ANIMALS, ONTOLOGY AND RORTY'S GIRAFFE

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I

Ontology has had plenty to say about animals; do animals have anything to tell us about ontology? It seems to me that consideration of animals raises important questions about the nature of reality and our access to it. In particular, it helps call in question a position that has been developed in the western world following Kant. The position holds that reality only ever appears as a correlate of categories of ours. Hilary Putnam has a lucid, late twentieth-century articulation of this position in *Reason, Truth and History*: "*[W]hat objects does the world consist of?* is a question that it only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description… 'Objects' do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. *We* cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description."[1]

Some form or other of this position is now received wisdom for many philosophical or theological discussions that take place in the wake of thinkers like Heidegger in the world of continental philosophy, or like Thomas Kuhn in the analytic tradition. When stripped of its relativist tendency and given a transcendental grounding, it goes however all the way back to Kant. A position that survives the vicissitudes of two hundred years like this must have something going for it, original intuitions of sufficient power to carry it past its *prima facie* implausibility. For the position affirms something strange. A person in the street, if asked whether objects exist independently of conceptual schemes, would answer that of course they do. The question might seem to them to be so removed from commonsense that it could be asked only by a lunatic, or an academic. But this misunderstands the position, which is not saying that my cat is no more than a construction of mine. It agrees that there is something in space not too far away from me that likes to be close to the fire. The point is rather that the thing that

[1]Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 49, 52 (emphasis original).

is out there is not "in itself" a *cat*. It emerges as a cat only within a certain conceptual scheme of ours that opens the world up in a certain direction, or along certain lines, allowing things with specific contours to emerge for the first time.

It seems to me that the position gains its plausibility by choosing certain kinds of examples and ignoring others. As it has appeared in recent intellectual history, it usually gets off the ground with examples of artefacts, proceeding perhaps to a few mineral examples. If animals turn up at all, it is late in the process, when the parameters have already been set. Inevitably they then seem to be further instances of the general description of an object which has already been developed through the artefact and mineral examples. Even the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, who precisely sets out to break the hold of reductionist Cartesian and Kantian prejudices on the nature of an object, sets up his alternative view in this way. He starts with tools, the famous hammer that first appears as something *zuhanden*, known in as much as it is used, remaining well below the horizon of the theoretical glance. The early part of *Being and Time* sets us up to see the whole world as emerging out of this kind of beginning, with things appearing first as *equipment*, taking on their contours in light of the practical tasks that preoccupy us in the world. When the text gets to natural things, they are also accessed in this way, in that our practical activities set up the logical space where natural things first appear to us. "The wood is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock; the river is water-power, the wind is wind 'in the sails'..."; [2] "(O)nly by the circumspection with which one takes account of things in farming, is the south wind discovered in its Being." [3] A quarrying interest, or presumably a climbing interest, are examples of interests that stand behind our separating the mountain from the plains around it, or from the air into which it reaches, therefore allowing it to appear as an object.

Whatever its relation to naturally occurring minerals, the Putnam thesis seems credible enough when confined to equipment and materials. Our practical interests give items of equipment their point, and enable them to appear as tools, appliances, buildings, clothing. Even when we leave aside questions of why such things should have been constructed, we cannot conceive of them apart from activities and interests of ours (any more than something can appear as food in a world that knows no appetite). Only

[2] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 100.
[3] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 112.

after the application of some sort of conceptual scheme which reflects a set of interests, do such objects appear as objects with definite contours. If we think away our interests, a toaster sitting on top of a table is a set of metal bits on top of a set of wooden bits. Why should anyone group the metal bits together and call them one thing, separating them from the wooden bits, which they call another thing? At other times in fact we group metal bits together with wooden bits and call them "furnishings." If the toaster is seen as a single thing, while the toaster plus the dust around it is not, this is because the toaster suits a purpose of ours, while the toaster plus the dust does not. What makes a difference here, and leads us to group a particular collection of parts as a single thing, is the intent of an artisan or a user. In a time of need, when the niceties of dining have disappeared, and the locale is opened up by people desperate for fuel, the table might disappear into a larger grouping of materials called "a winter's firewood."

