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Biodiversity and Great Ape Personhood: Reflections on Reason-ability and Compassion-ability

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Abstract:
That there has been increased observation in the decrease of biodiversity remains perhaps a perennially present submission of biodiversity sciences and environmental activism. Environmental scientists and have raised, and continue to raise resounding alarms concerning threats to the totality of existence following growing loss of species, flora and fauna. Dove-tailing biodiversity-conservationist argument for the preservation of endangered species is the Great Ape-Personhood standpoint that great apes be treated as persons – and, by extension, granted rights – as a means of protecting these life-forms from threat of extinction. Through the method of critical analysis, the paper seeks to examine the philosophical foundations of biodiversity with a view to seeing the plausibility of adopting the great ape personhood model – which calls for ascription of rights to non-human members of the hominidae – as a veritable platform for protecting great apes, among others, from threat of ecological extinction. The paper established that reason-ability and compassion-ability are established properties of great apes – human and nonhuman. The paper then recommended a framework for creating a sustainable and egalitarian ecology where every reasonable being sees the other as vitally important and protect that other from abuse, misuse and threat of extinction.

Keywords: *Great ape, personhood, biodiversity*

1. Introduction

In pursuit of its aim, the paper is divided into four sections. Section one outlines the philosophical – metaphysical, epistemological and ethical – foundations of biodiversity. The outlined philosophical underpinnings of biodiversity are background to section two where we examine the interplay between the argument for bio-diversity and the argument for great ape personhood. Taking into cognizance the Darwinian notion of sympathy, the third section of the paper is a critical reflection on reason-ability and compassion-ability as grounds for personhood. In section four, the concluding section, we discuss the implications of the study with the view of recommending a veritable strategy for sustainable biodiversity.

2. Philosophical Foundations of Biodiversity

Biodiversity is founded on the metaphysical assumption that nature is, and works as, a system. From a *systems* metaphysics, *biodiversity* proceeds to view environment as a structured whole comprising interrelated, interconnected and interdependent living and non-living things. According to Swingland, for example biodiversity comprises all the millions of different species that live on our planet, as well as the genetic differences within species. For Swingland, biodiversity also refers to the multitude of different ecosystems in which species form unique communities, interacting with one another and the air, water, and soil (Swingland, 2001). An etymological understanding of biodiversity indicates that biodiversity derives from two words: *bio*, which means life, and *diversity*, which means variety.

Crucial then to the metaphysics of biodiversity is the view that there exists in nature a variety of lives or a multiplicity of *bios* that are inextricably dependent on each other. Deducing from the phenomenon of *interdependency* (of lives), biodiversity, as an intellectual movement, seeks for the conservation of the environment as a means of preserving the various forms of lives that exist.

Aside its metaphysical foundation of being a worldview to which the interdependence and conservation of variety of lives is central, biodiversity is epistemic. The entire gamut of knowledge that makes up *diversity* is derived from observation. Thus biodiversity, like other observation-based disciplines, is founded on an empiricist theory of knowledge that a meaningful understanding of nature depends on facts gathered through sense experience.

Through sensations, or sensory experiences, biodiversity classifies variety of lives: terrestrial, oceanic, plants and animals, among others. Against the background of an empiricist epistemology, it makes sense, then, to speak of biodiversity as an empirical science (Contenill and Foisnner, 2010). The body of knowledge identified as biodiversity science consists of life-based sciences such as zoology, botany and biology, among others.

A metaphysical worldview founded on empiricist epistemology, biodiversity may also be viewed as a *moral* concern or movement founded on particular ethical assumptions about the rightness or wrongness of actions as they concern the variety of lives that make up

the environment. As a body of ethics, biodiversity deploys concepts such as *fair, just, right, wrong, good* and *bad*, among other concepts of the moral architecture to describe phenomenon such as extinction, conservation and global warming. Against the background of the fact that biodiversity is value-laden, it is logical to speak of biodiversity ethics (Piccard, 2006). In fact, much of the questions and discussions in bioethics is biodiversity ethics: 'is it right to use persons as specimens?' and 'is it fair not to treat all sentient beings as persons?'

