Conceiving Person: Toward a Fully Democratic Critical Practice

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A true democracy would have to include a much wider range of creatures than humans, for humans themselves are many creatures. Full democracy would be transspecies, transgender, transrace, transregion, transclass, transage, transhuman: what Emerson called “the democracy of chemistry.” (John Peters, Speaking into the Air, 260)

At a recent meeting of the National Association of Biomedical Research, Michael Soccaras, a leading legal expert on nonhuman animal rights organizations, warned scientists of potentially negative consequences to their research if the “animal-as-person philosophy” continues to gain traction (1). Citing Gary Francione, Peter Singer, and Steven Wise, Soccaras reasons that “the only effective route [to respond to this perspective] is to use philosophical and religious arguments for the primacy of the human person. …Personhood is about being human” (1). As Soccaras points out, animal advocacy organizations have argued, primarily, that human animals’ similarities to nonhuman animals provide ample evidence for their being legally protected as persons. For instance, The Great Ape Project (GAP), established in 1993, is arguably on the legal cutting edge in its advocacy that great ape primates (orangutan, gorilla, chimpanzee, and bonobo) deserve legal protection as persons. Arguing that nonhuman great ape primates are intelligent beings with a rich and varied social and emotional life, GAP’s reasoning rests on the assumption that there is sufficient trait correspondence between nonhuman and human great primates to justify their inclusion in legal protections. Both Soccares’s and GAP’s reasoning, however, begs the question, what is a person? Soccares’s human-as-person approach is tautological, not actually defining person, and GAP’s “nonhuman primates are like human primates” analogy is no more helpful in defining person.
What is lacking in most current critical discourse is a theoretical framework within which *person* is philosophically delineated. In particular, cultural critics, whose aims are to deconstruct, resist, and challenge systems of marginalization and oppression, could benefit significantly from a robust philosophical conception of *person* in order to effectively address relations between human and other animals. As Steven Best puts it

However “critical,” “subversive,” “groundbreaking,” or “radical” their probing of historical and social dynamics, very few theorists have managed to see beyond the humanist bias in order to adopt a proper analytical and moral relation to other animals; they have failed, in other words, to grasp the importance of nonhuman animals in human life, the profound ways in which the domination of humans over other animals creates conflict and disequilibrium in human relations to one another and to the Earth as a whole.

My aim in this article is to describe a philosophical perspective within which concerned critics can theoretically conceive *person*. “What is a person?” is a crucial critical question because in answering it, the critic decides who will be included in (and excluded from) the community of persons envisaged in his or her advocacy for a more just and compassionate culture. Moreover, the definition of *person* and how *person* functions in the critic’s discourse delimits the ground from which to launch ethical considerations. At bottom, I argue that *person* is the conceptual axis on which the development (or not) of a truly full democratic critical practice turns. In this article, then, I describe a philosophical perspective—*personalism*—which I suggest offers the potential for a fuller democratic critical practice, one that extends the ethical boundaries of who is included in the community of persons.
A relatively large body of literature has emerged during the last several decades that describes innumerable examples of human-animal relations (e.g., Bekoff, Bekoff, Bekoff & Goodall, Dawkins, de Waal, Griffin, Masson & McCarthy, Regan,). In particular, scholars have examined and articulated legal, ethical, and philosophical considerations with respect to nonhuman animal personhood (e.g., Becker, Fan, Graf, Kelly, Noske, Stern, Warkentin). Gary Francione has persuasively argued for nonhuman animals’ legal right to be treated as beings rather than property. Francione’s argument is based on an interest-balancing perspective, and he argues that equal consideration of nonhuman animals’ interests ought to be a part of that ethical perspective in law. For Francione, the question is fundamentally a moral one: “[W]hy is anything more than sentience necessary for nonhumans to have the right not to be treated exclusively as means to human ends?” (Persons 141). Steven Wise, extending his earlier work advocating for primate personhood, also makes a case for including other animals (parrots, dolphins, elephants, dogs) in the definition of person. His contention is that those animals’ autonomy (defined as desire, intention, and self-consciousness) justifies their being legally protected as persons. In 2009, Peter Singer (with Paola Cavalieri)--responding to Slavoj Žižek’s critique of nonhuman animal advocacy--defended and maintained his long-standing philosophical and ethical arguments for extending legal consideration to nonhuman animals:

Drawing a moral line around our species is exactly the form of biologism we condemn in racism and sexism; that the morally relevant characteristic is not rationality or autonomy, but the capacity to be consciously affected by what happens to oneself; and that, whatever the intellectual endowment of an individual, it is arbitrary to give her/his interests less consideration than to the similar interests of any other individual. (3)
Numerous other scholars have extended, diversified, and critiqued the ethical and legal implications of this work. It is an examination of the philosophical assumptions of most cultural critique that, I argue, can benefit by addressing how its assumptions with respect to theoretically conceiving *person* impacts critical practice.

