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Being with other animals: Transitioning toward sustainable food futures

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How do non-human animals (hereafter animals) fit into sustainable food futures? This question prompts ethical reflection. However, especially in times of transformative change, one should not overlook ontological assumptions before engaging in ethics. We follow up on the work of the late Australian philosopher Val Plumwood as she prominently made this move to the ontological level when considering the edibility of animals. As she invites one (1) to listen to animals as well as (2) to embody one's own edibility, salient ontological assumptions about how humans relate to other animals, and the rest of reality, rise to the surface. While Plumwood also developed a modest ethical framework to address animal edibility, her ontological approach is highlighted here, especially as it appears to point toward moral relativism. Plumwood's ontological approach is further developed, notably by unraveling the dualism between self and other. Doing so results in a more non-conceptual way of relating to other animals. As a genuinely interdependent way of engaging with reality, it appears most relevant to considering what role animals might have in sustainable food futures.

KEYWORDS

Plumwood, dualism, edibility, ontology, sustainability, food, moral relativism

1. Introduction

The role and extent of using non-human animals (animals hereafter) in sustainable food futures is widely debated, involving multiple disciplines, perspectives, and numerous concerns (Weis and Ellis, 2020). Whether one should consider animals as edible is hotly debated. Animal edibility features prominently in many dietary discourses that take sustainability seriously, from the abstinence proposed by veganism (Twine, 2018) to the valuing of animals as part of regenerative agriculture in more omnivorous diets (Fairlie, 2010). While increasing social concern about animal wellbeing in some geographical regions calls for less intensive husbandry systems (Rodenburg et al., 2020), increased demand for animal protein may ramp up intensive livestock production (Henchion et al., 2021). Parallel to these developments, plant-based alternatives to animal products as well as cell-based production of meat are considered relevant to sustainable food futures (Ismail et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore concerns about emerging zoonotic diseases, raising questions about the risks and threats ensuing from the ways in which billions of animals are bred and slaughtered globally each year (Lawler et al., 2021). Moreover, animal agriculture can be measured in terms of its relation to biodiversity, soil health, and climate change (Van Zanten et al., 2018). In relation to this, human-induced global heating can create increased risk of heat stress in animals, making animal husbandry more difficult in certain geographical regions (Thornton et al., 2021).

The one certain thing about animals and their edibility in sustainable food futures is change, the course of which remains uncertain. Philosophy can help to deal with the uncertainty surrounding the edibility of animals in sustainable food futures. Specifically, ethics provides a way to clear up ambiguity. For instance, one might settle after deliberate theorizing, as various animal ethicists and animal studies scholars have, with the reasoned conviction that one should strive not to consume animals (Katz and McPherson, 2019). That clears away much of the ambiguity about the edibility of animals, as they are basically removed from the plate altogether.

The Australian philosopher Val Plumwood took issue with this way of cutting through ambiguity, resorting back to ontology before engaging in ethics. How do humans and other animals fit into reality? The way one understands reality generally affects one's ethics. She for instance took issue with what she called ontological veganism, the idea of "universal abstention from all use of animals as the only real alternative to mastery and the leading means of defending animals against its wrongs" (Plumwood, 2012, p. 78). This, for Plumwood involves an ontological mistake, as it fails to acknowledge the ways in which humans and other animals are edible, inextricably part of trophic webs.

Plumwood herself did provide an ethical framework, a "context-sensitive semi-vegetarian position, which advocates great reductions in first-world meat-eating and opposes reductive and disrespectful conceptions and treatments of animals, especially in factory farming" (2012, p. 78). Importantly, Plumwood's ethical position emerges out of ontological questioning, of bringing attention to the ways in which humans believe themselves to fit into reality. It is Plumwood's emphasis on ontology that makes her work strikingly relevant on the cusp of transitioning toward sustainable food futures. Transitions inevitably move away from existing frames of reference, including for instance current forms of ethical theorizing and conceptualization. Ontology requires one to take a step back. To explore not only how humans and other animals fit into reality, but also how to engage in this exploration. Here, Plumwood's gesturing toward a more non-conceptual way of being in the world and engaging with other animals proves helpful.

