Chapter 24

Consolations of Environmental Philosophy

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Abstract Due to successful protection and restoration efforts, humans and wild animals more and more often come to inhabit overlapping spaces. This is often experienced by humans as problematic, as animals may cause material damages to property and pose threats to humans and domesticated animals. These threats, as well as normative beliefs about belonging and culturally-based prejudices, often provoke distress or aggression towards animals. While philosophy has so far provided normative guidance as to what we should do in terms of developing proper relationships, the actual tools designed to facilitate the development of more peaceful cohabitation have been provided mostly by wildlife management and social sciences. In this contribution, I propose that environmental philosophy can provide conceptual tools easing the difficulties of cohabitation. One such tool is the practice of consolation. I begin by drawing a distinction between the contemporary and traditional forms of consolation. I further show that several common ethical arguments concerning cohabitation with wildlife can be seen as following the ancient concept of consolation. I close with some practical remarks regarding how environmental consolation could be practiced today in the context of difficult cohabitation with wildlife.

‘Suppose that we are afraid, Socrates,’ he said, ‘and try to convince us. Or rather don’t suppose that we are afraid. Probably even in us there is a little boy who has these childish terrors.’

Plato, *Phaedo*

24.1 Introduction: The Difficult Coexistence

When it comes to human-animal relations, the Anthropocene is a time of paradoxes: while biodiversity and population numbers plummet worldwide, in many places

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445

encounters between humans and wild animals are becoming more numerous; while our understanding of animal agency deepens, technological and managerial manipulations are ever more present; while ethical sensibilities are changing taking into account animal interests, conflicts with wildlife are becoming increasingly common; while natural ecosystems are being destroyed, anthropogenic environments populated by humans are being actively colonized by non-human animals. Considering these tensions, the question ‘How to share this planet with other living creatures?’—one of the central questions in environmental reflection—acquires new layers of complexity and poses new challenges.

One of these challenges, which is also among the central tensions in all the above-mentioned paradoxes, is that of respectfully accommodating animal agency in the context of direct coexistence. The difficulty here arises, first of all, from the fact that animal agency often proves undeniably troubling. This has to do with the material threats posed by non-humans, such as direct attacks, damages to property and infrastructure, or risk of disease (respectively: Linnell et al. 2002; Gordon 2009; Anthony et al. 2013). But no less important in determining attitudes to species living in proximity to humans are the less material issues. These include primarily emotional distress caused by fear of the animals (e.g. Flykt et al. 2013; Hiedanpää et al. 2016), which is often aggravated by culturally-determined prejudices (Lopez 1978), and symbolic issues linked to the experiences of transgressions and the unsettling of the established order of things (Knight 2000; Skogen et al. 2008; Cassidy and Mills 2012).¹

In the past, in the western world, such conflicts and negative impacts would have been dealt with in a violent manner showing little recognition for animal well-being and much concern for human interests. Today, however, the situation seems to be changing. While the Anthropocene is marked by unprecedented human impacts across the planet, we are at the same time moving away from considerations of our Earth and its non-human inhabitants in terms of mere instrumentality. With respect to animals this means, among other things, experiencing other living beings as autonomous centers of life with their own sort of good. Consequently, while our experience of coexistence with wildlife often involves harm or distress, at the same time our changing moral sensitivity decries easy and violent solutions. As a result, we are confronted with the challenge of developing new forms of coexistence with animals—ones that would be respectful of their agency and at the same time would introduce ways enabling people to accommodate the destructive or distressing animal ways of living. Thus, in some sense, to recognize the agency and moral status of animals is not so much a solution to a problem (of past mistreatment of non-humans) but a beginning of a new one: how to reconcile moral concern with experiences of distress?

Several animal ethicists (for instance Michelfelder 2003; Acampora 2004; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011) have recognized this issue, yet, following the major trends of environmentalist thinking, they largely focus on the threats that humans pose

¹For an overview of research and a more extended discussion of these dimensions, including further references, see Tokarski (2019).

to animals. As such, the authors mostly limit themselves to arguing why we should respectfully accept our new neighbors. The moral arguments vary from strongly normative claims rooted in ethical theories, through instrumental considerations of benefits that animals bring, to pragmatic acknowledgments that we simply cannot get rid of wildlife spontaneously colonizing human-dominated spaces with the use of reasonable means. While such arguments lay directions for what we should strive for—a respectful cohabitation—and claim to determine what are the right things to do, they do not address the problematic psychological and experiential aspects of coexistence, and even less so the actual damages.

These latter two practical aspects are seen as primarily the tasks of environmental and wildlife management (which provides tools such as, e.g., fencing, culling, vaccinating, providing incentives and disincentives for humans, designing and re-designing infrastructure to take into account animals) (Woodroffe et al. 2005; Adams 2016). Common are also demands to change individual behaviors (animal-proofing houses, locking rubbish bins, keeping pets at home, driving carefully in wooded areas, etc.) and attempts to educate people for the new situation (how to act when encountering wild animals, replacing hearsay by factual knowledge).

The above practices are commonly based on collaborations between managers, who implement policies and use the tools, and social scientists, who study the human dimensions of coexistence in order to assess the best ways to apply these tools and measure their efficacy with respect to the changes in human behavior and attitudes (Baruch-Mordo et al. 2009). While not once questioning the adequacy and efficacy of such collaboration, in the following contribution I would like to focus on some practical means provided by philosophical-ethical discourses that could be of help in addressing the difficulties of coexistence with wildlife.

The kind of tools that I would like to focus on here are purely conceptual ones—strategies that target the ways in which humans make sense of themselves and the surrounding world, potentially altering those ways, and so consequently changing the perceptions of the world and particular events. As such, philosophical discourse would actually have a potential to address the negative psychological and experiential dimensions of animal impacts.

