

Being Toward Meat: Anthropocentrism, Indistinction, and Veganism
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Introduction

Much of the recent work that has been done in critical animal/animality studies revolves around the challenge of thinking about animals in other-than-anthropocentric terms. The difficulties associated with this task are varied and formidable, inasmuch as anthropocentrism, while not fully saturating the social field, is nevertheless ubiquitous to at least some degree in most of the dominant culture's concepts, practices, and institutions. The aim of the present essay is to explore in more depth what I take to be one of the more promising avenues for pursuing a thought and practice relating to animals that issues a thoroughgoing challenge to anthropocentrism and that opens up new possibilities for thought and for life. I shall use the term *indistinction* as the name for this general approach to rethinking animality and the human-animal distinctions, and I provide here a brief overview of that approach through a reading of portions of the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Val Plumwood. Before taking up this reading of their work, I should like first to explain in more detail what I mean by the term anthropocentrism.

Anthropocentrism as a concept is perhaps best understood as denoting an interrelated and interlocking set of meanings and practices. Among anthropocentrism's primary conceptual characteristics are (1) a specific version of human exceptionalism and human narcissism, coupled with (2) a binary human-animal ontology and (3) strong moral hierarchy. Among anthropocentrism's chief practical characteristics are its recurring tendencies to (4) institute and maintain sub- or extra-human zones of exclusion and to (5) employ a wide variety of institutions to found and reproduce a privileged space for the human. In this section, I briefly explore each of these aspects.

Narcissism and exceptionalism. Anthropocentrism should be seen foremost as a kind of incessant attention to and rotation around exclusively human existence. Recurrent efforts are made in anthropocentric discourses to demonstrate the special place that humans occupy among natural beings, and to examine in detail how the exceptional status of humans plays out in various domains. In my home discipline of philosophy, for example, nearly every field of inquiry is dedicated to exploring (supposedly) unique human capacities, whether it be in the domain of knowledge (epistemology), social life (ethics and politics), or judgment (aesthetics). One consequence of this kind of human narcissism and exceptionalism is that, when we do take the time to examine the life worlds and existences of nonhuman others, we tend to filter, measure, and relate to these worlds through quintessentially human perspectives and concerns. Indeed, it is through the process of placing the human in the center of beings and using the human as the standard and measure for all other beings, that *anthropocentrism* leads

to the anthropomorphization of other beings. Nonhuman beings become of interest to the human only inasmuch as they are measurable by standards and techniques that are relevant to us; conversely, if such beings do not fit our conceptual, epistemological, and practical projects, and if they do not take a form that correlates with some kind of human form or interest, anthropocentrism would encourage us not to attend to them.

Binary human-animal ontology. Anthropocentrism, as it is deployed in our thinking and interactions specifically with animals, functions most often by way of deeply reductive binary distinctions separating humans from animals. These distinctions are typically figured through a series of traits that belong solely to the human and that are found to be “lacking” in animals, as though animals are in some way deficient or impoverished in comparison to human beings. The traits or capacities that animals have been said to lack range from having a soul or consciousness to having articulate speech and awareness of death. A tendency to rely upon such binary distinctions separating humans from animals can be found in nearly all of the major fields that constitute the humanities and social sciences. To take philosophy as an example once again, we find this kind of binary human-animal distinction at work in nearly every major thinker, from Aristotle, Aquinas, and Descartes to Kant, Hegel, and Marx. And even in a post-Darwinian age, when such binary distinctions have become increasingly untenable from a biological and evolutionary perspective, it is still common to find an insistence upon sharp distinctions between humans and animals in terms of values (for example, in much of political theory) or in terms of the capacity for self-consciousness and subjective experience (for example, in much of philosophy of mind).

