Recognizing Animals: Sentience and Justice Beyond the Human

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**Abstract**

Recognition—conceived as respect for various individuals and communities, alongside an end to their devaluation—is seen by many theorists as a critical component of justice, including environmental justice. David Schlosberg (2007), in particular, seeks to extend recognition beyond the human, to nonhuman animals, species, and ecosystems. However, in attempting to develop a broad and inclusive theory of ecological recognition, he fails to recognize (and thus devalues) what is distinctive about nonhuman animals: their subjective experience, and their pursuit of what seems good to them. I argue that, in both our institutions and our personal lives, we must recognize sentient animals' distinct ways of life, and that this recognition has both a status and psychological component. I conclude with some suggestions about what this recognition might entail (including an end to legal property status), and explain how attention to individual animals' good may help orient us in cases where Schlosberg's more holistic environmental approach fails to provide guidance.

**Introduction**

Nim was raised to be human. Taken from his mother as an infant, he lived with human parents and human siblings in a house in New York City. He suckled human breast milk, wore human clothes, and soon learned more than 100 words in American Sign Language. He ate pizza, drank beer, smoked pot (Hess 2008, Kappala-Ramsamy 2011, Marsh 2011).

Nim Chimpsky, however, was not a human but a chimpanzee. Only nobody told him that. When asked to sort photographs of humans and chimpanzees, he distinguished between the two mostly successfully—but he put his own photo in the human pile. “I don't think Nim had any concept that he was a chimp,” remarked one of his sign teachers, Bob Johnson (Hess 2008). “It's possible that he looked at us and expected that one day he too would grow up and lose his body hair.”

But he was not a human, and soon began biting his human caretakers. As he grew larger and more dangerous, Nim was transferred to the Institute for Primate Studies in Oklahoma. “Nim had never been in a cage or met another chimpanzee, and the transition would be traumatic” (Hess 2008). He reacted poorly to the other chimpanzees at first, getting in fights. When humans passed his cage, he’d sign the word “out,” but to no avail. Later, he was sold to a New York medical research laboratory, then again to a Texas animal rescue ranch that was ill-equipped to care for chimpanzees (Marsh 2011).

The story of Nim, laid out in Elizabeth Hess’ book *Nim Chimpsky: The Chimp Who Would Be Human* and in the documentary *Project Nim*, is a sad one. One reason why is obvious: Life in a cage, many now accept, is harmful for any chimpanzee. For Nim, the harm may seem especially striking because of the contrast: One day he lives in a house with a yard, full of companionship and stimulation, and the next he is caged.

But I think that part of why the story grabs us is that there is something bizarre and unsettling about his life even before the cage: what is a chimpanzee doing in the Bronx? This is part of what struck *Project Nim* director James Marsh: Nim, a chimpanzee, grew up “in a human world,” he told *The Guardian* (Kappala-Ramsamy 2011). “He's in the wrong context and that becomes his tragedy." I think often about the fact that he could not even recognize himself as a chimpanzee—this feels sad to me, even if I struggle to articulate why.

I think we can make sense of Nim's plight (or at least, this aspect of it) by looking at recognition, or respect, as a component of justice. In fact, although misrecognition is far from the only injustice done to other animals, it is pervasive across human interactions with the more-than-human world.

The initial literature on recognition, represented by authors such as Iris Young, Nancy Fraser, and Axel Honneth, is almost exclusively anthropocentric. While several authors have since extended this concept beyond the human (Dobson 2014, Oliver 2015, Meijer 2016), here I will focus on Schlosberg (2007), whose work may be the most comprehensive attempt to elaborate a vision of recognitional justice for nonhuman animals, species, and ecosystems. In section 1, I will lay out Schlosberg's, Fraser’s and Honneth’s approaches to recognition in the human case. In section 2, I will analyze and critique Schlosberg’s exploration of what recognition means for more-than-human nature. While many of his ideas are intriguing and useful, his inattention to the differences between sentient animals and other nonhuman entities leaves his theory flawed. In section 3, I will contrast his view to that of Martha Nussbaum, and argue that the flourishing of a sentient animal cannot be understood merely as its functioning within an ecological system.

In section 4, I will explore how injury to animal social status differs from status injuries to “nature” writ large, and can at least sometimes contain a psychological component. In section 5, I apply Honneth’s psychological approach to recognition to nonhuman animals, finding it to be useful but incomplete. In section 6, I will explain Glen Sean Coulthard's critique of liberal recognition politics, and show that his alternate approach of collective *self-recognition* offers much to other animals. Throughout, and in the conclusion, I will consider what justice as recognition might have looked like for Nim.

1. Recognition and Justice

Schlosberg (2007) lays out four distinct but interdependent components of environmental justice for humans. First is justice as distribution—the fair allocation of benefits and burdens (12). Second is justice as recognition—respect for different individuals and communities and an end to "various forms of insult, degradation, and devaluation" (14). Third is participatory or procedural justice—"fair and equitable institutional processes of the state" (25), in which people have a genuine say over what happens to them. And finally, the capabilities approach to justice: "Capabilities are about a person's opportunities to do and to be what they choose in the context of a given society"—that is, "whether we have what is necessary to enable a more fully functioning life, as we choose to live it" (30). He believes this is a useful way of thinking about justice for groups as well as justice for individuals (35-37).