The specific philosophical discourse I would like to focus on in this contribution is the tradition of philosophical consolation. This is a type of philosophical discourse with origins in ancient Greece and is characterized by a clearly defined practical aim—that is of consoling those suffering. Given the distress experienced by many of those who find themselves coexisting with wildlife, and the role that perceptions of wildlife play in such distress, consolation seems strongly intuitively connected to the issue. Yet, despite a long disciplinary tradition, it has not been so far—to my knowledge—proposed explicitly as an approach by environmental or animal

philosophers² in the context of wildlife impacts.³ Therefore, I would like to make the first step on the way to possible applications of this tradition in the context of difficult coexistence with wildlife.

I will begin by presenting two concepts of consolation—first the dominant ideas and practices rooted in modern psychological scholarship and next the philosophical version of consolation as it was practiced by the ancient writers and as it still appears, albeit only rarely, in modern culture. I will then proceed to the discussion of the ethically-grounded responses to the instances of negative animal impacts. I will illustrate, firstly, how the philosophical-ethical discourses linked to the difficulties of cohabitation with wildlife can be in fact seen as consolatory in nature and, secondly, how we can only notice this potential if we refer to the ancient tradition of consolation rather than to its modern common-sense and academic analogues. I will conclude by providing some insights that arise from the confrontation of contemporary philosophical writings with the ancient practices, which, it is my hope, can be of some practical relevance for addressing the difficulties we face presently in attempting to develop new forms of human-animal coexistence.

24.2 The Dominant Concept of Consolation

While most commonly we associate consolation with the experience of grief after the loss of loved ones, psychologists studying consolation are quick to note that it is a much broader practice relevant in many different areas of life and addressing “distress caused by everything from daily hurts and hassles to major traumas” (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, 4). This extends all the way to an existential level, where “consolation is needed when a human being feels alienated from him or herself, from other people, from the world and from his or her ultimate source of meaning” (Tornøe et al. 2015, 8; see also: Norberg et al. 2001). Any such difficulties might provoke a need for consolation from others, and there is abundant evidence, both anecdotal and research-based, that consolation is efficacious in helping individuals and groups cope with challenging life situations (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, 4).

Consolation itself has been defined as “the type of communicative behavior having the intended function of alleviating, moderating, or salving the distressed emotional

²We might connect this to the general absence of this tradition from the discipline of philosophy throughout the modern period. And yet, despite the general falling out of favor of this tradition within academic philosophy, there are indications that today, as in the past, there is a significant demand for this sort of practice. One may mention the success of Alain de Botton’s book *The Consolations of Philosophy* (2001) or the field of philosophical counseling (e.g. Schuster 1999).

³However, we must note that there is a significant number of texts on environmental losses which focus on melancholia and mourning as responses to the loss of species or degradation of ecosystems (e.g. Albrecht et al. 2007; Mortimer-Sandilands 2010; Lertzman 2015; Barnett 2019). While these belong to the same conceptual field as the argument developed here, the crucial difference is that while the aforementioned authors speak about losses of nature, I focus here on the losses to nature. While the comparison of these two approaches would be extremely interesting, it would require much more space than I have at my disposal here.

states of others” (Burleson 1984, 64). This, of course, is rather open, as it leaves much freedom with respect to the communicative means used and the ways of assessing the success of alleviating the distress. The latter might be connected to fairly superficial actions, as in the “modernist and medical concern to return the individual as rapidly as possible to efficient and autonomous functioning” (Walter 1996, 2; see also: Wambach 1985; Broadbent et al. 1990). When focused more on the individual rather than on the efficient performance of social roles, consolation may change the emotional states of the consoled: “The defining characteristic of solace is the sense of soothing. To be consoled is to be comforted. Solace is pleasure, enjoyment, or delight in the midst of sorrow’s hopelessness and despair” (Klass 2014, 6). But it might also involve more fundamental, one could say existential, work, where it functions “as a form of healing that involves a changed perception of the world in suffering persons. This healing shift of perception enables suffering patients to set their suffering within a new pattern of meaning, in a new transcendent light” (Tornøe et al. 2015, 8; see also: Norberg et al. 2001).

The last point makes clear that consolation as a coping mechanism—in all its guises—is not focused on removing the external causes of distress but rather on attempts “to change what is perceived and how it is appraised” (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, 5).

Based on psychological research, several forms of emotional coping have been characterized that can achieve the above-summarized aims, and these include:

- (a) positive reappraisal (efforts to change, refocus, or reframe the meanings of an experience or event so that they are more positive, and less threatening); (b) distancing (efforts to detach oneself emotionally from the meanings of a stressful situation); (c) denial/suppression (choosing not to openly acknowledge stressors); and (d) escape/avoidance (trying not to think about what is troubling, and focusing instead on distractions). (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, 5–6)

Of course, not all of these coping mechanisms are deemed equally productive, and when it comes to actual practice of consolation the latter two are rather discouraged both for their lack of long-term efficacy and possibly problematic consequences of ignoring the distress (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, 8). These two aspects might be associated with the more informal, popular understanding of what consolation involves: the search for distraction in the midst of anxiety or the common enough assurances we hear that things ‘will sort themselves out.’

The second aspect, the distancing, often in common parlance referred to as the ‘letting go’ of the departed or anxieties, has also been recently questioned, even though it forms the backbone of the traditional psychological means of coping with grief (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, 6). Instead, the first of the mentioned approaches is today deemed as the most adequate, and “proponents of the new paradigm of grief theory have re-emphasized the role of cognitive processes in emotional adjustment and recognized meaning reconstruction [...] as the central mechanisms in grieving” (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, 6). This takes the form of re-narrating the relationships and constructing new meanings, even as far as reshaping one’s relationship to the world in such a way as to find a new place for the lost object of attachment (Neimeyer 2002, 302). This often involves “constructing a coherent narrative from a chaotic

and troubling event” which makes the troubling situations “more accessible, more understandable, and less foreign” (Kunkel and Dennis 2003, 5).