Strong moral hierarchy. Although one might take issue with binary human-animal distinctions from an ontological or biological perspective, there do not seem to be any inherent problems with such distinctions from an ethical perspective. It is entirely possible to generate a flat, radically egalitarian ethic grounded in binary and other sorts of sharp distinctions; and, indeed, many recent ethicists have sought to do just that in various domains. However, in the dominant history of what we might call “Western” culture, the recurrent tendency is to couple binary distinctions with a strong moral hierarchy in which beings on one side of the binary (in the context of our discussion, whichever group of beings are considered properly human) are given relative and even absolute value over beings on the other side (namely, animals and the nonhuman). As Jacques Derrida notes, “In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand.”ⁱ These kinds of hierarchies are also characterized by a kind of “missing premise,” where one moves, without justification or logical necessity, from the positing of a binary ontological distinction to a particular value hierarchy. In other words, while animals are said to lack some purportedly human trait, there is typically no reason given for *why* that lack should in turn entail having less ethical value, less ethical consideration, or less ethical standing.

Sub- or extra-human zones of exclusion. One of the effects of this conceptual configuration of anthropocentrism is that it serves to delimit a zone of human propriety not only with regard to animals and other beings traditionally considered nonhuman, but also *within and among*

human beings themselves. Whether a given being who might be relevantly human in a biological sense is considered to be properly, ontologically human will depend on whether such beings actually possess or develop the trait or cluster of traits that mark a class of entities as quintessentially human. Throughout much of Western cultural history, this kind of logic has allowed for racisms of various sorts that posit monogenetic human origins but epigenetic binary differences among human beings, with those differences used to locate certain groups of humans alongside animals and other nonhuman beings on the lower side of the value hierarchy. Such logic has also been used to internally divide the animality within human beings (for example, those aspects of human life and embodiment that tie us to animals and nature) from the zone of human propriety. Giorgio Agamben has analyzed variations on this general logic and the historical and contemporary effects of the constitution of the human under the rubric of “the anthropological machine,” claiming that the attempt to determine humanity through and against animality is perhaps the founding gesture of the political within the West.ⁱⁱ What an analysis of this logic suggests is that anthropocentrism is not actually concerned with all human beings as such, or about stressing the uniqueness of and higher ethical value of human beings as a whole; rather, anthropocentrism typically functions to include only a select subset of human beings for inclusion within the sphere of humanity proper while simultaneously excluding (through a kind of inclusive exclusion, as the process of exclusion simultaneously institutes both zones) the vast majority of human beings and the vast majority of animals and the “nonhuman” natural world from humanity proper. It is for this reason that the term *speciesism* (which is so commonly used in animal and animality studies) is a misleading concept, inasmuch as it fails to denote the logic most often at work in the dominant culture where distinctions among humans and animals and humanity and animality are drawn. For the most part, Western culture has never been speciesist, if by speciesism we mean a kind of irrational prejudice that grants higher ethical status to the biological human species as such. Our focus on and privileging of the human has never tracked simply along species-inclusive lines, nor can such a recurrent tendency be explained chiefly in terms of a kind of moral failing or irrational prejudice.

Institutional effects. Anthropocentrism, as the term is used here, is more than a conceptual apparatus; it should also be understood as robust, interlocking, complex series of discursive and material practices. The practices and institutions that serve to establish, reproduce, and maintain the anthropocentric form of life are too numerous to list exhaustively, but I wish here to highlight at least a handful of the more visible and more powerful instantiations. Primary among these institutions are those associated with the global capitalist economic and scientific-technological-corporate commodification of animal life throughout the so-called animal-industrial complex, stretching from the use of animals for the purposes of consumption, to the use of animals for their productive labor powers, to the use of animals in the military, medical, and pharmaceutical industries for experimental and biotechnological purposes. Other visible and powerful institutions in which anthropocentrism and animal subjection are continually reproduced include such institutions as the law (wherein animals are by and large not granted status as full legal subjects) and education (wherein animal bodies not only serve as material for the advancement of scientific knowledge, but where whole branches of the university system such as the humanities and social sciences are constituted upon a sharp nature-culture and

human-animal distinction that re-institutes and reinforces the very anthropocentrism we have been examining). More subtle practices and aspects of this anthropocentric form of life can be found in areas where we often fail to look, for example, in the construction of our cities that are hostile to many modes of animal life, in the urban sprawl that encroaches on animal habitats, in the roads, driving habits, and modes of transportation that kill more animals per annum than animal hunting, to the simple daily habits we have that aim to push away those portions of ourselves associated with animality (for example, in our psychological and political dealings with waste, embodiment, the feminine, and so on). And it should go without saying that variations on the pernicious effects of this anthropocentric form of life can be given for *all* of the beings in our societies who have been figured as nonhuman.