Haven established the philosophical – metaphysical, epistemological and ethical – undercurrents of biodiversity we come to deduce the ultimate concern of biodiversity. Biodiversity is an age long concern for the overall health of the environment through conscious and articulated call for the preservation of the interdependent forms of lives that make up the ecosystem. Biodiversity is historic – it dates back to man's curious attempt in the Stone Age to understand the workings of nature for survival. Biodiversity is conservative – it seeks to conserve and preserve the interconnectedness and interdependency of the variety or forms of life in the ecosystem (Rothertham, 2014).Most importantly, biodiversity is environmental and futuristic – it seeks to protect the natural environment for forms of lives that exists now, or that may come to exist in the future.

Biodiversity has generated an ever-growing interdisciplinary discourse among scholars. Scientists, philosophers, environmental right activists, theists and agnostics, among others, have shaped, and continue to shape the content of the life-preserving cum earth-saving enterprise of biodiversity.

3. Biodiversity and Great Ape Personhood

Three identifiable cardinal concepts come to the fore in the linguistic architecture of biodiversity: bio (or life), diverse (or variety) and conserve (or preserve). The trio of *bio*, *diverse* and *conserve* are at the hearth of biodiversity. First, advocates of biodiversity identify bio or life as an important aspect of nature. For advocates of biodiversity, it is inconceivable to think of nature, or meaningfully talk about existence, without some form of *bio*.

The inconceivability of bio-less nature is grounded in the metaphysics of biodiversity, which sees the totality of *what is* as a system. Hence, to take bio out of the earth system – the ecosystem – is to possibly throw the entire system into extinction or non-existence (Flash Eurobarometer, 2013).The attitude of promoters of biodiversity to bio is, in part, analogous to the attitude of religious faithful to God. Just as God is revered, respected and seen to be the *raison d'etre* of existence by the religious, promoters of biodiversity *religiously* cherish and revere *bio* as the cornerstone of nature.

The epistemic framework of biodiversity takes cognizance of the fact that bio exists in *diverse* forms. Thus, the coinage *biodiversity* implying *bio* diversified (or diversified bios). Advocates of biodiversity recognize the diversity of species or life forms.

Over the centuries, scholars of bio-forms – biologists, genealogists, botanists, orthinologists and zoologists, among others, have created and are still creating taxonomies that document diverse forms of plant, animal, oceanic and terrestrial lives, among others. Biodiversity recognizes the interdependence of the variety of species in the ecosystem.With respect, then, to the crucial status ascribed to bio in the ecosystem, promoters of biodiversity cherish and revere the interdependent and often symbiotic relationship that exists between diverse bios in nature.

The lexicon of biodiversity will be incomplete without reference to the concept *conservation* or*preservation* which is inextricably tied to the concept *extinction*. Champions of biodiversity argue for the continued well-being of individual species. The well-being of individual species is heuristic to the well-being of the totality of the ecosystem, the natural world.

Centrifugal then to biodiversity is the primacy of conscious efforts to conserve and preserve life forms in the overall interest of the ecosystem. Biodiversity discourse is characterized by an historic and perennially present concern for the continued extinction of life forms, most of which are considered strategic for the long-term health of the earth. Several efforts have been made to document the fact that the earth is at the risk of incalculable and intractable damage if deliberate efforts are not made to conserve and preserve life forms from going into extinction (Jose. L. 2013). Evolutionary biologists are for example concerned with the fact that the continued extinction of exotic species would continue to create 'gaps' and widen 'missing links' between species.