While the above seems to be mostly an individual task of the person in distress, it can naturally be supported by others. Here we enter the intersubjective space of consolation which has received much attention and has been foregrounded in recent scholarship, at the same time being commonly underlined as important by those in need of consolation. Some have pointed out that:

even etymologically consolation carries the sense [of] intersubjectivity. The word *comfort* is from the Latin *fortis*, strong or powerful, and the prefix *com*, that is from the Latin *cum*, that means *with*. To comfort means, then, to strengthen or find strength together. (Klass 2014, 6)

Much research on this dimension has been carried out in nursing studies, and here it has been pointed out that:

spiritual and existential care interventions involve conveying empathy, active listening, being present with patients, helping patients to accept their thoughts and feelings around death and dying, showing respect and supporting patients’ dignity. They also emphasize the importance of creating a compassionate and caring environment to bring hope, help patients to deal with the reality of death and to support their spiritual well-being in the terminal stage of life. (Tornøe et al. 2015, 2)

Thus, while the work of re-narrating relationships and searching for new meanings can only be carried out by the individual in distress, there seems to be a need for creating the environment supportive of such cognitive-narrative work, and this is precisely the responsibility of the consoler. One of the important elements raised in this context is for the consoler to open oneself to the pain of the other, and so to experience the pain together without passing judgments (Klass 2014, 8).

To meet the other as another seems to indicate a vital aspect of what consolation is and what it is not. To meet the other as another is to create space to allow the person to be who he/she really is. This space includes the possibility to be able to suffer in one’s own way. (Roxberg et al. 2008, 1085)

The last points, linked to the role of the consoler, underline that consolation is concerned in a significant way precisely with being able to suffer, with enabling one to suffer in one’s own way and for one’s own reasons, to acknowledge the rightness of this, and to open the space for the expression of grief and anxiety. Following this, I will not perhaps be wrong to state that within the present western culture there is a tendency to see distress over loss or troubling circumstances as something appropriate, even necessary. The strength of emotion is in some way seen as a corollary to the importance of the thing/person lost or the distress suffered.

However, it is precisely this basic assumption and prescription that stands in stark contrast to some of the most fundamental aspects of the philosophical tradition of consolation. I will presently move to the discussion of this alternative understanding of consolation, underlining the differences with the currently dominant ideas.

24.3 Philosophical Tradition of Consolation

We can safely assume that consolation as a simple act of comforting has always been a part of human relations.⁴

Under rhetorical and philosophical influences a specialized literature began to develop in Greece, leading to the establishment of a tradition which persisted throughout Antiquity and continued into the Middle Ages... What unites the works in these various categories [of poetry, letters, philosophical treatises, funerary orations] is that they are all concerned, one way or another, with the treatment of grief, and that they draw to a large extent on a common stock of consolatory topics. (Scourfield 1993, 16)

Many of these stock tropes include ideas that we can easily recognize and even use ourselves. These include such advises as: be strong, consider how much good the other person has experienced, focus on the good memories, grief does not help in anything, etc. But beyond those, there is one element that forms the core of philosophical consolatory practice and which we may perhaps find rather surprising. This is to chastise our grief as inappropriate and to provide a new horizon of thought from which one can look at the world in such a way that the event which caused us anxiety no longer appears as an occasion for distress.

This approach was motivated by one of the key aims of ancient philosophy, which was to achieve a state of perfect calmness and satisfaction, a happiness that consisted primarily in the state of ‘inner peace’ (Hadot 1995). And “Since grief was considered an inconvenient and disruptive emotion, the rhetorical and philosophical methods, like the traditional approaches before, aimed to reduce excessive grief and contain the disruptive effects it had on family and society” (Baltussen 2013a, xiv–xv). As a consequence of this aim, grief, anxiety, and distress, as deeply unsettling emotions, were considered inappropriate in a strongly normative sense, even to the extent of being considered a fault (Boys-Stones 2013). Thus, philosophical consolation⁵ became not so much a form of comforting but a way of eliciting a morally appropriate response to the trials and tribulations of life (Vickers 1993). If consolation is linked in our minds primarily with trying to cheer someone, to sympathize with them, acknowledge their pain, perhaps to distract them, the ancient and medieval consolation has much more to do with education, and even to some extent with chastising, admonishing, and reprimanding.

The Greek word is *παράμυθια*, and *παράμυθια* means something much less like *comforting* and much more like *encouragement*. Specifically implied here is the idea that the addressee is being helped to take charge of themself, to reassert control over an emotion that has run away with them... What they do is to challenge the griever to reconceptualise their grief as

⁴Indeed, there is currently an abundant literature on consolation even among animals, particularly primates (e.g. de Waal and Van Roosmalen 1979; Palagi et al. 2006; Fraser and Bugnyar 2010). Research on non-human consolation is so common that as a matter of fact it may be easier to find studies of animals than of human traditions.

⁵While this attitude and associated practices do not exhaust the content of actual extant consolatory texts, for the sake of brevity I will refer to this concern and the textual forms it gave rise to as philosophical consolations.

a different sort of problem, a problem of emotional susceptibility. (The solution—‘getting a grip’—is, then, not just the way to overcome grief; it is the way to greater all-round emotional stability). (Boys-Stones 2013, 124)

While such control of emotions and passions is a paradigmatic Stoic strategy, it was present in virtually all the ancient schools (Hadot 1995, 86–87). The way this control of emotions is carried out is through rational work, that is through reconceptualization of the way in which the sufferer thinks of his situation by reference to ethical or metaphysical theories. This is because the assumption is that grief is caused not so much by the situation in which one finds oneself but by a wrong conceptualization of this situation, by a flaw of reasoning or inappropriate prejudices in light of which the situation is considered. This is well summarized by Epictetus: “People are not troubled by things, but by their judgments about things” (quoted in Hadot 1995, 193). Consequently, it is precisely the judgments that need to be changed, not the events in the world, and this is achieved through an attainment of a new perspective on things, a new theory of the world, which more adequately represents what we can expect and what we should be concerned with. In proposing this way of framing grief, ancient philosophers “broke new ground... in their effort to rationalize the cause of grief and give meaning to it by exhorting the addressee to redefine or reconceptualize the event in order to enable him or her to move on” (Baltussen 2013a, xiv–xv).

While denying the adequacy of fear or sadness as a response to tragic events might strike us as insensitive—to say the least—the motif of reconceptualization might bear some resemblance to the cognitive-narrative work promoted in the contemporary research on grief. While superficially there might be some similarity, in fact there is a big difference. Presently, we are not dealing with a thorough reconstruction of the intellectual horizon so that the grief does not arise—indeed, such an attitude could be considered as callously insensitive—but with a reconstruction of the specific bond with the lost object/person so that our relationship to it is changed.

