

## An Ape Ethic and the Question of Personhood

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This paper addresses the Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching Sustainable Development (#11), in light of United Nations Development Programme, Goals 4 and 17. Mine is less a mechanical or technological “solution” and more about an attitude shift and a change in human preconceptions about “animals.” My contribution to this session is based on my book *An Ape Ethic and the Question of Personhood* (2020) which argues that great apes are moral individuals because of their land ethic as ecosystem engineers, or how an organism sustainably modulates the supply of resources in a habitat. This approach brings together philosophy and science, environmental ethics, animal studies, and biodiversity conservation. Because of time constraints, I can touch on only a few points.

### **Introductory abstract.**

My claim is to grant simian sovereignty to great apes. This would mean that vast tracts of tropical forests would be left under their stewardship, perhaps partly in line with E.O. Wilson’s (2016) notion of setting aside large portions of the earth to re-wild. For millions of years apes have maintained forests to promote seed dispersal, tree growth, and hence biodiversity. Rather than focusing on human-ape cognitive and behavioral similarities, which, however, like others, I indeed cover in my book, I emphasize differences in morphology and physiology. For instance, apes are the good eco-engineers, not humans. As is well known, many individuals and corporations have persistently encroached ape dominions to log, mine, and farm, thus diminishing and degrading habitats that rightfully belong to apes. Nonhuman primates sustain forest biomes which, in turn, aid earth’s atmospheric and oceanic self-regulating system known as Gaia (Lovelock 1979).

I draw the notion of an ape ethic from American environmentalist Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). In that book Leopold argues for conservation by moral necessity, not by economic expediency. Apes are meticulous engineers of their own environments and if left alone would care for their habitats, as they have for millennia. Borrowing from philosopher James Rachels’ book *Created from Animals* (1990) I also argue, tied in with the notion of an ape ethic, that apes exhibit moral individualism in their social self-restraint and environmental control. In the book I also draw on a number of biologists, primatologists, and social scientists to demonstrate how apes, beyond their intellectual similarities to humans are actually more different in a positive way. That is, apes exhibit an embodied cognition, eco-psychology, and epitomize a gestalt and *Umwelt* that has been lost to many modern human societies. For this presentation, I will focus on those points in arguing for ape personhood and forest sovereignty.

### **Eco-psychology.**

What is the adaptive “purpose” in great ape cognition and intelligence? General intelligence was considered only a human trait, but it is apparent now in chimpanzees and orangutans. A key factor is orangutan curiosity, linked to memory, learning by association, spatial understanding, and grasping the concept of cause and effect. This

general intelligence operates in apes as part of eco-engineering, evident in causally influenced behaviors from nest building to food sourcing.

Diet variety and not necessarily group size among primates appears to have been a driver of self-control. A feeding ecology of knowing what to eat and where to find the best nutrition exercised a selection pressure on self-control (patience and timing) with the effect of increasing brain size and executive functions. A larger neocortex with its metabolic costs encouraged foraging for the better though widely dispersed fruits providing both rich dietary and increased cognitive ingredients. With fewer primates as reliable seed dispensers, there would be, as predicted by T. Trevor Caughlin, et al. (2015) a negatively altered dynamic in the ecological structure of rainforests. Seed dispersal is critical for tree survival since, when aggregated with neighbors, trees have a diminished chance of full life growth. There seem to be correlations, then, among ape fruit eating, intelligence, and rainforest ecology. As Alejandro Estrada, et al. (2018) declare, with primates in peril, so too the forests of Brazil, Madagascar, Indonesia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Mutualism occurs routinely in the rainforest. There are fungi at roots that take energy but yet provide soil nutrients to trees. Mushrooms grow from the waste of wood-eating termites. Insects thrive off fallen fruit and then move on to pollinate trees and vegetation. While bacteria may kill a tree, once it falls to earth its corpse becomes home to newly growing plants and other small, even microscopic, creatures beginning new life processes. There are about twenty thousand forest dependent plant species across Sumatra and Borneo, thus encompassing a huge interdependent network of life forms. There are various types of peat swamps, mountain ranges, montane forests, and river forests. The highest population of organisms is in swamps, abundant valleys, and fertile lowlands. Orangutans are a crucial part of and substantively contribute to the rainforest biome which is critical to the earth's climate sustainability, and their intelligence has evolved a land ethic in these environs in order to service themselves and hence the ecosystem.

Other species, like ungulates, will eat fallen leaves from orangutan feeding and then, in their process of foraging, turn the soil. Subsequently, their excrement, too, acts as yet another fertilizer. Organisms eat in a network. Horned beetles, for instance, feed on fallen fruit and break it open where, later, essential bacteria thrive and recycle nutrients, which consequently help moss, mushrooms, and ferns. High humidity on the ground in the Indonesian rainforest permits worms, leeches, and other organisms like amphibians and crustaceans literally to swim on leaves and contribute their share to the community ecology. All these actors, whether in the tree canopy or forest floor, fuel the powerful engines of rainforest climatology and hydrology which support forms of life across the globe.

