

Article

Narrating Animals, between Fear and Resilience

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Abstract: With a focus on the animal realm, this essay explores the question of lived and believed narratives and how they can turn from being, at genesis, a compelling creative and empowering force to an oppressive force of disempowerment and destruction. Narratives help us make sense of the world and work out how to behave in it. They are also heavily dependent on emotional and automatic systems and processes. This can lead to a discrepancy between the narrative and its referent that can stretch to the point that the narrative is only beneficial if the impact upon the referent is ignored. Instead of empowering us, such narratives can have the opposite effect, making us fundamentally vulnerable. A notorious case is the narrative that Western tradition has developed in relation to nonhuman animals. This narrative is being progressively dismantled as its consequences for the nonhuman animals, the humans and the entire planet are becoming increasingly harder to ignore.

Keywords: animals; spirituality; religion; narratives; denialism; COVID-19; slaughterhouse workers; child abuse

1. Introduction

When I was a child, I was a victim of a paedophile. He was a Catholic priest. He told me very early on that our ‘relationship’ was illegal and I should not tell anyone. He also told me that even if I did tell people they would not believe me: it would have been my word—the word of a child—against his word—the word of a respected priest. He had a point, of course. Hierarchies of various kinds determine who and what is heard or not heard, but this is only part of the story. The other part is that people often do not want to hear, and perhaps he was counting on this too. Nevertheless, even the stories that we do not hear—whether because they are not told, or because we choose not to hear them—contribute to the greater narrative that we live by and pass on. My petit récit, my ‘little narrative’ (Lyotard [1979] 1984), affected me and those who came into contact with me, and, by not being told, it also supported larger narratives, those that dictate power relations, moral powers, and others—those very narratives that engendered my story in the first place.

With a focus on the animal realm, this essay explores the question of lived and believed narratives and how they can turn from being, at genesis, a compelling creative and empowering force to becoming an oppressive force of disempowerment and destruction. Narratives help us make sense of the world and work out how to behave in it. They are also heavily dependent on emotional and automatic systems and processes. This can lead to a discrepancy between the narrative and its referent that can stretch to the point where the narrative is only beneficial if the impact upon the referent is ignored. Instead of empowering us, such narratives can have the opposite effect, making us fundamentally vulnerable. A notorious case is the narrative that Western tradition has developed in relation to nonhuman animals. This narrative is being progressively dismantled as its consequences for nonhuman animals, humans and the entire planet are becoming increasingly harder to ignore.



Citation: Brooks Pribac, Teya. 2022. Narrating Animals, between Fear and Resilience. *Religions* 13: 597. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070597>

Academic Editor: Klaus Baumann

Received: 1 September 2021

Accepted: 23 June 2022

Published: 27 June 2022

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2. Gaps

Dadirri is a term used by the Ngangikurungkurr people of the Australian Northern Territory to refer to ‘inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness’: ‘When I experience *dadirri*’, explains Miriam Rose Ungunmerr (1988, p. 1), ‘I am made whole again. I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees (...) I can find peace in this silent awareness. There is no need for words. A big part of *dadirri* is listening’. Concepts akin to *dadirri* (also known as ‘deep listening’) are found in other nations and traditions within Australia and elsewhere. *Sikia*, for instance, is a Swahili term that can be translated as ‘integrated sensing’. While the Western tradition, Jon Roar Bjørkvold suggests, tends to ‘encourage specialisation and the division of sensation into isolated skills that can then be mapped and studied’, borderlines (mind–body, subject–object, self–world) in African thought are less clearly defined (Bjørkvold 1992, reported in Brearley 2015, p. 103). Nevertheless, even the Western *bodymind*, at the encounter with the concept of deep listening, is likely to be struck by a sense of familiarity, a deep recognition at the level of the experiential self, i.e., that embodied reality of being and perceiving that the mind—Western or other—cannot escape.

While it is true that dualism and analytical tendencies are pronounced in the Western tradition, there have always been voices—human and other—pulling the cart in different and opposite directions. In relation to other-than-human animals, Kocku von Stuckrad (2021) points out that many accounts about nonhuman animals from the medieval and early modern periods were written in a literal way. Conditioned by the dominant discourses, however, we have been unable to read them as such; instead, in the conviction that other animals are essentially different from humans, we have tended to read those texts figuratively. In the same essay, which is a critical reconstruction of the genealogy of the soul in European philosophy and religion and the demarcations of the human, von Stuckrad also identifies thinkers who did not adhere to the idea of a strict separation between body and mind, among whom was the young Immanuel Kant before he had a change of heart.