Schlosberg derives this approach to environmental justice not only from other theorists but from the demands and rhetoric of movements themselves (2004, 2007). His four-part conception of justice may not be exhaustive, but it is pluralistic and open-ended enough to work with as a starting point. I will take for granted here that in any comprehensive approach to justice, some form of recognition or respect is essential.

What does this respect entail? Two prominent but divergent approaches in the human case come from Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (Fraser & Honneth 2003). For Fraser, both distributive and recognition justice are rooted in the concept of "participatory parity" (Fraser & Honneth 2003: 36). What she means by this is that "justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers."[[1]](#footnote-1) Justice as recognition, then, represents "the intersubjective condition of participatory parity. It precludes institutionalized norms that systematically depreciate some categories of people and the qualities associated with them."

These norms might take the form of "burdening [categories of people] with excessive ascribed 'difference,'” e.g., by treating homosexual partnerships as legally different than heterosexual marriage. They could also involve “failing to acknowledge [groups’] distinctiveness,” e.g., by forcing assimilation into a dominant religion. Critically, for Fraser, the depreciation of other groups need not have any psychological effect on its victims (though it can); what qualifies something as an injustice is that it impedes participatory parity, preventing interaction as peers.

For Fraser, neither distribution nor recognition is more fundamental than the other. For Honneth, by contrast, recognition is fundamental to *all* injustice: "experiences of injustice [can] be conceived along a continuum of forms of withheld recognition—of disrespect" (Fraser & Honneth 2003: 135). And this disrespect necessarily has a psychological impact—"social injury to one's integrity, honor, or dignity"—that motivates most if not all demands for redress (131). What motivates worker movements, in this view, is not just the desire for economic redistribution for its own sake, but workers’ sense that their contributions have been unacknowledged, that low wages and poor working conditions are an affront to honor or dignity.

I suspect Honneth is putting too much weight on this sort of social injury here, and moving forward, I will assume that Fraser is correct that status-based injustice is not dependent upon any particular psychological impact. A given worker might not feel indignant or disrespected when her boss ignores her input, but there is still an injustice. But Fraser has been rightly criticized for attempting to fully excise the psychological component of recognition, leaving her unable to address the full scope of misrecognition’s harms (Schlosberg 2007: 20, Coulthard 2007: 448).

Rather than assume that misrecognition must be only status-based, or only psychological, it seems more fruitful to accept it can be both. Schlosberg takes this approach to humans, acknowledging both status and psychological injuries as components of environmental justice. Going further, I would suggest that most status injustices have at least some indirect psychological impact, and most acts of psychological misrecognition are connected to some issue of norms or status.

When it comes to nonhumans, however, subjects of what he calls ecological (as opposed to environmental) justice, Schlosberg changes his framework. While he believes that all four components of justice (recognition, distribution, participation, capabilities) can be extended to nonhuman entities, he maintains that a theory of nonhuman recognition must eschew “any hint of psychology” (Schlosberg 2007: 146). Instead, he argues that, while two forms of recognition are needed to advance ecological justice, neither contain a psychological component. All that is needed is (1) recognition of similarities between humans and nonhumans, and (2) recognition of nonhuman status.

This may be sufficient when discussing justice for holistic entities such as species or ecosystems, or non-conscious individuals who presumably have no psychology to speak of. But for an individual like Nim, as we will see, a failure to attend to animal psychology amounts to a damaging misrecognition.

1. Schlosberg’s Ecological Recognition

Schlosberg begins with the recognition of shared qualities including sentience, needs, interests, agency, and integrity. Sentience is typically defined as the ability to feel pleasure and pain, or more broadly, to have valenced subjective experiences that feel good or bad (anxiety, joy, distress, comfort, etc.) such that things can go well or poorly for the sentient being (Browning & Birch 2022).[[2]](#footnote-2) Sentience is often taken to be critical in the animal ethics literature: we can kick a rock but not a dog because the dog will *feel* it, will suffer, as a result. The rock (it is presumed) does not feel anything.

Many philosophers and scientists argue that sentience is at least potentially widespread among animals, including vertebrates and many invertebrates, but less likely to exist in non-animal beings (Feinberg & Mallat 2016, Godfrey-Smith 2020). Some thinkers challenge this view, suggesting that some form of consciousness, or subjective awareness, exists in plants, bacteria, or even entities such as water or electrons (Strawson 2017, McGregor 2018, Thompson 2022). I am open to such worldviews, though I suspect that there is still something unique about the pains, pleasures, and other experiences of many animals, as evidenced by the flexibility of our behavior and the complexity of our nervous systems.

Schlosberg himself, in his discussion of ecological recognition, briefly considers that sentience and consciousness might extend beyond individual animals (Schlosberg 2007: 134), but elsewhere refers to even mollusks as “nonsentient” (161). In other work he differentiates between sentient and nonsentient organisms (Schlosberg 2014: 79), suggesting that he thinks only certain complex animals feel pain.[[3]](#footnote-3)

And while he asks us to recognize that sentience is shared with at least some animals, he is concerned about placing too much weight on it due to its narrow scope, echoing John Rodman's (1977) worry that the "animal rights approach would apply to woodrats, but not to cactus or sagebrush—and to individual woodrats rather than the species" (Schlosberg 2007: 135). But the limited nature of animal rights does not mean that they are unimportant, any more than we should dispense with human rights because those, too, fail to extend to a cactus or sagebrush.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Instead of emphasizing sentience, Schlosberg looks to other, more broadly shared similarities between humans and nonhuman nature, such as needs and interests. All life forms have certain basic needs, such as air, water, and sustenance, as well as interests in surviving, reproducing, and so forth. While needs and interests may at least plausibly be worthy of moral consideration, he has moved on from sentience too quickly: needs and interests look very different for a sentient subject than for a nonsentient one.