There really is no simple way to explain the complex biomes of Indonesia in a few paragraphs. The point is that orangutans have evolved to be integral users of and responsible agents in their ecosystems while maintaining the health of the forests. Here, too, Esther Tarszisz, et al. (2018) clearly show with quantifiable experiments and not mere observation because of careful tracking and use of seed mimics that orangutans engage in mediated seed dispersal. Critical for plant communities is the viability of seeds to spread into new germinating sites away from parent plant competition. While female orangutans are active in such movement ecology, they are typically foraging in ranges of about a squared quarter of a mile each with some overlap. Male orangutans have wider

roaming tendencies, probably to avoid encounters with aggressive males and to scout mating possibilities. Seeds can remain in an orangutan's gut up to five days before passing. Tarszisz found that seeds from orangutan feces, and especially seeds expectorated, actually have a higher rate of germination than seeds directly removed from the plant. Sister great ape species diverged in diet according to body size and, in turn, ranging and social patterns were affected. The foraging habits and ranging movements of orangutans, without crowding each other, service the biome fauna for all species, suggesting that their evolved mental and physical behaviors are adaptations for ecosystem engineering. One can say so of beavers or earthworms, who operate on small scales, so why not orangutans, who operate on distributed arrays of various plants and trees?

These observations support an extended, embodied cognition where an organism works physically as well as psychically in a defined locale since the structure of that space is informational to infer data and achieve a goal. Bodily processes reveal cognition aggregated in several brain areas for a function, to maintain homeostasis and ecological symbiosis. Important here is how the orangutan intuits and sees her environment, not how we see an ape automating in the world. Even for the ape, the brain is less about storage and more about dynamic interconnections of neurons assembling contents for a purpose. Therefore, environmental psychology is an important consideration for this discussion, especially regarding ecosystem engineering.

There does not have to be a "reason" for ape ecosystem engineering. Humans look for reasons where there simply might be an evolved instinct to be conscious on spatial and temporal awareness of physical and mental self. In this type of consciousness an ape would become detached from the present, consider the past, so as to imagine events and actions in the future. Importantly, this consciousness occurs in large part because of one's body in nature. More precisely, great ape behavior in forests has been favored by natural selection since it benefits the entire ecological community. For example, orangutan roaming behaviors, as they lightly strip foliage, permit tree limbs to regenerate. Their buffet foraging, heavy movements, and daily nesting create forest holes of space and light encouraging new growth, especially for plant species crowded out. With knowledge of hundreds of types of plants, orangutans deliberately eat a variety of foods to balance nutrition, as if comprehending they'd deplete a tree's fruit easily.

Apes occupy, indeed have coevolved in, a certain ecological niche. Where it is accurate to say their cognitive behaviors reflect the ecology in which they evolved, it is even more precise to say, in line with Louise Barrett (2011) and environmental psychology, that their bodies are almost inseparable from their lush, life-teeming environment. That very connection is even more paramount than any debatable cognitive functions. In fact, there might not be need for much cognitive function to move around in an environment. Consider the earthworm whose brain is connected to muscles and nerves for movement and sensory detection. The truth is that this perspective offers a shift of emphasis away from the brain to the entire nervous system and body actively participating in the living world. This means, according to Barrett, that complex behavior and sophisticated cognition are not necessarily linked, since that's a human assumption. Consider the orangutan who lives among tree canopies. The trees are a natural extension of the ape's body and, therefore, psychically conjoined to the ape's whole being and healthfulness. This supports the claim that ecosystem engineering does not have to be a high level cognitive behavior but rather a strategy selected for in resource continuation. Barrett's

environmental psychology offers a simple explanation of how instincts (to eat) are not concretized genetic behaviors but can be modified (eat across a diverse range).

An ape's body knows it requires the tropical forest for safety, resources, and social interaction. In no way to minimize their intelligence, an ape's psychology is really a sensing body in a lively, verdant environment replete with variegated foliage, fruits, sights, smells, tactile sensations, tastes, and sounds. Thus, we can speak in terms of an animal's *Umwelt*. This means that in any given ecological community not all organisms equally perceive, experience, or respond to the same environmental factors. Rather, each organism has a specialized field of consciousness where its adaptive fitness is updated and restored by virtue of its entire nervous system, which includes and is not limited to the brain. Though I can't necessarily prove apes are consciously systematic ecosystem engineers with a land ethic, their *Umwelt* behavior certainly predicts it. Besides, ecosystem engineering does not need to be, strictly, cause and effect but is more to a variety of actions producing a net result. The ape's brain does not simply reflect back an environment but is an embodied actor controlling the jungle trees through her environmental psychology. This is an important point since mental representations in an ape's mind are not stored there as museum pieces but are part of a fluid means to cooperate with the fruited greenery.

