

Questions for Flat Ethics
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Before proceeding to discuss the questions of flat ethics, it's necessary to discuss some context in order to understand how and why these questions have arisen at all. At the outset, I want to emphasize that I really am posing these remarks as a set of questions. Although I am sympathetic to the idea of a flat ethics, I am still very much working through these issues myself and have not yet taken up any determinate positions of my own on these matters. Indeed, I see the work I'm doing here as propaedeutic; aiming at simply articulating the questions and problems of flat ethics, and whether or not a flat ethics is even feasible. Moreover, these questions would be better understood as questions for *meta-ethics* than ethics proper. Rather than articulating a set of ethical prescriptions for judging action, my questions revolve around meta-ethical questions of what ethics ought to be about, what the scope of ethics is, what entities ought to be the object of ethical regard, and what ethical problems and questions emerge when we extend the ethical domain beyond the human.

The debate surrounding flat ethics arose from the ontology I propose in my recent book *The Democracy of Objects*. I there referred to this ontology as "onticology" or "object-oriented ontology", though in my more recent work I refer to it as "mechanology" or "machine-oriented ontology". There I argue that being is entirely composed of units that I then called "objects", but that I now call "machines". I won't here rehearse my arguments for why being is composed entirely of objects or machines, but if I was compelled to shift from a terminology of objects to machines, then this was because I found the term "object" to have connotations that I wish to

avoid. First, in discussions, I've found that in the minds of many, the term "object" remains ineluctably anthropocentric in that it immediately evokes thoughts of a subject that either posits or regards the object. Since I wish to discuss entities in their being apart from humans so as to avoid the philosophical obsession of the relationship between subjects and objects that has dominated philosophy since Descartes, these are associations I wish to avoid. Although we tend to think of machines as produced by humans, we nonetheless have no difficulty attending to machines existing and functioning of their own accord. Second, the term "object" evokes something static and unchanging that just sits there, whereas I wish to emphasize that all beings are activities or processes. The concept of machine seems more amenable to this sort of thinking. Finally, third, the term "object" evokes thoughts of relations between qualities and substances. We think of an object as a substance in which qualities inhere. The tree, as substance or object, for example, is composed of qualities such as the color of its leaves and bark, its shape, its texture, and so on. I wish to emphasize, by contrast, what entities *do* rather than the qualities that entities *have*; and the concept of machine, again, seems more amenable to this type of thinking.

My thesis, then, is that all of being is composed of units that are machines. The largest rodent in the world, those wonderful capybara native to South America, is no less a machine than an automobile, a person, a rock, a tree, an institution, a philosophical theory, a recipe, a neutrino, or a black hole. Machines, of course, differ from one another and clearly a person is a very different type of machine than an electric can opener, but they are both nonetheless machines. Some, I'm sure, will protest that this is a metaphorical use of the term "machine". This is fine. I only ask that you follow my experiment of conceiving entities as machines in the spirit of

experiment and see whether it proves valuable in illuminating the being of various types of entities. If you prefer other terminologies, that's fine as well.

What then is a machine? Here my remarks must be brief for a concept that I've developed in more elaborate detail elsewhere. A machine, I argue, is a being that engages in *operations* upon some sort of *input*, performing transformations upon those inputs that produce various types of outputs. Let's return to the example of a tree. In what way is it a machine? A tree draws on flows of sunlight, soil nutrients, carbon dioxide, water, etc. In drawing on these flows, it performs operations on these materials, transforming them into various outputs. Some of these outputs will be the *qualities* of the tree: the green of its leaves and bark, how large it grows, the spatial configuration of its leaves, etc. I call these "qualitative outputs" and argue that qualities are the result of operations or activities on the part of a machine coupled with its environment. Other outputs will be the byproducts the tree produces as a result of its operations, such as the oxygen it emits, the fruit and leaves it drops to the ground, the chemicals it releases into the earth, and so on. I refer to these sorts of operations as "material outputs". The tree-machine, of course, will grow very differently depending on the sorts of inputs or flows that pass through it. If a tree is surrounded by many other trees, it might not grow very large as it competes for water, nutrients, and light. Its branches might grow in a particular pattern that they would not otherwise grow in as it strives to get more light. If the ground and air are filled with toxic pollutants, the tree will produce very different qualities such as sickly leaves and rubbery bark as these toxins interfere with the powers of the tree to engage in its accustomed operations. In many instances, then, we can say that the qualities a machine produces in its operation are a function of its environment or the inputs that flow through it. Different inputs or a different environment will produce different qualitative and material outputs.