‘Heart’ and mind tend to be intertwined, not only in the realm of religion, as has traditionally been assumed, but also, Donovan O. Schaefer (2022) argues, in the secular realm. Like religions, philosophical and scientific undertakings are also determined by emotion (some examples of this are discussed later in this essay), and emotions are heavily influenced by exposure—physical and ideological exposures. ‘Familiarity can breed contempt’, write Andrew Linzey and Dan Cohn-Sherbok (1997, p. 17), ‘but more often than not it breeds consent’. Echoing von Stuckrad’s concern, they continue: ‘So successful has the instrumentalist reading of Jewish and Christian Scriptures become that we frequently fail to recognise that there are other motifs within the texts’ (Linzey and Cohn-Sherbok 1997, p. 17).

Generally, Abrahamic religions tend to be seen as divisive, the epitome of dualism and of separation of the human from the rest of earthly existence. There is no doubt that certain voices and currents have been particularly hostile towards other-than-human animals (as well as towards many humans, such as women, queer, pagans, etc.). ‘Humankind has no duties to the [nonhuman] animals’, pope Pius IX opined (reported in Waldau 2002, p. 89) and forbade the opening, in Rome, of an (nonhuman) animal protection society. However, this is only part of the story. This society, which was operating in England, had been founded by an Anglican priest and supported by many prominent Christians and Jews (reported in Linzey and Cohn-Sherbok 1997, p. 9). Further, the literature of all Abrahamic traditions reflects a preoccupation with other-than-human animals on many levels, from mythical to legal.

Conversely, the greater fluidity of life-form categories characteristic of many non-European traditions does not automatically exclude the possibility of such traditions being anthropocentric and their narratives supporting speciesism. In relation to nonhuman animals, Buddhism is usually perceived as a tradition that is kinder to nonhuman animals compared to many others, but as Paul Waldau (2002, p. 137) points out, being *better* does not necessarily equal being *good*.

The *petits récits* that are left out or marginalised contribute to the shape and message of the grand narrative, dictating attitudes and behaviours. Religious authorities, in particular, carry a heavy responsibility because more often than not people will turn to religions (and their dominant doctrines) for guidelines on such attitudes and behaviours. On the one hand, exploring and including these little narratives to reshape the grand story and system can benefit both the marginalised and the marginalising in that it can expand the ethical potential (assuming that there is a generic tendency to strive for higher rather than lower ethical standards) and even, for those concerned, ‘liberate theology itself from its own obsession with humankind to a deeper and wider appreciation of God the Creator’ (Linzey and Cohn-Sherbok 1997, p. xviii).

On the other hand—and it is this second aspect that is the focus of the present essay—acknowledging marginalised narratives will contribute to plasticity and ultimately to resilience. We (human and other) animals create stories and narratives as we organise information and perceptions into functionally meaningful units and patterns. If these conceptual frameworks are to give us a sense of safety, make the world more predictable and adequately inform behaviour, we need them to be moderately stable. Stability, however, can quickly turn into rigidity, and if in constructing a macronarrative too many little narratives fall through the gaps, the macronarrative will evolve as a highly abstract and abstracted frame that is a poor reflection of the plurality and multimodality of life. Rather than resilience, it begets vulnerability because the little narratives will continue to exist and send reminders of their existence.

This is where the world is currently in regard to nonhuman animals and the health of the environment, with unavoidable consequences also for human life and wellbeing. The discrepancy between what is and what we think is sits at the base of the dominant master narrative, which is so depleted of flesh and blood that it can only exist—and we function in it—if we remain in denial. Long term, this is obviously not a solution, or at least not a good one.

Better solutions must exist, and while globalisation (certain aspects of it, such as free trade) is responsible for much of the trouble we are facing at present, it also reveals possible paths to reparation. For instance, there is growing appreciation of the diversity of systems of knowledge and perception within the human species and broader. These systems (and the micronarratives that have fallen through *their* gaps) have much to offer but only if they are genuinely viewed as opportunities rather than threats or ornaments of ‘tolerance’.

Opening up to other knowledge systems may also lead to opening up to new tools of presentation. Traditional forms, such as the traditional essay form, argues Australian David Brooks (1994), may limit the expression of these knowledge and perception systems. Therefore, an essay that wants to give space to these other voices may look different. Hybridities, Brooks theorises further (personal communication 2021), can catalyse such space and create gaps to see through, but they also enable what is on the other side of the macronarrative (e.g., nonhuman animals) to appear through these gaps. Auto-ethnography (Ellis et al. 2011) is an example of a tool that is being increasingly used in formal writing, defying the old view that attributed value only to observations in controlled settings.

Clearly, for these voices to be heard, including them into writings is not enough; they have to be read (as closely as possible to what they are trying to express) and taken seriously. Mikel Burley (2020) makes a case for taking narratives seriously in the philosophy of religion: engaging with narratives in a sustained manner rather than using them as decorations, he argues, can contribute to the philosophical understanding of religion, and, one could add, of many other things in life.