### **Gestalt.**

It would be instructive to look at the differences between great apes and humans through gestalt theory, especially as it relates to environmental psychology. Gestalt is a unified configuration where the overall pattern is not merely a summary of its parts. In gestalt, a part affects the whole and the whole affects the parts with a sense of belonging together. For apes, we can see how the physical environment is unified, to which they are integral users and communicators. Gestalt is critical for perceptions of all kinds, whether sight, sound, smell, or touch, and as a person of the forest, for instance, an orangutan is not there randomly but fortuitously. Most modern humans, on the other hand, have managed to separate themselves, literally and figuratively, from "nature."

There are three related phenomena to be conserved in relation to gestalt, as derived from Margaret Korb, et al. (1989). There is the perceiving object, its environment, and how both relate to each other in a creative process that integrates a whole. Gestalt is the experienced whole from parts in context, how all pieces function to make meaning for each other. The individual is self-aware in relation to her awareness of the environment. Gestalt is a pattern maker, a natural process where a sense of the present is paramount overshadowing, but not excluding, past or future concerns. This means there's existence of clear perception in the whole environment for good gestalt. Total awareness is crucial for good health, to be distinguished from attention, which is directional and which can impede awareness. Clearly no explanation is needed to understand, here, the difference between a human and his perceived needs in a constructed environment and an orangutan and her real needs in a rainforest. Which of these two beings is physically and mentally healthier?

Important is how excessive cognitive control, seen in the case of humans, diminishes or frustrates natural abilities for an organism to stay in balance with its environment. In line with evolutionary psychology, an infant orangutan has inborn psychological modules and intelligences to survive in the forest but, nonetheless, needs its mother to shape and help reveal forest skills successfully. Not all cognition is in the brain. The self is manifested when in contact with the environment, which can but does not have to

include other persons. A template for good gestalt, say Korb, et al. (1989), appears as follows:

1. Experiencing the here and now, immediacy;
2. Self-acceptance;
3. Interaction with the actual and not wished-for environment;
4. Self-honesty;
5. Avoiding self or interpersonal manipulation;
6. Accepting and expressing all emotions;
7. Willingness for experimentation and change.

Interestingly, like humans apes are susceptible to failure in numbers 5 (avoiding social manipulation) and 7 (willingness for experimentation). All in all, responding to the environment is akin to responsibility, an act of understanding one's limitation and managing expectations. So from the list, and observable in reality, it seems that great apes are more in tune with good gestalt than most humans. According to theorists of embodied cognition, great apes don't think apart from the world but are mentally engaged in their physical surroundings.

### ***Umwelt.***

Biologist Jakob von Uexküll (2010) pioneered the notion of *Umwelt* in the early twentieth century, and the concept hinges on how matter interacts with organisms and how organisms perceive the world of matter differently. The point to be made here is that apes not only have a social system but one that can be termed as socio-ecology, especially among orangutans, where social organization via ecology and species biology are interconnected in their community. Most modern human societies are not, at present, socio-ecologist, but considering the responses to global warming, that could change. For my purposes *Umwelt* and to some extent gestalt both deal with how an individual experiences her physical and social environments. *Umwelt* is a sense of where one's self is at any given place and time. *Umwelt* is embodiment, including the subjective world of stimuli and gestalt. *Umwelt*, then, is an organism's life-world, and that can differ dramatically among animals. Canines live in a realm of smell. Bats live in a sphere of echolocation. Orangutans live in the visual horizon of a tree canopy environment. Many modern humans experience the world symbolically and mostly indoors.

Correlating to *Umwelt* is *Innenwelt*, or how an organism directs itself internally for environmental orientation and adjustment. In some ways, then, the natural world consists of infinitesimal gestalten interacting with *Umwelten*, or what James Lovelock (1979) refers to as Gaia, the self-regulation of nature. Humans could be, as they once were, part of this natural, communal interaction of self-regulating organisms but have mostly disconnected from it. Great apes are not aliens to the material components of their physical world, from the soil they sometimes eat for minerals, to the sky they touch at the tops of trees. Their bodily ecosphere is intimately part of their social and cultural worlds, not separate. Humans have managed to alienate from the natural world with their cityscapes, but a return is more than conceivable. At the same time, humans need to respect, therefore, the sovereignty of apes in the environment they have learned to carefully sustain.

