

# PEOPLE, PENGUINS, AND PLASTIC TREES

Basic Issues in Environmental Ethics

Second Edition

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To an adult in formal dress, engaged on his official statesmanly interactions, the fence is an insuperable barrier. Down below, where it is full of holes, it presents no obstacle at all. The young of *Homo sapiens*, like those of the other species present, scurry through it all the time. Since all human beings start life as children, this has the quite important consequence that hardly any of us, at heart, sees the social world as an exclusively human one.

## 6 The Child's Quest for Variety

To spell this out: The point is not just that most human beings have in fact been acquainted with other creatures early in life, and have therefore received some non-human imprinting. It is also that children who are not offered this experience often actively seek it. Animals, like song and dance, are an innate taste. Even those whose homes have contained none often seek them out and find them irresistible. The fact seems too obvious to need mentioning and does not usually attract much criticism. Even people who believe that there is something perverse and wrong about adults taking an interest in animals are often quite content that children should do so. Like some other interests which appeal to children it may, however, be considered as something which one ought to grow out of. Prolonged interest in it may seem a sign of emotional immaturity. Behind this thought lies the more general idea that animals are suitable only as practice material for the immature, because they are in effect nothing but simplified models of human beings. On this pattern, those who graduate past them to real human relationships are not expected to have any further interest in them, any more than a real golfer does in clock-golf in the park.

This way of thinking has a certain point, but beyond the crudest level it can be very misleading. No animal is just a simplified human being, nor do children take them to be so. However friendly they may be, their life is radically foreign, and it is just that foreignness which attracts a child. The point

about them is that they are different. As for immaturity, it is of course true that we must all come to terms first and foremost with our own species. Those unwilling to do this can indeed seek refuge with animals, as they can in other activities. But the mere fact of taking an interest in animals does not show that kind of motive, any more than taking an interest in machines or music does. Experience of animals is not essentially a substitute for experience of people, but a supplement to it—something more which is needed for a full human life. The ewe lamb did not come between the poor man and his children. Instead it formed an extra delight which he could share with them, and so strengthened the family bond. (That, surely, is why Nathan mentions the children.) One sort of love does not need to block another, because love, like compassion, is not a rare fluid to be economized, but a capacity which grows by use. And if we ask (again impersonating an ignorant observer) whether the limits of its natural use in human beings coincide with the species-barrier, we see plainly that they do not. In early childhood that barrier scarcely operates. And even in later life it seldom becomes absolute.

## Notes

1. Muriel Beadle, *The Cat, its History, Biology and Behaviour* (Collins and Harvill Press, 1977), p. 66.
2. Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, 1979), essay 12, on 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?'
3. See the very touching account of Polyphemus and his ram, *Odyssey IX*, 447–60. Polyphemus, it should be noticed, was not an outstandingly sentimental person.
4. Sheila Hocken, *Emma and I* (Sphere Books, 1978), p. 33.
5. II Samuel xii:3.
6. For adoption by elephants, see Daphne Sheldrick, *The Tsavo Story* (Collins and Harvill Press, 1973).
7. See 'Play-Behaviour in Higher Primates, a Review' by Caroline Loizos, in *Primate Ethology*, ed. Desmond Morris (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967).

## SIDELIGHT: Do What's Natural, You Say?

We live in an age in which some marketing specialists exploit a certain revulsion against the plastic, i.e., what is quintessentially artificial, a matter of artifice, or human-made. Correlatively there is

a certain desire to live more naturally. "Natural" fibers and "all-natural" food are increasingly in demand. Indeed, the term "natural" seems honorific; conversely, the term "unnatural" is

frequently used pejoratively, i.e., implying that the thing so labeled is bad or wrong. Is there any rational basis for associating the natural with the right and the unnatural with the wrong? In particular, should we scan the processes of nature to find normative models, i.e., types of behavior that we should emulate? There are indeed subtleties to this topic, but we shall make an initial assault on the matter here.

There is a broad sense of "natural" in which anything that happens is part of the nature of the world as we know it. In this sense any action is natural; so, none is unnatural. Thus, Jeffrey Dahmer's cannibalizing of humans is natural, as is the mass destruction of Jews and Gypsies by the Nazis, or the mass killing of hundreds of thousands of Japanese by the American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Typically, however, we mark out certain actions or events from the set of all that occur by using labels such as "natural" or "unnatural"; that is, we are drawing a contrast between some events and others when we say only of some that they are natural or of others that they are unnatural. Thus, by "natural" we do not normally mean "whatever happens." Although we humans are without question a part of nature, by "natural" we often mean that which occurs without deliberate human intervention or a by-product of such. Hence, the mass extinction of 65 million years ago, the glaciations of the last Ice Age, the tides, the ocean currents, the revolution of the earth about the sun, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, the occurrence of photosynthesis, or even the striking of the earth by a meteor are, or would be, natural occurrences. Some of these events may be tragic, but there is no obvious connection between the fact that they are natural and their assessment as good or bad. Natural processes are extremely wasteful of life and potential life: In the ejaculation of a male human, enough sperm are produced to inseminate several hundred million eggs; of the offspring produced by a single member of some species, only a tiny fraction can survive. Not what one would expect of a world guided by the Protestant God of "waste not, want not."<sup>1</sup>