2. To listen and to be edible

In her book *The Eye of the Crocodile*, Plumwood provides a harrowing account of her famous near-death experience, being preyed upon by a crocodile. Barely making it out alive, she was changed forever. It made her take every effort to learn from her "saurian teacher", whom she described as "a wrestling master and a far better judge than I of my incautious character, the precarious nature of human life, and of various other things I needed to know and have striven to pass onto others" (2012, p. 10). The attack set her on a path to undo the misunderstandings humans have at the level of ontology, about how humans fit into reality together with non-human others. Ontological misunderstandings could lead to what Plumwood calls "hyper-separation", a severe disconnect between modern humans and the rest of natural reality as a result from dualistic thinking. Dualistic thought patterns separate, for instance, humans from animal and mind from matter, carving up reality in opposing concepts (Plumwood, 2012). Plumwood recognizes this dualistic thinking in the way some fail to see the mind, agency, and ingenuity of other creatures and living beings. It is an example of how the dualism between humans and animals, as well as between mind

and matter, reinforce each other, as if human consciousness were a glimmer of mind in a material, meaningless, inert world. Plumwood believed one should instead take seriously that mind is not limited to the human realm but found throughout the nonhuman world (2009). Another dualistic misunderstanding according to Plumwood is to believe that one has transcended predation, effectively placing oneself outside of trophic webs (2012). To avert such ontological misconceptions, she invites one (1) to listen and attune to non-humans (Plumwood, 2009) and (2) explore how one fits into trophic webs, like other non-human organisms (Plumwood, 2012). These two suggestions not only help to unravel dualistic knots in one's understanding of reality, but also sketch, by means of an open-ended exploration, a new way of relating to non-humans.

3. Respectful use, an oxymoron?

For Plumwood, the widespread exploitation of animals in intensive and industrial agriculture reduces animals to mere "meat" with not much further value beyond their edibility (2012, p. 89). She called it "the ideology of mastery" (2012, p. 78). To reduce an animal to mere meat demonstrates a lack of respect. It exemplifies dualism in the way it (ontologically) separates humans from nonhumans and (ethically) how it values the former to the detriment of the latter.

Plumwood also resisted the pull toward what she called "ontological veganism", the idea of a "universal abstention from all use of animals as the only real alternative to mastery and the leading means of defending animals against its wrongs" (2012, p. 78). For Plumwood, ontological veganism emphasizes respect too single-mindedly, to the effect of rendering animals, like humans, not edible at all. This also demonstrates dualism, however not for separating humans from non-humans, but by (ontologically) failing to see that all living beings – both human and non-human – participate in trophic webs and by (ethically) putting a wedge between respect and edibility. Because of this, Plumwood regarded ontological veganism as dualistic by generalizing the status of animals as not edible, and in denying humans all forms of predation while allowing predation in the natural realm. Both assumptions together overlook possibilities of "respectful use" to the detriment for instance of those relying on consuming animals, including various Indigenous peoples (2012, p. 87).

In choosing neither side, Plumwood carved out a way of engaging with other animals that includes both edibility and respect. In-between the dualistic positions of "use without respect" and "respect without use", Plumwood took seriously "respectful use", resulting in her own "context-sensitive semi-vegetarian position, which advocates great reductions in first-world meat-eating and opposes reductive and disrespectful conceptions and treatments of animals, especially in factory farming" (2012, p. 78).