Choosing (or not) to be guided by particular philosophical ideas in constructing critical discourse has implications for who we are in-the-world, what kind of work we contribute, and what kinds of communities we constitute. As Dennis Mumby puts it, “each [discourse] articulates a way of knowing that has different consequences for the way in which we frame issues of community and responsibility” (2-3). The ethical issue for concerned critics is who will be included in the membership of persons, given the polymorphous nature of interrelated species, both human and nonhuman. Moreover, in critical communities of interpretation, it is helpful to tease out how philosophical assumptions impact the normative utility of critical discourse. Indeed, as John Peters points out, addressing these issues by deciding how wide we will cast our net with respect to intellectually and theoretically conceiving the community of persons “may be the key question of politics in our century” (230). I argue this consideration is also crucial in the context of critical practices. In other words, understanding how philosophical concepts frame cultural critique is vital in framing these questions: What do my critical analyses enable me or others to do, see, or imagine is possible? What kind of a critic do I become if I decide to accept one theoretical interpretation over another? Intersubjectively, what kind of community of interpretation will we become if we choose one theoretical interpretation as opposed to another?

Engaging these questions, the first section offers a general overview of personalist philosophy followed by, in the second section, a description of *person* and the personalist posture
guided by it. In the third section, I illustrate what personalism means for concerned critics in an intersubjective community of interpretation, suggesting theoretical implications for critics working toward a fuller democratic critical practice.

**PERSONALIST PHILOSOPHY**

Although the origin of the term *personalism* is not clear-cut (see Zúñiga), its roots arguably extend to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and can be traced forward through 20th century German and French thought (e.g., Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Hermann Lotze, Emmanuel Mounier, Gabriel Marcel, and Emmanuel Levinas). Personalism’s most complete and (arguably) influential systematic expression in American philosophical thought was offered in 1908 by Bordon Parker Bowne (called the father of personalism by some personalists). Bowne was a professor of philosophy at Boston University, and the publication of his *Personalism* started a philosophic “movement” (or, further developed a perspective) and established what is now known as the Boston School of Personalism. This American philosophic approach included Edgar Sheffield Brightman (under whom Martin Luther King, Jr. studied as a doctoral student), Walter George Muelder, and Peter Anthony Bertocci. Other American personalists include feminist philosopher Carol Sue Robb as well as Georgia Harkness, L. Harold DeWolf, S. Paul Schilling, John H. Lavely, John Lachs, and, most recently at Boston University and Charles University in Prague, Erazim Kohák. Ralph Tyler Flewelling founded *The Personalist: A Quarterly Journal of Philosophy, Theology, and Literature*, which changed its name in 1980 to *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* and in 1985, Thomas Buford founded and edited *The Personalist Forum* to continue the work of *The Personalist*. After retiring, Buford passed the editorial responsibility to Randall Auxier in 1997. In 2005, *The Personalist Forum* was renamed *The Pluralist*. 
Very generally, from a personalist perspective, persons and their relations in-the-world are central ethical considerations. Thus, for instance, in considering environmental issues, a critic working from a personalist approach would understand, as primary, an ethic of respect and what we owe to others as opposed to privileging questions of utility. In sociopolitical contexts, persons and their lifeworlds take precedence when considering systems or structures. Ontologically and epistemologically, personal categories are irreducible to impersonal systems, suprapersonal, or subpersonal processes. A personalist approach to cultural criticism values meaning rather than cause, respect rather than force, moral value rather than efficacy, and understanding rather than explanation.