Among "unnatural" events, i.e., those resulting from human action, are a wildly diverse lot: the expected leaking of plutonium into arctic waters above Norway from a deteriorating, sunken Russian submarine (not to worry: it will cease to be

radioactive by the year 26,000), the selling of children into prostitution, destruction of 70 percent of the world's forests, the rescue of millions of people from the ravages of disease and injury, the heroic resistance against Nazi and fascist movements, the music of Mozart, the paintings of Seurat, Matisse, or van Gogh, and so on. All such behavior is unnatural if by the term one means involving human action or the result of such.

May we turn to animal behavior for inspiration as to how on earth to live (as if we are not animals and as if we are not part of nature)? Let us consider some interesting examples revealed by recent studies of animal behavior (some not to be read just before meals perhaps). Among nonhuman animals, there are many examples of wonderfully cooperative behavior. We find the analogue of monogamy among geese, swans, angelfish, beavers, and soldier beetles. Among owl monkeys, males rear the offspring and females search for food.<sup>2</sup>

Now let us focus elsewhere. Burying beetle couples prepare the corpses of small animals for their young to eat. When the young are born, the parents eat the numbers down to a size that the food supply can support (perhaps they have read Garrett Hardin on "carrying capacity"); thus, cannibalism gives the surviving youngsters a "head start," so to speak.

Or would you rather be a shark? Specifically a sand tiger shark. Out of the 100 eggs formed by the shark after mating, the first one to reach the uterus survives by eating all the other embryos and unfertilized eggs as they are released.<sup>3</sup> So among sharks, it is perfectly natural to kill off one's "unborn siblings." Are all mothers nourishing? Not among the emu; they abandon their offspring at the slightest sign of danger.<sup>4</sup>

Two woodpeckers often share a nest, but when one lays an egg another destroys it (perhaps to destroy the advantage the first one has). This continues until both lay an egg at the same time. A female of the praying mantis may start chewing off her partner's head while he is still mating. Among Australian red-back spiders, the male, halfway through the mating process, will jump into the female's jaws and allow itself to be eaten a bit; when he is done mating he surrenders the last time to her waiting fangs. For the red-back Australian spider, this is doing what comes naturally. A final gory example: The female *Ormia* fly has the capac-

ity to detect a male cricket's sounds, drop down on it, and deposit a squirming maggot on it that bores into the cricket and eats it. Anxious mother flies may have an extra incentive to succeed, since if they fail the hungry maggots begin to devour the mother from the inside out.

So, perhaps nature won't do as a guide to family values. Sometimes, it seems, we *ought* to be unnatural. We note in passing that in the Roman Catholic religion it is routinely maintained that homosexuality, masturbation, and heterosexual sex without the possibility of procreation is unnatural, and, it is implied, is, hence, morally wrong (recall the discussion of natural law in the General Introduction. In this regard, various instances of homosexual behavior can be found among nonhuman creatures; it has been found in bulls, cows, cats, rams, goats, pigs, apes, lions, etc.<sup>5</sup> Further, homosexual pair bonding has been found among western gulls.<sup>6</sup> A comment by Alfred Kinsey and his co-workers is of interest: ". . . the sexual acts which are demonstrably part of the phylogenetic heritage of any species cannot be classified as acts contrary to nature, biologically unnatural, abnormal or perverse."<sup>7</sup>

We encounter appeals to the assumption that what is natural is right or the claim that what is unnatural is wrong with regard to questions of sexual behavior, who should be dominant, the accept-

ability of biotechnology, debates over vegetarianism, and so on. Perhaps enough has been said to discourage ready acceptance of the key normative, and often tacit, assumptions noted.

## Notes

1. The apt expression is from David Hull in his introduction to Lamarck's *Philosophy*.
2. Facts about monogamy are derived from a column entitled "The Kinsey Report" by June Reinisch in the *News and Observer* (September 10, 1987) Raleigh, North Carolina.
3. In this discussion we have drawn on an article in the *New York Times*, "In Some Species, Eating Your Own Is Good Sense" (September 29, 1992) by Carol Kaesuk Yoon. We have also relied on a brief piece in *Science*, which reference has evaporated.
4. See the review by Rona Cherry of *Females of the Species* by Bettyann Kevles (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) found in the October 5, 1986 issue of the *New York Times Book Review*.
5. See the reference to the Kinsey studies in the useful article by James Weinrich, "Is Homosexuality Biologically Natural?" in *Homosexuality: Social, Psychological, and Biological Issues* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1982), p. 198.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
7. See Weinrich, *Homosexuality*, p. 204.