4. Some responses to Plumwood

In response to Plumwood, Alloun (2015) agrees with her critique of dualism. Alloun points out that merely drawing a wider moral circle to include sentient animals while leaving out the rest of non-human nature fails to disentangle a dualistic ontology. In doing so, Alloun envisions a less dualistic veganism. Respecting sentient beings alone is not enough, it would have to include a sense of interconnection as well as care for non-sentient beings and

collectives. By doing so, she distances herself from a form of veganism that takes sentience to be necessary for moral consideration. To what extent this aligns with Plumwood's context-sensitive semi-vegetarianism that allows for "respectful use", however, remains a question.

Montford and Taylor (2020) do take issue directly with Plumwood's ethical stance of context-sensitive semi-vegetarianism by arguing that it "is not contextual enough" as "some Indigenous scholars have argued that veganism may in fact be more consonant than meat-eating with traditional Indigenous worldviews" (2020, p. 129). Here, however, there seem to be different viewpoints, including those that apparently do align more with Plumwood's context-sensitive semi-vegetarianism (e.g., Belcourt, 2019). Struthers Montford and Taylor also question the way in which, for Plumwood, when it comes to "respectful use", "Indigenous human interests appear to always trump the interests of non-human animals" (134).

According to Gruen and Jones (2015), "[t]he fact that Plumwood almost became a crocodile's supper and that all of us could be consumed as "prey" in certain contexts is an important recognition of our vulnerability. But this recognition is distinct from the social categorization of certain others as edible" (2015, p. 163). Gruen and Jones (2015), like Alloun (2015), and Montford and Taylor (2020) aspire to co-exist with other animals on a basis of respect that excludes their edibility. While these scholars generally endorse Plumwood for her overall critique of ontological dualism, they part ways when it comes to the practical issue of animal edibility. Much of the disagreement, in other words, happens at an ethical level, where everyone develops their own respective position and supportive argumentative structure. Here, the question becomes, what, if anything, should one do with respect to such moral disagreement? Such disagreement is inevitable. Moreover, we do not believe that anyone is "right" in an objective or universal sense. In fact, Plumwood's ontological criticism itself appears to point toward moral relativism, something that remains unnoticed, apparently even by Plumwood. While her context-sensitive semi-vegetarianism makes room for a range of moral views, it does in the end prescribe what one should, and should not, do with animals. Plumwood's context-sensitive semi-vegetarianism could be taken as a theoretically developed moral perspective, but it is equally, or perhaps above all, a moral view of one, singular human being. Any ethical prescription will inevitably be relative to the person and often broader community holding such a view (Prinz, 2007).

5. Does Plumwood's ontological critique imply moral relativism?

Plumwood's ontological work dovetails rather well with moral relativism. Just as human bodies are part of certain trophic webs, human minds are embodied and enmeshed in a particular socio-ecological setting, affected by a lifetime of experience. Looking at human morality from such a perspective, it makes sense to view it as relative to the interplay between individuals and their lifelong socio-ecological context. Prinz (2007) has developed a view of morality as arising out of the ways in which emotions are shaped (triggered or tempered) in specific cultural and social settings across time. On Prinz's account, moral concepts such as fairness involve moral sentiments of disapprobation or approbation, all of which can be traced back to the emotions, such as anger, out of which these

arose during upbringing or other social interactions of an individual (2007). Moral beliefs follow from how one is (and has been) in the world. What one believes that one "ought" to do, follows from how one's moral sentiments have been and are shaped.

Some might worry that this moral relativism makes ethical deliberation superfluous, or even that it results in moral nihilism (Prinz, 2007, p. 288). However, moral relativism does not necessarily deny moral truth and meaning. Restricting the moral truth claim to an individual (or a community) does not render it meaningless by itself. Moral beliefs are true from a specific point of view (Prinz, 2007, p. 288). Moreover, moral deliberation could still be helpful. Others could, for instance, point out inconsistencies in the values one holds and the actions one takes (Prinz, 2007, p. 290). Ethical perspectives (including both normative theories and individual viewpoints) such as Plumwood's own could still be helpful, much like fiction, in fostering moral imagination (Rorty, 2006). Moral disagreement is to be expected as to whether animals should have a place in sustainable food futures, and if so, what sort of role. Ethics cannot solve this moral question. Moral dialogue can however help to enrich each other's moral imagination, to help each other carve out one's own moral outlook. Instead of determining who is right, the question becomes what does one genuinely believe? Moreover, moral relativism along the lines developed by Prinz might make one understand the particularity of one's own moral perspective, and to take seriously that another point of view might also be "right" (Prinz, 2007, p. 208). Such humility could make one more interested in how others live their lives and experience reality (Nieuwland, 2022).

