

How Big Was Bartram's Ark!

Ruminations on William Bartram's Place among American Nature Writers
in View of His Unpublished Ms on the Dignity of Animal Nature

I. *The Travels*

William Bartram was a simple, peaceful man with an incredible array of talents. History has not given him full credit for his remarkable understanding, especially his comprehensive and radical new world view that grew out of his traveling experiences in the Southeast. His most important achievement, in my mind, is that he flattened the Great Chain of Being with one grand hammer's blow. Crushing the hierarchy inherent in the Scala Naturae constructed by Plato and Aristotle, he imagined in its place a divine democracy which acknowledges the infusion of God's understanding and intelligence in every part of creation.

For the metaphor of the great chain he substitutes a harmony between body and soul, matter and spirit, very much akin to what Whitman would begin to chant seven decades later. Most especially, his philosophy of nature carves out a strong argument for a biological foundation of ethics when he boldly compares the behaviors of animals, native Americans, and Europeans. "We do better," he maintains after a critique of his own civilization, "when our actions seem to operate from simple instinct or approach nearest to the manners of the animal Creation."

These ideas are all inherent in Bartram's *Travels* (1791), but a comprehensive version of them is only found in his unpublished draft ms which I have entitled, "On the Dignity of Animal Nature or The Virtues: Divine, Human, and Animal." This document constitutes a prose creation account to explain the holistic relationship between God, nature, and humankind. It is a piece of pragmatic philosophy in the manner of Dewey, except that Bartram's praxis is a composite of botany, ethology, and ethnography. His picture of creation is all the more startling for its timing, embracing the era of contact and constitution, circa 1800.

God rolls through all that Bartram meets on his travels and shines forth in every part: wind, lightning, limpkin, rattle-snake, developmental stages of the mayfly, cypress domes, vistas of marsh and savanna, roiling patterns of fish congregations; the councils and communities of Creeks, Choctaws, and Cherokees; and especially in his own pure and simple heart. Species inhabiting the plant and animal kingdoms (the latter including humans) are regularly referred to as tribes and operate or fulfill their domains with equal force, fervently like the sections of a Bach choir. They sing a Canticle of the Cosmos, like Walt Whitman or Ernesto Cardenal. They are not following the same old hierarchical

song of Genesis (where humans are the rulers of nature), but rather play out a creation system that is growing, like a forest or a river, with ever new melodies and forms.

In Bartram's new world view, God is co-dynamic with instinct, with passions, and even with sin. If William had our understanding of molecular biology, he would say that God is in the genes. Creation is emerging within us. This is a scientific deism where all the divine intelligence is still designing and enchanting us and the other animals.

So in the first instance, Bartram's ark is sailing across the Atlantic, full of all the plants, seeds, drawings, stories and accounts, descriptions, and ideas he gathered on his journeys. This is Bartram's gift to Europe; and the Romantic Age was nursed on it from its infancy. It is a marriage of Linnaean science and Quaker theology (can you feel the subtle paradox of both these phrases?). Recently I spent a full day rummaging around this ark by reading through the extensive indexes in Harper's naturalist edition of the *Travels*. What an incredible array of scientific knowledge and artistic understanding, spanning everything from the physical to the moral attributes of each creature, species, tribe, and nation. The supremely fine lines of his drawings match the delicacy of his scientific descriptions. They provided Europe a full picture of the new America, as though the new Noah had just landed in London.

II. "On the Dignity of Animal Nature"

But Bartram's ark goes much further in his unpublished manuscript. Here he seems to be America's first Peace Corps volunteer, stepping out of his experiences of the southeast and expanding himself into the cosmos like Leonardo's microcosmic man. He redraws the spiritual foundation of the natural world in this extraordinary and confusing draft of an essay. His philosophy of life in America constitutes a new version of Plato's *Republic* which keeps the idealism and focus on the virtues, but reconstitutes them in the plant and animal world of nature.

Bartram's biology, sixty years in advance of Darwin's account of our origins, is by no means essentialist or static. It makes room for the idea of evolution and of species multiplication. It embraces an innate or intuitive ecology and represents the first voice in America inclined to ratify a bill of both animal and human rights through its ethology and ethnography. This essay taken together with *The Travels* forms two parts of an ecological Utopia.

The opening sentence of his rough draft makes you wonder how much Bartram had written to precede it: "It may be, also, thus, as we are Creatures of the supreme Being, we were made for a certain and indispensable purpose in this Vast System of Creation." In spite of the confusion about the layout of the pages and paragraphs of this

document, it is possible with careful content analysis to see what William Bartram was constructing without having the page or more which is implied by the opening sentence and without knowing who is included in the “we.”