There are, of course, many different types of machines and it is important to be attentive to these differences and the variety of different powers that these machines possess. I even believe that we need a discipline called “mechanology”, not unlike zoology or botony, that classifies different machines according to their powers, capacities, or what they can do. Some machines are incorporeal, such as mathematical equations, recipes, national constitutions, scores of music, philosophical and scientific theories, etc. Other machines are corporeal such as the tanuki raccoon dog of Japan, planets, neutrinos, and rocks. Some are both corporeal and incorporeal such as institutions like UTA. Machines also range from the very rigid to the very plastic. A rigid machine is a machine that undergoes little to no change in its operations or powers when inputs or flows pass through it. It is what we have in mind when we mistakenly suggest that all machines are “mechanistic”. These are machines whose operations or powers undergo little or no change in their operations as a result of encounters with their inputs. We might think of mathematical equations like the Pythagorean theorem, obsessional neuroses, automobiles, and Fordist assembly lines in this connection.

Other machines are incredibly plastic, and these in two ways. On the one hand, a plastic machine is capable of producing different outputs as a result of the nature of the inputs that flow through them. Unlike the equation $1 + 1$ where the output is always the same, a tree and human body produces different qualities as a function of the flows upon which it exercises its operations. A person who grows up on a diet with abundant nutrients will likely grow taller than someone deprived of these nutrients. On the other hand, plastic machines can also undergo changes in the powers or operations of which they’re capable as a result of operations that take place either within them or as a result of encounters with various inputs. Unlike rocks, human beings, dolphins, dogs, and institutions are learning machines. Learning is the formation of the

capacity for new operations as well as the development of access to new inputs that were before invisible to the machine.

Finally, some machines are capable of goal-directed operations, whereas others are not. Persons, corporations, squirrels, and cats seem to engage in operations not simply because they are caused to by an encounter with a particular input, but for the sake of ends. Unlike the rock that warms because it happened to encounter flows produced by a forest fire or the sun, squirrels seem to intentionally pursue acorns and other nuts for the sake of an end and also to bury their acorns for the sake of their end. Other goal-directed machines such as institutions, corporations, nation-states, radical political collectives, and persons take their goal-directedness of their operations one step further in that they actively fashion the operations of which they are capable through the operations in which they engage. Thus, for example, we do not begin by being able to play the electric guitar, but rather engage in operations that eventually, with practice, will produce the capacity for these operations. Similarly, a corporation engages in all sorts of operations such as training employees, acquiring certain technologies and access to various resources, advertising, etc., so as to produce capacities to produce various products and services and therefore attain certain profits.

Among these distinctions between the corporeal and the incorporeal, the rigid and the plastic, and the intentional and non-intentional, there will, of course, be all sorts of gradations or differences in degree. In any case, the questions I'm angling for with respect to the concept of machines are 1) what are the powers of which it is capable regardless of whether it exercises them or not?, 2) what operations does the machine engage in?, 3) what inputs flow through the machine?, 4) how does it transform these inputs?, 5) how is the machines composed or structured?, 6) what outputs in the form of qualities, materials, and activities does the machine

produce in the course of its operations?, and 7) how, if at all, are the capacities of a machine transformed by either operations that take place within it or the flows that pass through it?

So much for my brief, thumbnail sketch of machines. Closely connected to this machinic ontology is what I have called “flat ontology”. It is around the concept of flat ontology that a series of ethical controversies and debates erupted. Flat ontology is opposed to what I call “vertical ontologies” and is the thesis that while there are certainly differences in the power or influence various beings, all beings are nonetheless on equal ontological footing. This is to say, no being exists more than another being, nor functions as a hierarch or sovereign of all other beings. The concept of flat ontology was designed to address the anthropocentrism that I see as being rife throughout the humanities. As I mentioned earlier, philosophy, and the humanities more broadly construed, have, for some time, been obsessed with questions of the relationship between subjects and objects. In the world of philosophy, this focus might take the form of questions revolving around how we represent the world or know other entities. In phenomenology it takes the form of questions about how we intend the world. In disciplines such as literature, rhetoric, social and political theory, critical theory, race theory, gender theory, feminism, post-colonial theory, media theory, etc., it might take the form of how the world comes to be structured through our significations, and so on. While almost no one, in the humanities, would claim that humans are somehow more real than other entities, nor that humans are somehow sovereigns of all other entities, there seems to nonetheless be a treatment of humans as sovereigns at the level of our *theoretical practice*. Our focus has largely been on how humans and culture determine and signify other entities. At least, this is the sort of orientation I was encountering in the continental philosophy and cultural studies circles within which I run. There I encountered a rife anthropocentrism characterizing a vertical ontology in which

humans and culture were treated—implicitly, mind you—as unilaterally determining the rest of being through their representations, significations, intentions, narratives, and discourses.

