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To Love The Inhuman

a critique of John Zerzan's "Animal Dreams"

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tosome (a blood fluke that parasitizes first snails, then mammals during its lifecycle, eventually inhabiting a blood capillary) has a life incomprehensibly different from my own: sensing mostly through smell, metamorphosing multiple times, living as though “a vein is a river”²⁰, and mating perpetually as an adult. **I am surrounded by aliens who are yet my kin, each enclosed in its own *umwelt*, such that the world is a nigh-infinite array of mutually mysterious yet mutually informing perceptual universes that are constantly spilling into one another.** To call that vast and mysterious gestalt either good or bad, something to be either followed or rejected, is the greatest philosophical impropriety, as it entails tremendously overstepping what can be known or evaluated.

The only reaction that seems appropriate is something like Nietzsche’s Dionysian Pessimism, “a general approbation of the real in all its chaotic and cruel presence”²¹, because it is strange and lovely, awesome and ecstatic to be alive – one is moved to joy *despite* the purposelessness and lack of objective value one readily perceives. I relish that my body eats and shits, fucks and rots, pointlessly – that it dissolves other creatures into it, annihilating their consciousnesses even as a myriad of new bodies and minds erupt from my effluence and will erupt from my dead flesh. I recall once when I, having just fucked in the Hambacher Forest [*ed. – see **Rebels Behind Bars; Some Light on the Investigation Leading to the Imprisonment of the Comrade Arrested on April 13th***], watched as several flies descended to start feeding on my ejaculate within maybe ten seconds – *that* is Dionysian Pessimism. In short, to love the inhuman, do not preach to it or of it – simply accept it as such, and revel in that acceptance.

²⁰ The quote is taken from Zimmer, Carl. Parasite Rex.

²¹ Bell, David F. Introduction to Joyful Cruelty by Clément Rosset.

“Faced with the meaninglessness of the world – the real[...] the individual most often quakes and turns away. The experience of the real is literally unbearable, and philosophy has traditionally come to the rescue to save humanity from meaninglessness, to create the illusion of a truth...”

– David F. Bell, introduction to
Joyful Cruelty by Clément Rosset

Anarcho-Primitivist¹ John Zerzan’s thinking exemplifies just such an attempt at rescue, one not only unnecessary, but in fact unwanted, for an anti-civilization critique lived as a joyful life. This essay examines John Zerzan’s recent “*Animal Dreams*”, first situating it in a typical anarchist critique motivated through the enshrinement of particular reifications, then exploring how such action leads to Manichaeian thinking [*ed. – i.e. that breaks everything down into good or evil, light or dark, or love and hate (named after an Iranian prophet Mani): essentially, dualistic thinking*], and finally challenging specific

¹ ed. – Despite finding quite a bit of common ground with some who describe themselves as “primitivists”, we have a strong dislike for the terminology itself. The notion that the lifeways of pre-industrial peoples were “primitive” is present-centric, reductionist, and (if we measure ‘complexity’ in terms not defined by the dominant techno-logic and recognise the depth of methods and rituals employed by such peoples) simply inaccurate. Primitivists also often display a tendency to cherry-pick the parts deemed ‘relevant’ (in a utilitarian sense) to an anarcho-primitivist ideology while ignoring or underplaying the many other parts which said cultures used to understand and navigate their world; an operation more befitting colonialism and its particular scientific gaze. Additionally, this framing runs into the immediate problem of surviving cultures which are not civilised: “The use of the term “primitive” – which means “first” or “early” – for societies that have existed into modern times without developing civilization carries some questionable assumptions. How can societies that exist now be “first” or “early”? Did they just now appear? In a living world that is in constant flux, have they somehow remained static and unchanging? Can human development only happen one way – as the development of civilization? Besides, which of these societies is the genuine “primitive” one? They are certainly not all alike, or even all that similar. Homogeneity is a trait of civilization, not of these other social realities” (Wolfgang Iversen).

claims made within his essay. An alternative mode of relating to the nonhuman closes the piece.

Tenacious Spectres: Morality & Nature

Radicalization, that is, the development of one's critical theory, can be understood largely in terms of dispossession by reification²; as one's critique grows sharper, one increasingly liberates one's life from these enslaving concepts. All anarchists worth the name have dispelled themselves of State, most have excised Capitalism and God, and many have also banished such subtle ghosts as Family and Production – but some, as a result of their radicalization, not only fail to dispel, but actually enshrine all the more fiercely, Morality and Nature.

