and concerns between Lily and myself show that the community of egos or selves that constitute the community of moral subjects is not entirely human. Non-human animals are co-witnesses to the world; their responses to the brute materiality of the world, shared responses to blizzard, drought, and hunger reinforce our experiences of those same things. A similar thing is true is our moral lives; non-human animals are co-witnesses to tragedy, suffering, and vulnerability and thus have the power to reinforce our own moral experiences just as other humans do. Even if it is true that humans are at the center of the moral life, non-human animals are certainly present on the margins and are, in many cases, active participants in shared and co-constituted value experiences. This approach has clearly moved away from the traditional anthropocentric interpretation of moral phenomena, both in terms of the nature of the subjectivity open to moral concerns and nature of the things in the world worthy of moral concern.

In rejecting the traditional approach, which emphasizes the objectivity and universality of who or what is worthy of moral concern, we must also reject the traditional understanding of the notion of “intrinsic value.” The idea that we should extend the notion of intrinsic value, not only to animals, but to all living things, and perhaps to eco-systems, has been at the heart of many admirable attempts to develop a non-anthropocentric moral theory. To the extent that the notion of intrinsic value is part of a binary involving extrinsic value, the notion of intrinsic value is apart of the conceptual apparatus of rule based moral monism and gives rise to the instrumental reasoning inherent in that model.

The analysis of moral phenomena given here is an experiential and epistemic understanding of the rationality inherent in value experience rather than a metaphysical interpretation of value as an objective and atemporal property inherent in things. On the analysis given here, the goods we appreciate for ourselves and for others are never given as absolute but always provisional and subject to the satisfaction or frustration of future experiences. This approach to moral phenomena and the moral life is characterized by its intrinsic revisability in the face of an always open future. Moral experience is always directed toward a future that is yet to come. The final categories of moral understanding are forever postponed. By tracing our capacity for moral experience to the temporality and becoming of natural selection, to our direct face to face relations to others, and to the conceptual historicity of our world views, we can learn to interpret our various intuitions and experiences of value as a *prima facie* understanding of goodness to be born out in the future. This notion of goodness and value is a naturalistic and pragmatic understanding informed by a deep fallibilism in which our experiences of value and our understandings of the good are subject to continual assessment in light of subsequent experience.

¹ Val Plumwood, "Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism" in *Hypathia* vol. 6 no 1 (spring 1991), 3-27. Reprinted in *The Environmental Ethics & Policy Book*, ed. Donald VanDeveer and Christine Pierce (Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), p. 249

² See Christian Diehm's "The Self of Stars and Stone: Ecofeminism, Deep Ecology, and the Ecological Self," in the *Trumpeter* Volume 19, Number 3 (2003). In this essay, Diehm articulates Plumwood's reading of Naess' concept of the ecological self and discusses some comments by Naess in a recent interview that can be seen as his response to this problem.

³ Plumwood, p. 249

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 249

⁵ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*. The Heritage Press, New York, 1972, p. 319

⁶ Charles S. Brown, "The Intrinsic Rationality of Moral Experience," in *Skepsis XV/i-* 2004 pp. 477-494

⁷ Lily is a small black dog, mostly Pug, but with an unusual snout and face. She is approximately ten years old. My wife, Dianne and I took her in about eight years ago after she was found lost on the edge of town.

⁸ Plumwood, p. 249