3. Slaughterhouse

I spent most of the past fifteen years trying to hear and decode nonhuman animals’ stories. Nonhuman animals are everywhere: they are in our metaphors and on our dinner plates; they sell us internet plans, cars, cosmetics, but at the same time they are largely invisible. What we see are often re-presentations (Merskin 2018), not the real flesh-and-

blood individuals. Let us take so-called farm animals: pigs, hens, sheep and others. We tend not to think about them much, and we also do not know much about them. What we know is that they are supposed to be eaten, but that is really only our narrative. 'Behind those eyes is a story', Tom Regan (2004) reminded us, a different story, 'the story of a someone not a something'. These stories, or rather the absence of these stories because in most cases they remain untold, also influence the broader narrative and support the invisibility of these some-ones.

When I was trying to hear the silenced stories of nonhuman animals, I came across silenced humans, too. 'I'd rather have somebody go without their bacon and have my co-workers alive' a union steward at a large U.S. 'meat' company told the media as the plight of slaughterhouse workers was surfacing a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic (Bahney and Wolf 2020). The pandemic exacerbated the already critical conditions in this heavily racialised and socially stratified environment (e.g., Marek Muller 2018). This gave rise to a movement, supported by diverse groups, from farmers and slaughterhouse workers to public health experts, human rights and all-animal rights advocates, calling for a boycott of meat (e.g., Schlosser 2020; Sims 2020; Struthers Montford and Wotherspoon 2021). Some were advocating a blank boycott of all meat, and others of corporate meat which, in any case, represents most of the meat available on the market. Despite meat being an inessential item, and despite growing concern about the impact of meat-eating on human health, as the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (2020), which joined the boycott movement, pointed out, slaughterhouses remained in operation. Due to the inadequate protection of the workers, which included the companies denying the workers masks, physical distancing, paid sick leave and information concerning infection rates at the plants (Schlosser 2020), these places soon became COVID-19 hotspots, affecting the employees themselves, their communities and broader society. From this perspective, the relentless demand for meat was actually fuelling the epidemic.

Slaughterhouse work has always substantially impacted the employees and their communities, for which higher levels of crime, particularly violent crimes, have been reported compared to communities with other industries (Fitzgerald 2010). However, in the absence of a pandemic, such an impact is not perceived as a significant or direct threat to the rest of the society and is thus easier to bury among other hidden stories constituting narratives. To begin with, for most people, this type of employment is not indicative of their vocational aspirations; rather it is a result of the limited job options available to them. A large proportion of abattoir workers, for instance, are immigrants, and their socio-economic vulnerability is exploited to keep processing costs down, which results in cheap meat and the public overfeeding with the item. The human rights violations in this workplace are not lapses, as a Human Rights Watch report emphasises; they are systemic violations that are embedded in this kind of employment, and if an abattoir tries to improve its conditions it becomes uncompetitive (Compa 2004). As a consequence, the modus operandi in the slaughterhouse is oriented towards keeping the production line moving, and moving fast. Workers' injuries, which are not rare, should not slow it down: 'I've seen bleeders, and they're gushing because they got hit right in the vein, and I mean they're almost passing out, and here comes the supply guy again, with the bleach, to clean the blood off the floor, but the chain never stops. It never stops', Schlosser reports, citing a former worker (Schlosser 2001, 2020). Others talk of supervisors constantly shouting at the workers, and workers not being allowed to rest; they may even be refused bathroom breaks, which can lead to them wearing diapers at work and/or avoiding drinking water during their shifts, which can last for twelve hours up to seven days a week (Marek Muller 2018). Added to the physical danger and the mental pressure stemming from humiliating treatment and verbal abuse is the psychological toll resulting from the act of killing itself. Jennifer Dillard (2008, p. 407) discussed the psychological vulnerability of slaughterhouse workers and proposed that such work should be recognised as an 'ultra-hazardous activity for psychological wellbeing'.

One of the most touching testimonies to the validity of such a descriptor that I have ever encountered came from a former slaughterhouse worker named Virgil Butler. [Butler \(2003\)](#) writes:

It's just you and the dying chickens.

Out of desperation you send your mind elsewhere so that you don't end up like those guys who lose it: the guy who fell on his knees praying to God for forgiveness, or the guy that hauled off to the mental hospital that kept having nightmares that chickens were after him. I've had those, too.

Most people who work this room (...) use some sort of stimulant to keep up the pace, and some sort of mellowing substance to escape reality.

People tend to avoid you (...) You feel isolated from society, not a part of it. Alone. You know you're different from most people (...) They have not seen what you have seen. And they don't want to. They don't even want to hear about it.

