Chapter 4

Apes, Humans, and Other Animals

Project Nim and Rise of the Planet of the Apes

One way that the liberal imagination has been profoundly challenged in the 65 years since Lionel Trilling published *The Liberal Imagination* is with regard to how liberals historically have construed the relationship between human beings and the nonhuman natural world. The liberal imagination typically has been anthropocentric, speaking of “rights of man” and how “all men” or all people are created equal.

The seventeenth-century liberal thinker John Locke exemplified this tendency. In the first of his influential *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), Locke rebutted the patriarchalist arguments of Sir Robert Filmer. In *Patriarcha* (1680) and other writings, Filmer had appealed to the Old Testament book of Genesis to defend the divine right of kings. He held that God had given Adam exclusive “Dominion . . . over all Creatures, [and made him] thereby the Monarch of the whole World”; Adam’s original monarchical authority was then passed on through his heirs. Locke’s dispute with Filmer revolved in part around this passage in Genesis: “God said unto [Adam and his heirs], Be Fruitful and Multiply, and Replenish the Earth and subdue it, and have Dominion over the Fish of the Sea, and over the Fowl of the Air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the Earth.”

Locke advanced an antimonarchist liberal reading of Genesis. He insisted that Adam “was not made ruler, or monarch, by this charter,” and that God had in no way granted dominion, through “Noah and his sons, . . . to one part of men over another.” Moreover, God did not grant to Adam “Private Dominion over the Inferior Creatures, but right in common

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with all Mankind; so neither was he monarch upon the account of the property here given him.” God had thus established humanity’s collective dominion over all the other creatures of the Earth. Locke elaborated on this point by citing Genesis 9:2, where, Locke said, “God renewing this Charter to Noah and his sons, . . . gives them dominion over the Fowls of the Air, and the Fishes of the Sea, and the Terrestrial Creatures.” God gave mankind dominion over “the Irrational Animals of the World,” Locke maintained, to provide people with food and sustenance.

Later liberal environmentalist thinkers, from John Stuart Mill to former US vice president Al Gore Jr. have advanced secularized versions of this idea of human dominion over the presumably “irrational animals of the world.” Liberal environmentalists sometimes have joined this notion with the ideal of judicious human stewardship over nonhuman nature rather than selfish domination. Such views often have been humanist and anthropocentric—guided by ideas about the singular moral status of human beings. From this perspective, concerns about the well-being of other animals and the protection of nonanimals of the natural world are gauged in terms of the impact of such “non-human and non-animal” effects on human beings. However, some environmentalists (notably “deep ecologists”) and animal rights advocates approach these matters quite differently.

In light of such differences, moral philosopher Bernard Williams has distinguished human concern for the effects that human activities have on “the experience of other animals” from more general conservationist and environmental concerns that many human beings hold: “An experiential concern is likely to be with individual animals”—that is, with their experiences of suffering or flourishing—“rather than with the survival of species, and it is bound to be less interested in the less complex animals . . . It also, of course, has no direct interest in the non-living.” In Williams’s terms, the more generalized concern with the survival of species and such things as the effects of human activities on trees and ecosystems is a conservationist or environmentalist concern; yet it is not the sort of moral concern that will necessarily involve concern for the suffering of individual animals. While this distinction is helpful, it is complicated by ecological viewpoints that combine more generalized environmentalist priorities with an experiential concern for the well-being of individual animals.

The feature film *Noah* (2014), by writer-director Darren Aronofsky, offers a vivid popular culture example of the more general environmental approach. *Noah* revisits the story in Genesis of Noah, his family, the great deluge, and the ark on which Noah saves myriad animals species in a manner that resonates with John Locke’s religiously informed liberalism. Two other recent movies, the documentary film *Project Nim* (which followed