

In Communion with God’s Sparrow
Incorporating Animal Agency into Catholic Social Teaching

by
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Although secular environmentalism has focused on the degradation of ecological systems, recent Catholic social teaching adds a novel emphasis on the individual of any species. This development coheres with increasing cognizance of the animal’s power to engage us in Earth’s extrahuman sphere. As Anna L. Peterson puts it, animals “lure us to encounter and explore the more-than-human world, to cross the line.”¹ However, whereas Peterson and others who adhere to a Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology call for greater attention to animals’ ability to choose their own actions, or agency; Catholic teaching centers its explicit policy toward animals on need. Apposite for this analysis, the epistemology underlying both discourses makes possible a rough correspondence. For example, Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, affirms a point of fundamental significance to Merleau-Ponty: “[O]ur body itself establishes us in a direct relationship with the environment and with other living beings.”² Francis also asserts this key entailment: “[T]he life of the spirit is not dissociated from the body or from nature or from worldly realities, but lived in and with

¹ Anna L. Peterson, *Being Animal: Beasts and Boundaries in Nature Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 18.

² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, No. 155, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2015/6/18/laudatosi.html> (accessed January 31, 2016).

them, in communion with all that surrounds us.”³ Indeed, he calls us to move beyond intellectual and economic ways of approaching creation so as to use categories which “take us to the heart of what it is to be human.”⁴ Here, I put these two discourses in conversation, arguing that Catholic teaching, as oriented toward a cross-species “communion,” should go beyond its concern with need to incorporate an acknowledgment of animal agency, as the latter holds greater transformative power in regard to that aim. I advance this argument in three steps. First, I review key points in *Laudato Si* on the human relation to nonhuman being, and highlight Catholic teaching’s focus on need. Second, I describe how Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of an impulse to exist “with” some other grounds the sense of a shared “interworld,” and explain how Kenneth J. Shapiro applies that conception to the human-animal relation. Finally, I reference a number of social theorists to draw out the ethical significance of a Merleau-Pontyan animal agency.

Catholic Social Teaching Counsels Nonmaleficence in Regard to the Individual Organism

Laudato Si locates our relation to the more-than-human world within the expansive duality of a good creation and similarly good—in the sense of maximally transcendent, relational and loving—Creator. God’s transcendence is imagined as an infinite fullness, and contrary to the classical view, nonhuman beings exist not primarily for human benefit, but to serve God’s broader purposes.⁵ *Laudato Si* also describes a Creator who, as Trinity, is profoundly relational in substance and function.⁶ It understands Christ as universal Lord, and Jesus as demonstrating intimacy and harmony with nature.⁷ In particular, it elevates divine immanence, holding God’s love to be “the fundamental moving force in all created things” that enables creatures to exist

³ *Ibid.*, No. 216.

⁴ *Ibid.*, No. 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Nos. 83, 88.

⁶ *Ibid.*, No. 240.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Nos. 97, 98, 100.

“with” their Creator.⁸ No one is excepted: “Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection.”⁹

Creation is described in similar terms. Its “irreplaceable and irretrievable” beauty transcends the human sphere.¹⁰ Indeed, the world is beyond our ability to explore or understand, given the intricacy of its relational web.¹¹ Its goodness is “of the order of love” such that even apparent evils signify the birth pangs of cosmic renewal.¹² Creation is good both in whole and in part: Ecosystems, species, and individual organisms all have an intrinsic value.¹³ Whereas the classical view emphasized the organism’s instrumental value to those beings above it on a supposed ontological scale, *Laudato Si* both reframes the organism as instrumental to the interconnected whole and focuses on the organism’s intrinsic value.¹⁴ Because the divine Father loves otherkind, we are to elevate their quality of “*being* over that of *being useful*.”¹⁵ In No. 96, Pope Francis references Matthew 6:26 in regard to “the birds of the air” and affirms, here citing Luke 12:6, that “each one of them is important in God’s eyes.” Francis again cites this verse from Luke in No. 221, following with “I ask all Christians to recognize and to live fully this dimension of their conversion.” *Laudato Si* ends with a prayer which states in part: “God of love, show us our place in this world as channels of your love for all the creatures of this earth, for not one of them is forgotten in your sight.”¹⁶

Benedict XVI initiated this emphasis on the creature’s intrinsic value. Published in 2004 just prior to Benedict’s term, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* had asserted

⁸ Ibid., Nos. 77, 88.