There is an important conclusion which seems to follow from this, the view that there is no privileged description of the world. This is not to deny that given a particular opening, there are right or wrong answers to particular questions (it is or is not the case that there is food in the house...). But none of the various descriptions can claim any *large* privilege, as though they get at the way things originally are, and simply reflect back what is there. At best we set things out as they appear within a particular vocabulary of disclosure, and this is by definition only one among many possibilities, determined by a particular set of interests. Sometimes we see a kind of moral recommendation in works of theology or philosophy along these lines, that each act of opening the world needs in principle to be complemented by others, which open up different logical spaces.[4] And this situation seems quite general, so that it makes sense to see *everything* as emerging within a framework of interest that we project, a framework that determines the possible conjunctions and disjunctions that put together a particular view of the world. As regards much of the world, the artificial things and possibly the minerals, this is not implausible. But it seems to me that it ignores *animals*, and that if the first examples considered had been animal examples, rather than cases of equipment or materials, the thesis might have looked quite different. Certainly Aristotle would not have liked the sort of conclusion which Putnam proposes. Aristotle held that there are natural kinds, things

[4]For example Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 193: "Moreover, many models are necessary, since all are partial; thus, those who have found the traditional models of God and human life irrelevant are encouraged to work out new models."

in the world that have their own contours, whatever we think about the matter, and that the highest achievement of our knowledge is to discover the way such things originally are, so that we can bring our lives into correspondence with them. The best examples of natural things of this sort are animals. So Aristotle believes that parts of the world push us to use certain categories, if we are to get them right. When Descartes famously said that animals were machines, he was not just proposing a language which impoverished human lives with regard to the animal creation, but he was getting something wrong. The animals themselves were not as he said they were.[5] To post-Kantian ears this sounds, however, like a fallacy of misplaced concreteness, in that it takes the concepts we use to unify particular parts of the sense-manifold as somehow reflecting reality itself. To twentieth or twenty-first century ears, it often sounds like dogmatism, an insistence that one's own set of descriptions are *the* descriptions.

It is a sign of how far the post-Kantian approach has penetrated that even Aristotelian specialists can fall under its spell. In an introductory book on Aristotle written for students, J.L.Ackrill proposes a version of the "conceptual scheme" approach to our knowledge of objects. He suggests that when Aristotle insists that we can delineate general features of the basic kinds of things that exist, Aristotle is simply generalizing *one* way of looking at the world among many, perhaps the way that comes naturally to one who uses fourth-century Greek grammar. The discussion centres on Aristotle's category of "substance," the idea that there are certain fundamental things in the world, which cannot be reduced either to matter or to collections of qualities, and which are the basic bearers of existence. Ackrill takes a standard pedestrian example here, that of a table which has acquired a new colour. Aristotle, who holds to a metaphysics of substance (the table) and accidents (the colours) says that the same one table has modified one of its qualities, so that the same substance goes on existing in a modified way. But as Ackrill points out, I can equally well describe the change in other ways, for example by saying that with the table's changing colour a *new thing* has come into existence, a red table, where there was a brown table.[6] Here an ontology of substances might give way to an ontology of historical stages, or

[5]It should be acknowledged that recent revisionist interpretations of Descartes deny that he ever held that animals were machines in *this* sense. See Gordon Baker and Katherine J. Morris, *Descartes' Dualism* (London: Routledge, 1996), 102.
[6]J. L. Ackrill, *Aristotle the Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 30.

an ontology that sees the large middle-sized objects of the world as "societies" of stages (Whitehead has sympathy for such an ontology).[7] Certainly we do not normally talk this way. But the point is that we *could* talk this way if we wanted to. This is enough to show that reality is not forcing itself on us, and that Aristotle's ontology of substance is one of a number of choices that are open to us. We are then tempted to think that we make a choice for mere pragmatic reasons. If it can be shown that it all comes back to a kind of choice of ours, made for purposes of ours, then Aristotle's claim that certain descriptions correspond to the way things originally are, looks like dogmatism. The position seems exposed as arbitrarily privileging one scheme among others, the one that is most congenial to a fourth-century Athenian gentleman, who claims that his own scheme is somehow grounded in reality, and that everyone should see the world in this way.