Moral socialization is an odd, dissonant thing in the dominant culture. Children are taught at an early age to share, to treat others as they would like to be treated (the Golden Rule), to believe everyone's opinions are of value, and similar maxims according to the altruistic paradigm generally descended from Christian and Enlightenment [*ed. – see 'A Profound Dis-ease'*] beliefs, even if those value tables are never explicitly cited during this socialization. Simultaneous to this inculcation is children's experience of realities often at odds with the prescriptions they receive: they see not only the concerted exploitation of the majority by the few, but also

² Reification is a term that has been used in closely related, but nonetheless significantly different ways in the history of critical theory. A particularly well-developed definition is articulated by Jason McQuinn in his "Critical Self-Theory" essay in the third issue of *Modern Slavery*, too lengthy to cite in its entirety here. Going beyond the typical understanding of reification as the phenomenon in which an abstract idea is concretized, McQuinn notes that reification "includes two correlative moments[...] On the one side an activity is reduced to a passive object, and on the other side the activity that is removed from the then passively-constructed object is projected onto a symbolic agent."

his liking, obscuring and pretending not to notice its incredible variation, he swears his allegiance to it. He asks, posing as the *ingénue* after his obfuscation, "Might it not be that nature is for the happiness of all species, not just one?" I reply by asking **what is this "nature" that is somehow different than the gestalt "of all species" and the world's abiotic elements they inhabit and cocreate; and what would it mean for this totality to be "for" anything, as though the gestalt of innumerable valuing beings could somehow emergently value something in and of itself or, even if it did, that we could somehow comprehend this evaluation?** Like Tucker, Zerzan has regularly distanced himself from the Left and has written apt criticisms of it¹⁸, yet he is still operating on the same Manichaeic logic that has characterized most forms of anarchism and leftism since their earliest days. Bakunin¹⁹ saw human beings, originating in the objective good of Nature, as essentially moral until they were corrupted by the unnaturalness of the State; Zerzan extends this line of thinking by exalting the as-yet-uncorrupted nonhuman animals as moral exemplars.

To Love the Inhuman

Since I was a very young child, for as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by nonhuman organisms. The stranger, the more inhuman a creature was, the more I loved it – it fascinated me to know, for example, that a creature like a schis-

¹⁸ Consider his "The Left? No Thanks!" as well as his excellent examinations of the historical role of unions in *Elements of Refusal*.

¹⁹ ed. – Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin, another influential 19th Century anarchist from Russia and bitter foe of its imperialism in east and central Europe (amongst that by other powers). Deported from France, apprehended in Dresden for participation in a Czech rebellion of 1848, and imprisoned in Russia before escaping to Japan, the U.S. and then Europe, where he joined insurrections such as that in Lyon, France, 1870.

as a whole¹⁷, so why is he playing these self-shaming rhetorical games?

What is such a misanthropy except another form of human exceptionalism, another way of making the human the one and only Other who stands apart from everything else? As the Invisible Committee notes, referencing the anthropocentrism motivating the widespread move toward naming our era the Anthropocene, *“For the last time, [Man] assigns himself [sic] the main role, even if it’s to accuse himself of having trashed everything – the seas and the skies, the ground and what’s underground – even if it’s to confess his guilt for the unprecedented extinction of plant and animal species.”*

Underlying all of the problems outlined so far, moreover, is the deeper question of anthropomorphism that Zerzan uses to frame the entire piece. **Zerzan quotes Henry Beston’s apt statement, “For the animal shall not be measured by man”, but he seems not to take it to heart.** Yes, of course it is a mistake to have such an intense allergy to anthropomorphism that one is averse to the abduction that nonhuman animals are conscious – such an attitude suggests massive alienation. But Zerzan has tumbled over the edge into an anthropocentrism that projects his own morality onto the nonhuman world. As I write elsewhere of his friend and frequent collaborator Kevin Tucker, Zerzan has committed the same error as the ancient Stoics: he rejects anthropocentrism, but, in doing so, he is in fact anthropocentric in a roundabout way.