Here we meet with another issue. While the current reshaping of the perception of the situation relates to biographical re-narration and focuses on the subjective meaning of the event, object, or person, the ancient consolation was thoroughly a matter of a rational discourse which ultimately referred to theories about the nature of the world. As such, it related to universal claims regarding the universe and not to personal meanings and attachments. For Stoics, as well as for later Christian writers, this was connected, among other things, to the belief in a rational *logos* that rules the world, so that even the events experienced individually as tragic acquire a different meaning in the context of this higher rationality or plan. For Epicureans, the case was precisely the opposite—holding on to an atomistic view of the universe, they saw the world as a meaningless chaos with no pre-determined structures. While such a vision might seem to us like a source of anguish in itself, for Epicureans it extinguished many common fears and anxieties: of divine punishment, of afterlife, of not satisfying supposedly pre-existing social standards. At the same time, in such a chaotic world anything encountered in life that possessed a concrete form appeared

as “a kind of miracle, a gratuitous, unexpected gift of nature, and existence... a wonderful celebration” (Hadot 1995, 209).

Another apparent similarity, shared between the classical and the modern idea of consolation, involves the element of participation. Today, this is connected to a revelation of vulnerability of both the consoler and the consoled and involves expression of individual feelings. In the philosophical consolation, while it could have involved expression of sympathy, the relationship between the two persons was rather like that between a teacher and a student. Their interaction would not be that of sharing experiences or feelings, as it is in modern practices, but rather would involve a rational discussion, and it very often involved “an exhortatory style which may not be palatable to modern sensitivity” (Baltussen 2013a, xvi).

All of these features (normativity, rationalization, and exhortation) are strikingly present in Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, one of the most accomplished, if slightly unconventional, works of the genre. The treatise was written by Boethius in prison, where he was placed on false charges—an accusation which eventually resulted in his execution. In his treatise, Philosophy, embodied in the character of a woman, appears to a prisoner (whose situation is suspiciously similar to that of Boethius himself) and immediately expresses her surprise at his fallen spirit:

‘Art thou that man,’ she cries, ‘who, erstwhile fed with the milk and reared upon the nourishment which is mine to give, had grown up to the full vigour of a manly spirit? And yet I had bestowed such armour on thee as would have proved an invincible defence, hadst thou not first cast it away. Dost thou know me? Why art thou silent? Is it shame or amazement that hath struck thee dumb? Would it were shame; but, as I see, a stupor hath seized upon thee.’ (Boethius 2017, Prose II)

The defense of which she speaks is not that of any material means of protecting against enemies but rather a way of securing the spirit against all possible trials of fate through the appropriate understanding of the world. One of such shields was precisely the belief in the existence of a higher rationality that rules the world, giving meaning to even the most unjust actions. It is consequently not the imprisonment that Philosophy bemoans but the fact that the prisoner feels sorry for himself, which can only mean that he lacked the wisdom. Sometime later, rather than accusing his captors, she again points at the prisoner as the one who brought himself into misery:

When I saw thee sorrowful, in tears, I straightway knew thee wretched and an exile. But how far distant that exile I should not know, had not thine own speech revealed it. Yet how far indeed from thy country hast thou, not been banished, but rather hast strayed; or, if thou wilt have it banishment, hast banished thyself! For no one else could ever lawfully have had this power over thee. (Boethius 2017, Prose V)

The true exile, in which the prisoner finds himself, is thus not from his family, home, possessions, or titles but from his wisdom—and this abandoning of wisdom, of the appropriate way of seeing the world, is what Philosophy bemoans:

At bottom, she regards the prisoner’s grief as the noxious exhaust of misguided belief about life, death, and value. Once our thoughts have the unity of a sound syllogism, she thinks, we can face the ravages of mortal existence with equanimity. (Campbell 2016, 449)

This might seem rather insensitive, perhaps even cruel, of her, to speak so to a man who had just been falsely accused, stripped of all his wealth, separated from family, denied honor, and made to spend days in a dungeon. (We are speaking here about the fictional prisoner, not Boethius himself, although it is difficult to stop oneself from establishing an identity.) And yet, this is precisely the message of Philosophy and the only true consolation she can grant—had his ideas about life and the universe been correct, he would never grieve over his situation nor face any anxiety. What she aims to do then, in the remaining part of the *Consolation*, following the process of rational discussion, is to remind Boethius about the appropriate way of looking at the situation in which he found himself.

We need not go into the details of the worldviews presented by the ancient consolations. Many of those will no longer be of much practical help to a modern seeker of consolation. The key observation at this junction concerns the structure of philosophical consolation: it is a process of rational reconstruction of the conceptual horizon of the sufferer that is motivated by ethical theories about the good life and grounded in metaphysical theories about the world. As a result of such reconstruction, one comes to see the world in a different way, so that the cause of suffering no longer appears as such. This is the philosophical process of consolation, and as such it might be distinguished from a psychological or a popular one.

24.4 Environmental Philosophy on Ecological Discomforts

At this point we may return to the question posed at the beginning of the chapter—how to live with wild animals taking into account their disruptive agency? Given my discussion of consolations above, we may ask now more specifically—can consolations be helpful in situations where we find ourselves distressed by the realities of coexistence?

Below, I will briefly present some of the most common, ethically-grounded strategies of engaging with cases of negative animal impacts, particularly in writings of environmental philosophers. The sources of these ideas are ethical texts meant to propose an appropriate way of engaging with wildlife. However, although they are not written with the intention of being consolations, I want to suggest that they can also be read and function as such. Consequently, they can perform a very important role in addressing human anxieties linked to coexistence. Indeed, perhaps implicitly they have already been performing this role.

Nevertheless, as will soon become apparent, they can only be considered as consolations if we make reference to the ancient philosophical strategies of consolation, strategies that, far from offering emotional support and catalyzing narrative work, engage in quite stern moral and rational argumentation. And just as the ancient consolations, rather than offering an acknowledgment of our suffering, they open a possibility of uprooting the very conceptual assumptions that are perceived as the sources of our distress.