A few such examples are sufficient to attack the Aristotelian conviction that things are what they are independently of what we think about them, and that our knowledge sets out to discover them in their independence and correspond to them. This particular example is however very questionable. It loses sight of something that was evident to Aristotle, that if we want to get the idea of what an entity is, we must look first to an animal, and not to an artificial thing, or to something mineral. Ackrill agrees that the situation is different for living things, but lets his "table" example determine the general position regarding ontology. He should know better than to favour such examples when discussing the philosophy of Aristotle. For Aristotle, a table is not an *entity*. It is an artefact, a collection of entities or entity-parts, placed side by side, united by the intention of an artisan. It is striking how Ackrill's overall point changes its character, and loses its initial plausibility, as soon as we take an animal as the basic example of an entity, a chameleon say, that changes its colour. Is it still just a matter of *choice* whether we agree with Aristotle here, and say that the same one thing has lost and acquired a quality, or join other thinkers who say that a new thing has come into existence? In the case of a chameleon changing colour certainly, we would feel that the second way of talking is bizarre. We would suspect thinkers who try to talk of the chameleon in the second way, as wanting to carry through a metaphysical schema at all costs. Aristotle was not called the philosopher of common sense for nothing. Newman famously said that thinking correctly

[7] "An ordinary physical object, which has temporal endurance, is a society." Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 35.

often comes down to thinking like Aristotle, who "told us the meaning of our words and ideas, before we were born."[8] We talk about things "being" in particular ways all the time. For those who live after Newton, there is often an easy assumption that elaboration of what it is to *be* something starts with particles connected to make things like chairs and tables, and that animals are more complicated versions of these. By contrast, Aristotle thought that we discover what it is to be something when we look first at an animal. This is where we get our strange conviction that the objects of our knowledge go beyond their being just objects of ours. To put the matter in this way however makes it sound precisely like just another choice, the very thing an Aristotelian wants to avoid. To develop an argument here, we will look at a twentieth-century descendant of the Kantian view.

II

Richard Rorty's giraffe makes its appearance in the introduction to his collection of popular essays *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Rorty wants to attack Aristotle's notion of theoretical knowledge, the idea that knowledge aims at the way things are, and is not simply produced or limited by our interests. As well as objects of our knowledge which go back to some interest and activity of ours, Aristotle thinks there are other objects of knowledge which simply attempt to represent the way things are. At an everyday level, Rorty accepts this distinction between two kinds of object. There are things like bank-accounts, and things like giraffes. The one is a human artefact, in that without human interests and constructive activities, there would have been no bank-accounts. Giraffes on the other hand were around long before humans, and did not need humans in order to exist. But Rorty believes that this is a distinction which appears only within a common logical space that has already been opened up by a particular vocabulary. The use of a vocabulary is a human activity. Behind it stand particular human ways of being in the world, and the interests that underpin them. It is not the case that when we contemplate the giraffe, we are somehow accessing a reality that is originally given as itself, free from any needs or interests of ours. So we are not getting in touch with the way that nature itself arranges things,

[8] "(W)e cannot help, to a great extent, being Aristotelians, for the great Master does but analyse the thoughts feelings, views, and opinions of human kind. He has told us the meaning of our own words and ideas, before we were born. In many subject-matters, to think correctly, is to think like Aristotle; and we are his disciples whether we will or no, though we may not know it." John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New York: Image, Doubleday, 1959), 135–36.

with a knowledge that could claim to be uncontaminated by activity of ours. By contrast, Aristotle holds that our beliefs about giraffes pick up the way giraffes already are, identifying their natural contours, and corresponding to these, so that they correspond to a part of nature as it really is. Rorty sums up his position as a denial of this. Our descriptions do not "cut nature at the joints"[9] (Rorty will go on to deny that it has sense to say that nature has any "joints" of its own at all). With this he denies that there is anything that is radically "found," which could be discovered as among the original deposits of the world, the sorts of original existents with distinctive natures which populate Aristotle's world, and which provide the basic contrast against which he sets the products of human artifice. Rorty's position goes back to the familiar affirmation that only through our needs and interests do things appear at all, some of which (like bank accounts) depend on us in a narrow causal sense, while others (like giraffes) do not. This means that none of our knowledge is "contemplative" in the way that Aristotle believed. The framework of connections and disjunctions that stands behind the very constitution of natural things as objects of our knowledge, always goes back to our needs and interests.