Zerzan indicts others for projecting pecking order, Freudianism [ed. – for example, in *Animal Dreams*, that *“the fallacy that the Freudian paradigm of murderous rivalry between fathers and sons represents the state of nature”*], and hierarchy onto the nonhuman world, but he does the very same with his own values; once he has painted the nonhuman biosphere a color of

¹⁷ Jacke, Dave and Toensmeier, Eric. *Edible Forest Gardens* [ed. – also, see **Invasive**].

commonplace avarice among the many; they see the obvious destitution of some, often disproportionately along visually recognizable demographic lines; and they see women’s opinions more or less subtly devalued in quotidian conversation. This dissonance stirs feelings of moral distress that need some form of catharsis. For some, this release is a naturalization of perceived evils, perhaps via an unknowable divine plan, a misanthropic dismissal of humanity as essentially flawed, or a self-identification with Social Darwinism. Others, though, balk at the horrorshow, as their rationalization of the dissonance is that Morality’s normative purchase is genuine and reality is simply out of step with it; they demand either a sweeping change or annihilation of the status quo and the earthly manifestation of heaven. Pyotr Kropotkin³, an inspirational figure to many radicals, preaches with precisely this kind of moral indignation: *“Our principles of morality say: “Love your neighbour as yourself”; but let a child follow this principle and take off his coat to give it to the shivering pauper, and his mother will tell him that he must never understand moral principles in their direct sense. If he lives according to them, he will go barefoot, without alleviating the misery around him! Morality is good on the lips, not in deeds.”*

³ ed. – A renegade of Russian nobility born in the late 19th Century, this anarchist was also a prominent naturalist scientist of the day, author of the famous book ‘Mutual Aid’. “Under the spell of [Charles] Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, Kropotkin has sought in vain across all Siberia for keen competition between creatures of the same species. In place of it, he has witnessed a thousand different manifestations of mutual support; perhaps the latter is a more decisive factor in survival than competition per se. The only exceptions he can think of are among his own people: bureaucracies that resist improvement, regimes that stifle their subjects, prisons that deform rather than reform” (*Anarchists Traveling Through History*, Part II: Kropotkin Escapes). This work he combined with his organising with secret councils of revolutionaries (who later assassinated the Tsar of Russia), for which he was imprisoned, before being broken out during a hospital stay and escaping to England, where he continued his naturalism publishing.

Thus, *the process of radicalization for many is the moral impugment of the world.* Though I am unaware of any empirical study, it has been my own experience (and, I suspect, that of most readers) that the vast majority of radicals born into the dominant culture were at least initially radicalized in this manner, typically as especially indignant progressive liberals, and the majority of this set still occupy that analytical space, having only clarified their morality. Morality's ontological status is never called into question; indeed, in its besiegement by either the openly immoral or the falsely moral – i.e., *greed is good* or *people need authority or we would have the war of all against all* – amidst an obviously bleak culture, it is all the more vindicated as the Real, the Good, and the True.

In the same vein is the burgeoning anti-civilization anarchist who sees, on the one hand, the culture in which they are forcibly immersed, with its multifarious horrors of dehumanization, objectification, wilted affect, wanton waste, variegated and abundant interhuman oppression, and denuding of the Biosphere; and then sees, seemingly diametrically opposed, the nonhuman world with its vivaciousness, intimacy, immediacy of experience, nutrient and energy cycles in which nothing is wasted or wanted but the energy that the Sun or hydrothermal vents replace, various niches through which all lifeways are valuable, and species interactions in which, even as one kills another, one seemingly never acts against Life itself. It is a small leap, then, to see the Culture as the Evil against Nature, the Good.

Which Side Are You On?

Being a radical thus comes to mean taking a position on the Manichaean battlefield, fighting for and alongside Nature. Theoretically, it may mean embodying Nature or restoring an essential substance of wildness within oneself, as the battlefield

