



February 2023

Response to Comments

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

Eileen Crist

I am grateful for the learning and insights that the commentators brought to this discussion. I take the approach of connecting the perspectives offered into a narrative that reflects strong common ground, disagreements notwithstanding.

We face multiple eco-social crises accelerated by multiple drivers. The ideological and material origins of our predicament, as [David Barash](#), [Gary Steiner](#), [David Nibert](#), and [Freya Mathews](#) underscore, have a long history reaching back to the Neolithic. Fueling today's economic, demographic, technological, and socio-psychological drivers is the enduring legacy of a hierarchical zeitgeist instilled within institutions, language, and belief systems that are so longstanding as to have become taken for granted within Conventional Worlds.

This legacy has divorced humanity from a world of coexistence and reciprocity, a world that manifests the reality of oneness, meaning unity-in-diversity. Understanding hierarchy as the root cause of our dangerous situation, and restoring the guiding lights of universality in human life, are mandatory in order to foster human awakening and quicken the Great Transition.

Root Cause

The root cause of today's calamities is hierarchical systems of thought, seeing, and practice. While such systems have subjugated diverse entities—human, animal, plant, ecosystem—ultimately they are conjoined in the ways they play off, reinforce, and transport across one another. For example, hierarchy *as such* is steeled when non-Caucasians are compared to “animals,” native people are seen as “savage beasts,” women are regarded as akin to “lower nature,” children and animals are exploited just because they are powerless, trees are refused inherent standing because they are “non-sentient,” or fish are configured as “fisheries,” regarded as insensible to

pain, and extracted by tonnage from their living places and relations.

Hierarchical systems crisscross terrains when black and brown people are forced to work the kill floors, meat processing assembly lines, and pesticide-ridden agricultural fields. When workers in the Global South labor in nature-polluting mines to deliver high-tech raw materials for the privileged. When nature-polluting facilities are situated in BIPOC neighborhoods of the underprivileged. When exploited humans staff the decks of commercial fishing vessels in conditions of modern-day slavery. When cruelty toward animals (as [Angus Taylor](#) points out) is regularly co-present with cruelty toward humans. Or when expendable men and women are sent to die in wars bent upon seizing nature-extraction opportunities—be they breadbaskets or oil fields.

Hierarchical systems push cheap industrial food, made from the torture of animals and the ravaging of ecosystems, on people across global society. Consequently, those at the bottom of the human hierarchy are disproportionately afflicted by chronic “diseases of affluence” (actually, diseases of the poor) and are thus far more likely to suffer and die during epidemics. While the causes of present-day chronic diseases—the systemic pandemic of our time—are multiple, none is more decisive than industrial food made through the subjugation of animals, land, and seas on the backs of exploited humans.

There is no end to the suffering, callousness, invisibility, and premature death that beings experience. Because the terrain is so extensive, and the history one of millennia, sheer overwhelm drives many to compartmentalize oppressed groups, champion specific causes, and seek to prioritize reparative claims on some envisaged scale of importance. Yet, we may go deeper and discern the common root cause: the instilled schema of hierarchy. Hierarchy entails looking down on the “other” as lacking, fungible, unworthy, or even despicable, and *therefore* usable, dispensable, killable, or deserving extermination.

[Richard Falk](#) fears that connecting the dots across divergent arenas of subjugation, and urging the universal liberation of all beings, may be a “utopian trap.” “If we try to do too much,” he warns, “we will tragically end by doing too little!” Yet it may well be that postponing that unitive work is itself the trap. For the “pragmatism” that Falk insists upon, of pursuing doable consecutive steps, *has not*

been working—including the example he offers of prioritizing the abolition of nuclear weapons over the abolition of war. We are running out of time. [Guy Dauncey](#) suggests an alternative pragmatism: since progressives often express solidarity toward both oppressed humans and nonhumans, “the ground is fertile to connect different movements, bringing more strength to them all.”

[Steiner](#) observes that the hierarchical structures of anthropocentrism or human exceptionalism (ratified in most of the Western philosophical canon) conferred a “unique, morally significant capacity” to the human. That avowed moral superiority—wherein, theoretically, only humans are due direct moral consideration—has sponsored the immorality of animal extinctions, abuses, and exterminations. When do we grasp the irony? It is hierarchy that must go for ethical life to emerge. Hierarchy is the scheme that colors the gaze, and guides or condones action, toward those dubbed “lesser” who can then be used as resources or swept aside if they stand in the way.