Rorty works this out in typically vivid fashion. To identify a giraffe as a giraffe is to cut off a particular part of the space-time continuum and give it a name. We draw a line between a yellow spotted part of the outdoor colour-continuum and what is around it. Why did we draw the line precisely here? Rorty suggests that something like an interest in hunting might well have first set up such a boundary, which gets its meaning from the carnivorous interests of the hunter. If an ant or an amoeba could talk, a different set of interests would come into play, and a world that had different boundaries. For such creatures, living in the worlds opened up by their activities, it is not clear that a giraffe could ever loom as a significant object.[10] So the appearance of giraffes in the world presupposes a certain opening of the world that projects the requisite categories, along with the possible conjunctions and disjunctions they make possible. Because the giraffe requires such lines of projection if it is to appear as such in a world, it has no sense to say that our knowledge of the giraffe "cuts nature at the joints." Given that the boundaries of the objects we come to know are set up by our needs and interests, we cannot claim that the boundaries in terms of which we articulate them,

[9]Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), xxvi.
[10]Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, xxvi.

correspond to boundaries which are also the boundaries of the things themselves.

Again, this is a position which seems straightforward when it is a question of an artefact, or even of a mineral collection like a mountain. But there is surely a significant difference when it comes to a giraffe. In fact, when applied to a giraffe it seems an extraordinary thing to say. For there are parts of a giraffe which we precisely identify as its "joints," the hinges of its limbs, which enable it to move about (Aristotle memorably says that an animal moves about only on condition that part of the animal can remain stationary, while other parts move).[11] We are not arranging a set of nondescript materials into a kind of silhouette here. Rather the materials in question have already understood themselves, so to speak, in a particular direction. The joints we are identifying in a natural object, are parts of nature that the object itself already seems to use as joints. So the categories are not simply the categories that *I* find useful for articulating what is before me. They are also, in a qualified sense, the categories of the giraffe, in that it uses the bits I see as joints as – well – joints. This seems to imply a possibility that my talk does cut nature at the joints. Rorty is however not finished. To see how his argument can be further defended, we need to consider another of his discussions, a train of thought that results in a refusal to allow that it has any sense at all to talk about "the way something is."

III

The discussion in question occurs during a controversy between Rorty and John Searle on the status of the objects of our knowledge. Searle wants to defend a robust notion of truth, and along with it, a robust notion of "mind-independent reality." He distinguishes between features of the world that he calls "intrinsic" and features that he calls "observer relative." Expressions like "mass," "gravitational attraction" and "molecule" name features that are intrinsic. Such things would still be part of reality even if there were no more observers. Searle's example of a feature that is "observer relative" is the breezy "nice day for a picnic".[12] Such a thing can exist only if there are

[11]"For if any one of their parts moves, another part must necessarily be at rest; and it is on this account that animals have joints." Aristotle, *Movement of Animals*, 698a18–19, in *Parts of Animals. Movement of Animals. Progression of Animals* (trans. E.S.Forster; Loeb Classical Library 323; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 441–42.

[12]John Searle, *Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 211. Cited by Rorty, "John Searle on Realism and Relativism," in Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress, Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 72.

observers of a certain sort, the kind who have an interest in going into the country now and then with a food-hamper. Rorty's reply begins by covering some of the same ground as his remarks on the existence of giraffes. When our language talks about molecules, Rorty agrees that it describes things which have largely existed long before anyone talked about them. He does not want to say that our talk constructs the world. But this does not mean that there were molecule-type things waiting for us to give them expression, so that we could then claim that our expressions mirrored, or "corresponded to," things as they were. With this he starts to uncover what is at stake at the deepest level of this debate. People like Rorty do not deny that there is stuff out there that the vocabularies of our various interests turn into the familiar objects of our everyday world. But they deny that there is any designated structure out there, any invisible word that sets out a place from which the thing is to be seen, independently of interests of ours, and which expresses the way the thing is in itself. We are the ones who allow an object to form by talking in certain ways, so that behind every object is a residual reference to our needs and interests. Rorty's way of putting this is to say that reality does not consist of sentence-shaped entities that correspond to sentences of ours. We can test whether our sentences "work," in that they help us cope with the world. But it has no sense to try to ask a further question as to whether they really "correspond" to the world. There is nothing further that the word "correspond" could try to articulate, apart from the fact that they help us cope. Rorty puts his position in this way: "What people like Kuhn, Derrida, and I believe is that it is pointless to ask whether there really are mountains or whether it is merely convenient for us to talk about mountains."[13]