Gaianism¹⁵ & Misanthropy as Closeted Humanism & Anthropocentrism

At times, Zerzan exhibits nothing so much as his apparent biological ignorance. He writes, oddly misanthropically for someone who repudiates misanthropy, "*We are the top of the food chain, which makes us the only animal nobody needs.*" Besides the term *food chain* (Zerzan will later, inexplicably, use this same term in sneer quotes, as though he finds it unbelievable) being a bit of a misnomer – it is only one aspect of a food web, used to organize organisms into trophic levels, that is sometimes misleadingly employed to rank organisms in an Aristotelian Great Chain of Being-esque manner¹⁶ – one is moved by Zerzan's statement to ask whether he has ever heard of dust and face mites, roundworms, flukes, or tapeworms, to name only a few and those very broadly, or, if we extend beyond animals, any number of decomposers, human gut flora, mitochondria, and so on *ad nauseam*. Zerzan is most definitely aware of the evidence that North American Indians interacted with their forest ecosystems so as to create pockets of sub-climax forest succession zones that increased biodiversity in the forest

¹⁵ ed. – see **Invasive**.

¹⁶ ed. – Aristotle's hierarchical view of the universe was re-earthed by Christian theologians during the Middle Ages, and remained influential through to the birth of the modern era. God sits at the top of this pyramid, followed by angels, then men, then women, then 'primitives', then animals, then plants, then rocks, then sand, then soil etc. In the inherently body-hating tradition that Christian faith conveys, those at the top are perfect, while those at the bottom are imperfect (soil being all 'body' and no 'soul', whereas God is all soul and no body). We could say that in secular modernity, now abstract scientific law has replaced God at the top of this still-accepted pyramid, and that machines (who live forever and don't make 'human error') have replaced angels between God and 'men'...

adults due to their inexperience.” Indeed, “Roe deer fawns are left alone by their mothers for long periods of time, making them even more vulnerable to wolf predation[...].” Mercy, it ain’t – baby-napping, rather. The authors had occasion to cite six previous studies, ranging from 1970 to 2004, that supported the conclusion that wolves target vulnerable juveniles preferentially. One might reasonably infer, as others have, that they might target the elderly and ill for the same reasons – simple ease and opportunism. Far from experiencing mercy or remorse, the manner in which wolf pups play at hunting to gradually increase their skills suggests to me that the wolf feels hunger, desire, joy, and exhilaration as it hunts and kills.

Of course, Zerzan is likely motivated by a desire to redeem the wolf from its popular demonization as infinitely murderous, killing without even the need to eat. To make such a case, I much prefer Farley Mowat, who, besides indicting human civilization as being the real mindless killer, writes at the conclusion of his loosely autobiographical novel *Never Cry Wolf*, “Somewhere to the eastward a wolf howled[...] for me, it was a voice which spoke of the lost world that was once ours, before we chose the alien role, a world which I had glimpsed and almost entered[...].” **Mowat here redeems the besmirched wolf not by apologizing for its killing, but rather by pointing at what seems a beautiful intimacy between the wolf and its world.** Similarly, in a theme exhibited throughout his work, Nietzsche [ed. – see *Return Fire vol.2 pg52*] saw in animality (including uncivilized humans) a kind of profound, child-like innocence; not a moral innocence of being gentle, humble, and meek, all of which he clearly despised, but an innocence of unmediated life in which one is in tune with their senses, makes no apologies for their instincts, and is unafraid to grasp immediate joy.

may be not only material but also spiritual. Actionably, it may realize itself as protecting Nature via stopping particular non-human organisms from being killed, stopping industrial development in particular places perceived as wild or sacred, or attacking persons or infrastructure associated with Civilization; as well as aligning oneself personally with Nature via learning primitive [*sic*] skills, eating a particular diet, or adopting certain spiritual beliefs.

Again, these sentiments are eminently understandable and the actions may or may not be well placed, as what is beautiful in the organic, our habitat as human organisms, is being despoiled horribly by Civilization. The globalized, industrialized, spectacle-commodity culture is destroying kinds of beings at a rate one thousand times faster than they would normally go extinct, and huge portions of wildlife have been destroyed just in recent decades as the process accelerates, reaching such a rate as to prompt the creation of a neologism, “defaunation”. Meanwhile, the always-present thinness of such efforts as conservation, sustainable agriculture, and green technology becomes an increasingly revolting joke, recently exemplified by the ridiculous efforts this past year of endangered species translocation⁴ and the attempted displacement of indigenous populations in Alvaro Obregon for the construction of a wind power farm⁵ [ed. – including the 3rd largest in Latin America, after a ‘wind-rush’ for industry; see *Return Fire vol.3 pg39*].