The reason, of course, that slaughterhouse workers have this kind of psychological reaction is that, ultimately, they are not dealing with objects. The law can state that other-than-human animals are property. The law can fail to recognise them as sentient beings, but in the end that is what they are: pulsing, breathing individuals, not much different from you and me, and they do not want to die.

Even if slaughterhouse workers tried their best to give nonhuman animals a smooth, pain-free death, such would be impossible in that environment where the rule of thumb is to keep the chain going at all costs, and where constant noise and smell further blur the potentialities of liveability and relationality. Perhaps the animals killed, or to be killed, and these animals' wellbeing is the last thing the workers can allow themselves to care about if they are to keep their jobs, and minds. 'I can't care', said Ed Van Winkle, a former slaughterman, who explained that the emotional toll was far more impactful than the physical danger, 'pigs down on the kill floor have come up and nuzzled me like a puppy. Two minutes later I had to kill them—beat them to death with a pipe' (reported in [Dillard 2008](#), p. 391).

When undercover footage emerges of workers exercising 'excessive' violence, which is to say, when they appear to be intentionally torturing animals and enjoying their sadistic activity, viewers will often judge these workers as an aberration of human nature, as evil, sick or both. We rarely consider the possibility that they too may be victims, that this violence may indeed be a response to the unbearable nature of the situation and the job they are expected to perform, that the more you abuse the more you are hurting, that you need, in your mind, to devalue these animals even further, strip them of any worth, so you can kill them in the first place. These animals may be on their way to becoming someone's steak, but before that there was a face attached to that flesh, a face that does not end up on your plate ([Masson 2009](#)) because someone cut it off.

4. Faces

Over the past few decades, we have discovered, or re-discovered, that human and other animals share basic organismic structures and processes that make us all vulnerable physically and psychologically, but that can, in the event of adequate developmental and living conditions, also foster resilience. Both scientists and philosophers are becoming more open in recognising these parallels and the need to do something to change how we think of other animals and how we treat them. The fear of anthropomorphism, which was pervasive in the twentieth century, imposed serious limitations upon scholarly advancement with implications for theory as well as practical ethics. Accusations of anthropomorphising, which essentially covered any attribution of a subjective state to nonhuman animals, could cost people jobs and reputation, and young researchers were warned against it (e.g., [Yoerg 1992](#)). This resulted in a widespread anthropodenial perspective, which [Frans de Waal \(1997\)](#) described as the 'blindness to the humanlike characteristics of other animals'. This

blindness, combined with some other accidental myths that sprung from this partial, fractional approach to studying other animals, led to a heavily distorted picture of their personal and social lives. For instance, for a long time it was believed that nonhuman lives were primarily about aggression and reproduction, whereas now we know that cooperation and amicable relations are much more common (e.g., [Broom 2003](#); [Bekoff and Pierce 2009](#); [Innis Dagg 2011](#)).

We have inherited these misrepresentations, and they continue to affect the narrative we think and live by. Aaron S. Gross has noticed that the majority of theorists of religion will use the notion of the human/nonhuman animal divide uncritically to support their arguments ([Gross 2015](#), p. 91). Important intersections tend to be disregarded in other anthropocentric disciplines too, where uncritical reliance on adopted binaries will also unavoidably affect the quality and comprehensiveness of the argument. Such binaries are not uncommon within the very field of studies of other animals, where populist views often dictate approaches. For instance, primates have been studied extensively and as a consequence we are very well aware of their overall complexity. Sheep on the other hand, have been mostly ignored by researchers. Not because sheep are cognitively, emotionally and socially unsophisticated and uninteresting—we could not know that, as we had never tried to find out—but because we had assumed that they were. Once we chose to look into sheep life and sheep being, we discovered beauty and complexity; their social expertise, for example, has been said to equal that of apes ([Despret 2005](#); see also [Marino and Merskin 2019](#)).

There will always be subjective components tainting our endeavours for research objectivity. We choose the species to study, which means that some other species may not be studied. We choose the question we ask: are we looking for complexity or do we automatically assume that the species or individual in question is not complex and therefore we will not even try to ask complex questions? We have to work out how to ask the question so that the tested animals understand the task; we cannot simply deliver it to them as a (human) linguistic formulation. If they fail to answer the question, was it truly they who failed or was it us failing to ask it properly?

These are complex issues that we are becoming increasingly aware of and, as a consequence, better equipped to deal with in order to overcome the limitations imposed by adopted narratives that have impinged upon scholarly rigour and ultimately validity. As we move towards a more integrative approach, it becomes increasingly evident not only that if we (humans) have something, other animals likely have it too, but that the reason we have those things in the first place—and can feel them and think them—is because we are animals, because we have an animal body and an animal brain, not despite the fact that we are animals. This, as convergent evidence suggests, includes spiritual relating.