Imagine that some human goes on a long vacation and forgets to arrange for her plants or her pet cat to receive water. Both a houseplant and a housecat have a need for water, and an interest in obtaining it. Both, then, will have that need unmet, that interest thwarted, and will die a slow death of dehydration. In Schlosberg’s framework, then, the injustice is analogous.

But only for the sentient cat will this experience be excruciating. We imagine him suffering greatly, and his interest manifests as a conscious desire for water: perhaps he roams the house trying to lick moisture off any damp surface; perhaps he claws at the door or window trying to get out. He may even have some sense of betrayal or abandonment—a psychological experience of misrecognition. By comparison, the plant does not mind its fate, because the plant *has no mind*.[[5]](#footnote-5) The slow death of the plant may be unfortunate, perhaps tragic, but the slow death of the cat is a horror. Interests and needs may be shared across nature, but they manifest differently, and with varying moral urgency, across different types of creatures. A viable theory of recognition must attend to this difference.

Schlosberg also asks us to recognize agency as shared across nature, paraphrasing the work of John Dryzek: "Nature offers a form of communication; we know if something is 'off' in nature through its expression of agency, for example, floods, fires, ozone holes, climate change, disappearing tigers, and mad cows" (Schlosberg 2007: 134). But it is striking that these examples ignore the intentional agency of sentient animals: a cow leaping a fence to escape a slaughterhouse, a trout pulling against the line, a deer picking her moment to cross a road, or Nim signing "out" from his cage.[[6]](#footnote-6) This conscious intent demands our attention at least as closely as the more impersonal signals of ecological processes.

To differentiate between these two types of signals, it is helpful to consider Graham Smith's critique of Dryzek. Smith (2003: 71-72) agrees that the ecological signals cited by Dryzek carry meaning, and should be listened to. But he insists that "these are meanings *for* humanity. It is humans that value, it is humans that discover meaning." A flood or fire does not necessarily mean anything to the ecosystem, insofar as the ecosystem as a whole does not consciously reflect on itself. An ozone hole might not mean anything to the ozone layer. But the actions of the cow, trout, and deer, mean something to those animals—they reflect a conscious desire or will to leave the slaughterhouse, or resist the pull of the hook, or cross the road. Certainly, Nim's use of contextually appropriate sign language shows that these signs *mean* something to him.

Smith's critique, then, does not actually apply to the agency of sentient animals. It is not just humans that value. Other animals consciously care about things; these things matter and are important to them. In fact, one might argue, valuing arises from and is fundamental to the sentient animal condition (Korsgaard 2018: 168).

Dryzek himself, in a more recent work coauthored with Jonathan Pickering, alters his earlier definition of agency to distinguish between animal and non-animal action: Plants and ecosystems still communicate and qualify as "actants," Dryzek & Pickering (2018: 126) maintain. But "agency requires the capacity to think before communicating and acting." Thus, true agency exists primarily among "humans and some other complex animals"—"ranging from gorillas and elephants to octopuses and crows."

My point here is not to minimize or dismiss the concept of justice for plants, bacteria, species, or ecosystems. In particular, I agree with Schlosberg and other theorists that ecological interdependence poses a challenge to traditional individualist conceptions of justice. But if justice requires recognizing the needs, interests, and agency of nature, we must also recognize how these qualities manifest differently in different beings.

The existence of difference shouldn’t be controversial: Schlosberg himself maintains that there are differences between justice for humans and justice for the rest of nature (Schlosberg 2007: 139, 160). We can imagine, too, that recognitional justice will look different even between different human cultures: for instance, recognition for one group might require full and equal integration within an existing nation, whereas recognition for another might require respecting them as a distinct sovereign nation. This is why Fraser’s account of misrecognition includes failure to acknowledge distinctiveness, not just failure to acknowledge similarity. So it should not surprise us that recognition justice for the sentient animal will look different than recognition justice for a microbe or a wetland.

We can also recognize that other animals are different from humans. As Schlosberg observes, while we should recognize similarity, we should also respect the distinctiveness of other animals rather than treating them as some sort of defective or childish version of a human (135-136). This latter may be part of the misrecognition done to Nim: scientists imposed a human way of life upon him without recognizing his distinct chimpanzee-ness. As *Project Nim* director James Marsh put it, “I felt that Nim's life had been blighted by people projecting on to him human qualities and trying to make him something that he wasn't” (Kappala-Ramsamy 2011)*.*

But still, per Fraser, we also shouldn’t excessively ascribe difference: Nim the chimpanzee is in many respects much more like a human than he is like a tree, a forest ecosystem, or even the species *Pan troglodytes*.

In effect, in focusing on what is shared across *all* nonhuman nature, and downplaying the role of sentience, Schlosberg fails to recognize what is distinct about animals. In his ensuing discussion of ecological recognition, it’s not clear whether he thinks sentience should make any difference at all.