Considering all of this horror, it is not especially poetically adventurous to describe the culture as a death engine, essentially inimical to the organic. And emotionally intense or poetic writing can be a useful tool and a breath of relief amidst a general bleachedness, so long

⁴ “Episode 61: Hail Satan; It’s a Beautiful World” and “Episode 66: Make Total Destroy, and Bring Us the Champagne”, Free Radical Radio, 11/07/2014 and 12/10/2014

⁵ “Alexander Dunlap on Alvaro Obregon”, Free Radical Radio, 06/07/2015

as it avoids obfuscation by being clear about how, when, and why it is doing so. As a perhaps unfortunate linguistic consequence, calling oneself *anti-civilization* might leave one feeling obligated to be *for* something else that is similarly grand in scope, something bigger than our immediate lives and relations. But while Civilization is a kind of useful shorthand that can be quite clearly defined⁶, the abundant references to Nature, animality, and wildness coloring anti-civilization/anti-industrial literature, speech, and thinking are misleading vagaries at best and phantoms at worst.

Civilization, itself a set of overlapping and mutually reinforcing reifications and their corresponding material infrastructure, is characterized and reproduced by exactly this kind of absolutist, dualistic, universalizing thought. Abstract and transcendental values are themselves intrinsically authoritarian and antithetical to embodied and vivacious life, even if they are posited for ostensibly liberatory purposes, as I have

⁶ Many discussions of civilization are hampered by a lack of a clear definition of the subject. Briefly, by civilization, I mean a way of human life characterized by the growth of cities, areas of urban population sufficiently dense as to require the routine importation of food from corresponding rural surroundings characterized by agriculture. Civilized life generally includes all of the following, to varying degrees: collective activity tightly organized around a linear and numerical conception of time; a high level of ritual and symbolic culture; complex and explicit social hierarchy; political representation; the formation of a State, which attempts to monopolize the use of physical violence and delegitimize non-State violence; bureaucracy; compulsory labor (work); and societal mores and ideology rationalizing racial or cultural supremacy, dominance of Nature, and social progress [ed. – see **Return Fire vol.1 pg11**]. Civilized persons are characterized by highly reified thought, as Civilization itself is largely a set of reifications intersubjectively constructed by persons acting in social roles that create and maintain corresponding infrastructure. To be anti-civilization, then, is to be anti-reification; it thus is at least prima facie suspect to be in some way for a different set of reifications.

the incest among certain insects; and the parasitic parenting of cuckoos and certain insects, whose parents leave their offspring to be cared for by other species, as these host species mistake them for their own young through cloaking mechanisms.

There is thus among the animals no model for egalitarian gender relations and the ideal family. There is only an incredible variety of genders, gendered behavior, and familial relations that highlight how arbitrary human norms are at any particular time or place. If the world offers us no model, *why can we not choose our own* without recourse to it?

Mercy & Indifference

Continuing with Christian sentimentalism, Zerzan attempts to declaw the wolf, and perhaps predators in general, by saying it may be the case that “*wolves only kill animals that are near their end anyway – the old, sick, injured*”. Though hedged as a supposition, it is difficult not to see Zerzan attempting to soften predation into a world of mercy and remorse. And, again, he cherry-picks his evidence to find the conclusions he wants, ignoring readily available counter-examples. A 2009 observation of *Canis Lupus*¹⁴ in a region in which they had a variety of potential prey found, based on sampling the wolves’ scat, that 96.4% of the scat held remains of either roe deer or wild boar, thus indicating the wolves’ primary prey. Of the prey, 74.1% of the roe deer and 84.2 % of the wild boar were juveniles, less than a year old. Over time, the wolves took turns targeting the roe deer and the wild boar, each during its birthing period, for the reasons one might expect: “*The positive selection of young roe deer and wild boar may be considered opportunist behaviour, because the individuals of this age class are easier to capture than*