Interestingly, this sort of humility resonates with Plumwood's two ways of relating to non-human others. To really listen to others, or attune to them, one needs to let go of many preconceptions. In a way, to listen is an attempt to diminish the limitations of one's own viewpoint by genuinely considering other perspectives. Similarly, the "prey" humility that Plumwood tries to instill in us requires that one sees, for instance, how inexperienced and ignorant one may be about co-existing with predators. If one is ready to follow Plumwood's lead, however, there are still some other concerns that deserve further attention.

6. Can Plumwood disentangle the dualism of others?

Plumwood aims to diminish overt dualism while relying on language and concepts to convey her message (just as this article, of course), which are inherently dualistic. These mental phenomena almost inescapably carve up the world in dualistic terms, separating subjects from objects (Loy, 2019). In other words, the way Plumwood describes another way of relating may inadvertently reinforce dualism, as it involves language. Plumwood indeed appears to recognize the limitations of language, as she does not describe in detail how one should listen to non-human others or embody edibility. Some might feel that Plumwood leaves one hanging when she asks to "re-imagine the world in richer terms that will allow us to find ourselves in dialogue with and limited by other species' needs, other kinds of minds", only to add that "I'm not going to try to tell you how to do it. There are many ways to do it" (2009). While Plumwood eloquently diagnoses (*via* language) where dualistic thinking goes awry and indicates two different ways of relating to the (non-human)

world, readers may get somewhat lost in understanding how to foster such a new way of relating.

Moreover, as Plumwood aims to reach those under the spell of dualism, one might wonder whether she succeeds in getting the message across at all. As Christopher Cohoon worries, what if “a person sincerely wishes to listen for non-human expressions of mind but finds that she hears nothing – because of the sedimented habits or because these expressions resonate feebly for post-industrial humans”? (2021, p. 178). How does one learn to listen? When one has always looked at animals (and conceptualized them both implicitly and/or explicitly) as merely individuals acting out their instinct, it is quite a shift to open to a more mindful presence of others. The non-human songs might fall on tone-deaf ears.

According to Cohoon (2021), the idea of embodying edibility holds more leverage to undo the dualism between human and non-human. Asking how one might be edible by others could engender kinship, as “reflection upon one’s own edibility ... generates compassion for other edible beings ...” (2021, p. 186). We share Cohoon’s concern about the ability and willingness of post-industrial humans to listen to non-human beings, and that considering oneself as edible might engender kinship across species. However, we do not see how considering one’s edibility is necessarily much more compelling for post-industrial humans compared to listening and attuning to animals. Both require a willingness to explore with an open mind how one relates to non-human beings. Moreover, reflection could miss the mark, as it might quickly become a discursive exercise, a thought-based activity, to think of oneself as being part of a larger metabolic system, rather than embodying it.

Finally, for Plumwood, it took a voracious crocodile to shift her outlook on the world in the way she invites us to also explore. As Plumwood explained it herself, she was living an illusion of being separate from the rest of nature. Breaking through this illusion was not only brutal, but also rare:

For a modern human being from the first, or over-privileged world, the humbling experience of becoming food for another animal is now utterly foreign, almost unthinkable. ... In the absence of a more rounded form of the predation experience, we come to see predation as something we do to others, the inferior ones, but which is never done to us. We are victors and never victims, experiencing triumph but never tragedy, our true identity as minds, not as bodies. Thereby we intensify and reinforce illusions of superiority and apartness. Since the potential for more corrective and chastening forms of experience has been eliminated from normal life, there is less and less experience available of the type that can correct the illusion (2012, p. 13).

