

Understanding, Not Only Cognition

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Introduction

Recently, we discussed the idea of the surrounding world as able to perceive and to think. If the whole world is alive, we can converse with each thing as if it is a living creature. Of course, humans pay special attention to non-human animals¹ that we understand as having the highest level of intellect. But many questions arise. Can we see animals as our equals? Can animals have the same rights we have? Do animals need “our rights” or, perhaps, are their lives unique so as to obey other norms of behavior? I confess that when I first read the articles on this topic on the *Review and Reply Collective*, I did understand the importance of the discussion. The discussion seemed only to pretend to make philosophical sense. However, my opinion changed when I read the articles again and the response of Gregory Sandstrom to my previous comment. I am now convinced of the usefulness of these discussions.

Mathematical and Dead, Animated and Alive

Let us look at the situation of human rights for animals in terms of the difference between the thought associated with modern times — classical thinking — and post-classical thought. We are always dealing with idealizations, not with real things, both in the philosophy and in science. At the same time, we can never find a direct correspondence between the ideal and real; whereas, ideal constructions permit us to understand the surrounding world. For example, idealizations in Newtonian mechanics — such as a material point and an absolutely flat surface — do not exist in reality, but we try to make our roads flat as possible and shape our machines so that air resistance is minimal. Quantitative characteristics were fundamental in classical mechanics, which was interpreted as mathematics. Alexander Koyré emphasizes, in his work on the history of science, the paradoxical character of these characteristics. Galileo had enormous courage to say that the book of nature is written in geometrical signs and that bodies moving in straight lines in an infinite empty space are not real bodies moving in real space, rather mathematical bodies moving in mathematical space. Science replaced our qualitative world of sensory perceptions — the world in which we live and die — with a different world where a place exists for everything except man himself. Koyré notes the incredible difficulties that the human mind had to overcome to master a “new” (in comparison with the Aristotelian) view of the world.

Today, we face no fewer difficulties to recognize the need to *abandon* the perception of the world by means of mathematical science as devoid of any form of spirituality. We are used to treating the external world — not only in science and philosophy, but also in daily life — as an object of our intellectual or physical action and not as an interlocutor. When we say that the surrounding world deserves to be treated as if it was composed of animate things and that animals with high level of intellect, such as apes or dolphins, have something like a human personhood and, accordingly, that we have to give animals human rights — it sounds the same as if we asserted that absolutely flat roads and machines as material points exist in the reality. Even the most clever animals cannot think like humans. We cannot access the animal mind. We cannot suppose that certain

¹ I refer to non-human animals as ‘animals’ throughout the essay.

animals might be enhanced so that a sense of autonomy, of which we deem them capable, is realized in a way that we can recognize as our equals. Animals are not like us. Nevertheless, that fact does not mean that a shift to a fundamentally different way of thinking cannot occur. Still, as in Newtonian mechanics, the idealizations of this new type of thinking have no direct analogue in reality. We cannot find in the empirical world inertial motion and animals with human minds, but we can investigate the surrounding world either as a geometrical construction or as composed of spiritual things. In the first case we *study* the reality. In the second case, we *understand* it.

In classical mechanics we study things, and governing physical laws, as existing eternally. Even if things were created, science is indifferent as to when, by whom and for what purpose it was made. Quite another approach to the surrounding world in science and philosophy became predominant after the scientific revolution in the beginning of the last century. The main feature of this new thinking was to look at a thing from the standpoint of its predestination, of the aim of its creation. This approach is easier to understand regarding art where a common question to ask is what the author wants to say with their work. Importantly, we try to *understand* the work of art not as something finished, as a result, or as a product of a creative work, but as a process that begins with an artist's intention. We communicate with the painter. We do not *study* his artwork as something separated from him and existing independently. In the same way in philosophy, we consider everything as created by God, Nature, karma or man. We deal with the author. This communication is possible only because the author is different from us. Our intercourse is useful for both humans and animals if we do not attempt to discover first what we have in common. We should try to see an animal's uniqueness and determine what attitude to them we should have to make their life more comfortable and living conditions more suitable for their specific needs — which are unlike ours.