¹⁴ Barja, Isabel. “Prey and prey-age preference by the Iberian wolf *Canis lupus signatus* in a multiple-prey ecosystem” *Wildlife Biology*, vol. 15

prima facie; but his information is also simply wrong, as this proposition has been debunked along with so many others about nonhuman monogamy: studies since the late 70s have found that, for the goose, “*promiscuity is a part of the repertoire of yet another seemingly monogamous bird.*” An estimated 95-97% of mammals are similarly nonmonogamous. **In contrast, ruffs, wetland birds in the sandpiper family, mate in a manner resemblant of a queer bacchanal that, I must say, were I ever to eschew my aversion to being prescriptive and morally reifying nonhumans, would be what I wish more of us would consider to be “the right road”: among these highly promiscuous birds, there are three different male phenotypes, including a female-resembling male that the very masculine, domineering male phenotype will mate with, both topping and bottoming, seemingly because the homoeroticism attracts the attention of observing females and entices them to join the orgy.**

Zerzan similarly cites examples of animal familiarity, devotion, and parental care – and, certainly, these exist, but only as some among a great many. With parenting and devotion, there is the octopus mother who starves herself, often fatally, vigilantly defending her young; all around her are the numerous and variegated marine organisms – cnidarians, mollusks, fish, crustaceans, etc. – engaging in the zero-parenting that is broadcast fertilization, in which eggs and sperm are both expelled into the water, the resultant zygotes carried away for a planktonic larval existence in which many are sure to perish. As far as familiarity, we see on the one hand the whipspider mother who watches over her eggs and then carries her young on her back while, strikingly among arthropods, she seems to affectionately caress them. On the other hand, we see the cannibalism among young sharks and strepsiptera (parasitic insects who superficially resemble flies), who devour their siblings before even leaving the egg or their mother’s body, respectively;

written of elsewhere⁷. To reiterate briefly, to compartmentalize one’s raw, lived-and-felt, moment-to-moment experience in order to render it, to self-alienate it, into such categories as Nature or wildness is itself an act of separation. **Insofar as our loving gaze assigns to our lover fantasies of perfection, mutilating them into a quasi-divine being into which we can dissolve our inadequacies and disappointments, thus completing ourselves, we have betrayed anything worth the name of love and entered into the realm of religion.** Anarcho-Primitivism (AP, whether the nouns or the adjective) is thus, ironically, the stuff of civilized thinking, a pattern of thought that mourns for an imagined reunion with a de-anthropomorphized, but nonetheless extant, divinity.

To elaborate this point, I will unpack “*Animal Dreams*”, a recent essay by John Zerzan that appeared in the first issue of the biannual green anarchist journal Black Seed, as I find the AP analysis to be one of the most interesting ones with which I disagree because of something like convergent evolution: I arrive at superficially similar conclusions to the APs, but with a fundamentally different analysis.

Green Manichaeism: Anarcho-Primitivism as Cosmic Battlefield

Before examining “*Animal Dreams*” in particular, some context is in order. I am not merely accusing: for Anarcho-Primitivists, the world is *avowedly* a Manichaean battlefield. Zerzan has emphasized more than once on his radio show *Anarchy Radio*, as well as in personal exchanges, that he is dismissive of any anarchist analysis that does not regard a

⁷ “Corrosive Consciousness, Part I: How One Might Profane Green Platonism”, Black Seed, vol. 4, Spring 2015.

Civilization/Nature dualism as metaphysically fundamental: Civilization with its slavery, death, or undeath versus Nature with its freedom, wildness, and life.

In “*Animal Dreams*”, Zerzan adds to the Good seemingly all non-human animals, who apparently not only occupy the proper side of Mani’s ranks but also serve as models for us to do the same. I will examine how Zerzan assigns to various animals (predominantly charismatic megafauna) humanistic and Christian virtues and how these characterizations are either misleading (because they reflect only one or a few examples among a great many) or simply wrong. Later, I will propose what I find to be a more appropriate relationship to the nonhuman.

Couple Like a Goose; Love Like a Wolf

In sharp contradistinction to much of Zerzan’s writing that is, even where I disagree, compelling and provocative, “*Animal Dreams*” reads largely like a set of platitudes, some disturbingly normative for the culture. I want nonetheless to briefly begin where it has merit.