Capitalism, state power, language, ideology, and ruthless technology all work together in the present-day onslaught on all life. At the core of them all, and greasing the wheels of their elective affinity, is the makeover of the living world into *resource*.

It is high time to deracinate the idea of world, and anyone in it, as resource. At the root of the institution of property (highlighted by [Jerry Mitchell](#), [Alex Lautensach](#), and [Dayton Martindale](#)) lies that idea. At the root of factory farms lies that idea. At the root of burning rainforests for soybeans and palm oil, underlined by [Dauncey](#), lies that idea. At the root of vivisection, zoos, puppy mills, fur farms, and Sea Worlds—that Martindale would not have us neglect—lies that idea. At the root of militarism sending young people to death and disability lies that idea. At the root of mind-numbing and dangerous labor, coerced upon disempowered people, lies that idea. Because all forms of oppression are practically and ideologically entangled, [Nibert's](#) claim is compelling that “no single form can be effectively addressed if others are allowed to continue.” It is a tall order, yes, but commensurate with the depth of our predicament.

What lies on the other side of hierarchy and its construction of beings, places, and world as resource? Hierarchy does not intrude upon a blank canvas of either world or human mind. It intrudes upon a reality that precedes it and is far bigger: namely, the reality of unity-in-diversity.

[Nandita Bajaj](#) draws attention to the sensitivity present in children, who are more likely to express concern for the well-being of animals than adolescents are, revealing that the inborn human connection with the more-than-human world has to be broken through conditioning. “The worldview of supremacy,” she writes, “is a product of learned emotions, language, and behaviors that begin in childhood.” She justly calls such conditioning, effected in so many ways in schooling, “indoctrination” and “hardening.” [Gwendolyn Hallsmith](#) makes the same point. “We are born within an innate sense of relationship,” she states. “It has to be ‘educated’ out of us.”

Hierarchy hijacks the human mind, warps reality, and proceeds to deplete it of its vital force. Yet the reality of oneness remains ever-present, even among the ruins. [Judith Lipton](#) foregrounds the diversity-within-the-circumference-of-oneness by sharing a Buddhist practice: before the meal you are about to have, she asks, visualize and thank all the beings between you and the food before you. I was also deeply moved by [Melanie Challenger’s](#) discovery, in the diaries of whalers, that at least some of them expressed regret in killing the whales. I can only imagine how profoundly disturbed they must have been to be compelled to confess this in writing. The ethic of “felt kinship,” which [Steiner](#) advocates, arises within the reality that is always here. It is a matter of undoing the stranglehold of hierarchy, which obscures and distorts the reality of oneness, and then taking care to nurture the understanding of oneness in the children.

The reality of unity-in-diversity that [Mathews](#) calls a “unitive cosmos” elicits a sense of awe and attunement in its recognition. First People knew this, and wove stories and lifeways to align with it. Mathews makes contact with the normative side of unitive reality by calling it Law; she explicitly does not mean top-down imposition of injunctions. By Law, she draws attention to the arising of alignment, both compelled and voluntary, with the reality of oneness. The Indigenous Q’ero people call this arising of alignment *Ayni*, which roughly translates as “reciprocity” and “being in right relationship with.”

“Nature,” to quote [Taylor’s](#) rendition of an ideological cliché, “is viewed as an arena of perpetual struggle for survival in which the strong subdue the weak.” This view is a spin of hierarchical thought seeking to condone oppression, Taylor observes. Hierarchical systems veil the reality that is one, albeit exquisitely varied, and which calls forth the response of alignment (Law, *Ayni*). Yet hierarchy can never annihilate oneness. Indeed, we collectively experience the joy of alignment

with the reality of oneness in stories that we share. For example, in the film *Seven Years in Tibet*, the need to build an amphitheater for human artistic expression spontaneously generated the need to move the earthworms from the site of construction. That is a storied example of a mandate that arises from oneness. Such mandates of felt kinship do not come from ethics: instead, it is the other way around—inborn felt kinship has given rise to ethics. As [Mathews](#) explains, Axial morality falls short as a corrective exactly because moral exhortations within hierarchical societies try to come to the rescue in a world where *the very foundation of ethics*—alignment with the reality of unity-in-diversity—has been derailed via the violent intrusion of hierarchy.