To believe anything else would be to believe that "the world splits itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called 'facts.'"[14] And none of us believes this. There is no language out there which the things of the world use to describe themselves. It should be noted how radical this position is. It is not saying that reality may not be as we think – a position that belongs within a traditional metaphysical scheme, which is open to the rejoinder that if our languages work, then it is at least clear that they do not contradict the way that the world is. Simon Blackburn presses this rejoinder, insisting that a particular map helps us cope "precisely because it represents the landscape correctly."[15] But Rorty wants to argue that no

[13]Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 72.

[14]Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5.

[15]Simon Blackburn, *Truth, A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Penguin, 2005), 158.

useful general meaning can be given to the phrase "represents correctly" at all. In his view, the theoretical ambitions of traditional metaphysics towards something beyond a pragmatic account serve no purpose and are best abandoned. Metaphysics, with its view of a world which our talk aims to represent, is itself a particular way of talking which can be surpassed. Rorty refers to Chesterton's remark to the effect that if pragmatism is based on human needs, humans have a need to go beyond pragmatism. Rorty turns the remark around, saying it shows that metaphysics is based on a need of ours, one we can *outgrow*.[16] In other words we need to overcome the urge to ask the kind of question which Blackburn still wants to ask, recognizing that such questions are pointless.

It is striking how certain aspects of the Aristotelian scheme show themselves clearly for the first time when they are reflected in such a position. For the Aristotelian scheme to work, it is not enough that there be something out there which we can talk about. Rather the *concepts* within which we talk about it must also be dictated in some sense by the thing that we are describing. To the post-Kantian tradition this seems impossible. Rorty agrees that the world delivers over materials which can be connected in various ways. But on the question of how they should be connected, the world remains silent, in that it does not split itself up into sentence-shaped chunks called facts. Such a position represents a large and significant philosophical shift. At the deepest level, it reflects perhaps a loss of belief in God. Rorty himself tends to see it this way. To believe that there is a way that things fundamentally are, beyond the various ways in which they appear for us, is to believe in a deep identity of some sort, one ultimately put in place perhaps by an original creating spirit, which offers a fundamental measure to our knowledge.[17] (Aquinas held the thesis of the "truth of things", that things are knowable by us only in as much as they are known by God – that our knowledge does not correspond to a set of materials which it forms into "objects," but to a creative knowing glance that inscribes things with a primitive identity).[18] Rorty refers to the thesis of natural kinds as the view that there is a language of things themselves in which they describe

[16]Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 78.

[17]"The supposition that truth, as well as the world, is out there is a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own." Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 5.

[18]"(T)he forms of things are the impressing of the divine knowledge in things." Thomas Aquinas, *Truth* (3 vols.; trans. Robert W. Mulligan S.J.; Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952), 1:58.

themselves. He sees it as nonsense, given that nothing talks outside of human beings. For the Aristotelian tradition, however, it relates to the place of teleology in the scheme of things, the thought that the very existence of a living thing is a kind of striving. On this understanding, the exercise of even the most primitive sort of life is itself already a kind of interpretation, reflecting an implicit self-understanding, which looks at us from out in the world. This was the sense in which Aristotle thought that natural reality had the beginnings of its own language, not in the sense that animals speak, but that they have already implicitly understood themselves, and that the word of a speaker can bring this to articulation. If reality has a teleological dimension, it already has contours of its own, waiting to be articulated in a word.