⁹ Ibid., No. 77.

¹⁰ Ibid., No. 34.

¹¹ Ibid., Nos. 138, 240.

¹² Ibid., Nos. 77, 80.

¹³ Ibid., Nos. 221, 140, 33.

¹⁴ Ibid., No. 86.

¹⁵ Ibid., No. 69. (emphasis original)

¹⁶ Ibid., No. 246.

that “man . . . is the only creature willed by God for itself.”¹⁷ Given that Benedict’s teaching largely develops the theme of love, this new emphasis may stem from the realization that a loving God wouldn’t designate a class of creatures as available for use, thereby relegating all others to the “user” role. Such a division would not reflect the logic of benevolent social order, or “family,” for which *Laudato Si* explicitly calls, but of exploitation and slavery.¹⁸ To uphold the intrinsic value of each elevates the individual organism’s own viewpoint and compulsion to survive and thrive. In so doing, it brings an element of cross-species equality. Thus, other living beings are never “mere objects” to be exploited at will, but are owed our consideration if not also our care.¹⁹ However, although *Laudato Si* is careful to proscribe treating otherkind as mere objects, it conveys an exceedingly thin theory of animal agency. In its view, nonhuman creatures act to serve each other. They also act in regard to the superempirical sphere: revealing God’s goodness, praising the Creator, and fulfilling their “ultimate purpose” by “moving forward with us and through us towards . . . God.”²⁰

There is a tension between the intrinsic worth of nonhuman creatures and Catholicism’s human-centered theory of value, and *Laudato Si* resolves this, at least to some degree, by placing both terms within the frame of God’s love for creation. As against the technocratic paradigm’s elevation of the subject’s use of logic to attain control over some external object; Pope Francis endorses a view of human being as retaining an ontological privilege—a “preeminence”—on the basis of a constitutive and positive moral freedom.²¹ A loving God, in other words, creates a morally sensitive human who, because tending toward both a relational openness and

¹⁷ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, No. 133. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html (accessed January 31, 2016).

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, No. 42.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, No. 82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, No. 83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Nos. 43, 65, 90, 106, 139.

corresponding reflexivity, is oriented toward an ordered love for all creatures.²² Recent Catholic teaching eschews the traditional vocabulary of Aristotelian substance in favor of an “integral” human at the center of an “integral ecology.” This human makes a “gratuitous,” or agapic, love the highest norm for every action, generating a “culture of care” able to counteract a destructive consumerism.²³ Like Jesus, this human is appreciatively attentive to every being, seeking to discover God in that creature.²⁴ The human’s ultimate aim is to initiate those healing relationships able “to lead . . . creatures back to their Creator.”²⁵

Laudato Si maintains Catholicism’s longstanding distinction between humans and nonhuman “things.”²⁶ Humans possess more than just a general openness and reflexivity—they are the only Earth creatures whose relational powers enable an I-Thou dialogue with God and their human fellows. This accords them a unique dignity.²⁷ In keeping with the logic of family, however: “We do not understand our superiority as a reason for personal glory or irresponsible dominion, but rather as a different capacity which . . . entails a serious responsibility stemming from our faith.”²⁸ An integral ecology moves outward from—and usually returns benefits that enrich—those practices of family life and human society which inculcate respect for humans and other beings.²⁹ And it seeks only to cultivate, not control, their essentially open-ended development. Hence, *Laudato Si* understands the human to be a simultaneously exalted and humble “cooperator with God in the work of creation.”³⁰

²² Ibid., Nos. 58, 240.

²³ Ibid., Nos. 228, 231-232.

²⁴ Ibid., Nos. 226, 233.

²⁵ Ibid., No. 83.

²⁶ Ibid., No. 125.

²⁷ Ibid., No. 119.

²⁸ Ibid., No. 220.

²⁹ Ibid., Nos. 118-199, 127, 213.

³⁰ Ibid., No. 117.