Plumwood’s own ontological critique, however, cannot live up to the paradigm-shifting experience of being attacked by a crocodile. What could bring about such a shift in how one experiences reality? Here, one might go outside and become more intimate with one’s own ecological context, perhaps “rewild” oneself (Gammon, 2018). It is a sort of life that aligns with Plumwood’s own life, who for a long time lived on a mountain in Budawang National Park, New-South Wales, Australia (Rose, 2013). In addition to this more practical approach of exploring embodiment within ecological systems, there is a further dualism to disentangle. While this might not appear to be able to do the heavy lifting of rewilding oneself (let alone, surviving a crocodile attack), getting at this remnant dualism could nonetheless engender an unmistakable shift in how one relates to reality. This shift pertains

to the separation of self and other, a potent dualism perhaps still lingering in Plumwood’s own work.

7. Plumwood and the dualism of self

Turning toward Plumwood’s invitation once again, both ways – to listen, and to embody edibility – of attuning to the nonhuman world might imply the sense of a separate self. The invitation to listen to nonhuman others could reinforce a sense of being a subject listening to an object, including further conceptualization of one’s perception (Loy, 2019). For instance, hearing the call of a black-tailed godwit out in the field gets easily straightjacketed into concepts such as “me”, “black-tailed godwit”, “call”, “bird”, etc. Similarly, embodying edibility could also reify a sense of being separate, of being an individual that is subject to the threat of predation. It is a dualism between self and other so central to the Western dualistic philosophical rendering of the world that one is quick to miss it, perhaps even Plumwood. A subtle dualism, that nevertheless strongly colors how one relates to others (Loy, 2019).

There are different ways to unpack this dualism. First, the hypothesis of an independently existing autonomous agent can be investigated by scientific means. Through such a lens the supposedly independent self appears to be comprised of myriad neurological pathways (Davey and Harrison, 2018), a fully embodied system that cannot be separated from the environment and its affordances (De Wit et al., 2017). Biologically, the embodied human individual appears an ecosystem in and of itself (Beever and Morar, 2016), dependent on an unimaginable number of non-human beings living inside human bodies that, as symbionts, enable growth and development of the individual (Gilbert et al., 2012). Moreover, we are always ecologically embedded, even transitively interdependent with the biosphere at large (Nieuwland and Meijboom, 2019).

A second way to unpack the dualism between subject and object takes a contemplative and less conceptual route. While the scientific approach employs more conceptual machinery to unpack the dualism between subject and object, this contemplative approach eschews further conceptualization. Moreover, any conceptualization already in place is further loosened up by giving way to a more non-conceptual way of being. As such, the subject/object dualism is explored within one’s own awareness, to see how it arises. Interestingly, much of the subject/object dualism appears to arise out of thoughts and concepts. These mental phenomena tend to coalesce together, endlessly self-referencing to the point of creating the illusion of a separately existing entity across time, a sense of self. When one allows these thoughts to subside rather than becoming engaged with them, a sense of presence emerges (Loy, 2019).

Of course, letting go of “oneself” is easier said than done. Many, when trying to just sit still, get quickly pulled into thought. Thoughts often direct attention away from presence, going back into one’s past, anticipating the future, or conceptualizing the presence rather than letting it be (Brandmeyer and Delorme, 2021). Throughout history, various traditions have developed a plethora of contemplative practices to touch into this sense of presence (Loy, 2019; Henning and Henning, 2021). Meditation has garnered attention from the scientific community, which has started to research the way in which such contemplative practice affects one’s neurobiological structures so as to promote compassion (Singer and Klimecki, 2014; Josipovic, 2016) and diminish the dualistic separation between subject and