It seems from incidental references like “thy” and “my friend” that Bartram was writing a friend or relative (see ¶s 3, 7, and 13). The essay takes the form of an epistolary letter in the manner of the Renaissance humanists, a commentary on his experience in the *Travels* that caused him to redefine drastically the prevailing estimate of the Great Chain of Being. He never mentions the book itself, but in the middle of the essay, as he begins his argument about animal dignity, he writes: “Having resided some considerable time amongst several of these Nations, I can give a pretty concise view, both of their manners and the Animal creation in general” (¶22). In this he reminds me of Raphael Hythloday in More’s *Utopia*, except that this is no fiction. Bartram is integrating the science of his day with his own actual experience, already fully reported.

The structure of the essay supports this comparison because he starts with God and the system of creation. He leaves out altogether the nine choirs of angels and their counterparts in Hades.¹ Then he moves to humans and the vices incumbent upon a court life that thrives on dissimulation. By comparison to animals, who only dissemble to survive in the struggle for existence, the European courtier and hence his colonial American counterpart is excessive when it comes to vicious deceit and hypocrisy.

Even though there is a reference to Jesus (“as Our Lord hath said” ¶4), the whole essay seems quite deist and universalist. Perhaps the friend to whom the essay is written was a Christian, like Sir Thomas More, but, two hundred years later, entrenched in the capitalist and colonial enterprises of Euro-America.

It seems likely, then, that the friendship is a spiritual one because the plural first person pronoun in the opening sentence is carried over into several personal confessions about William’s struggles to live a simple life and to use his passions and affections innocently, the central theme of the essay (¶s 5-12). In this respect, Plato seems to be the primary source of the discussion about virtues because throughout the essay idealism and the force of Reason (philosophy) govern the discussion of human morality in dealing with the passions and affections.

Bartram then introduces as a digression his astounding argument for considering nature itself as the philosophical ground of ethics, and especially for seeing the life of the animals, from birth to death, as a model for human behavior. Largely anticipating the last thirty years of animal behavior studies and the moral sense in humans, Bartram sincerely argues that animals must have reason, understanding, and ideas to go along with their passions and affections so that they develop basic values that readily compare to those of native Americans. At one point, after showing that animals have

¹ In the second paragraph, however, he does allow for the possibility that God leaves the operation of the order and system of the Universe to a “secondary Intelligence.”

language (at once serving both the species and earthkind), he boldly claims that they must therefore have intelligence, ideas, and understanding.

Was he reading Pico della Mirandola when he says, “There is something so Aristocratic if a Philosopher may use the expression...the Dignity of Human Nature, because, as viewed in the chain of Animal beings according to the common notions of Philosophers, a Man acts the part of an Absolute Tyrant” (§34)? He goes on to assert that “Man is cruel, Hypocritical, a dissembler” and imagines that animals and other intelligent beings are not fooled. The tone here and later in the essay is one of remarkable anger for a man of simplicity and peace.

Pico’s famous essay “On the Dignity of Man” celebrates our uniquely Protean position on the great chain of being. Beasts and angels are static and unchanging, whereas humankind has the better lot: “On man when he comes into life the Father conferred the seeds of all kinds and the germs of every way of life. Whatever seed each man cultivates will grow to maturity and bear in him their own fruit.” So we can be vegetative like plants, sensitive like brutes, rational like heavenly beings, intellectual like an angel or the son of God, or solitary in the darkness like God. “Who would not admire this our chameleon?” Pico asks.²

By contrast, Bartram is a biological democrat. He seems to want the European self-styled, civilized elite to stop practicing the tyranny of feudalism on the tribes of animals and native Americans. Philosophers need to start recognizing Divine Intelligence in all of creation. This radical idea seems to be an extension of the Quaker attention to “that of God in each of us.” It also conforms to Bartram’s experiences and observations of animal behavior. His focus on behavior as a proof of moral (divine) intelligence is profoundly consonant with current leading edge experimentation on the genome of the fruit fly and its consequent behaviors (see Jonathan Weiner’s fascinating study: *Time, Love, Memory*.)³

The heart of Bartram’s essay is really an attack on the hypocrisy of the eighteenth-century conquistadors of all nations, primarily for being colossal liars, fakers, and dissemblers. The principal target of this digression into animal dignity might have been France’s leading naturalist, the Comte de Buffon (mentioned in §16). Bartram took

² “On the Dignity of Man” as found in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1948), 225.

³ At the end of twentieth century, leading scientists working on the ethos of animal mind are Griffin and de Waal, but many others have since followed up on their work. Darwin, of course, was a keen observer and compiler of the expressions of emotions in animals (mammals really) and humans; however, he didn’t cross the line into ethos. What he did understand in consonance with Bartram was the universality of the evidence. The discoveries of Seymour Benzer and other explorers of gene expression in the fruit fly when joined to recent studies of spindle neurons in hominids, great apes, some whale and dolphin species, and elephants promises to extend the scope of the evidence for moral order in the large-brained animals even further. Furthermore, the new science of epigenetics is revealing another source of “intelligence” in cell membranes as they monitor their environment and regulate molecular pathways.

exception to Buffon's notion that somehow European nature and natives were superior (hardier, etc.) to their new world counterparts and especially chided him for dismissing the evidence for intelligence in animals.