5. Spiritual Agents

When research led me to the question of animal spirituality ([Brooks Pribac 2017, 2020, 2021](#)), two frameworks emerged as central to developing and elucidating the idea of spirituality as an organismic response to agencies in the environment and consequently to the definition of spiritual engagement as a dance with animacy—wording based on previous work in the area by Donovan O. Schaefer ([Schaefer 2012, 2015](#)) and James B. Harrod ([Harrod 2011, 2014](#)). One framework concerns automatic categorisation systems in the brain, which will be discussed in more detail later. Suffice to say at this point that this process has been linked to the generation of awe ([Shiota et al. 2007](#)), and it is a process that humans share with other animals. The other framework is rooted in attachment theory ([Bowlby \[1969\] 1982, 1973, 1980](#)) and the psycho-biological relevance of attachment relations in the developmental period and later in life.

Starting at conception, we animals are in continuous communication with the environment. The organism learns to respond to perceived agencies before we become capable of the cognitive elaboration of what happens to us and around us. Our organism is primed

for such communication, which is implicit yet potent and direct; the organism is shaped by it, and it remains open to it throughout life.

Let us use mammals and birds as an example because the importance of attachment relations has been studied extensively in these animals. When we are born (or hatched), our brain and our system's psycho-biological regulation are still developing. They develop in conjunction with the caregiver (the mother or some other animal). The caregiver acts as a 'superstructure' (Polan and Hofer 2016) in the sense that the caregiver's own organism and psycho-bio regulation will guide the infant's regulation and eventually this will affect the way the infant's brain and regulatory system develops. This implicit communication and the ensuing regulation happen at multiple levels and affect multiple aspects of the infant's being. It is helpful, if we allow ourselves a brief digression into simplicity, to imagine these two subjects—the caregiver and the infant—as two spaces with blurring borderlines rather than considering them as singular, separate entities. As we are there—Mom and I—cuddling each other, invisible and intangible yet very real and influential arrows of agency are travelling back and forth—from me to Mom and back to me, etc.—carrying important information. Each information exchange is a story, and cumulatively these stories will shape our experiential, bodily narrative—the way our brain gets 'wired' and the implicit memories that emerge in this relational dance—a narrative that will underlie all other narratives later in life, whether we are a human, a sheep or a duck.

Within this context, the following question arose: Is it not possible that this is also how we communicate with other implicit agencies around us for the rest of our lives? That it is all simply an extension of the way our organism as an inherently relational entity communicates and engages with the world? And that when the self extends and we have the merging of the self with others on the self–nonself continuum (Han and Northoff 2009), we are really just returning to the origins of the self—to that multi-spatial Mama's hug (de Waal 2019)?

In my discourse on spiritual relating, an agent acquires agency by its capacity to produce an effect on us, regardless of whether it possesses independent agency or not. A rock, a waterfall, and another animal can all in this sense be agents. The interaction with these agencies can be positive, leading to internal bliss and stillness, but it can also produce negative feelings and dread. In part, this will depend on the ontogenetic narrative—the way our internal milieu has been shaped in our lifetime—and on the phylogenetic narrative—the way agencies speak to us based on our species. For instance, a pig—like a human—is more likely to have a positive exchange with agencies in a normative,¹ lush environment where he can savour the fresh breeze and the weight of a starry-eyed night-sky rather than in a small, barren, dark and stinky shed. In either case, these interactions appear to significantly impact upon wellbeing as they can aid or hinder organismic self-regulation. Although more research is needed concerning this issue, it is not only conceivable but also very likely that spiritual relating (as an organismic exchange with agencies in the environment) functions as a biological imperative comparable in its essentiality to alimentation, hydration and interpersonal relations (Brooks Pribac 2020, 2021). Finally, and importantly, these interactions are experientially meaningful; they are felt as they unfold, and they have felt consequences. They do not need to be interpreted or contextualised within religious or other frameworks to acquire meaning. Interpretations can colour the experience in distinct ways but they are not necessary for the experience to be felt.

This is not to say that the interpretative level is not important, quite the opposite. Humans and other animals are continuously interpreting and contextualising phenomena and events as we try to make sense of our worlds and our lives. The brain aids the process substantially through its automatic categorisation system: through experience and learning, we develop concepts and categories, and process sensory data through these acquired concepts. A concept in this context means a grouping of attributes, of details, that are characteristic of a familiar object (Snyder et al. 2004; Vallortigara et al. 2008). Once a concept is formed, we tend to focus on the bigger picture and ignore details. For example, after learning the concept of a 'table' (top surface, legs), in most cases we will be able to recognise

other tables as tables without a thorough analysis even if they look different. The same is valid for other entities, not only in the form of physical objects but also other types of phenomena, complex interactions and events: when we see two people arguing, for instance, we will recognise the concept of 'argument', and depending on the context we will decide whether to intervene or not. This is an incredibly useful capacity. In the absence of such a capacity, animals would have to stop and examine every single thing we encounter, which would make life very difficult.