IV

The Kantian tradition has however a reply to this. In its late twentieth-century pragmatist version, it suggests that the teleological way of talking (that my cat is nosing around the kitchen because he wants his dinner) is itself one of many possible ways of talking about animals, that is good for particular purposes. Humans do not get far in dealing with animals if they restrict themselves to a vocabulary of initial states and covering laws. They do much better to use a teleological vocabulary. But this is not to say that such a vocabulary, or the objects that appear in its wake, are in any way privileged. They are just ways of talking alongside other ways. The Kantian tradition regarded teleological talk as going back to this. It might be the most useful vocabulary for us to use in our dealings with animals, but this does not mean that it in some way picks up the reality of the animal as it is. The reality of a teleological entity is only ever "as if."[19] It should not claim to correspond to the way things are. This shows again the ultimately subject-centred quality of such an approach. For it is *to us* that it appears *as if* some natural things had ends of their own, or a viewpoint of their own. Rorty gives this sort of approach a pragmatic twist, proposing that we should see our vocabularies simply as instruments that help us cope with the world. So long as they achieve their purpose, well and good. No further end is served by asking the metaphysical question "but do these vocabularies also articulate the way things *really are*?" Kant and Rorty share the familiar

[19]Kant calls teleology a "regulative" and not a "constitutive" conception. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, II, I, 376 (trans. James Creed Meredith; Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), 24.

common thread that objects spring up as a result of the connections and disconnections which our categories, or our "final vocabularies" bring into play. In this sense, an object like a giraffe comes into play in much the same way as does an object like a mountain, emerging in the wake of a set of historical concepts which define possibilities of similarity and difference along a particular line. The word "giraffe" belongs in a taxonomy, a kind of grid that situates the giraffe in relation to other concepts around it. A giraffe is a mammal, something that is more like a zebra than it is like an emu. For Rorty, there is nothing behind such concepts except the accidents of history, as humans cope with the world around them. He is not of course worried by the sophistication of contemporary zoological taxonomies, given that such scientific vocabularies are just superior ways of coping. So there is no point to saying that such vocabularies attempt to grasp the way things really are (as in the Aristotelian position). The only grounding, if it can be called such, is pragmatic, going back to our historical ways of coping. Anything else would effectively see mountains and giraffes waiting with a preferred description of themselves, for a human explanation which "corresponded" to them. While Aristotle believes that the *teleology* of a living thing is precisely such a preferred description, waiting to be put into words by humans, Rorty believes that teleology is just one further concept we have evolved, to help cope with particular life situations.

Is there any argument that can help establish that animals have a peculiar ontological import here, giving a privilege to particular ways of talking and the realities that they capture? I do not think there is an argument exactly. But it is possible to illustrate a kind of choice that faces us in the everyday, and shows perhaps where Aristotle's view begins. It concerns not so much the situation where we observe the world around us and try to find useful ways of talking about it, but the situation where we face on to parts of the world around us in as much as they *come at us* in some way, even perhaps asking us for our help or our friendship. Contemporary thought often recognizes this possibility, and acknowledges its distinctiveness. But it tends to limit it to our relations with other humans, and therefore to miss its wider ontological significance. Jane Heal holds that "(o)ur relations with other people do not have the same structure as our relations with inanimate objects, plants or machines. We do not deal with our family members, friends, colleagues or fellow citizens as we do with volcanoes, fields of wheat

or kitchen mixers…"[20] Such an approach heads to anthropology, or ethics, focusing on what humans are for us, or should be for us. It misses a broader point that could have been made had animals as such been included in the list. It is odd in fact that animals are not included in Heal's list, which neatly jumps over the category that normally stands between human and plant. Could it be that the kind of relation in question forms the basis of friendships (or perhaps other forms of appreciation), precisely because it is a relation which allows the *reality* of another entity to appear, something that exists beyond its status as a mere object for observers. And this might be the beginning of our sense of reality generally, as opposed to the useful objects we project to help us find our way in the world.