Given the deeply and profoundly anthropocentric nature of the established order, the task of contesting anthropocentrism appears formidable indeed. The exploitation of animals is everywhere in our culture, built into the very fabric of society, into the material and immaterial infrastructure of our culture. There is, of course, no possibility of outlining a complete strategy or set of tactics for dealing with anthropocentrism in an article as brief as this one; however, it is possible to identify certain ways of beginning to contest this anthropocentrism in ways that might be more promising than others. In addition, it is possible to show that there are certain linchpins that tie together these various strands of anthropocentrism and that there are certain modes of thought and practice that offer promising possibilities for helping at least partially to unravel the larger logic and chief practices of anthropocentrism. As I hope to show in the following two sections, the thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche and Val Plumwood help us chart some of these paths of thought and practice.

Although Nietzsche is certainly not immune from the traditional anthropocentric inclination to paint humans as being exceptional in relation to other entities, he nevertheless consistently places human beings squarely and fundamentally in the natural world and among nonhuman animals. This kind of unyielding naturalism situates Nietzsche's work directly alongside Darwin's evolutionary approach (despite their differences on other points of science and ontology). Thus, we find Nietzsche in some of his earliest writings sounding evolutionary and naturalist notes about humanity as having a completely natural origin: "If we speak of *humanity*, it is on the basic assumption that it should be that which *separates* man from nature and is his mark of distinction. But in reality there is no such separation: 'natural' characteristics and those called specifically 'human' have grown together inextricably. Man, in his highest, finest powers, is all nature and carries nature's uncanny dual character in himself."ⁱⁱⁱ

It is here, through the contestation of establishing a sharp separation or rupture between human beings and the nonhuman natural world, that Nietzsche takes the first essential step in dismantling classical versions of the human-animal distinction. For Nietzsche, intellectual honesty requires us to break with the onto-theological predisposition to derive the human from spiritual or religious origins; we are now required instead to place the human "back among the

animals.”^{iv} The hope of definitively separating human from animal, or even the animality within the human from humanity proper, is, within the scope of Nietzsche’s project, definitively extinguished on intellectual grounds alone. In addition, Nietzsche suggests throughout his work that there should be no nostalgia for establishing a transcendent or supernatural origin for humanity; it is only through naturalizing humanity that we can begin to understand the genealogical underpinnings of our current situation as well as uncover different paths for life beyond the anti-life and anti-nature inclinations of the status quo.

And yet, the standard naturalist and evolutionary explanation of human origins does not seem to suffice for Nietzsche’s aim of contesting traditional human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism. There is also a need for human beings to see themselves from below, on the “wrong” or “loser’s” side of the binary. Thus, Nietzsche not only challenges the “false order of rank”^v that human beings have placed themselves in in relation to animals. Such a critique might be taken to imply that human beings should be seen as properly belonging on the same plane of perfection with other animals, which is to say, that humans and animals are fully equal when viewed from a naturalistic perspective. As Nietzsche notes, he knows “perfectly well how offensive it sounds when someone counts man among the animals plain and simple.”^{vi} But there is a need to go beyond even this offensiveness of positing human equality with animals. In fact, Nietzsche insists in multiple texts that human beings should actually be seen as occupying a *lower* rank than animals: “. . . relatively speaking, man is the most bungled of all the animals, the sickliest, and not one has strayed more dangerously from its instincts.”^{vii}

When examining those capacities for which human beings have traditionally granted themselves higher value, such as intellectual ability and language usage, Nietzsche goes beyond naturalizing those capacities and toward *devaluing* them. In “Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense,” Nietzsche’s naturalistic fable about the human intellect as belonging to the course of world history that opens the essay is immediately displaced by a different perspective that seeks radically to devalue and de-rank the human intellect:

One might invent such a [naturalistic, historical] fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it.^{viii}