object (e.g., Josipovic, 2014). This further disentanglement of the dualism between self and other is associated with caring dispositions regarding “others” throughout contemplative traditions (Loy, 2019). Desires and preferences that revolve around the egoic center of self indeed appear to lose some of their gravitational force once the egoic center drops (Josipovic, 2016; Loy, 2019; Ramm, 2021). Moreover, such non-dual presence allows one not only to genuinely feel one’s moral sentiments but also for novel emotions to arise that may prove highly relevant to exploring new ways of relating to other animals. For instance, emotions such as wonder and awe are quickly overlooked in a more conceptual rendering of non-human nature, while these may very well prove profound in how humans relate to non-human nature (Fingerhut and Prinz, 2020; Nieuwland, 2022).

Plumwood attempts to undo the dualism between humans and non-humans by demonstrating how humans are inextricably part of nature and its processes. The contemplative approach deepens this by cultivating a mind that sees beyond dualism. As such, it offers a radical reevaluation of how humans could relate to non-human others. First, by being present one is more able to feel one’s moral sentiments and to explore other emotions such as wonder and awe, that might have been overlooked in shaping human-animal relations. Second, decreasing the sense of a separate self and of separation between subject and object could promote caring dispositions. Third and finally, as the contemplative approach offers a genuinely interdependent way of engaging with reality, it appears most relevant when it comes to sustainability.

8. Conclusion: Toward sustainable food futures by being with other animals

The concept of sustainability, much like edibility, allows for a range of value-laden interpretations and operationalizations. Generally, sustainability involves (implicitly or explicitly) an acknowledgment of the disconnect between humans and the natural world, and of the ways in which this has become (and perhaps always has been) self-defeating, let alone destructive for many humans and non-humans (Jamieson, 1998). The need for sustainability dovetails with Plumwood’s critique of hyperseparation and her attempt to disentangle the dualism between humans and non-humans. Both sustainability and Plumwood’s work aim to reconnect across the divide, and to forge a better sort of co-existence. However, while the concept of sustainability generally indicates change, as for example developing sustainable food futures implies an alternative to the systems already in place, it is easily appropriated at a more superficial level, leaving untouched dualistic undercurrents that might prove problematic (Jamieson, 1998). In other words, when sustainability is considered the solution, one might overlook that the need for such a concept in the first place may require more thorough reevaluation of how humans see themselves as part of, and in relation to, non-human nature.

Plumwood’s work, deepened by the contemplative approach, proves helpful at this point. The invitation to really listen to non-human others and embody oneself within the trophic webs of the biosphere here on Earth requires one to explore ontological assumptions about non-human nature. To really listen to animals already requires one to overcome different barriers that have been placed between humans and animals. For instance, to listen to a pig, one needs (in terms of location) to be with her but also (in

terms of conceptualization) overcome various assumptions about these animals in general, as well as about this specific animal. In other words, it is not enough to be there, one must be present unencumbered by preconceptions as well. If fully present, one is not only interdependent on a physics level (as one shares the same space), or a biochemical level (as both breathe the same air) but also, if the subject/object divide fades, on the level of awareness. This presence appears most relevant to considering animals in sustainable food futures.

Of course, developing sustainable food futures requires conceptualization of all kinds, including ethical deliberation. However, when one considers animals primarily at a conceptual level, animals quickly become “building blocks” of a coherent system (or are left out of the system altogether). By requiring one to be present, to be with other animals (if animals do not find the presence of humans problematic) in settings relevant to sustainable food futures, any separation between humans and other animals is addressed from the beginning. It is a way of reconnecting with non-human nature not solely at the level of conceptualization, but by genuinely being there with animals. It creates space and opportunity to touch into and explore one’s moral sentiments regarding animals and to align this with, and help shape, sustainable food futures.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

JN developed the argumentation and wrote the manuscript. FM provided feedback during the writing and peer-review process. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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