I thus proposed flat ontology as a response to this state-of-affairs. Before proceeding, it's important to add that in proposing a flat ontology, the aim was not to reject or dismiss the discoveries of the cultural theorists, phenomenologists, and analytic realist epistemologists. I want to retain these things and believe that real discoveries have been made in these theoretical orientations. Rather, what I want is a shift in emphasis away from the unilateralism of these approaches, to an ontological framework that allows us to analyze how, for example, the tree relates to the flows of its environment without immediately jumping into a discussion of how various cultures *signify* trees, how we might intend trees in lived experience, or how we might truthfully represent trees; but also I wanted to open up a bilateralism of social explanation, capable of exploring the ways in which the properties of wheat, various technologies, various weather patterns, the availability of different resources, etc., contribute to the form that different human social assemblages take. I hasten to add that I am not alone in this work. Similar sentiments can be found among theorists such as Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, thinkers in the Deleuzian tradition, the new materialist feminists, and a host of others.

Apart from my intrinsic fascination with the natural world, technology, mathematics, and science—the discussion of which I felt was strangely prohibited or *verboten* in the framework of the continental cultural theory within which I work—I also felt a move to flat ontology was necessary because 1) the looming catastrophe of climate change requires a framework for the humanities capable of investigating beings in terms of their *own* material powers and not just in terms of how we represent, signify, and narrate them, 2) response to climate change requires us to de-anthropocize our theory, such that we're no longer treating ourselves implicitly or

explicitly as sovereign masters of all other beings in the world, 3) because our society has become pervaded by technologies of all sorts, we require a way of talking about the impact of these technologies that isn't restricted to analysis of how we signify or represent them, and 4) because societies are not simply composed of norms, discourses, laws, constitutions, ideologies, etc., but also of all sorts of nonhuman agencies that play a significant role in the form that societies take. With respect to this last point, it would follow that if we wish to produce social change, it isn't enough to simply debunk an ideology, change beliefs, or enact new laws, but rather we have to change the material world as well.

Flat ontology was thus proposed to respond to these issues. By emphasize that humans are beings among beings rather than sovereigns of beings, that nonhuman beings modify the ways in which we live, act, and live amongst one another, and that nonhumans interact with one another apart from us and how we signify or represent them, I hoped to contribute to opening a posthuman field of inquiry capable of responding to these issues. It was here that questions of flat ethics began to emerge. The question was "does a flat ontology entail a flat ethics?" The concept of flat ontology generated very different responses from opposing ends of the spectrum. On the one hand, anthropocentric humanists such as my friend David Berry, digital media theorist and Marxist critical theorist of Swansea University, took a very dim view of the idea of a flat ontology. In the view of thinkers such as this, flat ontology is a catastrophe for emancipatory political theory, because 1) the claim that humans are not sovereigns of all other beings but are beings among other beings, diminishes the dignity of the human thereby opening the door to the mistreatment of humans in all sorts of noxious ways, and 2) flat ontology opens the door to an attentiveness to nonhumans in ways that detracts from what ought to be the sole ethico-political struggle and aim of theory: the emancipation of humans from oppressive conditions. On the

other hand, theorists such as my friend Craig McFarland, a critical animal theorist and sociologist that hails from University of Ottawa, welcomed the idea of a flat ontology as they saw it as opening the door to a flat ethics that would deprivilege humans and provide us with the means to grant as much ethical regard to nonhuman animals as we do to humans.

Of these two responses to the idea of flat ontology, I find, without sharing his own views, McFarland's to be the more interesting. By contrast, I find the critique represented by Berry—and many others have raised similar critiques—to be unfounded. First, as we can see in the case of both theological and secular humanisms that privilege the human, humanisms, throughout history, have not had a particularly good track record at preserving and recognizing the dignity of the human. Whether we're talking about religious warfare, the abuses and genocides of colonialism, political oppression under both humanistic totalitarian and democratic regimes, the oppression of women and minorities, or policies based on eugenics, humanisms have seldom hesitated to brutally oppress other humans in the name of a particular conception of the essence of the human guaranteed by either a particular religious or secular teaching. It is difficult to see why a position premised on the recognition of alterity and the dignity of beings at both the human and nonhuman such as that advocated by flat ontology would be any more likely to generate such oppression. Second, it is my view that far from undermining projects of human emancipation, flat ontology actually assists in these projects. If it is true that societies—including their inequalities—take the form they take *both* because of discursive elements such as norms, laws, narratives, ideologies, etc., *and* because of nonhuman material agencies such as technologies, local resources, how infrastructures are laid out, and so on, then emancipation requires that we attend to both of these dimensions in society. A critical theory and politics that attends almost solely to the discursive will be doomed to miss one half of the equation as to why