In a similar vein, when discussing the origins of consciousness and human language in “On the Genius of the Species,” Nietzsche is intent both on naturalizing human cognitive and linguistic “abilities” but also on de-ranking them and demonstrating their ultimate origins in human *inferiority* to other animal species. Thus, consciousness and language are characterized as being derivative of human frailty and weakness rather than cognitive superiority: “. . . as the most endangered animal, . . . [the human] *needed* help and protection, he needed his equals; he had to express his neediness and be able to make himself understood. . . .”^{ix} And it is inasmuch as we are *unknowing*, stupid, reactive, endangered herd animals that we make use of what we

believe to be “knowledge”: “We simply have no organ for *knowing*, for ‘truth’: we ‘know’ (or believe or imagine) exactly as much as is *useful* to the human herd, to the species; and even here what is called ‘usefulness’ is finally also just a belief, a fiction, and perhaps just that supremely fatal stupidity of which we some day will perish.”^x

If one follows Nietzsche in this kind of critical imaginative process of not only naturalizing but also de-ranking and decentering the human (instead of the more common route of dismissing the Nietzschean gesture in favor of promoting one’s favored “empirical” theory of human cognitive development and language acquisition that re-establishes human uniqueness), what other possibilities for thought and life might open up? For it seems that this set of possibilities is what is at stake in thinking about life beyond anthropocentrism for Nietzsche. In placing the human at the center of attention and in a false rank in relation to animals and nonhuman nature, we have tended to view the entire world through the contours of that limited perspective. Until we have learned partially to bracket that perspective and to accept at the very least that other perspectives and openings onto the world exist, we will continue to believe in what Nietzsche calls our “aesthetic anthropomorphisms” and relate to ourselves and the world through their reductionist and domineering frame.

This anthropomorphic frame that functions as a kind of dogmatic image of thought, an image and ideal concerning which Nietzsche suggests we feel a certain amount of “fatigue,” revolves around a concept of the human being that has limited itself to a set of possibilities that emerge from a perspective that takes the human as the ultimate ontological and epistemological measure and wishes to see mirrors and analogues only of itself when it scans over its horizon. Nietzsche refers to this kind of dogmatic anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism variously as a kind of “idiocy” or “hyperbolic naivete.” Rather than being content with finding reproductions of ourselves in the other-than-human world, Nietzsche encourages readers to develop a counter-tendency: namely, that of seeking to *avoid* finding the human in animals and the rest of the nonhuman world. We are ultimately challenged, then, to develop a reverence for that which lies *beyond* the human horizon.

Nietzsche is, of course, well aware that once animals and the other-than-human world are no longer understood as participating to some extent in the classical human form, they will initially be rendered as worthless by most human beings, or as having less value than we thought they once had. This devaluation of and disappointment in the other-than-human world is one of the chief consequences of the axiological and epistemological nihilism concomitant with the death of God; but, for Nietzsche, it is also one of the great historical moments for a kind of radical potentiality to emerge. In conjunction with an initial disappointment in discovering that the human is not exhaustive of the form and possibility of animals and the other-than-human world, occurs a transverse moment in which the radical alterity of the other-than-human emerges along with the infinite number of perspectives on that world that might emerge in response to the world’s radical strangeness. Indeed, for Nietzsche, it seems as if this view of animals and the other-than-human world (which, as should be clear, also includes renaturalized, de-anthropomorphized, and de-deified human beings) is the chief reward of rigorously and unflinchingly following the path of thought that leads from the death of God

through nihilism to potentiality. Beyond anthropomorphism, thought encounters “a world so overrich in what is beautiful, strange, questionable, terrible, and divine”^{xi} that none of the previous dogmatic and anthropomorphic images of thought can sate it anymore.

For Nietzsche, then, it is ultimately this remarkable encounter with the other-than-human world that is at stake in contesting anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism. This encounter is what allows for another kind of thinking to emerge and for other possibilities for life to open up; and it is from this site of radicalized potentiality that the critique of anthropocentrism is to be primarily understood and measured. What is important for current trends to in post-anthropocentric thought to grasp here is that with Nietzsche’s analysis, we can begin to understand that anthropocentrism is not only ontologically and epistemologically problematic—in other words, moving beyond anthropocentrism is not simply a matter of improved *adaequatio* between thing and intellect or accurate ontological reference. Although epistemological and ontological issues certainly figure importantly in the modern displacement of anthropocentrism, if we take up Nietzsche’s path of and challenge for thought, there is a quasi-aesthetic and quasi-ethical imperative that plays just as important a role in motivating that displacement. What critics of anthropocentrism can learn from Nietzsche’s analysis, then, is that the displacement of anthropocentrism opens up affirmative possibilities for other ways of life, both for what has traditionally been deemed “human” *as well as* “non-human.”