As with gestalt, in *Umwelt* animals perceive and act on needs to shape their future, indicating a sense of development in time. The holistic approach of *Umwelt* suggests that great apes do not live in an entirely random, mindless world but are active participants in the creation of their physical environments on both the individual and

group levels. The shapes, contours, tastes, colors, sounds, textures, and odors of an orangutan's world are assembled by perceptual attributes and organized into a whole so that memory traces connect and associate. An important difference here is how an ape in *Umwelt* is a more sustainable ecosystem engineer through gestalt than most modern humans. The ape body is its tool in the forest. There are sensory and motor skills in a body schema that arrange movement according to tasks where space is not necessarily measurable but situational. This means that cognition cannot be reduced to a functional capacity or brain process. Ape cultural practices are part of a larger distributed cognition rooted in an active ecosystem.

Great apes "know" that if they learn how to resource food using tools or by manually manipulating fruits and leaves their action necessitates a change in the food source, i.e., disappearance with probable replenishment. They don't need to know how this "works," just as most people don't know how a car engine works. Ecosystem engineering, then, seems to be a blend of causal and logical reasoning based on inherent, learned, and socially influenced behaviors. This assessment is crucial since it grants psychologically moral or social agency to apes. That is, in *Umwelt*, an ape maps a biological self in an ecologically responsible manner, consciously or not, configuring patterns of behaviors that interchangeably sustain the self in a biome.

### **Dominion.**

In conclusion, the right approach would be to have huge areas of land off limits to humans permitting animals in these magnificent domains to live as they have for millennia. The planet is large enough to accommodate this environmentally decisive step. Some political philosophers like Robert Goodin, et al. (1997) declare that great apes as self-determining beings with moral and political sovereignty over their habitats are entitled to possess their own forest nations. This line of thinking about animal dominion, which I clearly advocate, receives full consideration in Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2011). Because orangutans settled in Indonesia from Asia about 1.5mya (and might I suggest by extension all great ape species in other areas), preceding *Homo erectus* by about one million years, they have a "birthright" to the lands they've "managed" in their own type of ecological civilization. If an ape dies of natural causes in the forest, he has done so as a free agent with his own will and mind. Any great ape languishing in a zoo or restricted to a small scale government preserve is not the same as a wholly free-ranging person.

Following political philosophers like Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) I see human and animal interspecies communities, with limitations. For the sake of my argument, human-animal community is minimized to elevate the idea of great apes as community communicators within their own *Umwelt*. Some thinkers will criticize this notion as fixing apes to one locale. True, but that is my point. Where much human business has stained the planet, ape activity, rather, has helped tropical forests bloom and green. It's a question of how a group organizes its environment. The differences between apes and humans are not so much about separation because we share the same biosphere. The difference is about concerns. Although apes eat much over a range that does not mean they are ravaging their forests. Instead, it implies they are seed distributors and plant cultivators on a widespread scale. Beyond any interspecies democracy Donaldson and Kymlicka call for, apes are persons in their own right who have earned, by virtue of their history, forest sovereignty.

Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) announce a type of human citizenship to animals. They argue that welfare claims (where humans grant rights to animals) or ecology claims (valuing ecosystems over animal rights) are misled causes that elevate human needs over animal interests. This is true. But note how I say that great apes are moral individuals because they engage a land ethic as ecosystem engineers. In other words, evident from their evolutionary history, apes and other nonhuman beings continue to ably express their own interests, which are often very different from and in conflict with human desires. Donaldson and Kymlicka argue for a fundamental change in human political thought that grants “inviolable rights” to all animals. That’s a given. Where we might seem to differ is in my use of the word personhood. These authors say that granting personhood to one species (e.g., humans) diminishes all others. Perhaps that is valid, depending on how the word personhood is used. These writers are political scientists, so their conception of person is more to the legal and less to the biological. I am not trying to legislate who is or who is not a person. I use the word in a figurative sense so that readers can grasp the depth and range in the moral and ecological character of apes. The expression of *person* has more clout than the face value of the word *animal*. Besides, I qualify the word person so: forest person. In the title of my book I clearly admit there’s a question of ape personhood. In terms of the truly non-polluting and sustainable ecosystem engineers, humans are inferior to apes, but we are, nonetheless, apes as well as persons. In line with the logic of Donaldson and Kymlicka, is personhood a “barrier” to rights if humans do not employ the “person” capacity of forest sustainability like apes? Hardly, of course, and that’s my point.

All I’m saying is that it’s easier to imagine apes as eco-engineers on a grand scale when we figuratively see them as forest persons and not as “animals” or instinct-driven machines. I use the word person, therefore, in a much more metaphorical sense than others. Because of how they evolved, apes have an express and privileged right to their domains that humans do not have to that land. Apes are forest persons as most modern humans are village, town, or city persons.

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