So let's recapitulate here. First we have the virtues of the creator that stand behind both the vast system of the universe and the smaller system of human life. Bartram never mentions the biblical account of creation and may indeed conceive of Genesis as an account of a terrestrial special creation, but his theology becomes immediately original and revolutionary. He advocates the notion that God as creator can work inside or outside the system in his capacity as ruler and preserver. Like Meister Eckhart of the medieval mystical tradition, Bartram imagines that God "waxes and wanes" when governing the on-going creative world and the process is organic: "The seed of the pear grows into a pear tree, the seed of the plum grows into a plum tree, and the seed of God grows into God." This is why Bartram suggests that we trust our animal instincts.⁴

That world according to Bartram is evolving and changing, as Ovid understood, not just in the ages of Mankind, but in the ages of animals outside of human development. In all parts of creation God still has an active hand and designs through intelligence, inside or outside the systems. No ark made of trees is big enough to hold all the new world's species, especially if we have to include the extinct megafauna. Darwin is standing off in the next century when Bartram creates this world view to sustain an ethical framework, *Systema Virtutum*. God's virtues are the immutable part, the archetypes that humans, following reason, can understand. Like the painting of a real animal, Bartram remarks, our virtues can only be a weak copy of God's attributes on a poor canvas.

It seems likely from the few pointed references to painting that Bartram's friend might share this interest, a fellow botanist and illustrator perhaps such as Benjamin Smith Barton or even the young Quaker painter Edward Hicks. Clearly William's world view could easily have charged the imagination of the peaceable kingdom because the world of animals and the world of American natives are deeply intertwined in the experience of the travels and the philosophy revealed fully in this draft.⁵

The peaceable animal kingdom begins to appear in the essay with what seems at first like a digression into a study of Dissimulation that is inserted into his lists of human virtues. In a single sentence paragraph which is most notable for its interpersonal framework, he starts to look at this vice as something quite natural in

⁴ Jefferson, in a letter to Thomas Law (13 June 1814) says that "Nature has implanted in our breasts . . . a moral instinct," but never imagines that the animals have it as well nor thinks of it as governed by Divine Intelligence as an active force in every part of nature.

⁵ Scholars have noted that Bartram's book takes almost no account of the revolutionary war and largely ignores the conflicts between natives. His handling of animal and native mores in the manuscript also avoids the issue of killing for food or intertribal warfare. The utopianism of Bartram's views matches those of Edward Hicks and puts many readers off.

animals. As “we” zoologists have found, animals use dissimulation “for their own defense, for protecting their young, for procuring only a necessary subsistence, or for their safety” (§ 6).

The real turning point of the essay comes then at paragraph thirteen when Bartram begs leave of his friend to follow a hobby horse of his own, a small matter to mankind “of much importance to me,” the Dignity of Animal Nature. “If man alone is indued with Intelligence and Reason,” Bartram writes, “he acts as if he seldom consulted or obeyed the Divine Monitor” (§20). Giving a list of imperial tyrants of classical times, Bartram asserts that their actions represent “madness and intoxication.”

By contrast, he argues, “we act most naturally...when we imitate the animals.” Then he examines in detail the mores of the animals and compares them at length to the Indians, until finally it does seem simple enough. Our philosophers, he says, can’t call all that animal behavior virtuous because that would detract from the dignity of human nature. He shows then in short paragraphs how they make extraordinary things, educate their young, sing or speak a language of their own species and a more universal language among tribes and families of other species.

When the flower hunter is done with this digression (full of righteous passion itself), he calls the reader back to his “text,” as though he is preaching a sermon on the animal kingdom of God: “Let us endeavor to improve the Heart and embellish the mind” (a phrasing rekindled from paragraphs four and thirteen).

This time he switches from dissimulation to covetousness and presents an attack on the budding idea of America’s manifest destiny and a life of exploiting the riches of the nation instead of cultivating the virtues of its citizens. Implied in this statement is a sense that the treatment of animals and natives is a part of the degradation overlooked by the greed and quest for riches of many Euro-Americans.