1. Integrity and Dignity

The final similarity Schlosberg points to between humans and nonhumans is what he calls integrity. Individual life forms and ecological systems, he believes, each have an "autonomous integrity that is necessary to allow for the unfolding or realization of the potential of nature" (Schlosberg 2007: 137). This unfolding constitutes flourishing for the entity, and violating this autonomy or impeding this flourishing is a form of misrecognition. But again, there are critical differences between the “unfolding” of a species or ecosystem and the unfolding of a sentient being.

To see the significance of these differences, and what they imply for animal and ecosystemic flourishing, we must look at how Schlosberg’s conception of integrity shapes his approach to animal capabilities, and contrast his views with the concept of animal dignity that underlies the work of Martha Nussbaum.

Recall that capabilities for humans are about “hav[ing] what is necessary to enable a more fully functioning life, as we choose to live it" (Schlosberg 2007: 30). Nussbaum (2006, 2023) has extended this approach to other sentient animals, exploring what they need to flourish on their terms. While Schlosberg commends Nussbaum for looking beyond the human, he laments that "unfortunately," she does not consider nonsentient entities or ecological systems (Schlosberg 2007: 143, 145). In fact, he chastises her for "seem[ing] quite biased toward sentient and even self-conscious animals—not much of a progression beyond the contractarians she criticizes" (144).

Her problem, he suggests, is her desire to respect animal dignity, which he takes to be "a psychological term referring to self-respect … [which] only fits for the most sentient and self-conscious of species" (146). He wants to replace dignity with his concept of integrity, because this would "apply more uniformly across a greater spectrum of nonhuman nature and refer to status rather than any hint of psychology" (146).

Again, it’s not clear why we should prefer a concept that can apply uniformly, when nonhuman entities are far from uniform. If the psychological element of recognition matters when it comes to humans—and Schlosberg says it does (16-20)—then his theory is already not uniform between humans and ecosystems. Why should uniformity suddenly matter when discussing justice for sentient animals?

But as it turns out, Nussbaum herself is not actually talking about self-respect; Schlosberg appears to have misread her. She draws instead on a concept of dignity as “moral worth,” the idea of “the human being [or animal] as an end” (Nussbaum 2006: 36).[[7]](#footnote-7) In her more recent work, Nussbaum (2023: 96) calls dignity “that vague property that means, basically, deserving of end-like treatment rather than means-like use.” What grounds this dignity is “the pursuit of valued goals by an animal, all by itself.”

This latter does get close to Schlosberg’s concept of “integrity,” insofar as it involves respecting autonomous activity. But the difference for the sentient animal—the difference between what’s required for dignity and for integrity—is that these goals are *valued by the animal*. The animal does not simply unfold toward some potential, like a nonsentient ecosystem. She *wants,* she *cares*, she makes choices based on what matters to her. We can talk of a sentient animal choosing how to live her life in a way that is difficult to apply to species or ecosystems.

This also means that, while misrecognition may only harm the self-respect of certain animals in certain conditions, it will have other psychological effects in a wide range of cases: violations of dignity thwart animals from pursuing what they value and deprive them the satisfaction of successful pursuit. Nim Chimpsky, for instance, would have experienced frustration, confusion, and distress to have inborn desires thwarted in New York; to be separated from his human family and left in a cage; to be thrust among caged chimpanzees while believing himself to be human; to have his repeated requests for "out" be ignored and denied. If a theory of capabilities for nonhuman nature must leave out "any hint of psychology," then it fails to recognize sentience and does an injustice to other animals.

To rectify this, Schlosberg wouldn’t need to dramatically change his framework. "At the core of the human realm are the capabilities necessary to be in a position to develop one's own notion of the good," he writes (Schlosberg 2007: 154). While other animals don’t necessarily develop a notion of the good through rational self-reflection, as (some) humans might, all sentient animals *pursue* what seems good to them. With only a slight modification, his conception of human flourishing can be extended to other sentient animals: they deserve the capabilities needed to pursue their own good. (This is similar to Nussbaum’s approach.)

Instead, he groups sentient animals with various nonsentient entities: "For other animals, nonsentients, or ecological systems," the emphasis should be on "the capabilities necessary for that subject to attain its highest possible level of functioning, or to function in a way that acknowledges the integrity and autonomy of the individual or system" (155). This framework could still create space for recognizing sentience, if we argued that part of the flourishing or “functioning” of sentient animals is to pursue their subjective good.

But Schlosberg’s interpretation of "level of functioning" does not specifically attend to the accompanying conscious experience, instead emphasizing role within a system. "To be food for others is the essence of functioning for some beings. Acorns can become oak trees, or they may become squirrel food; gazelles can breed in social units, or may become tiger food. Either direction represents a particular form of flourishing, as long as one recognizes that flourishing happens in systems, with creatures in relation with one another" (151).

I do not deny that gazelles “becom[ing] tiger food” may contribute to the flourishing of the tiger, the broader ecosystem, or even the gazelle species and other gazelles. But it is a mistake to say that getting eaten constitutes flourishing for *that particular gazelle*. When an animal "acquires consciousness and a point of view," Korsgaard (2018: 29) explains, their good is no longer what is good for their species or their genes—it is what is good for their conscious self. This is why death is not good for the individual who dies, even if it serves some broader benefit.