Knowledge, as Bacon aptly puts it, is power (Jose Maria, 2001). Knowledge of how species evolved through the ages is a powerful tool for human survival. A holistic explanation of the origin and nature of man is, for instance, a powerful tool for ensuring a sustainable future for man. The more extinctions there are in the ecosystem, the more the missing links or gaps in nature. And, the more the missing links, the more the lack of knowledge of nature. It is on the strength of the need for a fuller understanding of nature, and the place of bios in nature, among others, that promoters of biodiversity argue for the preservation and conservation of life forms. Consciously protecting life forms from going into extinction is crucial for accessing histories, assessing the present and projecting the future.

Dovetailing the concern of biodiversity to conserve and preserve diverse life forms is the two-part great ape personhood argument, first, for the preservation of life-forms of the *homo* (or hominidae) genus, and second, for the ascription of personhood to life forms of the hominidae (Cavalleiri and Singer, 1993). Taxonomically speaking, members of the great ape or hominidae genus include apes, gorillas, orangutans, bonobos, chimpanzees and man.

There is preponderance evidence that members of the great ape family, aside man, are increasingly decreasing in population (Prado-Martinez and Sudmant, 2013). Advocates of great ape personhood see the pursuit of ascription of personhood to chimpanzees, for example, as substantially foundational to the enterprise of protecting Great ape life-forms like gorillas, orangutans, bonobos and chimpanzees from the threat of extinction. Thus, the guiding philosophy of great ape personhood, it may be asserted, is the quest for grant of *personhood* to great apes as stepping-stone for protecting great apes (Wise, 2000).

Implied in the biodiversity of the ecosystem is diversity of the life-forms – great apes. Just as it makes sense to speak of biodiversity, it would make sense to use the linguistic construct *greatapidiversity* (great-ape-diversity) to refer to the diversity of great apes - gorillas

and chimpanzees - and any of the several large primates that belong to the family hominidae, which includes man. Also referred to as *Homo* –, humans, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans share hominidae characteristics that are classifiable as either physiological or non-physiological.

Facial structure and large brains are for example physiological characteristics of the hominidae. A cursory look at a human face and the face of a chimpanzee show striking facial resemblance: nostrils, mouth, eyes and ears, all physiologically arranged with great resemblance. Brain researches such as neuroscience identify physical resemblance of brains of humans and chimpanzees. Located in the head of great apes, among other vertebrate and invertebrate animals, for example, the brain – an organ that serves as the center of the nervous system – exerts centralized control over the other organs of the body through a network of billions of neurons, synapses and axons.

Aside physiological semblance humans and other members of the great ape family share non-physiological likeness that are mental, intellectual, social, emotional and behavioral in nature. There exists copious studies indicative and illustrative of capacity of great apes – including man and chimps – to be self-aware and perform tasks requiring high level cognition, invention and application of devices or tools. Chimpanzees, like human apes, have been shown to possess and exercise ability for high level thinking – an essentially mental activity – that impacts on observable bodily behaviors. Studies show that like humans, non-human apes demonstrate and exercise ability for abstractions and ratiocinative, intelligible, reflective and futuristic thinking which impacts on observable behavioral patterns, social and emotional (Goodall, 1986).

On the strength of documented studies affirming both physiological and non-physiological likeness of great apes, advocates of great ape personhood seek to promote rights of great apes to enjoy the liberties enjoyed by humans: right to life and freedom from bodily torture. Champions of great ape personhood call for extension of limited rights to chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – closest evolutionary relatives of humans. It is argued, humans, like non-human apes, think, live in communities (groups), experience self-awareness, feel pain and joy by virtue of which they enjoy rights to life and bodily freedom for example. Given the shared characteristics of humans and non-human apes, it is then only reasonable to call for extension of legal personhood to chimpanzees and gorillas, among others.

The nexus between biodiversity and the great ape personhood project then is the need to protect the biodiversity of great apes through a process of gradual enfranchisement of non-human members of the *hominidae*. Recognizing non-human apes as legal persons is a beach-head approach to saving chimpanzees and orangutans, among others, from extinction.