These strategies can be divided into two broad groups. One of these combats anxieties through the promotion of a rational attitude predicated upon a moral theory, the other involves a perspectival shift away from the human point of view. Both of these strategies, if successfully embraced, may erase the very conditions upon which distress in the face of animal impacts is based.

With respect to the first group, the examples I will use come from moral arguments grounded in consequentialist-utilitarian and deontological theories.

Speaking about the former, even a cursory glance at the literature on human-animal conflicts reveals that many instances of animal impacts are discussed within the context of calculations of costs and benefits of coexistence with wildlife. The negative impacts (say, damaged crops or distress caused by a sense of threat) are tallied on the side of costs of cohabitation and are balanced against the potential benefits (for instance ecosystem services or the pleasure of watching wildlife). Thus, when one makes note of the damages that wildlife causes and the negative psychological effects this has, one is asked to take into account the fact that at the same time the animals are bringing with them a lot of benefits. This is only rational—if we already consider animal impacts in terms of their consequences, we should consider all possible consequences. Such are the requirements of consistency. What is more, following the principles of utilitarianism, we should consider the consequences of some event not just for ourselves, but for all those beings that can experience suffering or pleasure, and this, in more recent utilitarian accounts, should include also the costs and benefits for the animals involved.

The question of what to do when confronted with animal impacts is presented here as a matter of rational decision making based on an ethical theory that defines good and bad in terms of perceived overall utility. But once this stance is adopted in a consistent manner and internalized, it can also provide one with a way of freeing oneself from anxieties. This is, first of all, because the argument presents a framework which allows for tallying together all the individual values of particular experiences into a cumulative evaluation treating all the aspects and participants in principle equally (with such necessary corrections as intensity or quantity of effect). Given that such a cumulative evaluation of the coexistence with wildlife is commonly judged as good, from the perspective of such final evaluation it might be much easier to suffer some particular discomfort when one knows that it is merely an unavoidable element of an overall positive state of affairs.

A claim that bears some resemblance to this, is one often presented by the rights-oriented animal ethicists working in the context of theories of justice:

At the moment, we are hypersensitive to any risk that liminal animals might pose to us getting sucked into airplane engines, causing car accidents, chewing insulated electrical wires. Or we wildly exaggerate threats, especially in the case of disease. Meanwhile, we ignore the countless risks we impose on liminals—cars, electrical transformers, tall structures and wires, window glass, backyard pools, pesticides, and many others. [...] it is unfair to have a zero-tolerance policy as regards animal risks to humans, while completely disregarding the risks we impose on them. (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 244)

Here, justice is claimed to demand of us equality in the distribution of benefits as well as threats. Any specific damage, threat, or distress is thus presented not in the context

of our individual experience but rather as an element in the fair balancing of rights, obligations, and harms. Once we internalize such an argument, our harm should appear to us in a different light—that is as an element of just distribution. While we might be personally to some extent disadvantaged, inconvenienced, or distressed, this personal experience acquires its full significance only in the light of the broader concern for distributive justice. And within the context of such framework, a loss or hurt we suffer is a positive step towards the ideal of justice (although it might also be an instance of injustice—as in the case of harms experienced by animals). While the negative impacts of animals might thus persist and inconvenience me, I should not be angered or frustrated by them because in fact they are an element of just distribution. At the very least, this should make one tolerant of events experienced as hurtful.

In both of the examples discussed above (utilitarian and deontological) we are asked to shape our attitude to negative animal impacts not following our emotional reactions or personal narratives but by rational deliberation following moral principles grounded in ethical theories. At the same time, such rational attitude carries a promise that when embraced it will provide us with a perspective from which what we experience as distressing will no longer appear so. The latter part is not an explicit element of philosophical argumentation as we presently encounter it in the writings within the field. Indeed, for the ethical theories presented it does not matter how we *feel* about the animal impacts. What matters is that we do the good/right thing. However, implicitly, these theories carry a potential for a philosophical consolation. This consolation functions not through the establishment of a personal narrative relationship to the situation but through the acceptance of a theory that claims to provide not so much a meaningful but rather a right or true picture of the situation.

The emotional disturbances that are primarily targeted in both, I would argue, are anger and frustration, which could then give rise to actions that seek retribution on animals. This reveals to us an important transition from the ancient practice. While traditionally philosophical consolations have been related primarily to the achievement of a right state of mind (that is ataraxia), and as such can be associated with concerns over personal character and excellence relating to virtue ethics, here we are focused on the right conduct towards others and the establishment of moral relations. Despite this important difference, the basic structure of grounding consolation in ethical (rather than psychological) considerations is maintained.

The above presented arguments demand a transition from the frame of reference of the individual experience to the consideration of rational, overarching principles with a claim to universal applicability. Such shift is even more pronounced, and more radical, in the second set of philosophical claims often presented in response to unease over animal impacts. Here, the idea is no longer connected to grounding our assessment of a situation in rational deliberation following ethical principles but rather in a change of perspective that can be very well termed metaphysical.

Holmes Rolston is one of the scholars who early on noticed and addressed the problem of ecological discomforts, developing a sort of ecological theodicy. The essence of Rolston's argument (Rolston 1983, 1992, 2015) is that while from an individual perspective certain features of life in nature might appear "evil" (suffering, death, predation, etc.), from a systemic perspective of a whole ecosystem (or even

the whole biosphere) all these individual harms contribute to the development and flourishing of the system. More than that—from the perspective of that system the individual wrongs can be transvaluated in such a way that they become goods.