Personalism is a particularly productive perspective for the cultural critic for several reasons. First, for personalists, ethics is first philosophy; all else—epistemology, even metaphysics—is derivative. In this sense, as Erazim Kohák explains, personalism obliges critics to consider ethical questions with the understanding that “the world [in our experience] first of all means and has values, only derivatively is or is not” (6). Second, personalism can be defined as a “philosophy which regards subjectival (or “subject-related”) categories as primordial and basic to [the] intelligibility of reality, any other categories as founded upon them” (6). Understanding that truth and knowledge are subjectival—that is, all truth and knowledge comes in personal form—underlines the primacy of subject-related (rather than object-related, or material) categories, which aligns with a critical approach to scholarship. Third, and most importantly for the purposes of this article, personalism offers a well-developed philosophical description of person, which provides a sound theoretical basis for widening the community of persons most often assumed by cultural critics in their ethical considerations.
Person and the Personalist Posture. When person is understood anthropocentrically by a critic, it means that beings who exhibit (ostensibly) human characteristics or traits (in our human experience) may justify their right to personhood. Gary Francione calls this “the similar minds theory” (“Hypocrisy” 51-52). Epistemologically, human animals do not have access to nonhuman animals’ subjective experience; however, making descriptive claims about that experience has been a focus in a recent encyclopedic treatment of human-animal relations (e.g., Allen, Irvine, Margodt, Marino, Pierce). Donald Griffin, in a comprehensive survey of the work in nonhuman animal behavior, suggests that there is ample evidence supporting the claim that many other animals employ forms of cognitive behavior and possess an emotional life. As such, he urges “tentatively considering animals as conscious, mindful creatures with their own points of view” (63). The work surveyed by Griffin, including his own groundbreaking research, offers a way to understand that the human claim of uniqueness in relation to characteristics like rational thinking and emotional (even moral) characteristics ought to be reconceived. Further, Michael Allen Fox points out that “so-called higher animals exhibit rationality, concept formation, purposive behavior, symbolic communication, and even rudimentary self-consciousness. Moral behavior, including lifelong pair-bonding, altruistic acts, peacemaking, caregiving, sympathizing, and reciprocity” (62) have also been observed in some nonhuman animals.

However persuasive the evidence of human-nonhuman animal characteristic correspondence may be, the anthropocentric assumptions of the argument for personhood based on it presents significant theoretical problems. Using this evidence as “proof” of personhood carries with it the residue of Descartes’ cogito, wherein a mind capable of rationality and formulating ideas—interiority—becomes the test of personhood. Clearly, this anthropocentric test excludes all other
nonhuman beings from the community of persons, except those deemed to be “like” humans (and even those claims face significant challenges). By extension, Peters argues that making interiority the test of sentience or consciousness is a recipe for guilt-free slaughter or abuse of creatures that lack interiority [because] if the rational world exists only in ideas and humans alone have them (among mortal creatures), then the worlds in which birds and cows and pigs move and breathe are subject to radical doubt if not oblivion. (232)

If nonhuman beings are considered “merely” animals (that is, beings without interiority), critics are not obliged theoretically to consider them persons in a broader community of persons.

All too often, as Peters notes, anthropocentrism also theoretically compels critics to assign (explicitly or not) an inferior position to other animals as a way to define human: “Animals have long served humans as mirrors of self-definition” (242). From Aristotle forward, considered philosophically, the apparent absence of particular qualities in other animals has provided the basis for human claims of value superiority. The bright line drawn between human and other animals--the line between superior and inferior beings--is based not only on the ostensible absence of interiority on the part of (most) nonhuman animals, but also on their inability to produce speech--to communicate on our terms. Since before Descartes, we humans have prided ourselves on our rational abilities--the ability to consciously consider ourselves, enjoy an emotional sense, and possess language--all characteristics that other animals allegedly do not possess. This is an assumption that continues to found the human claim to value superiority and, by extension, to found the human order. However, it provides a fragile basis for defining ourselves as persons in a community of persons. When research supports the claim that other animals also possess so-called human characteristics, the fragile distinction between humans and other animals becomes radically permeable, creating a sense of ontological
uneasiness for some and compels others to insist the definitional boundary between human and other animals be refortified.²

The definition of human superiority based on attributes, on characteristics, or on properties (i.e., personality traits) presumably uniquely human has considerable implications for critical practice. In a critical community of interpretation, the failure to recognize how such a premise informs our critical practices when ethically considering the other and how it obscures our seeing the other in the mirror becomes the basis for a containment strategy. On the one hand, the containment strategy creates a bright line between superior and inferior beings. When it is drawn in critical practice (intentionally or not, explicitly or tacitly) between humans and all other animals, cultural critique excludes ethical consideration of nearly the entirety of other species on the planet. Joan Dunayer points out that this practice is “like sexism or racism, [in that it] is a form of self-aggrandizing prejudice” (1). Any other (gender, species, class, etc.) that is excluded from ethical considerations in critical practice is effectively contained. Specifically with respect to excluding other species, the nonhuman animal other becomes the repressed, and it is on the backs of dominated and contained other animals that the power of the human is founded.

On the other hand, but in much the same way, anthropologically defining humans as superior to nonhuman animals obscures our ability to see ourselves as other. Humans are animals, profoundly, to whit ontologically akin to other animals. However, when critics are dazzled by seemingly unique human attributes, it is much easier to be blinded to that kinship. The bright line between humans and all others effectively prevents critics seeing the need ethically to consider our own otherness in relation to a community of other persons. This posture is a form of speciesism, as Marjorie Spiegel explains it:
[Speciesism is a] belief that different species of animals are significantly different from one another in their capacities to feel pleasure and pain and live an autonomous existence, usually involving the idea that one’s own species has the right to rule and use others. [It is also] a policy of enforcing such asserted right. [It is also] a system of government and society based upon it. (7)

Put simply, in a community conceived in speciesist terms, humans are autocrats.