4. Reflections on Reason-ability, Compassion -ability and Personhood

Though great ape personhood seeks limited rights or limited (legal) personhood for non-human class of the hominidae – orangutans and chimpanzees, for instance – the idea of personhood suggests a process of evolving or becoming. Beings for example become *person*-able or *right*-able when they exercise given traits or abilities – thinking, self-awareness, sense of worth, purposive behavior, sense of rightness and wrongness, consciousness of pain and consciousness of others' distress, among others. It is by virtue of the exercise of these abilities to reason and show compassion that hominidae *beings* come to be admitted into a unique kind of *hood,* personhood. Thus, there exists an interplay of *reason*-ability (that is ability to reason) and *compassion*-ability (that is ability to demonstrate compassion) in determining a being's *person*-ability (whether a being has demonstrated, or is capable of demonstrating, enough abilities to qualify as a *person*)

The attempt of great ape personhood to grant the status of *persons* to great apes as a means of preserving their biodiversity, while saving them from extinction, is historically pre-dated by the 18th century Darwinian assertion to the effect that 'If we choose to let conjecture run wild, then animals, our fellow brethren in pain, diseases, death, suffering and famine – our slaves in the most laborious works, our companions in our amusement – they may partake in our origin in one common ancestor – we may all be netted together'.

Charles Darwin's epochal publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 generated – and continues to generate – scientific, social, legal and linguistic knowledge that are evolutionary and progressive. Concerning personhood for example, a Darwinian or evolutionary theory of person will view persons as members of the hominidae who have progressively evolved, physiologically and psychologically, as beings with ability for high level thinking and ability to exercise compassion. The intersecting boundaries – animal-human, man-woman and civilized-savage – that have characterized much of literature since the 19th century do, for example, have little or no place in the Darwin's evolutionary understanding of human nature. *Animality* and the ability of beings to become persons (*person*-ability) exist in a continuum. *Animality* is in fact a pre-human condition of animal nature or character. Today's humans – homo sapiens or *person*-able beings – exist in an evolutionary continuum which, historically speaking, had included extinct predecessors such as homo *habilis*, homo erectus and homo *neanderthlensis*.

Today, homo sapiens (modern man or wise man) is recorded to be the only surviving species of the genus Homo. Evolutionary biologists note that homo sapiens, through progressive physiological development have emerged as the most influential species to ever live on earth. Characterized by large brain size, the ingenuity and adaptability of the species homo sapiens makes it the least species threatened by extinction.

The question then is: should today's man – homo sapiens – throw other species (other life-forms) into extinction? Should other species in the ecosystem live at the mercy of modern man's destructive activities: bush burning, deforestation, destruction of the ozone layer, animal hunting (wildlife), and indiscriminate experimentation (vivisection)? Should man's closest natural relatives – as instantiated by chimpanzees and gorillas – continue to suffer bodily enslavement and torture in the quest by man to satisfy thirst for exotic 'meat', exotic entertainment and exotic lifestyle? Is development of any kind possible in the face of man's continued destruction of the ecosystem?

Moreover, could it be the case that chimpanzees and gorillas are not fully *person*-able? Studies of chimpanzees and gorillas in and outside of their natural habitat have shown that they are sociable – as they live in communities; reason-able – as they demonstrate high level cognition or intelligence; and compassionate (or compassion-able) – as they feel other's pain and express sympathy.

We reflect closely on reason-ability and compassion-ability. Historically speaking, reason or rationality has generally been taken to be the defining property of *persons* or personhood. From a philosophical point of view reason refers to capacity or ability to do a number of things: applying logic, making informed decision and making sense or meaning of ideas, things or facts. Possession, or potential possession of this property – reason or rationality – transforms a being from the level of mere being-hood to the significant level of person-hood. Thus reason, together with its linguistic corollaries – thinking, cognition, intellect, reason-ability and rationality – has the transformative power to transmute levels of existence. Thus, if great apes have demonstrated abilities or capacities for ratiocinative, reflective and self-aware behavior, will it be just to deny great apes natural transmutation to personhood? Will it be appropriate to say great apes are not *person*-able? If human babies and mentally retarded humans are ascribed status of persons why not adult chimpanzees and gorillas which exhibit reason-ability?