From both the piece itself as well as personal conversations with its author, it is clear that part of Zerzan’s goal was to repudiate the dreadfully common and grotesquely speciesist [*ed.* – see **Return Fire vol.2 pg10**] diminution of the inner lives/*umwelts* [*ed.* – *environmental factors collectively capable of affecting the behaviour of an individual*] / phenomenalities of non-human organisms. This goal is certainly worthwhile and admirable, especially in light of Behaviorist/Cartesian [*ed.* – see ‘**A Profound Dis-ease**’] residues that linger in both popular and academic cultures⁸. Zerzan aptly decries the allergy to so-called anthropomorphism, more accurately described in this

⁸ The mere need for an international assembly of scientists in 2012 to sign a document declaring that at least some nonhuman animals are in fact

the starkest example is that of the elephant seal, in which males violently compete for harems of females numbering up to the hundreds.

In a variety of invertebrates, again having evolved repeatedly in diverse phyla, mating takes place through *traumatic insemination*, in which a spined – literally weaponized – penis pierces the female’s body to deliver sperm directly to her viscera. One theory for why this vicious method evolved is to bypass *mating plugs*, an adhesive substance secreted by penises to literally glue a female’s reproductive tract closed after mating in order to block the sperm of competing males. I thus shudder at the brazenly general sentiment that “*animals[...] are the right road.*”

Moreover, even engaging in comparative gender relations among the incomprehensible diversity of nonhumans is a close to useless endeavor given the incommensurability of gender across species. In a great many animals, particularly many arthropods but also certain vertebrates like hyenas, females are physically larger and stronger, more socially and sexually dominant, and longer-lived, inverting the physical and social power relations characteristic of patriarchal humanity. And a good deal of genderfucking is present with the abundance of hermaphroditism and sex-changing among nonhuman animals – a huge diversity of animals are capable of changing their sexual organs to make the best of their conditions. One is moved to wonder what could possibly be gained by making human value inferences from beings so different from ourselves, most of whom are indifferent to these human values.

Coupled with Zerzan’s appeals to anti-patriarchy is a shockingly Christian sentimentalism for monogamy, as he cites geese and gibbons favorably for their long-term coupling. Why Zerzan is implicitly praising a human institution so closely associated with patriarchy, intimate abuse [*ed.* – see **Return Fire vol.1 pg46**], and commodity culture is bemusing

rigid division of labor and violent enforcement of hierarchy via physical mutilation, ritualized dominance/submission social interactions, infanticide, and other forms of what entymologists actually dub “policing”. Again, similar eusocial, hierarchical behavior is exhibited by non-Hymenopteran insects like termites as well as non-insects like certain crustaceans – creatures that are not directly related evolutionarily – suggesting that, like parasitoidism, domination is a tendency that life produces again and again, an eddy that the organic regularly recapitulates. There is thus nothing to be gained from looking at animals in some generalized way in order to legitimate our desires for anarchy.

Patriarchy, Sexuality, & Gender Relations in Non-Humans

Patriarchy is a repugnant aspect of the dominant culture that seems to lie at the core of Civilization, perhaps being among the first forms of alienation and generative of the compulsory division of labor¹³ [ed. – also see *Return Fire vol.2 pg6*]. Any thoroughgoing anarchist analysis demands a critique of it, but Zerzan seems to think, again, that we need to look to nonhumans to rationalize this critique – this venture is a useless one, as gendered behavior among animals reveals itself to be a riotous smorgasbord of possibilities.

Among our closest relatives, despite Zerzan’s highlighting of lioness hunting and elk matriarchy, the overwhelming majority of mammals are polygynous, often with harem-holding male dominance and sexual dimorphism that leaves the male considerably larger, stronger, and more aggressive. Perhaps

¹³ The earliest known monument, Goebekli Tepe, depicts numerous erect penises prominently, seemingly as signs of masculine power. Zerzan himself has suggested that patriarchy may have generated the first division of labor in his “Patriarchy, Civilization, and the Origins of Gender”.

particular case as qualitative inference to the presence of consciousness in nonhumans, an act of the very same kind of abduction that nearly every human commits with nearly every other human on an everyday basis⁹.