It is in view of this increased zone of potentiality that Nietzsche calls for a new art and a reevaluation of values. To engage this “overrich” world in such a manner as to do it even a modicum of justice requires *creation* and *invention*. Not only do we need new ideas, but we also need new practices, both in terms of practices that resist the status quo but also that allow for other forms of life and relation to emerge. It is this broader conception of creation and invention that Deleuze and Guattari have in mind when they say that in order to resist the present, we need to invent new concepts.

I have argued elsewhere that this kind of post-Nietzschean displacement of anthropocentrism, when read from within the context of existing debates on critical animal studies and post-anthropocentrism, radically undercuts the human-animal distinction and places what we call “humans” and “animals” in a zone of profound identity called *indistinction*.^{xii} I also try to show there that Deleuze’s writings on Francis Bacon take up the creative and inventive task issued by Nietzsche by exploring this zone of indistinction in order to develop and create a new concept of *meat*, understood as a zone of shared, exposed embodiment among human and animal. Bacon’s work can be read, I suggest (following certain themes in Deleuze’s reading), as asking us to see the identity between human and animal not on the basis of some proper attribute that belongs to the human (say, consciousness or language) that is then extended out to the animal by way of a logic of identity. Instead, with the notions of indistinction and meat, Bacon (and Deleuze’s reading of his work) allow us to see both human beings and animals as being caught up beyond their control in a shared space of exposed embodiment. In the closing section of this essay, I’d like to explore how some of the same themes are played out in the work of Val Plumwood, with special attention given to the way in which these themes lead Plumwood to develop a practice of veganism as a kind of being-toward-meat.

In "Being Prey,"^{xiii} Plumwood recounts her tale of two consecutive day trips taken in February of 1985 to the Kakadu National Park wetlands in northern Australia. Her first trip takes place in a rented canoe on the placid backwaters of the park, where she is able to immerse herself in the colorful display of water lilies and bird life in the area. On the advice of a park ranger, she stays clear of the main river channel where, he warns her, there are a number of crocodiles that might attack park-goers. Floating around in the backwaters, free from any danger, she is given the opportunity simply to sit back and "glut" herself on the "magical beauty" of the park.

Inspired by the overwhelming beauty of the first day's trip, Plumwood resolves to return to the park the following day to repeat her experience and also examine some of the striking aboriginal rock art in the park. Predictably, repetition proves impossible and her canoe trip gets interrupted this time by foul weather and her inability to find the rock art site she had hoped to visit. Pressing on with her quest to find the rock art site, Plumwood pulls over her canoe briefly for a bite to eat and feels herself being watched. Despite her sense of unease and the inclement weather, she continues on in her canoe looking for the rock art site. Suddenly, she notices that her chosen path has brought her perilously close to the East Alligator River, the main river channel she had prudently steered clear of the previous day in order to avoid a possible crocodile attack. After a strange rock formation grabs her attention and shakes her consciousness, she comes back to herself and realizes the seriousness of the situation. "As a solitary specimen of a major prey species of the saltwater crocodile, I was standing in one of the most dangerous places on earth" (57).

Paddling out of the area, Plumwood catches sight of a single crocodile in her path ahead. She paddles on to a different path to avoid the crocodile, not particularly afraid of a possible attack in this instance and even thinking that "an encounter would add interest to the day" (57). But as with any genuine encounter, in addition to an element of interest there is always the irreducible potential for the encounter to become an event, a radical *surprise*, in which one is caught off guard by something wondrous, grabbed and held tight by something or someone one least expects. In Plumwood's case, this encounter with a crocodile turns into an event in all possible senses of the word.