Overall the myriad individual passages through life and death upgrade the system. Value has to be something more, something opposed to what any individual actor likes or selects, since even struggle and death which are never approved, are ingredients used instrumentally to produce still higher intrinsic values...This can seem in morally wild disregard for their individuality, treating each as a means to an end. But the whole system in turn generates more and higher individuality. Problem solving is a function of the system too as it recycles, pulls conflicts into harmony, and redeems life from an ever-pressing death. (Rolston 1983, 196–197)

It is important to understand in what way the reference to a system is introduced here. Quite often “in sorrow many people find consolation in the sense that they participate in something that transcends present space and time” (Klass 2014, 9). We could also interpret the framework proposed by Rolston as giving us a place within an ecological community that transcends individuality. This might be the interpretation embraced by many who come to see themselves as members of more-than-human communities. But the main thrust of Rolston’s argument has to do with departing from one’s individual perspective. One is not so much asked to see oneself as a member of a community but rather to take the perspective of such a community—a subtle but important difference—and only from ‘such great heights’ one can truly appreciate that everything, in the end, acquires a positive value. This is reminiscent of taking the “view from above,” which was such a characteristic element of spiritual exercises of all the schools in ancient philosophy (Hadot 1995, 238–250) and is further connected to the belief in a higher rationality that stands as a guarantee of ultimate goodness of everything that happens in the world.⁶

To distinguish this from the shift involved in the previous two examples, we should note that here such transition is not based on ethical theory that determines the relationships between sentient creatures but on a different perspective of what constitutes the fundamental processes that organize the totality of life itself. The fundamental conceptual switch that is required here is not linked to ethical concepts (such as justice, good, or utility) but rather to metaphysical visions of what constitutes the privileged level of existence: wholes rather than individuals, processes and qualities rather than the separate entities they involve.

A similarly radical transformation of perspective can be found in Val Plumwood’s writings motivated by her near-death encounter with a crocodile (Plumwood 2000, 2012). By trying to make sense of her experience, she arrived at an interpretation of the crocodile attack as a revelation of a form of justice much different from the one that is based on individual inviolability (like the one that is at work in Donaldson and Kymlicka’s idea of justice) and that organizes exchanges between people.

This is the universe represented in the food chain whose logic confounds our sense of justice because it presents a completely different sense of generosity. It is pervaded and organised

⁶It is perhaps not without significance that Rolston, among his titles, holds one in divinity and is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church.

by a generosity that takes a Heraclitean perspective, one in which our bodies flow with the food chain. They do not belong to us; rather they belong to all. A different kind of justice rules the food chain, one of sharing what has been provided by energy and matter and passing it on. (Plumwood 2012, 35)

The meaning of justice proposed here involves a completely different set of basic assumptions about the identity of individuals and the rules that govern the interactions between them. Here, there is no sense of individuality as a distinct identity separate from other creatures and processes. The living world is presented rather as a constant flux, and it is not without reason that Plumwood calls this a ‘Heraclitean’ world. In this framework individual loss no longer appears to us as a wrong or a harm. Rather, it becomes an appropriate way of existing, one which carries its own special sort of goodness. As such, when fully internalized, at least in theory, it should provide us with a way of assuaging the individual worries and anxieties, and that is because within the perspective based on unconditional generosity there is no stable sense of individuality which could experience the harm as a breach of its existence.⁷

On a smaller scale, though still following a similar principle, are the perspectival transitions involved in the appreciation of the intrinsic worth of other creatures, whether animals or plants, with their proper means of flourishing. For any entity we can discern its species-specific possibility of flourishing and evaluate the activities of the creature from that perspective rather than from the egocentric perspective of human self-interest (Taylor 1986). Such change allows for disinterested admiration, which in itself can become a sort of consolation. If we cease to look at the world from the perspectives of our own interests and desires and instead ‘feel our way’ into the flourishing of another creature (perhaps one that is inconveniencing us), the suffering, unease, or distress arising out of the confrontation with that creature should dissolve. This, I think, is the lifting of the curse of which John Muir spoke:

I cannot understand the nature of the curse, ‘Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee’. Is our world indeed the worse for this thistly curse? Are not all plants beautiful? Or in some way useful? Would not the world suffer by the banishment of a single weed? The curse must be within ourselves. (quoted in Norton 1994, 19)

To detach ourselves from our own judgments, cultural prejudices, and preferences is to find peace—to leave behind the curse of egotism, and, following further the biblical reference, to return to paradise. But we must remember it is not an earthly paradise where the lion will lay with the lamb but rather a state of mind, a peace with ourselves and the surrounding world.

The above-summarized ways of writing about ecological discomforts were not intended as consolations. Neither do they qualify as such if we look at the ways that consolation is commonly understood today. Indeed, in their focus on normativity,

⁷We must be careful here to note that Plumwood, while proposing this new framework of justice, claimed emphatically that it is necessary to retain also the human sense of justice based on individual inviolability. Unlike in Rolston, then, in her writings there is a continuing sense of tragic duality and consequently the consolation remains incomplete. Still, the perspective of justice as generosity, when viewed on its own, provides the sort of altered frame of reference in which individual loss no longer appears as a cause of distress.

impersonal principles, rationality, radical shift of perspective, and denial of appropriateness of grief and distress they may strike one as insensitive to the experiences of individual suffering. This is particularly so with Rolston, who takes the idea of systemic view of things to its logical consequence, something for which he has been in fact strongly criticized (Le Blanc 2001; Holland 2009; Plumwood 2012). However, if we look at the philosophical tradition of consolation, we can see striking affinities between the ancient and contemporary texts.

First of all, both ancient and environmental philosophers acknowledge that distress in face of difficult life experiences forms a problematic issue. For the ancients, this was connected to the disruptive potential of emotions, which drive one away from the ideal of serenity. Today, acknowledging troubling aspects of nature is often perceived as potentially undermining the motivation to protect nature (Ouderkirk 1999). While psychological practice strives towards establishing a relationship of sympathy and promotes emotional work, in ancient and environmental philosophy we find rational discourses in asymmetrical relationships. While presently we focus on assuaging of pain, the ancient philosophical consolation took diminishing of pain as secondary to the illumination of truth and concerned itself with bringing the individual back to the appropriate frame of mind—from which the diminishing of pain would follow naturally. Suffering was, therefore, not so much a ‘disease’ that needed treatment as a symptom of a deeper underlying problem—the falling away from truth, virtue, or appropriate conduct. I would venture proposing that this is what is also happening in environmental philosophy. The anxiety, fear, hatred, or disgust with animals are not in themselves the problem or are so only secondarily. These attitudes and emotions are rather symptoms of a fundamentally misguided worldview, most commonly characterized as anthropocentrism. Consequently, what is provided is a way to treat the actual problem, that is to propose an alternative metaphysical and ethical horizon. Discomfort, then, is a symptom of a deeper issue that needs to be treated; indeed, one that can only be treated not with sympathy but with fundamental normative-conceptual work. Such work takes the form of rational discourses and proposes a thorough transformation of the conceptual horizon from which one looks at the world.