social oppression takes the form it does, denying itself all sorts of opportunities for emancipatory interventions. Finally third, I simply don't accept the thesis that human emancipation is the only burning political project we face. We equally face the looming specter of climate change and response to climate change requires us to expand our focus beyond the discursive so as to also become attentive to nonhuman entities such as other living beings, the fuels we use, the role that technologies play in our lives, etc.

Setting aside the humanist critiques of flat ontology, I now turn to the question of flat ethics. Returning to my earlier remarks about machines, I propose that *any* ethics, regardless of the ethical claims that it makes and whether it turns out to be true or false, is an *incorporeal machine* not unlike a mathematical equation, recipe, or scientific theory. If there is something distinct about ethical machines, then this is because their operations consist in *selecting* from beings, activities, affective states, and social statuses, so as to produce a particular type of *future* and being. In other words, the difference between an ontology and an ethics is that an ontology aims simply at articulating, in the most general possible terms, what is and what is not and what all beings that are share in common regardless of whether the beings that exist are good or bad, whereas an ethics aims to select for certain types of existence, excluding others, so as to produce a particular future outcome whether that be happiness, the good life, *eudaimonia*, intellectual love of God, a Good Will, justice, the greatest happiness for the greatest number, authenticity, the abolition of the self, obedience to God, salvation, etc.

In other words, an ethics doesn't simply tell us what is right and wrong, good or bad, or allot praise or blame, but rather selects things and aims to produce something. Every ethics is thus a machine through which some other machine engages in operations so as to transform itself and its relations to the world about it. My language here is intentionally vague as I want to leave

open the *possibility* that nonhuman entities such as animals—but also nations, corporations, institutions, armies, political groups that depend on humans but perhaps strangely transcend them—themselves have ethical machines and that awareness of this, if true, raises all sorts of questions about how we deploy our ethical machines. Through its operations, an ethical machine thus performs operations that engage in selections of states, actions, statuses, and entities that aims to fashion a self, whether human or nonhuman, a world, whether social or natural, and particular relations between that self and world.

The thesis that an ethics is a machine is rather abstract, so hopefully some examples from the history of ethical thought will help to illustrate what I'm claiming. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle develops an ethical machine that aims to produce a self composed of certain virtuous habits, through operations that choose the mean between excess and deficiency. Given Aristotle's claims at the beginning of the text that political science is the highest of the sciences and that ethics is that science that pertains to political science, it would appear that a central aim of this machine is to produce a subject that would be worthy of social esteem in his community. This aim would be desired, in its turn, because it would allow us to achieve *eudaimonia* or an excellent life, characterized by happiness. In the case of Lucretius and other Epicureans, by contrast, we get a very different machine that aims not at excellence and social esteem, but rather peace of mind and freedom from anxiety. This ethical machine proposes four sorts of operations to fashion the sort of self for which it aims. First, it counsels us to discover the true causes of things so that we might free ourselves from fear produced by superstition or beliefs that unusual natural events are punishments visited upon us by the gods. Second, it counsels us to overcome our fear of death by arriving at the knowledge that we are our bodies and thus that there is no afterlife. In this way, we will devote ourselves to this life rather than the next. Third, it advises

us to use our reason to engage in what Martha Nussbaum has called “a therapy of desire”, where we abolish our desires for unnecessary things such as wealth, prestige, exotic foods, lovers, etc, and devote ourselves solely to the pursuit of simple pleasures that are readily available. By recognizing that we do not need the former things, we will no longer experience despair in their absence, nor will we engage in unpleasant activities such as working at an investment firm to acquire the wealth to attain these things. Finally, fourth, the epicurean councils us to organize the social and natural world around us in a particular way so as to best produce pleasure and avoid pain. We are to form, as Epicurus did, a “Garden” of like minded individuals so as to better avoid the tribulations of the social and natural world. We get a very different ethical machine in the case of Kant, where the operations engaged in are not undertaken for the sake of producing excellence as in Aristotle, or peace of mind as in Epicurus and Lucretius, but where the aim is to produce what he calls a “good will”. A good will, according to Kant, is a will that acts for the sake of duty alone, rather than for the sake of any sort of psychological inclination, such as love, preference, affection, revulsion, etc. Kant proposes the categorical imperative as that machine that allows us to both determine our duties and to select our duties. Within this framework, an operation is only ethical if it is done for the sake of duty alone. Thus, for example, if I choose not to cheat my friend in a business deal *because* she is my friend and I care about her, Kant would contend that this action is without moral worth. This is *not* because my action is *immoral*, but rather because it is motivated by affection rather than duty. My action only becomes fully moral when I am disinclined to engage in fair dealings with another person, yet nonetheless do so because duty demands that I do. In this way, Kant is able to establish a certain universality for our obligations that would not be possible if they were based on our affections or how we feel about other people. I cannot, perhaps, make myself feel a particular