This brings us to the second framework that inspired the consideration of animals as spiritual agents, intimated at the beginning of this section. Sometimes we encounter perceptions that cannot be automatically assimilated within established mental templates. This prevents us from attaining cognitive closure, that is, the resolution of a state of uncertainty, which is, as just discussed, to various extents achieved automatically. Instead, it leaves us in a state of uncertainty, which can give rise to the experience of awe in humans (Valdesolo and Graham 2014). Given that other animals' brains also process perceptions in the same way as humans, is it not possible that they too experience encounters that are not easily categorised? This failure of categorisation and closure does not need to stem from unfamiliarity with the phenomenon encountered; it could also be that the phenomenon is so broad (from a psychological perspective) that it does not fit into anything with boundaries, anything reductionist—the process of categorisation ultimately being a generalising and reductionist process. There is little reason to believe that other animals do not find themselves in such situations and that they are not pulled, like humans, into the relational dance with perceived agency, and experience a holistic embodied engagement at the base of spiritual relating.

This, in my opinion, marks the distinction between spiritual relating and religions. Animals can relate spiritually, and this relating is experientially meaningful without cognitive appraisal and post-processing of the experience; this level of relating is more immediate and direct, and is accessible to any sentient organism. Religion, on the other hand, is a broader concept and it includes a strong component of cognitive closure (which is not to say, as it has been misunderstood, that I see religion as being all about closure, far from it). Religious imagination, for instance, could be seen as a form of cognitive closure with roots—like other types of closure—in this necessity that we animals feel to systematise perceptions, to make some sense of the world, to make it more graspable and predictable, facilitating navigation in it and enhancing perceived safety. Social norms and moral codes in human and other animals' societies may also arise from the need to understand what goes on around us, how to respond to it, and how to be in it.

6. Closures

Many years after my first explicit encounter with the narratives of power, mentioned in the opening paragraph to this essay, I was sitting in the bishop's office as a survivor of child sexual abuse. A shift in circumstances had made the telling of my story inevitable. There was only one, small thing that I needed the bishop to do, and that only he could do. He knew it was the right thing to do, he wanted to do it, he wished he could do it, but he could not. He said so. He was trapped, by other stories, other narratives and their power relations. There was something deeply disturbing about his impotence, about the pitifulness of his situation, only vaguely disguised by his imposing robes and room décor. How did we get to this stage, so shielded that the steel is carving into our flesh? How does something that is supposed to empower and protect us (closure—solution—narrative—safety) end up achieving the opposite and making us vulnerable?

This meeting took place ten years ago, but the question keeps creeping up in a variety of contexts. Imagine an evening out at your favourite restaurant: soft music in the background, the table cloth crisp white, the waiter bowing in kindness, wine aged to perfection, you order your favourite dish, take a piece into your mouth expecting a splash of heavenly aroma, but instead, as a distant memory unexpectedly interferes, what you get is an explosion of blood and urine and screams as the human stabs the nonhuman and

accidentally also himself; he bleeds as he's pissing into his diapers waiting for the cleaning guy to bring the bleach, excretions by now leaving the perishing body of the nonhuman, the fluids mix as do many other things, and perhaps this is the only reason you are able to afford the meal in front of you. How does this make you feel? Unpleasant? Do you want to spit it out? Or swallow it really quickly—both the meat and the image? Does it make you feel vulnerable? Powerless? How did we get here?

The nineteenth century move of slaughterhouses to the outskirts and progressively further away from large populated centres (Fitzgerald 2010) certainly contributed to the current psychological distancing practiced by the majority of human consumers of non-human animal flesh. However, the removal itself should be seen not as a reason but as a consequence and continuation of the speciesist narrative that depicted other-than-human animals as comestibles and their lives as disposable. There were alternative narratives in circulation at the time advocating for an update of the master narrative. It is indeed curious how different people saw different solutions to the abuse witnessed, as historical records show. For instance, the following scene, described by a neighbour of London's Smithfield meat market, prompted this person to appeal to the authorities to remove the market from the city (*The Farmer's Magazine* 1849, p. 142):

the incessant barking of dogs, the bellowing of the oxen and calves, the bleating of sheep, the grunting of swine, the roaring and swearing of men, with torches, passing to and fro among the frightened animals, and the continued sound of blows inflicted on the horns, heads, and bodies of the poor animals, produce an impression on the beholders that no person can adequately describe, and must be seen to be believed.