The point I am making here is that as a consequence of this reshaping one can also expect the alleviation of grief, anxiety, or even the actual conflicts themselves—indeed, that is what seems implicitly to be promised in many ethical arguments:

If we attempt to see animals apart from our anthropocentric projections and desires, might we be able to see these animals with some sort of clarity? If we understand the animals on their own terms, could we then minimize or end conflicts with problematic wildlife? (Nagy and Johnson 2013, 10)

As such, animal ethics and environmental philosophy are practical not only in providing directions for action, but also in that they provide conceptual tools for addressing certain problematic aspects of cohabitation with wildlife. This opens up an additional avenue for developing coexistence, one based not on material transformation of the environment or managerial regimes controlling the behavior of people and animals but on “spiritual” transformations effected by consolatory work.

Consequently, the analysis carried out here is not only an analytical framework, useful in analysis of philosophical positions, or another interpretative key that can be productively applied to nature writing. Indeed, the ancient examples show us precisely how this approach can be used in practice and how standard tropes (and we already have a number of those established in environmental thinking) can be creatively made use of to discuss individual instances of hurt, grief, or anxiety.

Unfortunately, some aspects of philosophical consolation discussed above might strike many modern-day readers as counter-intuitive. Moreover, the above-summarized moral arguments are not explicitly framed as consolatory. For these reasons, we might expect difficulties in the practical application of the discussed philosophical approach. Consequently, below I will discuss some lessons that we may derive from the ancient practice of philosophical consolation that may be of use in our present predicament.

24.5 The Scope of Consolation Is a Total Transformation

Ancient consolations often did not limit themselves to an issue immediately at hand. Because they touch the matter of despair and suffering, in many cases they eventually fall back upon one of the most fundamental questions of ancient—if not of modern—philosophy, that is what is happiness and how to attain it. Consequently, consolations usually became discourses on the good life—what constitutes it and how it can be achieved—and very often moved in the direction of basic metaphysical beliefs. The consequence of consolation is then envisioned as a deep spiritual transformation: “The ancient *consolatio* genre is a prime example of what Pierre Hadot calls ‘spiritual exercises,’ an engaged philosophy that seeks to form readers over an itinerary mapped by its arguments, rather than simply informing them” (Campbell 2016, 447).

The point here is to realize that philosophical consolation should not be treated merely instrumentally, as a sort of conceptual or symbolic analogue to more traditional means of wildlife management. We should also not expect that it simply aims to treat some separate instance of distress, while the rest of our life remains intact. Rather, this approach, far from being a mere tool, transforms the very situation in which it is applied as well as the person undergoing consolation. Ultimately it transforms us into people who think and act differently—as such it is existential rather than instrumental.

So how exactly does such a transformation take place?

24.6 Gentle and Strong Remedies

It is important to notice that ancient authors recognize two stages of consolation. Taking Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* as an example, we can distinguish ‘gentler’ and ‘stronger’ remedies, which “mirrors the ancient physician’s approach to

acclimate the patient to the medicines of increasing strength as one prepares oneself slowly and by degrees for moving out of darkness into bright light” (Phillips 2002). In the treatise, this means beginning from rhetorical arguments, poetry, and the kind of claims that are readily acceptable to the one suffering, as they still fit within her present worldview: “The ‘gentler remedy’ is not meant to cure but rather to strengthen the patient...so that he can take the stronger medicine later” (ibid.). In a similar vein, also Stoics underlined the importance of letting some time pass, and with it the worst of the grief, before undertaking serious philosophical consolatory work (Baltussen 2013b).

This does not mean we have to immediately break into song or engage in the kind of floral speeches we may encounter in, for instance, Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*. Rather, and taking to heart the insights of modern consolation studies, the above drawn distinction would suggest beginning with the compassionate, narrative, and emotional grief-work that is currently seen as both most adequate and most efficacious. The first stage could be what we would commonly consider a consolation in that it takes on various forms of soothing, sympathizing, and acknowledging. The gentle means of compassion, such as encouraging expression and showing one’s own vulnerability, might be the first step of assuaging grief and preparing the other to be ready to be consoled in a more radical manner, with the use of conceptual consolation that transforms the perspective on the situation. What is more, this initial step might help build trust and rapport in the context of issues that provoke strong partisan divisions. By encouraging expression it might also make the conceptual bases of anxiety more visible, which might be helpful in the later work of reformulating those through philosophical consolation.

While this might appear as contradictory—since it depends on confirming the attachment to the worldview that gives rise to distress—it might nevertheless be psychologically necessary. It is very difficult to enact a total transformation of a worldview at a moment of crisis where people seem to require stability the most and cling to the ideas that have so far organized their life. And since philosophical consolation strives for achieving actual results, it cannot afford to disregard the psychological structure of the experience it tries to address. Hence, to reach the pre-determined normatively defined goal, it often has to be pragmatic in the choice of means it employs. The writing cure of Cicero can be interpreted in this light as such first stage on the way to complete consolation, which would later include philosophical work that returns one to the appropriate way of perceiving the world. In general, it shows that philosophical consolation is always a balancing act and an art that requires sensitivity both to the psychological nature of the situation and the ethical goals of the practice.

24.7 The Individual and Private Is Universal and Public

Another important feature of consolation as a practice was that it most commonly took the form of a dialogue. The three great works of consolation: Plato’s *Phaedo*,

Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, and Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, all take the form of a dialogue. Consolations were also often part of epistolary exchanges—they were extended dialogues. Authors were often quite aware that such private letters would be made public; indeed, they often wrote with a larger audience in mind: "Pieces such as these [private letters by Seneca], though directed to a particular and personal situation, have the character rather of an essay than of a letter; here, as elsewhere, the distinction between letter and treatise becomes hard to define" (Scourfield 1993, 21).