This is a vision of the human as enacting nothing less than a “universal solidarity” with nature as sustained by a sense of “deep communion.” As Pope Francis explains, “[p]aying attention to [the divine manifestation in nature], we learn to see ourselves in relation to all other creatures: ‘I express myself in expressing the world; in my effort to decipher the sacredness of the world, I explore my own.’”³¹ Such solidarity entails a universal reconciliation as exemplified by Saint Francis of Assisi:

‘[F]rom a reflection on the primary source of all things, . . . he would call creatures, no matter how small, by the name of ‘brother’ or ‘sister’’. Such a conviction cannot be written off as naïve romanticism, for it affects the choices which determine our behavior. If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their [sic] immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were . . . radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.³²

As the above exposition indicates, *Laudato Sí* is concerned, primarily, to convey a thick description of the real. Consequently, its explicit treatment of human duties to animals is brief, and occurs under the subtitle “New biological technologies”:

While human intervention on plants and animals is permissible when it pertains to the necessities of human life, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that experimentation on animals is morally acceptable only ‘if it remains within reasonable limits [and] contributes to caring for or saving human lives’. The *Catechism* firmly states that human power has limits and that ‘it is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly.’³³

The synthesis of a God who desires the flourishing of each and an “integral” human being will approach a cross-species justice in terms of a perceived necessity. In 2009, for example,

³¹ *Ibid.*, Nos. 14, 85, 91.

³² *Ibid.*, Nos. 11, 66.

³³ *Ibid.*, No. 130.

Benedict XVI emphasized that we may only use nature “responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs.”³⁴ It can be helpful to imagine this approach as adhering to a concentric pattern, in the sense that central interests hold more ethical weight than peripheral interests, in proportion to their centrality. This is true in regard to a given agential “I” as well as any surrounding array of potential moral patients. For example, given that a shark’s fin is more central to the shark’s flourishing than it is to Sally’s, Sally avoids ordering shark fin soup. At the same time, if potentially lethal whacks to a shark will save Javier’s dog (or family member/friend/fellow human) who is floundering in harm’s way, Javier has warrant to whack away. A focus on necessity will balance two ultimate and incommensurable goods—a universal compassion, and love in its alternative aspect as a fidelity to the relatively near-and-dear—and counsel the avoidance of unnecessary suffering, or nonmaleficence. Put positively, the elevation of nonmaleficence requires the prudential management of resources so as to meet the diverse needs of a creaturely family. Conversely, it requires any harm be justified by either the generation of a greater benefit, prevention of a greater harm, or both.³⁵ While a focus on nonmaleficence is useful, it can be significantly enriched by Merleau-Ponty’s conception of a cross-species being-with.

³⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas In Veritate*, No. 48. http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html (accessed January 31, 2016).

³⁵ Christian Smith gives a general description of a similar moral approach in *What Is A Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 409-410. I offer a more detailed account of this moral logic as applied to the extrahuman sphere in “If You Want Responsibility, Build Relationship: A Personalist Approach to Benedict XVI’s Environmental Vision,” *Environmental Justice and Climate Change: Assessing Pope Benedict XVI’s Ecological Vision for the Catholic Church in the United States*, Jame Schaefer and Tobias Winright, eds. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 34-37.

A Merleau-Pontyan Being-With Grounds the Sense of a Shared Interworld

Articulating a radical break with Cartesian dualism, Merleau-Ponty describes a “knowing” body situated in space and time.³⁶ A quick sketch of three concepts—intentionality, spatiality, and habit—can introduce his thought and inform his notion of being “with.” Merleau-Ponty begins with the observation that a living body seeks, or intends, fulfillment in the larger world which surrounds it. Sight, for example, “is achieved and fulfills itself in the thing seen.”³⁷ It does this in an active, prospective way, as when we focus our gaze precisely in order to see what is there. Importantly, it is not subjective consciousness, but the body as a synergic system which integrates the input from two retinas to accomplish one single gaze.³⁸ As so integrated, the body responds to a sort of invitation or motivation that emanates from some object.³⁹ And although objects both present and absent, material and immaterial can “invite” such attention; the concrete and particular object, as evincing a relative qualitative richness, is prototypical in this regard.