Or, as Cripps (2010: 10) puts it, “it is hard to see how a painful death courtesy of a tiger can be said to contribute to the flourishing life of *that individual gazelle*, any more than heavy work loads and having no control over their own lives could be said to contribute to the flourishing of individual slaves in Ancient Rome, even if it was integral to maintaining the overall social system.”

Schlosberg uses this same argument around functioning to defend human consumption of farmed animals. While he critiques factory farm conditions that prevent animals from exercising their basic life activities, he praises more local, allegedly ethical farms (Schlosberg 2014: 79-82). In such a food system, "the animal serves one of many functions of all life on the planet: providing for other life. Functioning is the focus, in both life and death" (82). But unlike the tiger who eats the gazelle, humans do not need meat to survive. And perhaps unlike the ecological relationship between predator and prey, the farming and killing of domesticated animals is not necessary for most of our flourishing (it is often ecologically destructive). So here, not only are the interests and needs of the sentient animal being subsumed to the broader goal of systemic functioning, but the system itself (like Roman slavery) is an unjust one.

For captive and/or domesticated animals in particular, the creature’s good might not always line up with what we see as their “ecological functioning.” While many captive animals will do better with the opportunity to exercise the species-characteristic behaviors they evolved to perform, unusual or atypical behaviors could also contribute to their welfare. Kasperbauer (2013), for instance, argues that learning sign language might be stimulating and enriching for chimpanzees in captivity. Insofar as we can’t safely return them to the wild, maybe learning this skill—or other “unnatural” pursuits such as drawing, watching television, or playing with humans—can contribute to their flourishing. Whether he is correct about this specific case, the broader point that forms of life and function are not static must be kept in mind. For this reason, a conception of justice that emphasizes functioning within an ecological system has little to offer a being like Nim, who no longer exists within the ecosystem in which his species evolved.

In sum, Schlosberg maintains a distinction between humans and nonhuman nature that leaves no place for sentient animals. While his attempt to expand justice to all of nature is admirable, he ends up dragging down sentient animals and reinforcing human exceptionalism.[[8]](#footnote-8) Attending to sentience also changes how we should consider injuries to nonhuman social status.

1. The Social Status of Animals

Recall that in Fraser’s non-psychological framework of participatory parity, institutionalized norms that prevent humans from seeing other animals as peers represent an unjust misrecognition, whether the other animals are aware of them or not. Such misrecognitions can take a variety of forms, including cultural domination, nonrecognition (or rendering invisible), and disrespectful representations such as stereotypes (Fraser 1998: 7, Schlosberg 2007: 140). While Schlosberg applies these three status injustices to nature writ large, we can be more specific about how these status injuries manifest in our relationships with nonhuman animals. There we see that these status injustices often have direct or indirect psychological components.

The general pattern of cultural domination is clear: human cultures' (especially wealthy capitalist cultures') ostensible need for more land, materials, energy, and profit takes precedence over any needs of the wild animals whose homes are destroyed and/or transformed. The very fact that these animals have cultures at all is ignored to their detriment.

For instance, scientists hypothesize that the near-extinction of elephants has caused a "social breakdown" in elephant cultures as individuals witness their family members killed, pathways of social learning break down, and survivors show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Bradshaw et al. 2005). Although Fraser is right to insist that status misrecognition is not *dependent* on any particular psychological impact, it's important to note that this form of cultural domination directly damages the animals’ psyche.

Many wild animals have ways of life, social relationships, and particular places that matter to them, increasingly under threat as their habitats are destroyed (Van Dooren 2014: 1-85). Effective environmental policy requires not just attending to ecological functioning, but to the knowledge, preferences, and memories that make that functioning possible. Insofar as decision-making institutions ignore animals’ minds, and assume that economic needs come first, we prevent any consideration of their needs on an equal playing field.

Nonhuman animals also suffer from nonrecognition that renders them invisible, including in climate politics. Katie McShane (2018) observes that the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) discusses at length the well-being of individual humans as well as broader impacts on biodiversity and species populations. But it mostly ignores questions about the well-being of individual animals—that is, while much of nonhuman nature *is* recognized in this document, individual sentient animals are not. Insofar as we fail to consider other animals as individuals in decision-making spaces, we deny them participatory parity.[[9]](#footnote-9) While these animals don’t necessarily know they are being rendered invisible, the result is that we may ignore important factors in planning to adapt to warming’s effects, from intensified natural disasters to climate-induced migration. These effects will impact animals’ psychological development and well-being.

Thirdly, other animals are routinely maligned and disparaged in public representations: endless advertisements thrust animals’ flesh in our faces, begging us to eat their dead bodies. Circuses put them in silly costumes to entertain. We insult each other as bird-brained, dirty pigs, lying snakes, forgetful as a goldfish.[[10]](#footnote-10) Such disparagement prevents us from seeing them fully as potential equals, whose claims on a flourishing life may be as powerful as our own.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Other animals may not be able to parse the meaning of these phrases in the ways that humans do, meaning in this case the status misrecognition might not cause psychological harm (as it would for humans). However, even if our dog does not know what the phrase “you dumb dog” means, she may pick up on body language, tone of voice, and other elements that affect her psychological state.