A comparable scene spoke to Australian Robert Jones differently and he urged his fellow humans to discontinue the consumption of animal flesh (Jones 1888, reported in Crook [2008] 2014, p. 129). Many did so; indeed, the vegetarian (and to a lesser extent vegan) movement was strong in nineteenth century U.S., Europe and Australia, with vegetarian schools, hotels, restaurants, magazines, etc.—but the majority of the population continued to eat other animals. Behind our backs, the animal industrial complex grew bigger, stronger and more destructive. It is now seriously affecting our personal and planetary wellbeing, yet we continue to push it out of sight and out of mind. This issue—denialism, as it has been termed—has begun to preoccupy thinkers lately (e.g., Grušovnik et al. 2020), but its roots go back to our mental templates and how the stories are put together in this jigsaw of existence.

As discussed earlier, the processes of categorisation and closure are extremely helpful in life, even critical on many levels. Nevertheless, the narratives that evolve from them are not always beneficial for us or for those around us. The categorisation system is pretty automatic and dependent on exposure, and as such it is also vulnerable to prejudice. This is how we may end up perceiving two completely comparable animals, such as a pig and a dog, one as food, the other as a pet. If we were born in a different culture, the categories may be different. Along with speciesism, which describes discrimination based on species (often accompanied by the belief in human superiority while we dismiss or downplay other animals' emotional, cognitive and social complexity and their human-comparability), other forms of discrimination, such as chauvinism, racism, and homophobia, also spring from categorisation systems. Another problem could develop when, or if, we become too settled in the perceived safety of adopted categories. It is easy to become emotionally attached to what is known and fear and avoid what is not. However, this comfort with the familiar can start working against us. Life is fluid and change is inevitable. Resilience is built upon facing rather than ignoring changes, taking up new information, and working out new systems, as well as new categories if the old ones prove to be inadequate for present challenges. Alternatively, we grow weaker and more vulnerable.

These ideas are not novel, and neither is the knowledge that so-called reason is deeply intertwined with emotions, which always makes solutions more complex than the available equations. Various theories have emerged trying to explain, and possibly

overcome, this precarious attitude of denial, some more credible than others. Those that focus on individuals to me sound less convincing than those relying on our social nature.² COVID-19 has shown that most people tend to do ‘the right thing’ (within the framework of how they understand right and wrong in relation to a particular situation³). Doing the right thing (or what is perceived to be the right thing) is also easier; social animals are ‘wired’ that way (e.g., [Cialdini 2003](#)) as anti-social behaviour can be costly. Nevertheless, there is a massive lack of (pro)action that is urgently needed in order to save the planet but also in order to bridge the gap between what is and what-we-like-to-think is. By bridging this gap, we can avoid finding ourselves in that undesirable and vulnerable position in which we are desperate to look away because witnessing what our (in)actions support hurts too much. Why the resistance to align what is with what feels should be, and to remove the threat of exposure and ultimately of pain?

As is usually the case, the answer will be complex, but is it possible that one of the factors holding us back is attachment to the narrative of denial and our own powerlessness? Have we grown so used to the idea that we are incapable of implementing any meaningful change that we do not even try, so instead we blame others or seek refuge in denial, or both?

Speaking of emotional pain experienced on an individual, intimate level, Eckhart [Tolle \(\[1999\] 2004\)](#) offers a compelling insight:

As long as you make an identity for yourself out of the pain, you cannot become free of it. As long as part of your sense of self is invested in your emotional pain, you will unconsciously resist or sabotage every attempt that you make to heal that pain.

When an attribute has been with us for a long time, the danger of adopting it, adapting to it, working with and around it as opposed to focusing on eradicating it becomes real. It may be a feeling familiar to many who have either experienced it first hand or detected it in those around them. Of course, these are implicit forces, not easy to isolate once they get hold of a person, let alone groups of people. Could a large part of the human population (regardless of financial and social status) have grown into a narrative of impotence, of victimisation, which is now fuelling inaction? The capacity, and necessity, for narrative formation turns from a creative force that empowers and helps with life into a destructive force of vulnerability and disempowerment. The *modus vivendi* shifts from resilience-building to the avoidance of pain. As destruction grows, so does pain and the urgency to avoid more, and more, to the point where we have narrated ourselves into a corner and there is no escaping it.