Sometimes the reality of oneness is perceived instantly in the precipitation of a conversion experience, as for example when Aldo Leopold's world was turned upside down in the flash of eye contact he made with a dying she-wolf's green eyes. What instantly followed was not only remorse, but understanding. It is not a coincidence that Leopold recounts his conversion event in the same chapter that he sketches the vibrant ecological web of predator-prey-plantlife, and its undoing when top predators are exterminated. [Mathews](#) boldly states that "the Ought lies at the core of the Is." Otherwise stated, the experience of recognizing oneness brings the "ought" and the "is," simultaneously, online. The Leopold example raises the vexed question of hunting, which [Koontz](#) brought vividly into the discussion. Clearly, hunting can be done (in the modern world probably most often) without any acknowledgement of oneness. But can hunting be done in the context of maintaining oneness? Many Indigenous people say yes—with a lot of ceremony. Does ceremony absolve the violent act of killing? I leave that as an open question, but ceremony *is* praiseworthy as an act of remembering oneness.

The potential of alignment with unitive reality is immanent within human life. Our current riveted attention upon indigeneity carries this signification. The Indigenous model cannot be about adopting socio-historically decontextualized lifeways, as [Taylor](#) and [Martindale](#) rightly point out. But in its universal meaning, indigeneity is accepting that we are just one of many species. As [Suprabha Seshan](#) depicts the ideas and lifeways of the once forest dwelling Adivasi people, "*they are the forest.*" Likewise, humanity may one day understand that *it is the Earth*.

The knowing of unity-in-diversity is concealed in the open, and, when overtly expressed, it is often dismissed as romanticism. But its indestructible presence is the reason, for example, that violence against beings has to be kept hidden, or cloaked in euphemisms like “culling,” “harvest,” “bycatch,” and “Wildlife Services,” or tenaciously denied. An unforgettable experience I had as professor at Virginia Tech, while teaching a module on CAFOs, was a student declaring in class that all notions of abused animals in factory farms are PETA propaganda. In reality, he asserted, the industry had long ago corrected any ethical lapses. To be sure, we diagnose such a claim as denial. Within it, however, lies an oddly hopeful nugget: *violence has no inherent justification*. Inherent justification belongs only to oneness and to its tropes of care, reciprocity, consideration, attentiveness, wonder, and the like—or, in a word, to love, broadly understood.

Thus, while [Challenger](#) makes a valid point that “our extraordinary mental and endocrinal toolkit can nudge us towards acts of caring and bonding, or towards acts of selfishness, exploitation or violence,” we bypass a pivot for transformation by not acknowledging the built-in asymmetry between these modalities. [Judith Lipton](#) cites Bertolt Brecht’s words that “we crave to be more kindly than we are.” Yet the existential asymmetry between kindness and its opposites belies Brecht’s statement: closer to the truth is that we crave to be as kindly as we truly are. Because love is its own inherent justification, and violence is only justified by the illusion of hierarchy, the real possibility exists that humanity will create a world in which all life is nurtured to its fullest potential.

Legislation to safeguard animals from domination is indispensable and integral to the Great Transition. This is set forth by [Mitchell, Falk, Martindale, Koontz, Mike Jones](#), and [William Lynn](#), citing various examples of successes in recent years, “cracks of light in the darkness of animal injustice,” in Koontz’s words. Along with that work, we can persevere in continually revealing reality’s foundation of oneness that will accelerate the spread and adoption of needed policies. What lies ever-present in the communicative sensibilities of human lifeworlds? What timeless heritage is preserved in the Indigenous knowledge of kinship as primal ground? What are we called to manifest—which is always here but smothered by hierarchy—in the turning of history that is coming?

Universality

Universality is bound with the question of how humanity may live in a world that is one and an indescribable multiplicity. The most general answer is to accede beings their birthright to be who they are and become as they will in the places where their natures want to dwell. In political terms, as [Hallsmith](#) puts it, universality demands that “the voices of all beings should have a legitimate place where decisions are made.” Applied to wild animals, it means letting them “run free,” in [Seshan’s](#) words, to pursue their lives, forging, by means of requisite abundances and relations, their evolutionary destinies. Wild animals—especially the big ones who like Mother Trees are an umbrella of protection for all—need spacious, unfragmented habitats. They require large-scale nature protection, rewilding projects at all scales, and connectivity between protected places.

The advocacy for large-scale protection of land and seas frequently meets the criticism of mirroring the human separation from nature that got us into the big mess in the first place. But the bane of human-nature dualism lies in *hierarchy*, which becomes operational, with respect to wild nature, through the nonstop incursions and appropriation of the natural world. Nature protection—whether strict or within Indigenous guardianship—does not reflect dualism but sensitive consideration for nonhumans’ places. Far from being a novel spin on human-nature separation/dualism, the directive of nature protection flows from our overdue affirmation of deep esteem for nature.