way about others, but I can use reason, by following the categorical imperative, that shows me I nonetheless have obligations to those I dislike or am indifferent to.

Examples of ethical machines could be multiplied indefinitely. We could talk about the ethical machines of Levinas, Badiou, Marx, Kierkegaard, Spinoza, Mill, Rawls, Freud, Lacan, Epictetus, and a host of others. We could also talk about the various ethical machines found in Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Jewish thought. To discuss them all would take us too far afield, so hopefully these examples are sufficient to illustrate the thesis that ethical machines select certain things to fashion a self and/or world in a particular way. As an aside, an attentiveness to ethics as a machine, I hope, also shows that different systems of ethics that we see as being in contradiction to one another such that we must choose one or the other might not, in fact, be opposed at all insofar as they're aiming at very different ends. It is entirely possible, for example, that one could *simultaneously* be an epicurean *and* a Kantian, because these ethics are very different machines aiming at entirely different ends. The epicurean ethical machine raises a question of *psychology*, asking how we should live to achieve peace of mind and freedom from anxiety, so as to live a life characterized by the most consistent and reliable pleasure. The Kantian ethical machine is a machine designed to determine our duties and obligations. Not only does the Kantian machine claim that we have a *duty* to pursue happiness even where we're filled with despair or suffer from depression, but so long as we obey our duties or obligations, there's nothing in the Kantian machine that precludes a self-fashioning that generates a psychology free of anxiety and characterized by peace of mind. What appears as the same question in these two ethics—"what is the good?"—turns out to be two very different questions.

Returning to the theme of this talk, we are now in a position to raise the question of flat ethics. What would a flat ethics be in contrast to the ethical machines I just discussed? We will

note that all of these ethical systems, with the possible exception of Spinoza, are *anthropocentric*. They are ethical systems that are either concerned with how we should fashion ourselves or how we should relate to our fellow humans. The question of nonhumans scarcely appears in the picture at all beyond questions of how we should relate to nonhumans such as the food we eat, alcohol, drugs, technologies, etc., in the pursuit of *our* aims. With the exception of ethical theorists such as Schopenhauer, Peter Singer and Cary Wolfe, questions about our duties *to* nonhumans hardly appear at all. The ethical machines we so far have are thus overwhelmingly dominated by questions of how we should relate to our fellow humans and seldom about how we should relate to nonhumans. In short, the majority of our current ethical technologies—and there are important exceptions—are characterized by human privilege or exceptionalism. At the outset, we can thus say that minimally a flat ethics would be one that contests this human privilege, extending the scope of ethics beyond human and how we should *use* other things for ourselves, developing operations that would have ethical regard for nonhumans, but perhaps also that would be attentive to the ethical machines *of* nonhumans.

It seems that there are two ways in which a flat ethics could be formulated depending on whether we focus on the objects of ethical machines or the agents of ethical machines. The object of an ethical machine pertains to that over which an ethical machine ranges. For example, in Levinas the object of an ethical machine is the Other, whereas in Epicurus it is pleasures and beliefs, while in Kant it is duties. The object of an ethical machine refers to that which is a matter of ethical regard or selection and exclusion. By contrast, the agent of an ethical machine refers to the being that deploys the ethical machine or who carries out its operations. It answers the question of *who* the ethical subject or operator is. We get very different flat ethical machines depending on whether we place our emphasis on the agent or the object of these ethical

machines. If we begin with the object of flat ethics we get what I call an “anthropocentric flat ethical machine” (AFE). This is the variant of flat ethics I happen to favor at present. If we begin with the agent of flat ethics, we get what could be called a “posthuman flat ethics” (PFE). I’ll discuss each of these in terms.