Spatiality shifts the focus to the acting body itself. Because we aim at things through our moving bodies, our most fundamental apprehension of our body regards its functional value.⁴⁰ Correlatively, Merleau-Ponty understands “world” to mean “a collection of things . . . present[ing] themselves to our body as ‘to be touched’, ‘to be taken’, ‘to be climbed over.’”⁴¹ I approach a triangle, for example, through its spatial configuration—which makes explicit its possibilities. Hence, I arrive at its meaning by viewing it from different angles. A given object’s

³⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 407, 475.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 438.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 270, 272.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, vii, 31, 67. Merleau-Ponty does not explain this process. Referencing Edmund Husserl’s focus on the “essence” (form or structure) revealed by a given object, in the sense of its constellation of essential features; he states only that it involves a “spontaneous arrangement” of those features.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 160, 172.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 512.

meaning is neither an eternal idea, nor a collection of its quantifiable characteristics, but the sort of structure expressed by “a certain modality of my hold on the world.”⁴²

Third, it is the arc between an intention and the fulfillment of that intention, as manifested by the body in motion, which makes explicit—in a strongly processual manner—a certain essence or structure. Put differently, a given processual structure, or “gesture,” evinces an intrinsic intelligibility.⁴³ In this way, the “habit” of the knowing body generates meaning. Merleau-Ponty in fact holds behavior-as-form to be an irreducible phenomenon—not to be divided, for example, into those gestures which produce intentional meanings and those which “merely” satisfy material need.⁴⁴ As Dillard-Wright puts it, “[b]ehavior, whether at the animal or human level, . . . has its unity and coherence in meaning itself, a ‘coordination by *meaning*’ that becomes visible when the organism adapts to new circumstances.”⁴⁵ Conversely, we learn when we develop facility in those practices that invite us to recognize the possibility of, and enable us to bring to completion, some arc between available means and desired end.⁴⁶

Understood thus, all bodies that move themselves, whether human or not, are at least to some degree agential. As David B. Dillard-Wright explains, the body’s integration of the subjective and objective poles creates an irresolvable disjunction within consciousness which is *per se* generative. While my own embodiment enables knowledge of others as embodied, I can also withdraw “into the perspective from ‘above’” so as to reflect on others.

⁴² Ibid., 448-449.

⁴³ David B. Dillard-Wright, “Thinking Across Species Boundaries: General Sociality and Embodied Meaning,” *Society and Animals* 17 (2009): 62. As Merleau-Ponty explains, taken in itself, a gesture doesn’t offer up a meaning, but its sense can be “recaptured by an act on the spectator’s part” (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 215).

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 138. See also Dillard-Wright, “Thinking Across Boundaries,” 54-55.

⁴⁵ Dillard-Wright, “Thinking Across Boundaries,” 59 (emphasis original). Dillard-Wright is here referencing Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fischer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 156.

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xxiii, 160.

The imagination produces a virtual body derived from the actual body which explores potential actions, some actually undertaken. Toggling back and forth between the real and the virtual characterizes normal experience, and, without the virtual facets of consciousness, it would be impossible to undertake any meaningful or creative activity or to sympathize with other people or animals. The virtual body generates a nexus of possibility, a phenomenal catalogue of potential actions.⁴⁷

Accordingly, every animal possesses at least some agency in the sense of an “existential freedom, loosely defined, that enables animals to make choices and engage in actions that do not necessarily conform to their species-specific behaviors”—a “freedom to produce and transform one’s own world.”⁴⁸ Such an agency implies an irreducibly idiosyncratic mode of behavior.⁴⁹

In sum, the animal body possesses an “exteroceptivity” which impels it to engage with its context. Importantly, such engagement seeks a mutual intelligibility.⁵⁰ As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “[t]o be a consciousness or rather to be an experience is to hold inner communication with the world, the body and other people, to be *with* them instead of being beside them.”⁵¹ Such a being-with is a “bipolar phenomenon [through which] I learn to know both myself and others. . . . [it is a question of] making explicit my experience, and also his experience as it is conveyed to me in my own, . . . and to understand one through the other.”⁵²

We attain such a being-with through a process of inhabitation. First, we “find others at the intentional origin of their visible behavior”:

The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the

⁴⁷ David B. Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible: The Animal World in Merleau-Ponty* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 38-39.

⁴⁸ Zipporah Weisberg, “Animal Agency: What It Is, What It Isn’t, and How It Can Be Realized,” *Animal Ethics and Philosophy: Questioning the Orthodoxy*, Elisa Aaltola and John Hadley, eds. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 66, 74-75.

⁴⁹ Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 122-123.

⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 394.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 111. (emphasis mine)

⁵² *Ibid.*, 394.

conduct of other people. It is as if the other person's intention *inhabited* my body and mine his. The gesture which I witness outlines an intentional object. This object is genuinely present and fully comprehended when the powers of my body adjust themselves to it and overlap it.⁵³

In other words, we understand the other by taking up its intentional structure, in the sense of its own observable mode of existence.⁵⁴ The second step occurs when I compare the two intentional structures, and perceive the other's intentions in my own body. As Merleau-Ponty describes:

A baby of fifteen months opens its mouth if I playfully take one of its fingers between my teeth and pretend to bite it. And yet it has scarcely looked at its face in a glass, and its teeth are not in any case like mine. The fact is that its own mouth and teeth, as it feels them from the inside, are immediately, for it, an apparatus to bite with, and my jaw, as the baby sees it from the outside, is immediately for it, capable of the same intentions. 'Biting' has immediately, for it, an intersubjective significance. It perceives its intentions in its body, and my body with its own, and thereby my intentions in its own body.⁵⁵

Hence, between my own consciousness and my observation of the other's consciousness in motion, there is an internal relation which frames the other as the completion of the system, such that the parts of my body and of the other's body make up one whole, an "interworld."⁵⁶ For example, even a mere gesture of impatience from a stranger will allow me to access something of his thoughts. On the other hand, "if both of us withdraw into the core of our thinking nature . . . [such that] each of us feels his actions to be not taken up and understood, but [merely] observed," "the other's gaze transforms me into an object, and mine him."⁵⁷

The knowing body is therefore incomplete, in that its structure impels it to enact some sort of relation with each of the myriad others in its world. First I act, structuring my existence, and then I recognize that same structure in another being.⁵⁸ I "synchronize" with it, assimilating

⁵³ Ibid., 214-215, 503. (emphasis mine)

⁵⁴ Ibid., 392.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 410.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 410, 412, 415.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 420.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 239, 520.

its structure so that the other effectively reorders my own being.⁵⁹ We can regard this reciprocity between presence to oneself and to the world as an intercorporeal communion between self and other which tends to deepen over time. On this account, the very structure of animate being tends toward such communion—to enter into relation so as to understand the other, and to grow in understanding so as to be in even closer relation.

Shapiro’s Kinesthetic Empathy Bridges Human and Animal Being

Although Shapiro does not deny our frequent construction of animal experience, he sees a Merleau-Pontyan inhabitation as enabling a “kinesthetic” empathy which uses overlaps in bodily experiencing to bridge human and animal being.⁶⁰ While kinesthetic empathy, as unmediated by Cartesian categories, is a direct apprehension of the animal’s intent and experience; it is neither entire nor pure. It remains, rather, an interpretative act.⁶¹ Nor is it able to erase differences, as evident, for example, in the acute attunement common between predator and prey.⁶²

A game of keep-away and chase with Shapiro’s dog Sabaka serves to illustrate. In this situation, “the invitation ritual, the play itself, the implicit rules and regulations governing the legitimate play area, permitted and prohibited moves, and the object of the game, as well as the conditions ending it, were all quite intricate and yet easily maintained by both players. Even more subtle were the postures, feints, and deceits.” Shapiro clarifies that

⁵⁹ Ibid., 153, 213, 369.

⁶⁰ Kenneth J. Shapiro, “Understanding Dogs through Kinesthetic Empathy, Social Construction, and History,” *Anthrozoös* 3, no. 3 (1990), “What Is It to Be a Dog?: A Qualitative Method for the Study of Animals Other than Humans,” *The Humanistic Psychologist* 31, no. 4 (2003), “A Phenomenological Approach to the Study of Nonhuman Animals,” in *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes and Animals*, eds. Robert W. Mitchell, Nicholas S. Thomson, and H. Lyn Miles (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997).

⁶¹ For example, Shapiro understands the application of kinesthetic empathy to the human-animal relation to rely on a foreunderstanding of two hermeneutical texts, including the relevant construction of a species and traditional natural scientific findings regarding a given animal individual. “The Human Science Study of Nonhuman Animals,” 29; “What Is It to Be a Dog?,” 92. See also “Understanding Dogs Through Kinesthetic Empathy,” 193, regarding the interpretative act and the investigator’s involvement in the hermeneutic circle.

⁶² Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible*, 44.