The unthinkable happens. While trying to steer around the crocodile, it attacks the canoe violently. The crocodile's repeated attacks threaten to capsize the canoe, forcing Plumwood to make a leap out of the vessel toward the river bank to escape. As she makes a leap for the bank, the crocodile bursts out of the water, grabs her between the legs with its jaws, and whirls her into "the suffocating wet darkness" (57).

Plumwood then describes a series of repeated death rolls through which the crocodile takes her. She survives one death roll after another just long enough to try to escape again up the river bank, only to be recaptured in the jaws of the crocodile and dragged back underwater.

During the death rolls and repeated attacks, Plumwood struggles mightily against the crocodile, trying to jam her hands into its eyes (only to end up sliding her hands into what she thinks are its nostrils) and grabbing at branches and anything else that might help her escape.

By digging her hands deep into the mud on the side of the river bank to gain more traction, Plumwood is able finally to escape from the crocodile after it releases her from yet another death roll. Badly injured, she is nevertheless able to navigate her way back to safety and is eventually rescued by a search team.

Plumwood's sensational story of attack and survival was immediately picked up by the mass media in Australia and subjected to dominant phallogentric and anthropocentric narratives. She notes how the news reports sought to exaggerate the crocodile's size (it was actually not a particularly large crocodile, which is why she was likely not initially worried about an attack); how the news stories would suggest that the Australian bush was no place for a woman (despite her significant bush experience and her fierce resistance to the attack); how the reports sought to sexualize the attack into the sadistic rape of a helpless woman by a vicious crocodile. Indeed, during transport to the hospital, her male rescuers wanted to frame the attack in this kind of "masculinist monster myth" (59), suggesting that they should go back to the river the next day and shoot a random crocodile as an act of revenge.

It took Plumwood ten years to find the space to tell her story on her own terms. She desired to tell a very different story from the one that developed out of the masculinist monster narrative. She wanted to tell a story of the "shocking reduction" she suffered from being a unified human subject to being a piece of meat, an experience that the dominant news stories simply could not convey. And she wanted to relate how this reduction to being a piece of meat allowed her to understand herself and her place within and among animals and nature differently. This kind of ontological and ethical shift simply could not be explained within the confines of the rapid, sound-bite speed of the mass media or within the confines of the framework of the masculinist monster myth.

In what remains of this essay, I want to follow Plumwood's path of thought in order to track these themes more carefully. In particular, I want to underscore how Plumwood's thought inhabits the same space of thought that I have outlined above in my reading of Nietzsche and also show her thinking leads to a different understanding of what it might mean to be vegan.

First, in reading through Plumwood's own account of the event, one cannot help but be moved by her unflinching insistence upon thinking through the most radical implications of her "shocking reduction" from seeing herself as an inedible human being to becoming prey for another animal. Acknowledging and accepting that kind of reduction and displacement of human exceptionalism as a permanent, virtual possibility is no doubt one of the most difficult facts for thought to bear and sustain. For this acknowledgement entails both a radical undercutting of the human-animal distinction (one of the classical understandings of the human is, of course, as the one who consumes rather than as the one who is consumed), as

well as accepting that human beings belong—like all embodied beings—to a space of profound weakness and vulnerability.

Plumwood herself describes the attack as a moment in which a deep split in her subjectivity occurs. Prior to the attack, she tended to uncritically inhabit the space of subjectivity “from the inside,” that is, from within the all-too-human phenomenological perspective of a self that maintains a certain mastery over itself and its place in the world, a self that maintains a substantial consistency, propriety, and identity across time. Under attack and on the brink of death, she notices this all-too-human self trying desperately to hold onto its consistency and identity through delusional and impotent protestations: “*This is not really happening. This is a nightmare from which I will soon awake*” (58). Caught within the jaws of a crocodile and thrown into repeated death rolls, this human self has no choice but to give up its delusions and make way for another self, one that links up with and opens onto the world from the other direction, that is, “from the outside.” As soon as the crocodile grabs her and slams her into the water, Plumwood’s perspective slides from inside herself and over into a world of indistinction where it is revealed to her that she is in fact *meat*:

In that flash, I glimpsed the world for the first time “from the outside,” as a world no longer my own, an unrecognizable bleak landscape composed of raw necessity, indifferent to my life or death. (58)

. . . I glimpsed a shockingly indifferent world in which I had no more significance than any other edible being. The thought, “This can’t be happening to me, I’m a human being. I am more than just food!” was one component of my terminal incredulity. It was a shocking reduction, from a complex human being to a mere piece of meat. (61)

It is precisely this “shocking reduction” to a zone of indistinction that I’d like to pause over for a moment, for it is here that we find ourselves on the threshold of the thought that I hope to explore and track throughout the remainder of this final section of the essay.