In the case of an anthropocentric flat ethics, the emphasis is on that over which ethical regard ought to range. If this variant of flat ethics remains anthropocentric, then this is because it is still *humans* that are the sole agents deploying ethical machines, rather than rabbits, sharks, rocks, or mantis shrimps. For AFE’s the question is what should be the scope of ethical regard or duties? Where traditional anthropocentric ethics tend to treat humans as the sole object of ethical regard and duties, an AFE would argue that we have duties and obligations to nonhumans such as animals, plants, and various mineral beings. In other words, it would argue that the nonhumans of the world are not simply there for our exploitation and use, but that there are right and wrong ways of relating to nonhumans. It is clear that environmental thought has gone a long way in developing AFE’s.

With AFE’s, the question becomes one of articulating 1) the criteria by which we can determine our ethical obligations to nonhumans, 2) the extent of those obligations, and 3) how we might go about cultivating ethical regard towards nonhumans among humans. With respect to the first two questions, to what nonhumans am I obligated and to what degree? Am I ethically obligated to *all* nonhumans or only a particular subset of plant, animal, bacterial, viral, and mineral beings? How do I determine what my duties are to these nonhumans and how far they extend? Suppose, for example, that I adopt a sort of Kantian flat ethics where I argue that *all* beings, not just humans, are ends in themselves and that therefore I should treat all beings as ends in themselves and not just as means to an end. Such an ethical machine would council us

not to interfere in the being of other entities. It is clear that this sort of flattened Kantianism is going to lead us into innumerable problems. On the one hand, as humans we need clothing, shelter, and need to eat. Yet these things entail relating to other entities as means to an end rather than ends in themselves. Were we to follow this flattened Kantianism we'd end up in a sort of ethical masochism that would entail our death. On the other hand, flat ethics introduces new challenges that we don't seem to encounter in traditional humanistic ethical systems. In humanistic ethical systems we're dealing with beings of the same order, humans, while in a flat ethics, we're now dealing with an ethical universe composed of very different entities: humans, capybara, colugo or flying lemurs, H1N1 viruses, oil, etc. All of these beings have very different needs and aims. Suppose, for example, a virus is ravaging a particular population such as the tanuki or Japanese raccoon-dogs. Should we interfere? And if so, by what criteria do we determine that we ought to privilege the interests of the tanuki over the virus? Within a flattened Kantianism, this would be an impossible decision as we have already resolved to treat all entities as ends in themselves and are therefore obligated to treat the ends of *both* the virus *and* the tanuki with dignity. One might respond with ethicists such as Peter Singer that we only have ethical obligations to beings that have consciousness and that are capable of feeling pain, but it is difficult to see why, in a flat ethics, our ethical obligations should be restricted to conscious beings. Moreover, since our climate problems pertain to mineral and chemical beings as much as organic beings (including non-conscious organic beings such as algae blooms produced by fertilizer run-off into oceans), Singer's ethical frame seems to restrictive for a flat ethics.

Another strategy that I find far more appealing due to its naturalistic temperament—in my view, naturalism is the only credible ontological perspective today --would be to emphasize the manner in which our own bodies are bound up with the bodies of other nonhuman entities.

Here the idea is to combat the ethical egoism of human exceptionalism by showing that the harm we do to other nonhuman entities harms ourselves. In this connection, we should have regard for nonhumans because having such regard is also having a regard for ourselves. Deleuze articulates the problem of human egoism nicely with respect to Hume. In *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, Deleuze writes that [For Hume], it is a fact that sympathy exists and that it is extended naturally” (37). As Deleuze continues, “...it is not our nature which is moral, it is rather our morality which is in our nature. One of Hume’s simplest but most important ideas is this: human beings are much less egoistic than they are *partial*” (38). In Deleuze’s Hume, we are not first self-interested egoists and then altruistic, but are rather defined by sympathies to our fellows. We are defined by sympathies to our children, our lovers, our friends, family, and the people of our tribe. The problem is thus not how to pass from individual selfishness to altruistic regard for others. We are profoundly altruistic to those with whom we’re sympathetic and generally think of them before we think of ourselves. The problem is how to extend these sympathies beyond their partiality, beyond those to whom we’re immediately related, so as to develop sympathy for the anonymous, the stranger, or those unlike us. Our sympathies are based on both locality and resemblance. We tend to have sympathies for those who most resemble us and with whom we have the most local interaction. With regard to this latter point, this is why, for example, the racist can be perfectly kind and generous to his black neighbor, while nonetheless virulently hating all other members of that group. The ethical question is that of how to enlarge our sympathies to the level of the non-local and different.