[i]n the midst of the game, I do not know or anticipate [Sabaka's] moves by inference—although if I stepped back I could infer some of them. Rather, I know the potential space of his moves by inhabiting his bodily potentialities and inclinations. I know his moves by empathizing with him in a broad sense of that term that takes ‘feeling with’ to refer to his vital significances, attitudes and point of view.⁶³

Kinesthetic empathy is a skill developed through involvement over time, preferably through an extended and participatory relationship with a particular animal.⁶⁴

Mutual Recognition of Agency is Constitutive of a Communion Which Says “We’re Home”

While a large body of observations affirm the existence of animal agency, there are multiple reasons why Catholic ethicists might hesitate to acknowledge it.⁶⁵ First and most generally, the critical realism that underlies much of contemporary Catholic ethics can tend to overlook those creatures, including most animals, who have been relegated to society’s margins. This is because critical realism assumes, first, that “real” entities will produce causal effects in the world; and second, that we evaluate a given account of reality by testing its adequacy vis-à-vis the actual living of our everyday lives.⁶⁶ Given animals’ relative social weakness, both assumptions frame them as relatively unimportant. There may be a related reluctance to get too far ahead of conventional views, to answer questions that have not yet been asked, or to acknowledge the desirability of what seems at present to be an unimaginable degree of social change. Another general objection might stem from the ultimate incommensurability of the individual and collectivist viewpoints, such that harder cases may well require the sacrifice of

⁶³ Shapiro, “What Is It to Be a Dog?,” 90.

⁶⁴ Shapiro, “The Human Science Study of Nonhuman Animals,” 29.

⁶⁵ In addition to Shapiro, notable phenomenological investigations of animal agency include the now-classic Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (New York, Harper & Row, 1966); as well as the recent works Leslie Irvine, *If You Tame Me: Understanding Our Connection with Animals*, foreword by Marc Bekoff (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Janet M. Alger and Steven F. Alger, *Cat Culture: The Social World of a Cat Shelter* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); and Marc Bekoff, *Animal Passions and Beastly Virtues: Reflections on Redecorating Nature*, foreword by Jane Goodall (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

⁶⁶ Smith, *What Is A Person?*, 15, 108-112.

individual animals.⁶⁷ More specific to the above exposition, a reflexive appreciation of animal agency and value requires a certain minimum of experience in cross-species relationships. Humans differ widely in their sensitivity to animal behavior and adherence to cultural proscriptions against engagement with certain species.⁶⁸ There is considerable ambiguity, also, in regard to which species possess what sorts of agency; and indeed, an overly-broad application of the concept risks weakening its ethico-political potency.⁶⁹ Finally, although the areas of overlap between human and animal agency are extensive (although as yet largely unappreciated), many species are, as Cynthia Willett puts it, “tuned to modalities of experience and expression inaccessible to humans.”⁷⁰

Laudato Si urges development of a new environmental ethics, and indeed, some are suggesting mid-level principles congruent with a subjective ecology.⁷¹ These include the protection of humans’ empathic capabilities; respect for most animals’ ability to function as a habit-habitat unity; greater protection for domesticated species who cannot survive on their own; a transparency that avoids deceit; a subsidiarity that restores a “small scale society ethos” within larger scale political units, a precautionary principle such as that articulated in the Earth Charter, and reparation or at least alleviation of past harms.⁷² Given space constraints, I focus here on how attention to animal agency can promote Pope Francis’ broader aim of “Care for Our Common Home.” Recall from my introduction Pope Francis’ invitation to move beyond

⁶⁷ Peterson, *Being Animal*, 149.

⁶⁸ Gene Myers, *The Significance of Children and Animals: Social Development and Our Connections to Other Species*, 2nd ed., rev. (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2007).

⁶⁹ Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible*, 40; Weisberg, “Animal Agency,” 63-69.

⁷⁰ Cynthia Willett, *Interspecies Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 97.

⁷¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, No. 210.

⁷² In regard to empathy and habit-habitat unity, see Shapiro, “The Human Science Study of Nonhuman Animals,” 32, 40; in regard to the priority of domesticated animals, see Jay McDaniel, “Practicing the Presence of God: A Christian Approach to Animals,” *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics*, Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 142; in regard to transparency and reparation, see Taylor, *Respect for Nature*, 210-211, 213 and 186-192; in regard to a small scale ethos, see Willett, *Interspecies Ethics*, 74; *Laudato Si* itself endorses a precautionary principle in No. 186.