[Lynn](#) submits that we promote the well-being of animals “through ethical renewal and rewilding.” “Rewilding,” he argues, is “a direct duty humans owe as a matter of restorative justice in a more-than-human world.” Wild animals, *both* as individuals and lifeforms, may thus rehabilitate their birthright to autonomous existence stolen from them by hierarchy. In the words of [Seshan](#), restoring wild homelands lets animals “be sovereign in their own right.” “They are sinewy and strong,” she writes. “Their lives interweave to make mindboggling diversity. Along with plants and fungi, the microbes, winds, and waters, they create the forest.”

Focusing the lens of universal reasoning upon so-called “livestock,” deferring to their birthright (a birthright co-created with humans) means abolishing CAFOs and reinstating farm animals on farms. “Dismantling the animal-industrial complex,” writes [Taylor](#), “is not diversionary but

essential." Superseding industrial and large-scale animal agriculture will take us a long way toward preempting extinctions and addressing climate breakdown by letting land and seas revert to carbon-sequestering rewilded expanses.

Farm animals dwell by origin in farms where humans in alignment with them care for them with kindness supporting them to live long lives. Yet for farm animals to live on farms, without undue intrusion on wild nature, there must be far fewer of them. Today, "livestock" comprises 62 percent of terrestrial mammal biomass, while wild mammals have been beaten back to 4 percent. We can move in the direction of flipping those percentages.

I find myself resisting the idea that farm/domestic animals, having been brought into existence by means of domination, should be left to die out or blend back into free nature when the time of their liberation arrives. We underestimate animal agency when we deny farm animals their involvement in coming-into-being. Citing Mary Midgley, [Baird Callicott](#) points out that the process of domestication cannot simply be reduced to the capture and enslavement of nonhuman animals. The mixed-species communities that formed, especially after the Neolithic, involved agency on the part of "both parties." Otherwise put, farm animals' subjugated identity does not exhaustively define them; they are also, especially by now, forms of life. In agreement with what Callicott seems to hint toward, as lifeforms in their own right, farm animals deserve protection and preservation within the contract of care that industrial animal agriculture has so unforgivably violated.

The pressing question remains: what does it require of us to loose wild animals into their spacious abodes and to restore farm animals where they belong? One thing is certain: humanity cannot expect to continue on the path of growth and also be able to liberate animals into the places they want to live. On the contrary, the human enterprise needs to shrink. Shrinking is not about loss; humanity, as [Bajaj](#) states elsewhere, can "shrink toward abundance." For one (extremely important) thing, downscaling human presence and activities would let us build a world where high-quality food can be grown for all. By shrinking, we can upgrade the quality of human life at every level, including creating conditions where people can be nourished with wholesome food, while abolishing the industrial-agriculture and industrial-fishing warfare modes of food production. But if we stay on the path of growth, continually struggling to "feed the world" with cheap and unethical food, we move ineluctably toward the destruction of both planetary and human health. As [Seshan](#)

sums the matter, “well-being is of the whole, and suffering is of the whole.”

Do we have a choice between whether we continue to grow or opt to shrink? This remains an open question. Beyond its existential overtones, people have a chance to recognize that they have some choice in what they eat. (Of course, degrees of choice vary.) If, in accordance with the above reasoning, farm animals need to be fewer, so that both they and wild animals can live well, then it follows that the aligned human choice is a mostly plant-based diet. Humans would thus defer to the interests of all other animals. Yet that is not where the story ends. Because, as a general rule, when one becomes mostly vegan, while also eating uncontaminated and real (nonindustrial) food, one embarks on a life journey of feeling exceptionally well, physically and mentally. Relatedly, one also finds that the odds of evading the diseases of civilization—heart disease, stroke, cancer, obesity, diabetes, bowel disorders, and Alzheimer’s, to mention the most prominent—become remarkably high.

Briefly put, what is good for all other animals turns out to be good for the majority of human animals too. Why are we missing this extraordinary alignment staring us in the face? How many more decades of data do we need under our belts to become convinced that a mostly vegan diet of clean whole foods is a choice that vastly facilitates vibrant life?