If there is still an egoism of human exceptionalism here in Hume’s points about human nature, then this is because those that resemble us the most are our fellow humans. As a consequence, our sympathies are largely restricted to fellow humans and those animals that

resemble us in their emotions and appearance such as dogs and cats. Within this framework, the question for an AFE would be how to extend our sympathies beyond the human to the nonhuman. Social and political theorists such as Jane Bennett and Stacy Alaimo have both proposed ways of accomplishing this task. In her wonderful book *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett seems to propose that it is life as such that we sympathize with and that if we are to overcome our exploitation of nature, we need to cultivate a *secular* enchantment with the beings of the world. Through the production of this affect, and the recognition of the mysteriousness or vibrancy of matter as well as its vitality resembling life, along with a recognition of its complexity and tendency to behave in unexpected ways, we will be less inclined to treat it as a mere stuff there for our exploitation but will instead attend to it with greater care and caution. While I find Bennett's proposals deeply appealing and experience a similar awe towards nature and matter, I am nonetheless suspicious of an ethics based on affect for the same reasons that Kant was suspicious of an ethics based on affect. Affects seem to be something that you either have or don't have, yet obligations seem to be something that we should have regardless of whether or not we are *inclined* to have them. While it is true that we can engage in all sorts of strategies for cultivating affects, it is likely that there will always be people that simply do not experience this sort of enchantment towards the world and therefore will not be moved to act towards it with greater reverence. As such, enchantment seems like a limited strategy for producing regard for nonhumans.

In this regard, Alaimo's strategy seems to fair better. With her concept of trans-corporeality developed in *Bodily Natures*, Alaimo emphasizes the manner in which our bodies are imbricated with other bodies of the world. As I've put it in my commentaries on her work, our bodies are porous such that other bodies pass through us and modify our being. Part of the

problem with human exceptionalism or the anthropocentric point of view is that phenomenologically it conceives what takes place over there or what is thrown away as no longer affecting us. For example, when we spray pesticides to kill mosquitos, we think of this as merely an affair for insects, failing to recognize how these pesticides affect the food chain, our water supply, and the air we breath. By emphasizing the manner in which our bodies are sheathed in a world defined by complex chains of direct and indirect relations that affect our own bodies, Alaimo is able to show how nothing is ever really just “over there”, but how things we do such as mountain top mining, the clearing of rain forests, use of pesticides, etc., affect us here too. In this way, she’s able to give an account of why we should have a regard for nonhumans. What we have here—and she might object to this characterization –is a sort of enlightened self-interest that calls for us to think of the ways in which we are with and among other beings and how our welfare is bound up with theirs.

It is likely that the vegan critical animal theorist and the deep ecologist will be dissatisfied with this sort of AFE. The vegan critical animal theorist, for example, would forbid any eating of animals, regardless of whether they were derived from environmentally destructive factory farming or hunting; whereas Alaimo’s position, as I understand it, wouldn’t see anything particularly wrong with food derived from hunting depending on the scale of that hunting. However, it is difficult to see how the critical animal theorist doesn’t fall into a sort of human exceptionalism that leads to ethical asceticism and masochism. Why, we might ask, should humans eating meat be ethically objectionable, when it is not ethically objectionable for lions and sharks a coyotes to eat meat? I can readily understand arguments against eating meat based on the destructive consequences of farming practices and over fishing, but it is much more difficult for me to see why eating meat is intrinsically unethical.

A far more radical flat ethics would be what I've referred to as "posthuman flat ethics" (PFE). PFE's focus not on the object or scope of ethical deliberation, but on the agents that operate ethical machines. First proposed by video game theorist and object-oriented ontologist Ian Bogost, PFE's radically decenter the human, arguing that other nonhuman beings operate ethical machines of their own. For example, in addition to the ethical machines of humans, dolphins, rats, dogs, sharks, corporations, institutions, economies, armies, certain computer systems, etc., would also have *their* ethical machines. PFE's are posthumanist not in the sense that they abolish or eradicate the human, but in the sense that they pluralize ethical perspectives. Rather than simply treating ethics as a question of how humans relate to other beings, PFE's look at how nonhuman entities such as sharks and corporations—entities that are not dissimilar – evaluate other beings, including humans. Here we would have a genuinely flat ethics insofar as ethics would no longer be the exclusive domain of humans, but would be something practiced by nonhumans as well. In short, PFE's move beyond speciesism.