intellectual and economic ways of approaching creation to the sort of understanding that can “take us to the heart of what it is to be human.” In accord with secular modernity, our treatment of the extrahuman sphere usually oscillates between two approaches: sorting otherkind to facilitate their optimal management and a preoccupation with nature’s utility.⁷³ The alternative is to begin with an inherently social human who seeks fulfillment in some external structure that evinces purpose and so meaning. On a macro level, the living web is paradigmatic in this regard. On a micro level, the paradigm is the in-person encounter between human and animal. As we have seen, humans are not ordered, primarily, so as manipulate a world of passive objects (some of which might be victims with unmet physical needs); but for cross-species interactions that reveal both partners as whole and integral subjects. Put succinctly, a fundamentally “open” sort of embodied interaction roots the self. It is both the proper start point for, and the reservoir that enriches, relationship. Indeed, because the self arises from its relationships, self-continuity entails their maintenance.⁷⁴

Acknowledgement of animal agency can inform, energize and transform embodied interaction. It can inform by highlighting those overlaps which enable the bridging of essential difference. At a minimum, we grasp the way in which an animal relates its species-specific form to its context. Animals, as Dillard-Wright explains, “carry expression in their every movement,” such that “the clown-fish, no less than the marine biologist, expresses the life of the sea.”⁷⁵ At the other end of this continuum, we enjoy the sort of artful and open-ended interchange that enables each party to more fully express their individual identity, as mediated by their species-style. Indeed, because “intentions unfold within directed behavior,” it is through agential

⁷³ Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 114. See also Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 22-25.

⁷⁴ Myers, *The Significance of Children and Animals*, 52, 61.

⁷⁵ Dillard-Wright, *Ark of the Possible*, 47.

expression that the creature reveals its own experience of need.⁷⁶ To understand the other as agential, second, is inherently engaging. Playing with machines can be fun, but we are tantalized by the open character of the interanimate relation.⁷⁷ An exchange of gifts is the implicit logic here. Thus, while attention to need highlights scarcity, a focus on agency generates a perceived abundance. And generally speaking, the more I interact, the more fulfilling I find those interactions. Encounters which incorporate agency, furthermore, hold the potential to transform human understandings and practices. As against the Cartesian dualisms—the assumption of an active, individual, inspirited, intentional, and expressive human as versus a passive, generic, wholly sensate, determined, and mute animal—that discourage a horizontal mutuality, they encourage us to seek out more and better cross-species relationships.⁷⁸ Indeed, such encounters will, over time, foster a relational “complexification,” in the sense of an “upward spiraling of ability and challenge.”⁷⁹

In conclusion, although one can meet a physical need in a mechanical way, one must incorporate animal agency to attain *Laudato Si*'s vision of communion, or what Alejandro R. García-Rivera describes as a mode of “transforming reconciliation.”⁸⁰ Indeed, if we understand communion as requiring a self-understanding which honors the viewpoint of each fellow organism, recognition of agency is constitutive of such communion. In accord with *Laudato Si*'s subtitle, it is precisely this felt sense of a cross-species coinhabitation that tells us we're “home.” Mark Doty has observed that the family pet functions, in today's frenetic world, as a kind of

⁷⁶ Ibid., 47, 101.

⁷⁷ Myers, *The Significance of Children and Animals*, 65-88.

⁷⁸ Anna L. Peterson, *Everyday Ethics and Social Change: The Education of Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 82-109.

⁷⁹ Myers, *The Significance of Children and Animals*, 52. Myers cites Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990) as originating the notion of a relational “complexification.”

⁸⁰ Alejandro R. García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 91.

portable “hearth.”⁸¹ I suggest that our mutually beneficial interactions with animal subjects work in a similar way, helping to ground a sense of an ever more intelligible and abundant cosmos.

I have argued that Catholic social teaching, as oriented toward a cross-species communion, should go beyond its present concern with balancing human and animal need to incorporate an acknowledgment of animal agency. Although Catholicism teaches that the individual organism, as loved by God, can never be a mere object to be used and controlled; its explicit animal ethic centers on a potentially calculative and mechanistic response to animal need. We find an alternative, however, in a Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology that understands every animal to possess some degree of agency, a capability which extends to reception of—and consequent adjustment to—the other’s own intentions and experience. As Shapiro explains, we can use such a kinesthetic empathy to bridge human and animal being. Indeed, we can understand the mutual recognition of animate agency—as informing, energizing and transforming those embodied interactions which nurture the self—to be constitutive of the cross-species communion which makes Earth feel like “our common home.”

⁸¹ Mark Doty, *Dog Years: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).