There is an interesting example of the various possibilities in a recent popular film, the Dreamworks Animation production *Madagascar* (2005). Three animals from the New York Zoo find themselves after an unlikely series of misadventures in Madagascar, where they discover that, as the blurb says, "it's a jungle out there!" The animals, a lion, a zebra, a giraffe and a hippo, are old friends and relate easily to one another in a stream of running gags and staged antagonisms. Once they arrive back in the jungle however, the lion finds to his alarm that he is reverting to his wild state. He starts to view his friend the zebra as *steak*. There are funny scenes where the lion is running after his friend, and suddenly sees up ahead of him, not a zebra but a portion of meat, ready to be eaten. In other words the zebra is becoming an object that exists as caught in a network of interests projected by the observer. His reality is being reduced to food, something that exists only as the correlate of a subjective view, picking up significance (its "joints") only in relation to the interests of the one observing. Food is a correlate of appetite, so that we can think of food only in relation to organisms that need to eat. The film illustrates how most animals exist for other animals on the one side, as objects caught in the projections of interest and appetite, and also the kind of move which can lead beyond this, on the other. In the film, the lion is first of all a friend of the zebra. Friendship seems to be an example of the kind of move which gets beyond the relations of object to subject, to an appreciation of the reality of the other.

This move does not normally seem to be open to animals. At least it is never open to them in its fullness, however close they seem to get to it at times, with their uncanny ability *almost* to articulate attitudes and feelings

[20] Jane Heal, *Mind, Reason and Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 42.

we would easily recognize if we saw them in human beings (the indignation of a cat, the guilty look of a dog). But there is no sign that the cat ever comes to see or appreciate the reality of a mouse, as a small rodent with a family to feed. The cat sees it simply as prey. This is to say that it sees it only as it is framed by the interests of a cat. (There is a cartoon that has an adult cat saying to a young cat "how many times have I told you to play with your food before eating it!") It escapes the cat that the mouse might be an entity with interests of its own, a family to feed and so on.

This move is however clearly open to humans. The fact we can become friends of animals opens a possibility of seeing the things of the world as having a reality of their own, and not simply appearing as framed and limited by the interests of a subject. We have to imagine a passage so familiar to us that we do not notice it. It is the transition from observing something as inanimate, to the moment where we react to its being *alive*. We often associate such a passage with a sense of alarm, in that we are concerned as to whether the animal might hurt us. But in itself the feeling is different from sheer alarm, quite different for example from the feeling we might have when we suddenly realize we may be threatened by a rockfall. It is rather the awakening we experience when we suddenly feel a tug on the other end of a fishing-line, or realize that what we thought for a moment was a telephone answering-machine is in fact a live person at the other end of the line, or the moment of embarrassment when we have been talking to ourselves in an empty room, and realize that the room is not empty. There is another agent out there, who is not us, and has quite different interests from ours, and who is moving *in relation to us*. The situation requires an odd kind of consent from us, a consent that acknowledges the reality of another who faces us, and is not simply a silhouette that appears from interests of ours. It is a consent we are not forced to give, in that we can choose to stand off and regard the antics of the animal in the same way as we regard an avalanche on a mountain. But someone who resolutely did this through the whole of a life would be a very strange person. Before we know about it, most of us consent to acknowledge the reality of the animal that looks back at us from a set of interests that are not ours, which we can however register. This means we acknowledge that there is a way the animal is, and accept that it is not just an object formed by a set of interests of ours. We can see mice as "vermin," and can at least imagine them as "food." Here we are forming materials of the world into objects that are put together by ourselves and our interests. But humans are also capable of making friends of mice, seeing them with a certain sympathy, as even rather like us. C.S. Lewis has an account of a

mouse that made no attempt to run away from him when in a trench under bombardment.[21] In *A Man and His Dog* Thomas Mann describes his dog being led off for treatment at a university clinic “looking back at me with a frightened and bewildered face.”[22] This original sympathy has been much noticed in recent decades. It can be extended to plants, and even perhaps, in a seriously qualified, limit-case kind of way, to minerals. To see plants or minerals as real is to take up something like this relation towards them. I want to suggest that it is where our sense of reality *generally* begins, and also our interest in metaphysics and ontology, the reflective discussion of our conviction that things really are in a certain way. It is the contemplative moment of our dealings with the world, where we are caught up in the reality of a thing that has nothing to do with us, and exists gloriously beyond our needs and interests.

[21]C.S.Lewis, *Surprised By Joy* (London: Collins, 1959), 157.
[22]Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice; Tristan; Tonio Kroger; Mario and the Magician; A Man and His Dog; The Black Swan; Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man* (trans. H.T.Lowe-Porter; London: Secker and Warburg/Octopus, 1979), 541.