This attention to status is a powerful way of understanding misrecognition for nonhuman animals. And attending to animal sentience reveals a more diverse array of injustice than we would see by only looking at a broader “nature.” But, as discussed in section 1, status alone is insufficient for achieving full recognition. As other animals, too, can experience psychological harms, we must go beyond Fraser and attempt to explore whether misrecognition for them can have a distinctly psychological component.

1. The Psychological Component of Recognition

Honneth points to three main spheres of capitalist society in which recognition (or misrecognition) take place: love, achievement, and law (Fraser & Honneth 2003: 138-143). Whether or not we accept this framework, these three spheres at least offer a place to start when considering psychological harms of misrecognition. By looking more closely at sentient animals' role in each of these spheres, we can ask whether misrecognition affects their own psychologies, and if not, whether there still might be an injustice.

First, the sphere of love: "The recognition that individuals reciprocally bring to this kind of relationship is loving care for the other's well-being in light of his or her individual needs," Honneth writes (139). Here he has in mind not a generalized concern for all others' well-being but the mutual affection and care of intimate relationships.

The reciprocal nature of this conception of love likely excludes nonsentient nature; I doubt that my gut bacteria or my local ecosystem are consciously invested in my individual needs and well-being, even if they may both contribute to and (in the former case) rely on it. But we form such relationships with many sentient animals, such as the dogs and cats in our homes. Not only are we capable of caring for them, but they can be attentive and responsive to our needs as well (Nussbaum 2023: 262-266 offers an example of human-dog friendship).

Misrecognition, in these cases, can occur as either a failure of loving care or as a failure of attention to individual needs. The first is the most direct: situations of abuse, neglect, cruelty, or even just indifference to the animals we live with. What makes this specifically an injustice of misrecognition in the sphere of love is not *only* the associated pain, boredom, distress, frustration, or other negative experience of the animal. This suffering is compounded by the fact that the human owners in these situations fail to recognize the reciprocal relationship of interdependence and mutual care, and on some level the dogs and cats may be aware of this failure.

This sort of misrecognition also shows up in Nim's case. Nim had relationships with the humans he lived with: they cared for him, he brought joy to their lives, they mattered to each other and knew it. By moving Nim to a cage, his caretakers violated this relationship.[[12]](#footnote-12) A beloved friend who you have raised from infancy is not the kind of being who you can just send away. While the cage represents an injustice to the other chimpanzees, too, for Nim there is an added psychological element of betrayal.

Less obvious but perhaps more common are failures of attention to individual needs. Many dogs are beloved companions whose needs are nonetheless unmet (Torrella 2023). They are left alone for hours at a time while their humans work; they are dragged away from interesting smells and dissuaded from their desired routes on walks. We may also love pets such as parrots, horses, or goldfish who struggle to live flourishing lives in captivity.

Here, too, it is easy to see a misrecognition done to Nim, even before he was transferred to a cage. No doubt many of those around him genuinely loved and cared for him. But it seems probable that he had unmet and unrecognized needs, perhaps needs he was not even conscious of, that prevented him from living a fuller, happier life. These may include social relationships with other chimpanzees, ability to roam freely across large outdoor spaces, and more. In trying to make him into a human, the scientists put their own research before any consideration of what would actually be good for Nim.

Again, the psychological impact can be complex. Both primates and canines engage in cooperative, reciprocal relationships in the wild; they have social expectations of each other and are capable of emotional responses such as gratitude or anger when those expectations are met or unmet (Bekoff & Pierce 2009: 78, de Waal 2019: 130-140). It’s not a stretch to imagine that when dogs or primates form close relationships with humans, they also have expectations and can react emotionally when they are not met.

In fact, we see the psychological impacts of misrecognition upon other animals all the time. Dogs rescued from uncaring homes might remain skittish and suspicious around strangers, or whimper in alarm whenever you leave the room out of fear of abandonment. “When compared with a convenience sample of 5,239 companion dogs, abused dogs were reported as displaying significantly higher rates of aggression and fear directed toward unfamiliar humans and dogs, excitability, hyperactivity, attachment and attention-seeking behaviors, persistent barking, and miscellaneous strange or repetitive behaviors” (McMillan et al. 2015). The inverse of this is that dogs who are loved and respected might be more capable, calm, and confident—they have intact *psychological* dignity, even in the sense of self-respect.

We can have intimate, loving relationships with nonhuman animals outside of our homes, as well. Nussbaum points to examples of scientists who spend long periods observing groups of the same animals, and gradually become accepted and recognized by those animals (2023: 266-271). Crows will sometimes befriend particular humans, spending time with them and leaving small gifts (Ohlheiser 2022).

If misrecognition in the sphere of love can have a clear psychological impact on other animals, the sphere of achievement gets a little more speculative. Under capitalism, Honneth explains, some elements of recognition are doled out according to merit: "each [is] to enjoy social esteem according to his or her achievement as a 'productive citizen'" (Fraser & Honneth 2003: 141). While tying esteem to productivity may seem to favor wealthy capitalists, Honneth argues that the language of merit and achievement creates openings for social movements. For instance, some women have based demands for respect in part on the societal contributions made by housework.