The first question to ask of PFE's would be what beings are ethical agents? For example, it seems unlikely that machines like quartz crystals, the moon, black holes, and hydrogen atoms are ethical subjects. As I suggested earlier, ethical machines are operations that select among things for the sake of producing a future. These entities interact with other entities in a purely causal way, possessing no intentionality, and therefore cannot be thought as ethical agents. This would restrict ethical agents to beings capable of some form of intentionality and choice, and therefore living beings with suitably developed cognitive systems, institutions like armies, universities, and corporations if we're willing to treat them as cognitive systems over and above the humans that participate in them, as well, perhaps, as suitably developed computer systems.

In his book *Rational Animals*, Mark Okrent has gone a long way towards showing how we can think of a number of nonhuman animals as being ethical agents in this way.

If it is true that a number of nonhuman entities are ethical agents, then all sorts of new, and somewhat terrifying, ethical questions emerge. Clearly the ethical machines of nonhumans will have different aims than those of humans. In her novel *The Sparrow*, Mary Doria Russell dramatizes a posthuman flat ethical encounter of this sort, by depicting the first encounter between humans and an intelligent and advanced species on another planet. Although the two species seem to be communicating with one another and to understand one another, it turns out that they have very different value machines. The aliens believe that they are honoring the humans, but their honor significantly maims the humans.

PFE's raise the question of how we are to respond ethically to the ethical machines of nonhumans. Rather than asking the question "what are these beings *for us*?", they invite us to adopt the perspective of these nonhumans, asking "what are we and what is the world for these nonhumans?" In other words, PFE's ask us to engage in what Ian Bogost has called "alien phenomenology" and what systems and autopoietic sociology Niklas Luhmann has called "second-order observation". In alien phenomenology or second-order observation, we do not observe another entity, but rather attempt to observe how *that entity* observes or encounters the world. The question here is not "how do *I* experience the computer?", but rather, "how does the *computer* experience the world?" Alien phenomenology thus proposes a bracketing of our own lived experience and ethical machines, so as to observe the lived experience and ethical machines of other entities. The degree to which this is possible, is, of course, a burning question; though animal ethology as developed by biologist Jakob von Uexkull has developed all sorts of strategies for practicing this sort of phenomenology. Moreover, it is notable that this problem of

exploring the worlds of nonhumans is not markedly different than the problem of exploring the worlds of other humans that have very different experiences than ourselves. While we can never, to quote Nagel, *experience* what it is like to be a bat, we can nonetheless make a number of inferences about how bats experience the world.

From an environmental and ecological perspective, it is clear that PFE's are of tremendous importance. We know very well, for example, why bees are important to *us*. However, by posing the question "what is important to bees?" and seeking to enter into the lived experience and value machines of bees—if they have them—we might find that we are better able to attend to the needs of bees. This, in turn, could benefit us in a number of ways. As humorous as it sounds, this seems to be the lesson of shows like *The Dog Whisperer*. In his interactions with dogs, Cesar Milan approaches problem dogs from the standpoint not of how these dogs are problems for their *owners*, but rather from the standpoint of how the environment in which the dog is acting up is a problem for the *dog*. Through his practice of alien phenomenology, he is able to find solutions that make for both happier dogs and happier owners. PFE's thus open the possibility of a trans-species ethics that is better able to attend to the needs of our nonhuman others.

However, PFEs are also of social and political importance. Suppose that there are already intelligent aliens among us and that we don't have to look to the stars to answer the question of whether or not there is other intelligent life in the universe. Here I am not referring to the possibility that dolphins and octopi are as intelligent as us, but rather am suggesting the possibility that machines such as corporations, nation-states, institutions, collective groups, etc., are intelligent, cognitive beings *over and above* the people that participate in them. This is a disturbing thesis defended by sociologist Niklas Luhmann and is, I believe, one of the major

themes of *The Trial* and *The Castle* by Kafka. Here entities like corporations would be agents in their own right, rather than mere effects of humans that work in these institutions. They would be akin to something like giant brains. If this is true, and I hope it's not though suspect it is, then aliens would already be among us. Like all nonhumans, these intelligent aliens would deploy very different ethical machines than the ones we humans deploy at the aims of this machines might very well be at odds with our own.

If this is true, then it would entail that we need to develop very different political strategies for dealing with these machines. It would no longer be a question, say, of persuading a CEO that runs a corporation to believe and behave differently—though that can't hurt—because he would be but a neuron in a much larger brain. Rather, like Cesar Milan who attempts to enter into the world of the dog so as to find solutions to its problems, we would have to engage in an alien phenomenology of the corporation to discover how it experiences the world and what ethical machines it deploys so as to determine the most effective ways of responding to these machines and insuring that our aims and the aims of other beings on the planet, not theirs, are privileged.