Here I want to address the statement, offered by [Dauncey](#), that humans are “the apex predator.” We are not even remotely close to being the apex predator; indeed, one thing humans are clearly not is carnivores. [Taylor](#) tags the claim of humans as “top predator” as one that helps to rationalize (regardless of author intention) domination over animals. The real top predators among us—fanged, clawed, sharp-toothed, and overwhelming in force—can take a human out in the blink of an eye. The big predators, who play starring roles in their terrestrial and marine habitats, need space. We can choose to concede them the space their natures need, and stay out of their way. If we visit their homes in search of adventure, we should understand the risks.

The invention of fire by an ancestor of *Homo sapiens* enabled humans to become omnivorous. Omnivory is rooted in the deep and recent biocultural history of the human. Even so, humans thrive mostly on plants with perhaps some animal foods on the side. Like [Martindale](#) and others in this conversation, I am vegan (since ten years ago and vegetarian before that), but I do not think

that asking all people to become vegan is reasonable. But asking humanity (with a few exceptions) to become 80 to 90 percent vegan, while sourcing the remainder from “small-scale, organic, and humane animal agriculture” in [Callicott’s](#) words, is squarely within the bounds of reason. For this entreaty not only asks humans to align with the wellness of all other animals, but with the highest potential within their own bodies.

[Mitchell](#) writes that factory farms feed billions. Factory farms source animal feed from industrial agriculture, which overtakes grasslands, savannahs, and rainforests. Industrial crops come packaged with agrochemical and synthetic fertilizer inputs. The fertilizers, as Vaclav Smil starkly put it, have been the detonator of the human population explosion. [Lautensach](#) comments that the growth of human numbers contributes to the problem of the ill treatment of animals. I agree that population growth factors into many problems, but most importantly it factors *intrinsically* into our socio-ecological crisis by handing over food to the industrial system. Roughly half of us would not be here were it not for industrial food production.

Industrial inputs destroy soil fertility (and simultaneously mask the destruction) by degrading soil biodiversity—including obliterating many little animals who are part of the workforce of the soil. The industrial system today grows food by contaminating the planet, destroying biodiversity, keeping subjugated animals alive long enough through antibiotics, and damaging human health most especially among the disempowered. This arrangement will not last. We can either see the entangled domination that defines the industrial food system and supersede it, or we can let it chug along to its endpoint of the physical degradation of everything and the moral degradation of the human.

Humanity does not need industrial inputs to grow food on a planet that knows fertility beyond imagination. Along with spreading the message of the all-around amazing tidings of mostly plant-based eating, we can pursue balancing our numbers—by means of human rights—with Earth’s innate fertility and the conservation of wild places.

Animal

Reading the contributions offered a captivating ride through different terminology and admonitions about terminology. The word “animal,” as in exclusively nonhuman animal, carries

a range of uses and connotations some of which decisively resist derogatory or hierarchical meanings. One way that human love for animals pushes back against their subjugation is by elevating the word “animal” into the grandeur that it references. “To encounter an animal is an elixir of life,” writes Sylvain Tesson in a recent travelogue in search of the now rare Snow Leopard in Tibet. [Jones](#) echoes this experience when he shares his childhood memory of “delight and wonder,” “peering through the cover of bracken to watch a vixen play with her cubs” on summer eves. Walt Whitman famously proclaimed: “I could turn around and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain’d.”

Inside such statements in reverence of animal life lives the desire to convey the magic of animals, and the wisdom that they teach us provided we are paying attention. While their praise points toward what lies beyond the word “animal,” they also redeem the beauty that lives within that word.

Endnotes

1. Sylvain Tesson, *The Art of Patience: Seeking the Snow Leopard in Tibet* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021).

About the Author



Eileen Crist is an Emeritus Professor of Science, Technology, and Society at Virginia Tech, where she taught for twenty-two years. Her work focuses on the extinction crisis and destruction of wild places, pathways to halt these trends, and inquiries surrounding humanity's relationship with the planet. She is the author of *Abundant Earth: Toward an Ecological Civilization* and co-editor of a number of books, including *Gaia in Turmoil: Climate Change, Biodepletion, and Earth Ethics in an Age of Crisis* and *Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of Earth*. She is Associate Editor of the online journal *The Ecological Citizen* and regular contributor to the blog *Earth Tongues*. She holds a PhD in sociology from Boston University.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Eileen Crist, "Response to Comments," contribution to GTI Forum "Solidarity with Animals," *Great Transition Initiative* (February 2023), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/solidarity-animals-author-response>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.