Needless to say, that such an approach does not exclude the necessity of *studying* the things around us, at least to find out what material properties they possess. When Rodin carved the human hand of marble he certainly knew physical properties of the material with which he was going to work. But, at the same time, Rodin already saw the hand in marble as if it was enough to remove all unnecessary material to achieve the goal. For Rodin, it was more important to guess the result of his work as if it was already present in the piece of marble and that was intended by its nature (by its author) to be transformed into a sculpture or an architectural work but not, for instance, into plates or china. In the latter case we use clay or artificially created materials such as glass or porcelain. Not only is marble hard and durable, but also the artist seeks a material that can *understand* his desire to create this definite thing. Similarly, not everyone can satisfy us when we want to talk on a certain subject.

Human Beings and Animals

We should adapt to the communication abilities of animals when we are dealing with them — and that is what we are doing, really. For example, we know we can communicate with dolphins only in the water and we take this into account. And one should be careful with chimpanzees since they are very strong and can hurt you, and so on. Animals have natural features that make it impossible for them to have our mind and to speak human language. This does not mean animals are deprived of something desirable that would make them happier and their lives more comfortable. Animals are

created for the existence of a definite kind. We have to understand this reality, but not to try to teach them our language and to give them our rights. Our relationship with animals should be based on the comprehension of how they were conceived by their creator, with whom we can find mutual understanding. The creator (author) expresses his thought in the result of his work (in an animal, for instance), and we need to comprehend his intention to understand this result. Talking with animals occurs through the mediation of the “author”.

Remarks on Gregory Sandstrom’s Comment

Sandstrom mentions my use of the terms “creation”, “creators” and “authors”. Allow me to clarify the sense in which I use these terms. One does not need to be a religious person to employ them — it is enough to be a philosopher. For a philosopher a carpenter who makes a table can be a creator, no less than God. The carpenter has a plan. He determines how to make a table for the kitchen, or for working with books and a computer, or for the meals of a large family, or for the garden and so on. When you buy a table, you want to know the intention of its “author”.

Such an approach means that we can consider things as if they are simultaneously material and ideal. The border between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* disappears.

As I see it, a difference exists between those who believe that there is only one creator for each thing (usually it is not a man but God or the cosmos), and those who find that there is a different creator (the author) for each thing. As a result, a thing’s diversity in the world, in the first case, depends on the will of one source, be it God or the human mind (SMH). In the second case, the peculiarity of the author (man) is transmitted to the product of his activity.

At the end of the 19th, and the first half of the 20th century, Russian cosmism began as a philosophical trend. Cosmism’s representatives were well-known philosophers and scientists — the Russian cosmism of Pavel Florensky, the Christian cosmism of Vladimir Solovyev, the philosophy of common affairs of Nikolay Fedorov, the cosmic philosophy of Konstantin Tsiolcovsky. Each school of thought had differences, but for all cosmists the surrounding world appears before us as an animated macrocosm, and human beings as a microcosm. This notion drew together their position and the current position of the investigators of the human mind. For the cosmists, the distinction between thought and matter did not exist.

Sandstrom is right, of course, that the subject of technology capable of thinking is important and directly related to our discussion. It is not by chance that Fuller analyzes specific features of artificial intelligence. But this issue requires special consideration.

I appreciate Sandstrom’s remark that my position admits the idea that some day we can become guests in the world of machines — a sad perspective, I think. There is a Russian proverb: “It is good to be a guest, but to be at home is better.” Perhaps the difference between us and machines will disappear — who, then, will come to visit? This question is present in the Sandstrom’s reasoning concerning Human Satellites; especially, when he is speaking about a redefining the limits of physical human bodies and shared knowledge (2014b, 61). Sandstrom’s other idea is also important — when he argues that after McLuhan humans on a satellite are not passengers, but crew (2014b, 61).

I believe the discussion of the relation of man to animals is a symptom of a fundamental change in human thinking. The world around us is no longer a lifeless object of *study*, it is alive and it needs of our *understanding*.

Now, I agree with Fuller. Sure enough what is good for us is also good for animals. But you must add that what is good for animals is also good for man.

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