These are Quaker ideals, to be sure, but the central exercise of comparing animal behavior to native Americans is extraordinary. Why have not the textbooks of colonial American history been full with the understanding of this message? Primarily, it’s because he never polished the piece or submitted it for publication. However, in the last hundred years a steady stream of Bartram scholars have been mentioning this draft without following through to publish it, a situation about to change.⁶

Perhaps Bartram lacked the courage to say it out loud or beyond his friend’s hearing. Once this essay is published (Feb. 2010), however, there should be no excuse. Even though Bartram’s essay did not reach his contemporaries, his ideas did through

⁶ Thomas Hallock and Nancy Hoffman have prepared a new collection of unpublished letters and essays forthcoming in 2010 by the University of Georgia Press. The two most comprehensive treatments to which this essay is indebted are by Earnest (1940) and Walters (1989). Some treatments identify two different mss in folders 81 and 83 (cf. Hoffman’s dissertation and the study of Waselkov and Braund).

the *Travels*. We now have to say that a different vision of nature and our place in it, one thoroughly consistent with our constitution, could have emerged. The essay is implied in the *Travels*, but here Bartram declaims fully on animal dignity. These are by far the earliest and most radical declarations for the rights of nature appearing at the dawn of the rights of man. It represents an ecological constitution for America that one only wishes had been taken up by Thomas Jefferson and his band of revolutionary aristocrats.



The author, in the spirit of Bartram,
exploring the swamps of Spring Hammock.

III. Bartram's Place among America's Nature Writers and Philosophers

I find myself now considering the ark of Bartram's imagination, trying to take the measure of his place among America's finest nature writers. He would surely be the

founding father of them all, had only this draft manuscript and the book of travels as well had the benefit of some understanding editors. Of course, no amount of editing can turn the *Travels* into a classic like *Walden*.

If you take Thoreau and Emerson together as one, adding especially the scientific imagination brought to light in the former's study of seed dispersal in forest ecology, then his revolutionary spirit and his bountiful transcendental philosophy, you are close to the scope of Bartram's world view. However, Thoreau just didn't have a way to expand from *Walden* into more than the regional flora and fauna and mountain habitats to include the human scale. He lacked the perspective to be found through contact with a variety of native tribes. Perhaps he fully abandoned the classical foundation of western society and the great chain for a very important reason, but lost in the process the animal-human nexus of Bartram's radical revision. He didn't read the *Travels* carefully enough or else he skipped all the tribal visits. I can't see Thoreau engaged with wonder at the Cherokee maidens in the strawberry fields or drawing the hardiness of Mico Chlucco the way I imagine Wordsworth and Coleridge taking notes.

Bartram is one of the few nature writers who could almost match the scope of Muir's walk to the gulf, his scaling of the Sierras, and his surveys of the glaciers of Alaska. Would that Bartram's experience of the South had persisted longer for him to turn out chapters on the limpkin and the gator to rival those of Muir on the water ouzel and the douglas squirrel. However, on the level again of contact and ethology of both natives and animals, Muir like Thoreau had the moral sense to write about the rights of animals, but not so much to speak for an equal peace and understanding of the native Americans. In "The Country of the Chilcat" Muir comes close in one dramatic scene when the chief tells him that white men are only interested in what they can get out of the natives and therefore talking to them is like trying to speak to someone across a raging stream. By and large, however, Muir's imagination does not arc across that river and does not recommend a better democracy, more inclusive of Alaskan natives.

The best example of a nature writer with Bartram's comprehensive scope would be Mary Hunter Austin. She lived at times among the natives and wrote an ecology of the Owens valley and the desert southwest that subordinated the waves of human history to the sparse embraces of the desert ecosystem. For Austin, the spirituality of the places she wrote about infused all the creatures and spoke out against the oppression of an unequal democracy, especially between man and woman, Euro and native American. She gathered in her ark (read first *The Land of Little Rain*, 1903) the native poetry and ritual, but had far less of their animal understanding. Her theology was equally mystical, but seldom became a part of her best writings on the land. Her breakdown of the chain of being is distinctive, focusing more on the male-female than the human-animal disparities. Her concept of genius was fully earthbound and instinctual.

Bartram was more interested in undoing the pride of Pico della Mirandola's humanist optimism about the human Proteus or chameleon and so the force of his argument in this draft manuscript is squarely and directly placed on the new republic. I wish this letter had been sent to Jefferson. What was it that the revolution against England was destined to uphold? Bartram's ark has the advantage over all later scions of American nature writing of being drawn and designed in parallel with the American constitution. If Jefferson is the architect of our political heritage, then Bartram should be standing right across the Schuylkill river from him, asking for a more inclusive natural history, one that all the revolutions of the science of biology for the past hundred years even more thoroughly support. Bartram's imaginations about the simple dignity of animal and human nature make more and more sense every day. It is a pity the friend who presumably received a polished version of this essay was no John Burroughs or Roderick Nash, someone to advertise its unusual perspective. Perhaps then it might have changed the course of America's history of misconception and mistreatment of both natives and animals.

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