



February 2023

Greenwashing Greens

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

Angus Taylor

In her opening [essay](#), Eileen Crist does a fine job of describing the massive structural violence against nonhuman animals, the “differential imperative” used to excuse this violence, and the ways in which the human/animal binary has been challenged by animal advocates. She rightly notes the role that the exploitation of animals plays in the growing ecological and social crises facing the world. The magnitude of the problem may be judged by the fact that governments seeking ways to tackle the climate crisis and biodiversity loss will not contemplate any action that would significantly curtail the meat industry, looking instead for technological fixes.¹ Resistance to animal liberation is entrenched even in many who deplore the power of major industries to block necessary societal transformation.

Studies of the cognitive, sensitive, and social lives of animals, coupled with several decades of debate among philosophers, have left the old doctrine of human exceptionalism with little intellectual credibility. No longer is it possible to maintain that a morally relevant line in the sand can be drawn between all humans and all nonhumans on the basis of some intrinsic capacity, like rationality or moral agency. No longer does it make sense to place humans at the pinnacle of some single hierarchy of value.

And yet the insistence that human beings are entitled to exploit other forms of sentient life to serve human purposes refuses to die. Instead, it is being reincarnated in the guise of ecological wisdom. Instead of domination rationalized on the basis of a radical gulf between the essential natures of human and nonhuman beings, we now have domination rationalized on the basis of a shared embeddedness in the life cycles of the natural world.² Talk of mutual dependence, predation, and ecological balance is everywhere, whether in the writings of certain philosophers, hunters, or farmers, or in the teachings of popular food gurus, while “the circle of life” is the

new mantra. “Life feeds on life.” “For something to live, something else must die.” “Live fully by embracing your role in the circle of life!”

How fortunate for us that we are the top predators in this brave new ecological order of eat and be eaten. Our technological ingenuity—not to mention our ingenuity at rationalizing our self-serving behavior—ensures that we are never asked to pay the price that other species must pay. At most, we will become food for worms after we die, but while we live, we can remain masters and possessors of nature so long as we respect the injunction not to undermine the material basis of our own rule. Factory farms must go, but our exploitation and consumption of animals is commendable when carried out sustainably and “respectfully.”

Calls to reduce meat consumption, to buy only “humane meat” or locally produced meat, or to “harvest” wild animals sustainably may serve environmental goals (though food miles typically are more or less irrelevant to carbon footprints), but they do nothing to challenge human domination of nonhuman creatures. On the contrary, they substitute a new logic of domination, this one cloaked in ecological language—often with spiritual overtones—that helps salve moral qualms.

As Eileen Crist writes, we have much to learn from Indigenous cultures about how to approach the natural world with respect. But some environmental advocates forget that ethical practices have a socio-historical context and that Indigenous ways cannot be plucked out of context and applied to all issues facing the wider contemporary society. That we owe justice to our nonhuman sentient co-inhabitants of the planet is an emergent reality of global civilization. A reorientation of our relationships with animals may constructively be inspired by Indigenous views but must also embody new ways of thinking appropriate to new circumstances.³

Reordering civilization at all levels to recognize ecological constraints is vital. Nevertheless, it is salutary to recall that demands to heed ecological imperatives can have a dark side. The very word “ecology” was coined by Ernst Haeckel, a prominent nineteenth-century zoologist and Social Darwinist whose nationalist writings played a role in the rise of the German extreme right. From Nazis to neo-Nazis, demands to return to nature and submit to its laws are common. Here nature is viewed as an arena of perpetual struggle for survival in which the strong subdue the weak.

One does not have to accuse modern circle-of-life advocates of being “ecofascists” to recognize that calls for environmental responsibility can be part of a worldview that condones, and even celebrates, hierarchy and exploitation.

Rejection of the present industrial/extractivist paradigm in favor of a new ecological worldview still confronts us with the profound choice between continued exploitation of our fellow creatures in a green guise and a genuine recognition of their right to flourish as individuals. The exploitation of animals is so deeply rooted in most human society and culture that we must guard against the temptation to indoctrinate ourselves with a comforting new ideology of domination.

Endnotes

1. See George Monbiot, "There's One Big Subject Our Leaders at Cop27 Won't Touch: Livestock Farming," *The Guardian*, November 9, 2022. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/nov/09/leaders-cop27-livestock-farming-carbon-budget-governments
2. See Angus Taylor, "Electric Sheep and the New Argument from Nature" in *Animal Subjects: An Ethical Reader in a Posthuman World*, ed. Jodey Castri (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008).
3. For a nuanced examination of the harmonies and tensions between animal rights and Indigenous practices, see Will Kymlicka and Sue Donaldson, "Animal Rights and Aboriginal Rights" in Peter Sankoff, Vaughan Black, and Katie Sykes, eds., *Canadian Perspectives on Animals and the Law* (Toronto: Irwin Law, 2015).

About the Author



Angus Taylor taught philosophy for many years at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. He is the author of *Animals and Ethics: An Overview of the Philosophical Debate*. He helps run the website BEST Futures, which works to support the emergence of a sustainable and just world through providing people and communities with new tools, perspectives, and knowledge.

About the Publication

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