This ambiguous status of consolatory texts connects the private and the public sphere of both grief and consolation and this has two important consequences. On the one hand, the texts needed to be made very individual, so as to address the specific suffering of the addressee. As such, the common tropes had to be adapted for the specific situation and with a particular person in mind. On the other hand, given they were meant for the greater public, they needed to provide consolation in a way that others could identify with. This is of course no mean feat.

One way to address this tension was to depend on stock arguments that developed together with the genre (Baltussen 2009, 71).

These stock examples, far from being anemic, standardized commonplaces, served the user well in providing words at a time when many are at a loss for words. Rather than trivialize these commonplaces as "mere platitudes," we should acknowledge their power to express an individual's response to grief in a verbal form sanctioned by experience. (ibid., 91)

The skill of a consoler was visible precisely in the way that she managed to make the traditional tropes applicable to the situation at hand.

In a similar way we can endeavor to see whether there are such stock approaches in modern environmentalism. And indeed we can find those—above I have summarized several moral arguments that belong to the developing stock of tropes commonly used in situations of animal impacts by philosophers and broader publics alike. While they are 'stock arguments,' they can be at the same time transformed according to the need to fit a specific situation, and the skill of a consoler is visible precisely in the way that she can make the general, perhaps even universal, bear on the individual in a unique way. Perhaps this is why the writings of Val Plumwood on her experience with the crocodile are so powerful. She develops her philosophical ideas permanently referring to her own personal experience while at the same time managing to touch universal notes.

24.8 Conclusion—the Limits of Consolation

As any practice, also that of consolation has its limitations and it is important to be aware of those. There are several problematic features that philosophical consolation has struggled with from its very beginning.

While many philosophical works profess optimism as to the efficacy of this approach in expelling anguish, this has not been a common cultural presumption. For

once, even in ancient Greece, there was a strong sentiment against consolation, which is visible in Greek tragedy that often underlines the impossibility of successful consolation (Chong-Gossard 2013). Private writings of philosophers, for instance Cicero's, show a discrepancy between the publicly professed belief in philosophy and personal experience. While he maintains that philosophical work has helped him show his grief less, he acknowledges that the actual pain remained unchanged (Baltussen 2013b, 74). Even some works of consolation, like Boethius' text, according to some scholars express doubts regarding the capacity of philosophy to actually provide the consolation it promises and can be read more as a satire (Relihan 1990, 2007).

The awareness of this limitation is important because it can also draw our attention to the limitations of the philosophical and rhetorical strategies used by environmentalists addressing the problematic issues surrounding coexistence with wildlife. It also opens the space for texts which, like ancient tragedies, directly address the refusal or the impossibility of thorough consolation and instead focus on the irreducibly tragic aspects of coexistence (Snyder 1990; Williams 1995; Steeves 1999; Jordan 2003; Tokarski 2019). We can heed this warning and include it more openly even in the philosophical, journalistic, and narrative texts which strive to address ecological discomforts.

Acknowledgment of the limited efficacy of consolation also helps us realize how immense work is asked of the grieving or distressed. Indeed, the consolations of the past were written most commonly as reminders of what one already believed but temporarily lost due to being overwhelmed by grief. They aimed to remind people already steeped in philosophical ways of perceiving the world how they should look at the tragic events that befell them. In some way, it was then preaching to the converted. In much of ancient consolation, one should have already been open to this way of thinking to accept it.

With this in mind, one can perhaps go as far as to note the presence of a paradox in the practice of consolation. Grief comes in a moment when our world is overturned by some tragedy, which might unsettle the beliefs we have held so far. But consolation in such instances might be nothing more than bringing back those beliefs to assuage our grief.⁸ The very ideas and ideals that are put in question by a tragic event are brought up to set us more fundamentally in these beliefs. Not only a paradox, then, but even a circle. That this is not a vicious circle might be noted by observing that the ideals are now scrutinized in a different light, in a context of a different situation. It is significant in this context that most environmental philosophers do not bring new frameworks or principles into the question of negative animal impacts; they rather

⁸Naturally, this is only so for those who already hold given beliefs, in this case environmental ones. For those who do not, and who must be thoroughly transformed at the moment of tragedy, the work needed is even greater and does not involve this sort of circularity. But even for environmentalists there might be an element of transformation involved. This is well illustrated by the case of Val Plumwood and her near-death encounter with a crocodile. Plumwood notes that through this tragic event she came to realize how shallow her integration of the environmental beliefs actually was (Plumwood 2012). Consequently, tragic events and subsequent consolation might be the moment when the true internal transformation takes place, when one not only says the right things but also sees the world in a different way.

re-present their established theories by showing how they stand up to the challenge of tragic encounters.

Consequently, discomfiting encounters might form something of a test even for professed environmentalists. Sometimes, as in the case of Val Plumwood, they may reveal the shallowness of one's own convictions and consequently lead to doubt. For others, they might lead to the collapse of ideals. But in a like manner, they might be a sort of trial-by-fire from which one emerges with a renewed conviction. They are what philosopher Paul Tillich calls "extreme situations" (1951)—it is only when a philosophical system can withstand such extreme situations that it is worth holding on to and following.⁹ Belief and conversion at the time of crisis are perhaps a difficult task, but every system of belief must possess resources that could be employed at a time of a crisis—to provide guidance and consolation. Environmentalism and animal ethics have been heavy on guidance. Based on the above, we can see they also have much to offer in terms of consolation. This in turn can be of inestimable worth at a time such as the Anthropocene, when most of the beliefs our culture held most firmly are being overturned and challenged. If the Anthropocene requires radical rethinking of our relationship to the world, it will be not enough to employ sophisticated technologies and material tools provided by environmental management. We need something that will guide us through the existential crises that go hand in hand with fundamental conceptual transformations, and here the practice of philosophical consolation with its rich tradition can prove an important supporting element.

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⁹In the context of grief work see also Klass 2014.

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