7. Concluding Remarks

This Friday of late August 2021 (the time of writing), two items stand out in the daily news influx: our state’s premier announced an extension of the lockdown—by the end of September the Australian state of New South Wales will have been in lockdown for thirteen weeks—and, for the first time in recorded history, there was rain at the summit of the Greenland’s ice sheet ([Koumoundouros 2021](#)). On our dry and depleted continent, the falling of rain would be good news, especially for the graziers, who have contributed to most of the depletion and who will now have to keep the nonhumans on the land for a little longer as one of the largest slaughterhouses in the country has just closed for a week. There are no infections at the slaughterhouse, the owner hastens to clarify ([Brown 2021](#)). We may never know the validity of this claim; Australian slaughterhouses have also come under the spotlight (e.g., [Bucci 2020](#)) during the pandemic for reasons that mirror those in the U.S., and as a consequence appearances are critical at this stage. The Greenland rain, however, is not really good news. [Koumoundouros \(2021\)](#) points out that ‘the Greenland Ice Sheet holds enough freshwater to make sea levels rise 6 metres (20 feet), and has a large influence on weather and climate’.

Behavioural scientist David [Comerford \(2020\)](#) sees parallels between the climate crisis and the COVID-19 crisis, and believes that the pandemic has unmasked the human capacity

to mobilise and tackle crises, which gives hope for climate change. There is good reason to support this position but perhaps a change of narrative is intrinsically involved. There may be too many crises around and not enough orientation towards solutions. The gods are dead, we hear, subjectivity is in crisis, and now we are nearing an ecological collapse, the consequences of which most of us cannot truly fathom. Even our food, some tell us, is not what we thought it was: a lump of tissue humanely extracted from a happy automaton.

In reality, God and gods have never left and probably never will; the subjectivity crisis has not killed our subjectivity as our sense of self, McGilchrist (2009), inspired by Wittgenstein, reminds us,⁴ continues to be alive and well in our daily lives. There is an immense potential out there for acquiring food that does not involve oppression and killing, and importantly, to large extents we remain the creators of our own worlds and realities. What is needed perhaps is more faith in our creative capacities because what we do (or do not do) is, indeed, never neutral; it always produces an effect—positive or negative. The awareness of a problem offers the opportunity to look for solutions and to retain our ‘right to not be a perpetrator’ (Boyer et al. 2016)—a powerful concept and a powerful right that is too readily relinquished. The pervasive emphasis on crisis and negativity may condition not only the general public; government officials, religious leaders and others who have the opportunity to inspire and motivate large numbers of people also often appear locked in narratives of despair. By overcoming the identity of victimisation, and expanding the practice of mere management into that of leadership (on all levels, from personal to public), homo omnicens, ‘killer-of-everything’ (Brooks 2019, after Jensen 2011), could develop a new narrative and grow into homo sanator, a healer that will never again want to look away, but will, Tolstoy-style, come close, as close as possible to the suffering, and help.⁵

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: This essay has its origins in a talk I gave as part of the webinar series ‘Storytelling for Social and Planetary Change’, organised in October 2020 by *Counterpoint: Navigating Knowledge* and the *Pachaysana Institute*, <https://www.counterpointknowledge.org/storytelling-for-social-and-planetary-change-a-pachaysana-counterpoint-webinar/> (accessed on 30 August 2021).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ An environment that reflects the type of environment in which the species evolved and is adjusted to, which will naturally differ from species to species.
- ² For instance, can denial of climate change and animal abuse truly be a result of the majority of people not being morally developed enough to do ‘the right thing’ (e.g., Kohlberg’s Theory of moral development, cited in (Stoll-Kleemann 2020))? I do not think so.
- ³ The pro- and anti-vaccination people attacking one another on social media could have much more productive conversations if they acknowledged that neither party (with some individual exceptions within them) is in favour of vaccination or against it to annoy the other party. Both parties are convinced they are doing the right thing, and deep fear underlies both positions, with one party fearing COVID-19 and death and the other fearing the vaccines and death and/or loss of freedom, mind control and a dehumanisation and mechanisation of society.
- ⁴ Iain McGilchrist (2009, p. 89) writes: ‘Philosophers spend a good deal of time inspecting and analysing processes that are usually—and perhaps must remain—implicit, unconscious, intuitive; in other words, examining the life of the right hemisphere from the standpoint of the left. It is perhaps then not surprising that the glue begins to disintegrate, and there is a nasty cracking noise as the otherwise normally robust sense of the self comes apart, possibly revealing more about the merits (or otherwise) of the process, than the self under scrutiny (...) As Wittgenstein once remarked: “It’s strange that in ordinary life we are not troubled by the feeling that the phenomenon is slipping away from us, the constant flux of appearance, but only when we philosophise.”’
- ⁵ The following sentence attributed to Leo Tolstoy serves as the motto of the Save Movement: ‘When the suffering of another creature causes you to feel pain, do not submit to the initial desire to flee from the suffering one, but on the contrary, come closer, as close as you can to him who suffers, and try to help him.’

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