Comment

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Dianne Romain's "Feminist Reflections on Humans and Other Domestic Animals" raises more questions than it answers. But that is precisely her intent. I shall discuss three aspects of her paper that I believe should also lead us to further discussion and debate. I shall begin with her notion of "feminist reflections" and attempt to unpack that term, particularly in regard to the practice of "raising consciousness through storytelling." I will then consider briefly her discussion of oppression. Finally, I shall seek a philosophical antecedent for what Romain calls "seeing God" and her quest to achieve a perspective free from human concerns and conditions.

Throughout her paper, Romain weaves stories about animals that are or have been her pets and other animals that she has observed. She intends these stories to "raise consciousness." What does she mean by this notoriously overused term? I take it that this term means what we commonly mean by it, *viz* to make one more aware than before. I remember once hearing a male speaker constantly refer to the members of a particular profession as men. In the question-and-answer session he was reminded, none too politely, by a listener that women, too, held such positions, and had for a very long time. She began her remarks by telling the speaker that she wanted to "raise his consciousness," meaning she wanted him to notice a plain fact, whether he was innocently ignorant or calculatedly missing the point.

Romain's method of achieving this task is to tell us stories about animals. Some of these stories are more successful than others in achieving this aim, simply because what she derives from certain stories is more interesting than what she derives from others. Her story about her cat Napenthe is about human contact; though touching, it did not offer me any new insights about this common fact. Certainly the more serious point concerns her claim that this is a feminist methodology. I would need much more convincing evidence that storytelling as a means of persuasion is gender specific.¹

Furthermore, we may question whether consciousness raising is better accomplished through storytelling

or through more discursive means. I am fully prepared to be told that I need my (male) consciousness brought up a notch. But that is not the point. I want to know what makes a story better than an argument for raising consciousness. Is it that we must envision a world as a whole through a story and that this is more "real" than the dry bones of logic and metaphysics? I need not remind this audience that the particular province and power of philosophy comes from its level of abstraction and thus philosophy is one way to engage in dialogue about issues of general importance. But, you may reply, there are novelists (Milan Kundera, Peter Handke, and Walker Percy come readily to mind) who use philosophical arguments and speculations in the body of a fictional work. Yes, that is true, but if you carefully look at these speculative passages, you will notice that they are the *least* akin to narrative in the author's work. Indeed, Kundera often has long passages in which he discusses abstract topics in a discussion removed from the narrative action of his characters.

Still, one may be able to argue that the particular images employed in a story are more arresting than a philosophical argument. Romain's image of the pregnant cow lumbering up the hill is vivid and powerful. It calls upon us to empathize with this creature, and for me, it worked. Thus I am prepared to allow metaphor to *suggest* a point that then needs to be argued.

Romain continues her discussion by considering the idea of oppression. She states that conditions for oppression include undervaluing another, causing pain, and controlling that other for one's own personal benefit. The oppressor has created barriers that justify his greater value.

I would agree with this general definition. It is difficult to justify limiting the behavior of animals. If a cat want to go outside and stay there through the night, why not let it? But, leaving that aside, it does seem that under Romain's definition, we do at least oppress some animals some of the time, and our behavior is even more so oppressive with other animals that are

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not "domestic." I would want to know why she does not consider the many instances of our deplorable treatment toward animals, viz. cosmetics testing, meat processing plants, and the film industry, to name a few.

Romain's final point is a powerful and provocative one. She is disturbed by the bias of our ethics. She looks beyond an ethics that places man as the central value from which to judge others. Though she does not directly make this connection, we can see it as the link between her metaphoric borrowing of Alice Walker's term and her earlier discussion of moral philosophy, viz. "In determining value, philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant, Mill, Bentham, and Noddings begin with humans." I shall now turn to a discussion of this point in conjunction with a philosophy that may shed some light on her quest, its prospects, and problems.

Descartes justified what was cruelty to animals because he saw them as unfeeling robots. Spinoza's monism at least points us in the direction of reconsidering this Cartesian arrogance. Spinoza might provide some inspiration for those who would like to remove man and woman from their eyeball, and might help us understand Romain's metaphoric term, "seeing God." His doctrine that there is only one substance, which he calls God, and his belief that all things are animate, though in different degrees,² certainly at least suggest what might be called an environmental monism, where man is a cooperative and reverent part of the natural order. Moreover, Spinoza's consideration of all of nature is wider than that of Romain, whose title limits her discussion to "domestic" animals.

But there is something else about Spinoza that I would like to at least mention. Spinoza's materialistic determinism might be of help as we consider our place in the world. Spinoza rejected Descartes' dualism and the freedom of the mind that it implied, labeling it a kingdom within a kingdom.³ Man is part of nature and not exempt from its laws. This doctrine may help us reorient ourselves to coexisting with the natural world.

But is it possible? Will my use of a seventeenth century philosopher, clearly out of the mainstream, help us? Frankly, my sympathies are much more voluntaristic than such a determinism would allow. Yet I am prepared to consider some of the excesses of a sort of voluntarism and the social and environmental price we have paid for this view. Even the most cursory reflection upon what has brought us to the brink of environmental disaster reveals the banal truth that we

have placed our own interests above those of the other members of the natural world. Just how we may extricate ourselves is a difficult question. Dianne Romain has at least pointed us in the right direction by raising these important issues and leaving us with lingering doubts.

Notes

¹ See Harvey Siegel, "Genderized Cognitive Perspectives and the Redefinition of Philosophy of Education," *Teachers College Record*, 89, 1 (fall 1983) 100-119.

² Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza's Ethics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 73.

³ Curley, p. 79.

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