Does this way of thinking about achievement and recognition make sense for other animals? In some circumstances, yes, although not always. Many animals display aversion to inequity: in one famous study, captive female capuchin monkeys were trained to exchange a rock for food. One monkey handed over her rock to the human researcher and received a slice of cucumber, which she ate. Then another monkey in a neighboring cage exchanged her rock and received a (much tastier) grape. This caught the first monkey's attention. She again turned in her rock, and again received a mere cucumber slice. This time she was incensed, refusing to eat it and in some cases throwing it back at the researcher (Bekoff & Pierce 2009: 127-8).[[13]](#footnote-13)

These monkeys, arguably, have a sense of fairness. The first monkey felt that her rock should be worth a grape, too. Receiving different rewards for the same task was felt by the monkey as an insult.

More suggestive still is that, when the same study is done on chimpanzees, in some cases *both* primates will refuse their reward; the grape-receiving ape seems to show solidarity with the cucumber-receiving ape (Safina 2020).

These observations, coupled with the previous acknowledgment that some nonhuman animals are capable of gratitude and anger, suggests that they may have some sense that they deserve credit for things. If a dog perfectly performs several tricks upon command, she might expect a treat. To deny some praise or other reward, or to offer greater reward to one of your dogs than to another, might be a form of misrecognition with psychological impact on the dog.

Nonhuman animals labor to support human societies in many cases, from police dogs to circus performers to horses used for transportation. At the Institute for Primate Studies, Nim and other chimpanzees swept floors, dusted, and washed dishes (Marsh 2011). Sometimes, working animals refuse to cooperate, turn on their captors, and/or otherwise resist (Hribal 2007, 2011). Perhaps this is their way of saying they aren't getting enough out of it; it is plausible to think that animals who are "well compensated" for their labor (whether through tasty food, free time and play, praise and attention, or whatever else matters to them) are more content than those who are not.[[14]](#footnote-14)

While many animals are now forced to work in exploitative conditions, Kymlicka & Donaldson (2014: 207) argue that “humans, and members of other social species, are drawn to co-operative activities which allow them to develop knowledge and skills; to experience the satisfaction of competence and mastery; to develop relationships; and to feel they are making a contribution or being helpful or taking care of their family.” If true, providing animals the opportunity for meaningful and non-coercive work, “in line with the interests and inclinations of animals themselves,” may be an important element of recognition (206).

But full recognition of nonhuman animal achievement must attend to more than just their immediate subjective experience. For instance, Cochrane (2016: 15-17, 27-30) argues that nonhuman animals deserve a variety of labor rights, including representation by a union and a right to retirement. These creatures might not know about unions or pensions, and their present psychological well-being isn't impacted by the fact of whether they will retire five years hence. But down the line, their life will go better for them, and the recognition of their labor paves the way for this. In Nim's case, his keepers should have recognized that he was (knowingly or not) doing a great service to science, and felt obligated to reward that achievement with something better than a cage. In fact, labs are now supposed to retire chimpanzees to sanctuaries, although this is proceeding slowly (Grimm 2017).

My intuition is that when we recognize the work that other animals do for us *as work*—from the reproductive labor of dairy cows to the "ecosystem services" of wild insect pollinators—this will lead us to respect them more and treat them better, even if the pollinators themselves (for example) have no idea what we think of them. But I hesitate to put too much weight on animals’ contributions to human society as a requirement for their recognition. Human dignity extends even to the hermit who does nothing for society; similarly, we should respect other animals whether or not they seem "useful" to humans.

In other words, both love and achievement have limits: the former only applies to animals with whom we are in reciprocal intersubjective relationships, the latter only to those who visibly contribute. These forms of recognition are thus incomplete.

One way to expand recognition could be through Honneth's other sphere, the law. With the advent of legal equality, "the individual could now … know that he or she was respected as a legal person with the same rights as all other members of society" (Fraser & Honneth 2003: 140). It is unlikely that legal equality could affect other animals psychologically in such a way, as they don't know about human laws.

But they do feel those laws' effects. Today, animals have the status of property (Nussbaum 2023: 202-207); even wild animals are typically the property of the state (Freyfogle et al. 2019). This means they are ours to confine, use, kill, and sell. Nim may not understand his legal status as property or experience indignance around that status, but the fact that he is bought, sold, and moved around *does* disrupt his social relationships, sense of self, and psychological well-being.

If nonhuman animals were legal persons, as many advocate (Andrews et al. 2018), the law might be able to do more to promote their good for their own sake, or at least give them the space to pursue their own good. Kymlicka & Donaldson (2014: 204-205) go further, arguing for domesticated animals' recognition as “full members" of society through the status of citizenship, giving them a meaningful say in political decision-making. If Nim had had the status of a legal person, or better yet had been a citizen, he could never have been put in a cage, and might have been spared significant psychological trauma.

For Honneth, injustice as misrecognition is connected to "the distinctively human dependence on intersubjective recognition" (138). As we have seen, other creatures, too, depend on intersubjective recognition, and thus psychological injustice can be done to other animals. However, certain misrecognitions—failure to recognize achievement or legal equality, or injuries to social status—can be done to other animals even if they have no intersubjective relationship with humans. So, while Honneth's theory alerts us to many varieties of injustice done to nonhuman animals, it also proves itself insufficient.

This approach also misses that other animals don’t just have intersubjective relationships with humans, but with each other.

