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Anchoring the Ought in the Is

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

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In her eloquent [essay](#), Eileen Crist details the enormity of the crimes that humanity, via the political and economic apparatus of corporate states, is currently perpetrating against nonhuman animals. She sets out facts and arguments with great clarity but also manages to convey, in a manner characteristic of her work generally, something of the lived reality that lies behind the facts. Through the expressive power of her writing, she makes this vast but hidden realm of loss and misery painfully present to the reader's mind.

The picture that Crist evokes for us is one of a world in which the moral consideration that is, upon any degree of reflection, so manifestly due to animals is, at the structural level of society, systemically ignored and denied, and its absence normalized. Given the global-industrial scale of this violation, and the way it is so deeply woven into the political and economic fabric of modern civilization and so resistant to reform, we can only infer that when the interests of morality and raw power collide, morality as a social tool is no match for power. But why this frailty? The function of morality is to show how we as humans ought to order our lives. How can something so crucial to the viability of society prove so ineffectual?

That is what I would like to examine in this brief piece. *Is* morality our only guide to how we ought to order our lives? Is the baffling fault in our treatment of animals, and often our treatment of one another as well, a fault not so much in ourselves as in our conception of ethics? Is there another conception of the normative root of society than the one we commonly invoke via the terms *morality* and *ethics*?

Perhaps. To explain this, let me introduce a distinction between two very different conceptions of the "ought" that lies at the root of society: the *axial* and the *deontic*. The *axial*, which is

associated with agrarianism and post-agrarian or industrial societies, aligns with our contemporary notion of “the ethical.” It emanates from societies whose economic system carved out a distinct sphere of human operations—of cultivation, domestication, and manufacture, all valorized under the banner of “culture”—against the neutral background of the “wild” or “nature.” Without moorings in any larger normative order than the fluctuating ends of their human members, such societies were originally held together by appeal to religious ideologies, generally imposed from above by rulers. Eventually however, in the so-called Axial Age (800-200 BCE), a more universal key to social cohesion was discovered: “the moral point of view.” To assume the moral point of view was to place oneself “in the shoes of others,” where such an expansion of ego-consciousness led to the Golden Rule, the realization that as the inner lives of other persons are no different from our own, their ends and interests are as entitled to sympathetic consideration as are ours. “Do unto others as you would that they would do unto you.” The Golden Rule became embedded in most of the religions that emerged during the Axial Age.

The *deontic* perspective (from Greek *déon*, meaning “that which is obligatory”), by contrast, is associated with pre-agrarian societies whose economic system of foraging and land custodianship required functional integration into the ecological environment rather than the carving out of a distinct sphere of purely human-referenced operations. Such functional integration into local ecologies called for a deep understanding of and conformity to the principles that ensured the ongoing flourishing and renewal of those ecosystems. While we might offer intimations of these principles today via relational terms such as *mutual adaptation*, *mutual accommodation*, *bio-synergy*, or *symbiosis*, they tended to figure in pre-agrarian societies themselves as *Law*, where Law consisted in protocols for acting and being that applied as much to human affairs as to the affairs of other-than-human-beings.

From the deontic perspective then, there were not two spheres, one of culture, lit up with meaning and purpose, and the other, of nature, shrouded in darkness. Rather, there was a unitive cosmos, a living whole animated by an originary will, a Law of self-unfolding and self-increase, to which the will-to-self-existence of every finite thing was tributary. The obligation of humans, from this perspective, was to align with Law. Because the ontological context of Law was holistic, Law could

not be grasped merely from the outside, via observation and reason, but had also to be grasped from the inside, via *feeling*—via attunement to the originary will as it moves in oneself. This is a quite different way of knowing, lost to our contemporary post-agrarian societies who place themselves outside the world-to-be-known. It is a way of knowing that ensures that, in the act of intuiting Law, one also falls under its sway. Pre-agrarian societies, guided by such Law, had no need for authoritarian rulers and ideologies to assure cohesion.

I develop these arguments further in my forthcoming book *The Dao of Civilization: A Letter to China*. But the main point I want to make here, in relation to the issue of animals, is that there may be a fatal flaw in the axial perspective: namely, the fact that, from the axial perspective, the question “Why be moral?” is ultimately unanswerable. Unless I happen to be already of an empathic or compassionate disposition, there is really no reason why I should treat the interests of others as on par with my own when clearly, from my perspective as an organism, they are not: I am in a special biological relation to my own interests, with unique responsibility for multiple aspects of my biological and hence existential functioning, a fact which the Golden Rule obfuscates. When I adopt the pre-agrarian standpoint, however, intuiting Law not through reason but through the highly differentiated modes of bodily engagement with environment that pre-agrarian praxis requires, then I experience Law as coincident with my own will, and the question “Why conform to Law?” does not arise.

Our current loss of the deontic perspective—our loss of knowledge of the great “Ought” that lies at the core of the cosmic “Is”—may then help to explain why our contemporary world is so broken. Axial ethics does indeed contribute important insights to contemporary consciousness. But while it is plainly as applicable to animals as to humans, insofar as animals have inner lives relative to which we can assume the “moral point of view,” the axial perspective cannot supply the kind of protocols that assure the ongoing regeneration of a living cosmos nor can it command assent when challenged by powerful interests, since it lacks epistemological self-evidence. For both these reasons, it may be inadequate as a normative guide for human societies.

Eileen Crist appeals in her essay to Indigenous paradigms of kinship amongst all beings as a referent and guide for modern societies. I am in strong agreement with this, but the ways of knowing that underlie such paradigms are rooted in protocols of thought and action deeply counter to those

that shape the consciousness of modern civilization. We might perhaps then need to devise new forms of praxis conducive to holistic forms of consciousness before such dwelling-in-kinship can become a shared reality for us today.

About the Author



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