The common critique that humans can report their mental states while nonhumans cannot is laughable and evinces what a lack of understanding there is about communication: the whine of a distressed dog, the enticing change of color of a ripe fruit, the limb-waving and stridulation of a threatening tarantula, and the garish and warning colors of a toxic nudibranch [ed. – *a type of poisonous sea-going slug*] are all communication. Almost any pet owner, forager, or anyone else who has spent a good deal of time with nonhuman animals, including this author, would readily say that nonhuman animals reasonably seem to have an inner life that they are capable of communicating to a greater or lesser extent depending on the particular case. I agree completely with Zerzan that “*It is not ‘anthropomorphic’ to recognize that animals play*”¹⁰; and that we also can only loosely speculate what these inner lives are like, as “*we do not know how to even comprehend consciousnesses different from our own.*”

Where Zerzan errs, heavily and repeatedly, is his flagrant and nonsensical moralizing that dominates the piece. **He seems to wish to tell us, implicitly, the following: that we should value animals because they exemplify our popularly held morals, as he lists a number of cases of**

conscious (“The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness”) is a testament to this incredible alienation.

⁹ The ancient Problem of Other Minds – the fact that we ultimately have no way of knowing, of directly experiencing, the consciousness of other beings – is ultimately indissoluble. A difference of species does not change the problem fundamentally. Because we routinely assume other humans are subjects of a life, it is just as reasonable to do the same with at least some nonhumans.

¹⁰ All unreferenced quotes following this one are from Zerzan’s “Animal Dreams” piece.

animals seemingly championing them; *but also that we should view animals as moral exemplars, models of behavior, as “we are lost, but animals point to the right road.”* Besides the odd circularity inherent in this bifurcated claim that undermines its entire thrust (animals are good because they follow moral X; moral X is good because animals follow it), it is easy to find a number of counterexamples for every moral example Zerzan deploys.

Though he acknowledges, seemingly anticipating a critique like mine, that “*All is not sweetness and light in the non-human realm,*” he softens this admittance by adding “*especially in this shaken and disturbed world*”, as though the human, somehow *causa sui*, were perhaps *really* to blame. He proceeds to make this caveat close to meaningless by using the bulk of his essay to enumerate cases of non-human organisms exhibiting behaviors in line with liberal humanism or Christian ethics.

Hierarchy & Domination in Non-Humans

As an anarchist, Zerzan of course desires a world without formal hierarchy; he seeks to find animals, needlessly, to validate this desire – as though it were not sufficient for him to simply desire it, but that it instead needed to be written in the cosmos to be legitimate – and thus offers a repudiation of the commonly held idea of animal pecking order. It may indeed be the case that domestication induces hierarchy in some animals in whom it does not exist in the wild, such as has been recently observed with the behavior of wolves versus dogs. There are nonetheless numerous cases of dominating behavior in wild organisms.

Many parasitoids¹¹ seize control of their hosts’ bodies, ending their reproductive possibilities through death or debilitation: barnacles of the genus *Sacculina* castrate their crab hosts in order to hijack their bodies, including their sex organs, for reproduction; the Gordian Worm larva inhabits an arthropod host and, maturing, forces the host to drown itself so that the adult worm may erupt from its dead body to reach an aquatic habitat; and wasps of the genus *Ichneumonidae* inject their eggs and symbiotic viruses into other insect larvae, restricting their metamorphosis and creating abnormally large larvae that, like bloated cattle, are gradually devoured alive by the maturing *Ichneumon* larvae¹². Similar behavior exists in diverse organisms, the behavior having developed numerous times among creatures not closely related to one another: mollusks, nematodes, flatworms, and so on, including non-animals like fungi and viruses.

Besides the parasitic dimension, the social Hymenoptera (colonial bees, wasps, and ants) exhibit caste societies with a

¹¹ Parasitoids are organisms who, like parasites, spend a significant portion of their life upon or within a host organism that they use for some combination of food, shelter, and transportation. Unlike parasites, parasitoids necessarily kill, devour, or sterilize their hosts to complete their lifecycle. They are my favorite counterexample to the moralization of nonhumans, due to the fact that their behavior is often quite horrific from a Christian/humanist perspective - so much so, in fact, that no less a figure than Charles Darwin was moved to write of them to one of his colleagues: “I own that I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of Caterpillars[...].” Here we see Darwin resisting a metaphysical flight from the real that David Bell describes in the epigraph.

¹² Interestingly, Zerzan brings up the *ichneumon*, referring to it imprecisely as a fly [*ichneumon* are Hymenopterans, closely related to other wasps, bees, sawflies, and ants; they are not Dipterans, the true flies], in order to showcase its marvelous senses; he avoids bringing up its reproductive cycle that might turn moralistic stomachs.