What is essential about these passages, I would suggest, is Plumwood’s effort to think not simply her *death as such*, but her willingness to accept her indistinction from the world around her, the loss of her human propriety. In much of philosophical discourse, to acknowledge and assume one’s finitude functions to maintain a kind of double propriety: the propriety and dignity of *my* death (as if *I* am actually there as I die and as if *I* am not essentially always already dead) and the propriety and dignity of my *human* death (as if my human death can be sharply differentiated from the death of an animal or plant, and as if my death as a human being retains a certain kind of priority and dignity over the death of nonhuman beings). Such an acknowledgement of one’s finitude (which is found most notably in Martin Heidegger’s thought but which serves as the point of departure for nearly all of contemporary Continental philosophy), while often presented as a radical departure from metaphysical humanism, works in practice to maintain a subtle anthropocentrism. As such, it is only by leaving the analytic of a uniquely human finitude behind that we can stay with Plumwood’s more difficult, radically non-

anthropocentric thought of becoming-meat and being-prey. For Plumwood, the attack does not single her proper human death but instead marks a shift in perspective in which her death and life is placed on a profound and radical plane of immanence, where like all other animals she becomes prey, becomes meat. What most philosophers would take to be a properly human death becomes, for Plumwood, an opening onto a shared, non-exclusive realm of human-animal indistinction and a joint existence in a world of “raw necessity.”

Second, what is perhaps even more moving than Plumwood’s unflinching insistence on thinking through the shocking and violent nature of the attack is that her account doesn’t bear even the slightest trace of resentment toward her crocodile attacker or toward the “indifferent” world of nature that serves as the narrative backdrop of the event. In fact, Plumwood’s experience of being attacked by a crocodile appears to have allowed her to think and move within another register of relation altogether, one that is radically different from the overwhelmingly reactive notions of relation that dominate our current forms of life. Much as Nietzsche suggests that the abandonment of aesthetic anthropomorphisms allows us to gain access to “a world so overrich in what is beautiful, strange, questionable, terrible, and divine,” Plumwood’s experience provides her with another opening onto the world, here understood as an “alien” world and one utterly foreign to the standard anthropomorphic forms we place upon it. Plumwood explains:

The wonder of being alive after being held quite literally in the jaws of death has never entirely left me. . . . The gift of gratitude came from the searing flash of near-death knowledge, a glimpse “from the outside” of the alien, incomprehensible world in which the narrative of self has ended. (59)

Here, Plumwood offer us precisely *an affirmation of nihilism*, which is to say, a joyful, grateful embrace of the world understood as lacking in human meaning and value but not as lacking in meaning and value altogether. To find oneself alive, within, and immanent to this alien world is for Plumwood a “gift of gratitude” rather than (contra those who protest the so-called disenchantment of nature) an unwelcome disappointment.

I suggested in the previous section that Nietzsche’s work calls for a new art, new values, and new practices in the face of this re-discovery of the world. If we come to see ourselves as located in a zone of indistinction alongside animals and the rest of the nonhuman world, as immersed in a world of “raw necessity,” what other possibilities for life and thought might open up? And, in view of the question concerning animals with which we opened this essay, how might thinking about our relations with animals from this starting point change our concepts and practices? I want to offer one partial answer to these questions by looking at the practice of veganism.