Same goes for ability to feel other's pain and willingness to help relieve such pains or distress – compassion-ability. Great apes, like humans have demonstrated that they are compassionate beings. Suffering, pain and distress characterize existence for great apes and humans alike. Great apes, like humans show compassion for others in pain or distress (Bakeoff, 2008). Thus, compassion-ability, like reason-ability, appears not to be a distinctive human property after-all. So, again, will it not be appropriate to treat beings which demonstrate sufficient capability to care for others – compassion-ability – as persons? If humans, like chimpanzees, show compassion for their young ones; if humans like chimpanzees, console and care for others on the loss of beloved ones, will it be fair to declare that great apes are not person-able?

Charles Darwin in the book, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) puts forward a heuristic perspective of human nature that has the potential of transforming, deepening and expanding our understanding of personhood beyond the current anthropocentric or *speciecist* conception. In the fourth chapter of *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin, while describing how animals and humans developed abilities for sympathy or compassion, submitted that the concern for the welfare of all living beings – human and nonhuman – is the highest moral achievement. Darwin's concern for all living beings is founded on the evolutionary thought that animals not only have abilities for sympathy – or compassion – but also that humans "share with, and have inherited from, animals, instincts that compel us to act for the community of good" (Paul White, 2013).

The Darwinian *other-ist* approach sees the *other*, not just as humans, but also as encompassing all life-forms, including great apes and lesser apes. Seeking personhood – limited, legal or in any form, for specific species within the ecosystem may be counterproductive – as it in turn generates some kind of speciesism, homo-speciesism for instance.

5. Implications, Recommendation and Conclusion

Reason-ability and compassion-ability are, no doubt, and to a large extent, established properties of great apes – human and nonhuman – the abiding task however is that of preserving the biodiversity of interconnected and interdependent life-forms; plant, animal, terrestrial and oceanic. The ultimate goal of the philosophy of biodiversity is, and ought to be, that of creating a sustainable and egalitarian ecology where great apes and less apes, among other species, shall see the *other* as vitally important and protect that *other* from abuse, misuse and threat of extinction.

Extending sympathy to the whole of nature, in line with Darwin, is the highest moral value. As Darwin puts it: "Sympathy beyond the confines of man, that is humanity to the lower animals, seems to be one of the latest moral acquisitions…This virtue (concern for lower animals, one of the noblest with which man is endowed, seems to arise incidentally from our sympathies becoming more tender and more widely diffused, until they extend to all sentient beings" (Darwin, 2004).

Similarly, The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness (2012) – which asserts the convergence of evidence to the effect that 'non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors'– is further justificatory of the *other*-ist concern of Darwin for humanity to extend "sympathy beyond the confines of man". The import of Darwin's 18th century submission and those of the 21st century Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, is that the capacity to feel, perceive or have subjective experience (alongside its corollary, creativity, self-awareness and high cognition) – sentiency – is not distinctive of persons or great apes.

Homo sapiens, modern man, by virtue of possession of capabilities for reasoning and compassion, on the one hand, and by virtue of being the single surviving specie of the genus Homo, on the other hand, is indisputably and naturally placed to compassionately create a sustainable and egalitarian ecology through a reflective articulation of what may come to be known as Declaration of Rights to Biodiversity. If only we can apprehend the psyche of lesser sentient life-forms, they possibly are declaring, *a la* Evelyn Hart: 'Ain't we earthlings?'

The articulation and pursuit of an emergent Biodiversity Rights Order that recognizes the fundamental rights of all life-forms – right to life, right to a secured and safe environment and, freedom from bodily or mental torture – could just be one step away from a compassionate Universal Declaration of Rights to Biodiversity. After all, Darwin's *other*-ist proclamation, regarding other *sentiments*, that "we may all be netted together", remains an unshaking and perennially present scientific hypothesis.

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