1. From recognition by humans to self-recognition

For Coulthard (2007, 2014), what makes Honneth’s approach insufficient is not its psychological elements, but that it leaves the victims of injustice dependent upon their oppressors for recognition. Building on Fanon, he argues instead that indigenous peoples should develop a politics of “personal and collective *self*-affirmation” (Coulthard 2007: 453). This involves enacting “another modality of being, a different way of relating to and with the world” on their own terms, without the blessing of the state (2014: 169).

There are obvious dissimilarities with the nonhuman case. While other animals do rebel against misrecognition and at least attempt to claim control over their own lives, they might not do so in an organized, collective way.

But other animals do form their identity through relationships (Kymlicka & Donaldson 2014: 206), sometimes with humans but often only with each other, especially those animals in the wild (Safina 2020). This is the self-recognition denied to Nim: He saw himself as a human because he was unable to work out who he was in relationship with other chimpanzees and other forest inhabitants. Some form of socialization is critical for the development of many animals and for them to live fulfilling, meaningful lives. Even nonsocial animals develop into themselves and learn how to be in the world through relationships: mates, parents, offspring, competitors, cooperators, mutualists, parasites, predators to evade, prey to chase.

This means that we impede the collective self-recognition of nonhuman communities not only when we remove certain animals from the wild, but when we degrade their ecosystems in ways that limit such intersubjective activity. In this way, legal and status misrecognitions do impact other animals’ psychological development even when those animals do not have direct intersubjective relationships with humans. And assaults on the integrity of holistic entities such as ecosystems and species will have psychological impacts on the individuals who comprise these entities.

1. Conclusion

Nim is no doubt an unusual case. Most animals, wild or domestic, do not go through all of his specific travails. But one aspect of his life is increasingly common: He does not fit neatly into a traditional ecological paradigm.

If, as Schlosberg suggests, flourishing for nonhumans is about functioning well within a given system—what was Nim’s system? The Bronx? The laboratory? African forests that he never saw? An animal sanctuary? To be sure, Schlosberg would agree that an injustice has been done to Nim insofar as he is unable to function within his ecological system. But his theory is not able to articulate the whole scope of that injustice, much of which manifests psychologically. Nor can it provide any realistic solution, given there was no prospect of reintroducing him into the wild. Defining justice as the autonomous unfolding of natural potential offers little useful guide for a creature in such unusual circumstances.

But as human influence grows—polluting and disrupting habitat, relocating and killing off species, and dramatically warming the climate—the unfolding of all ecosystems is entering uncharted space. Animals will enter new territory, ecosystems will transform, and it is no longer clear, if it ever was, what proper functioning looks like. Countless creatures will be in situations where their functioning within the system is dynamic and evolving; a purely ecological assessment of their flourishing might offer little guidance in new situations. And of course, many animals like Nim live in captivity, where their place within the system may depend on human whim.

In such conditions, the pursuits and preferences of our fellow animals offer an ethical compass. Recognition for other animals depends on acknowledging and attending to their sentient striving. This is what will get them through the changes to come, and it is what we must understand if we are to do them justice.

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1. The parenthetical reference to adults raises the curious question of whether injustice can be done to children. One would assume the answer is yes, but it might require a modification of this framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. While sentience requires consciousness–subjective experience–consciousness may not require sentience: one can imagine a being that is subjectively aware of the world around them, that has some sensory experiences, but doesn’t feel pain or pleasure or otherwise care what happens to it. But here I mostly assume consciousness and sentience are coextensive (and as Browning & Birch 2022 observe, sometimes sentience is used to mean any form of consciousness). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In a more recent piece, Schlosberg and co-author Anik Waldow suggest that a tree or a system may have “phenomenal experience” (Celermajer et al. 2020: 481), but they are ambiguous about what this entails and maintain a contrast between “sentient and non-sentient life.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Schlosberg does point us to Marx’s critique of individualistic human rights (Schlosberg 2007: 161), but this critique does not necessarily say we should dispense with rights entirely (Benton 1993: 106-112). In other parts of his book, Schlosberg appears comfortable using the language of rights. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Again, we are assuming that plants are nonsentient, as Schlosberg seems to believe at least in this book. If plants *are* sentient than this scenario looks different; but this only affirms the importance of sentience. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Disappearing tigers” or “mad cows” may involve sentient animals, but do not express the intentional agency or communication of those beings. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In later work, Schlosberg clarifies that Nussbaum was not referring to self-respect, but still argues that the word dignity is misplaced because *others* use it to mean self-respect (Schlosberg 2012: 175). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Schlosberg seems comfortable with human exceptionalism, asserting that "there is rarely a claim for 'equality'" among theorists of animal and ecological justice (Schlosberg 2007: 133), and that the interests of butterflies and sea turtles don't need to be "considered equal" to those of humans (195). But "equal consideration of interests" is precisely the ethical bedrock of Peter Singer's work on animal liberation (Singer 1989). A more complete theory of ecological justice must at least engage such arguments. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Schlosberg’s inattention to sentience may also contribute to nonrecognition along these lines. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Goldfish actually have good memories! (Baker 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In this sense, Schlosberg’s dismissal of equality for animals is another impediment to participatory parity. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In the documentary *Project Nim*, several of Nim’s caretakers reflect on what it was like to leave him behind in Oklahoma, all with obvious feelings of guilt. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The video is worth watching: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meiU6TxysCg&ab_channel=TEDBlogVideo> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. That said, animals who *don’t* actively resist may still be victims of injustice, just as in a human workplace. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)