One of the standard objections to adopting a vegan diet revolves around the notion that predation is natural and that animals often kill and eat each other. Thus, if the distinction between humans and animals collapses, and we see ourselves as being in a profound zone of indistinction with animals, wouldn’t such a perspective necessarily entail a *rejection* of

veganism? Of course, this standard line of argument works only if veganism is based on the notion that animals ought not be eaten because they, like we, are somehow fundamentally and ontologically inedible beings. There can be little doubt that many people who adopt a vegan diet and related practices do so under just such a conception of humans and animals and see veganism as an attempt to “raise” animals up to the level of the human by removing them from the sphere of edibility and predation. But the line of thought we have been pursuing here would urge us to avoid this way of thinking about veganism and other similar practices that seek to develop more just relationships with animals. Rather than trying to think about veganism from the side of the human subject and trying to extend to animals a certain kind of analogous subjectivity, might it be possible to adopt the notion that both humans and animals are fundamentally and ontologically edible creatures and still arrive at a kind of ethical veganism?

This is precisely the route that Plumwood takes at the close of her essay, after describing her survival of the crocodile attack and the subsequent shift in worldview and subjectivity that occurred as a consequence. For Plumwood, undergoing the shocking reduction to being prey for another animal didn't lead to her leaving vegetarianism behind; instead, it served to reaffirm and deepen it. Being reduced to prey allowed her to see the question of eating animals from a different perspective, from a place where human bodies and animal bodies exist in an indistinct zone of *vulnerability and potentiality*. Being reduced to food for another animal was the simple and unavoidable consequence of being caught in a crocodile's jaw; human beings *are*, in principle and as a permanent virtual possibility, meat for other beings (both human and animal). But, in the moment of being prey for another animal, Plumwood also realized that this was not her exclusive mode of existence; during the attack, she also made a claim to being *more* than meat, through resistance, through seeing the beauty of the crocodile's eyes even as she was being attacked, through her desire for survival.

And here is where Plumwood's approach to thinking about eating animals helps us to move beyond both the standard rejection of veganism (animals eat each other, and human animals should do the same!) as well as the standard reason given in favor of veganism (both humans and animals should never be eaten!). A veganism that takes indistinction seriously, that takes the displacement of anthropocentrism seriously, must begin from the idea that humans and animals are simultaneously both meat and more than meat. The dominant culture encourages us to eat animals without a second thought for this “more,” for this other range of potentials, that characterize animal life; and it simultaneously seeks to block from sight the possibility that human beings might end up as meat at some point. As Plumwood notes:

Animals can be our food, but we can never be their food. . . . We may daily consume other animals by the billions, but we ourselves cannot be food for worms and certainly not meat for crocodiles. This is one reason why we now treat so inhumanely the animals we make our food, for we cannot imagine ourselves similarly positioned as food. We act as if we live in a separate realm of culture in which we are never food, while other animals inhabit a different world of nature in which they are no more than food, and their lives can be utterly distorted in the service of this end.

Veganism starting from this perspective, then, asks us to think seriously from this double site, in which (1) the human being is reduced not just to the realm of animals but to the indistinct zone of being meat, and (2) we push back against the dominant anthropocentric worldview that disregards other possibilities for animal life besides being only meat for human consumption. Again, making room for other possibilities for animals does *not* mean removing them and ourselves from the realm of predation and being meat; rather, it is an attempt to immerse ourselves ever deeper into that shared zone of embodied, vulnerable, exposed potentiality and to see what else we and they might become. I leave the final words of this essay to Plumwood herself:

Reflection has persuaded me that not just humans but any creature can make the same claim to be more than just food. We are edible, but we are also much more than edible. Respectful, ecological eating must recognize both of these things. I was a vegetarian at the time of my encounter with the crocodile, and remain one today. This is not because I think predation itself is demonic and impure, but because I object to the reduction of animal lives in factory farming systems that treat them as living meat. (61)

Notes

- i Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 41.
- ii Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).
- iii Friedrich Nietzsche, "Homer on Competition," in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 187.
- iv Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols: And Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), §14.
- v Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Josephine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), §115.
- vi Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), §202.
- vii Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954), §14.
- viii "Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense," trans. Daniel Breazeale, in *Truth and Philosophy: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the 1870's* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979).
- ix Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, §354.
- x Ibid.
- xi Ibid., §382
- xii Matthew Calarco, "Identity, Difference, Indistinction," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2011): 41-60.
- xiii Val Plumwood, "Being Prey," *Utne Reader*, no. 100 (July-August 2000): 56-61. Subsequent parenthetical page references in the text refer to this edition.