Spiegel’s study of the similarities between human slavery and exploitation of nonhuman animals also points out that our inability to see ourselves as other in relation to nonhuman animals can extend to our relations with humans that we consider other. Notes Peters, nonhuman animals have long served “quite literally as guinea pigs for the treatment of humans” (242). This is both an observation and a phenomenon that Michel de Montaigne recognized as centuries old: “After they had accustomed themselves at Rome to spectacles of the slaughter of animals they proceeded to those of the slaughter of men, to the gladiators” (206).

Theodor Adorno underlines the political implications of spectacles like this (and, I argue, other atrocities more currently perpetuated) that bear the sediment of containment strategies and speciesist assumptions:

The constantly encountered assertion that blacks, savages, Japanese are like ‘animals,’ monkeys for example, is the key to the pogrom. . . . the mechanism of ‘pathetic projection’ determines that those in power perceive as human only their own reflected image, instead of reflecting back the human as precisely what is different. (105)

That other-humans are “like” other-animals has been (and continues to be) justification for the systematic persecution and extermination of groups of humans considered inferior. Theoretical
reconception that includes this human-nonhuman animal relation is key for an inclusive critical practice, as is understanding other intersections of oppression:

The ultimate purpose of theory and critique is not to deconstruct textual contradictions, to explore the polyphony of meaning, or to experiment with alternative realities in literary imagination, but rather to align itself with [other] animals and fight for their liberation. Importantly this must not occur in a way that conceptualizes [other] animal issues as if they existed apart from social issues, but rather that illuminates the central role of speciesism in the major problems of cultures and societies, and shows how [other] animal exploitation is now only part of a massive global system of exploitation that must be changed at all points and not just one. (Best 40)

It is plain, then, that for concerned critics, anthropocentric and speciesist orientations are fatal for the development of a democratic critical practice that will include extending the rule of respect to all in a community of persons while understanding the complex of other intersections of oppression and exploitation.

Philosophically and theoretically, personalism offers an alternative. Personhood from a personalist perspective is not reliant on being understood in an entity sense, nor is it reliant on a human-centered standard. As Kohák articulates it, *person* is a *mode* of being constitutive of meaning and value. For critics working in the personalist framework, *person* does not designate an entity with particular identifiable properties. Instead, *person* is action, practices--a *mode* of being. In Richard Prust’s words, “a person is not the bearer of properties but the enactor of properties” (70). When *person* is understood in this way, Kohák explains, *personalistic does not, repeat, does not mean anthropocentric.* A human being can be a person, but a person is not necessarily a human being. Peter Bertocci was fond of saying
that ‘persons are not boys and girls.’ Strictly speaking, the term *person* designates not a being but rather a *mode of* being which constitutes its world in terms of value and meaning. Thinkers like Albert Schweitzer made us keenly aware that this is characteristic of all life. A flower turning to the sun, a woodchuck relishing young dew-damp grass constitute what-is into a whole by relations of value and meaning. (6)

When *person* is employed by the critic, then, every being constitutes a personalistic world and each is owed respect as an integral value- and meaning-enactor of the whole.³ Clearly, when the critic theoretically reconceives *person* to include the sum of both human and nonhuman persons in the community of persons, the boundary traditionally thought to exist between human and other animals is at the very least ethically open to scrutiny. At its most, a personalist approach can erase the boundary.

Challenging the human-nonhuman animal boundary changes the ethical terms in which critical practice is articulated. When we recognize from a personalist perspective that it does not matter whether we can know other animals, or whether we can communicate with them, or whether we might discover an interiority to which we can connect, we are able to confront the other as kin with our otherness. Indeed, Peters writes that “It is precisely in recognizing the impossibility of communication [with other animals] that the blessing comes….Empathy with the inhuman is the moral and aesthetic lesson that might replace our urgent longing for communication” (245, 246). Our ethical obligation to other animals, in other words, comes not from their or our inner life, nor from their or our ability to communicate and connect, but from our compassionate recognition of our kinship with them in a community of persons who constitute the whole in terms of value and meaning. This obligation is radically relational.
Adopting a “personalist posture,” as Kohák calls it, means the critic commits to an ontology much like the one assumed by a process theory of reality (indeed, most personalists also subscribe to a process, or anti-Newtonian, worldview). A process philosophical approach is anti-reductive, in part, because it does not reduce being-becoming in-the-world to either material (i.e., naturalistic or “matter in motion”) relations or ideal (i.e., ideational) relations. That is, adopting a personalist posture means that personal categories are primary, but that the personal and material are continuous, rather than discontinuous, in constituting the world—the personal and material are radically relational. In contrast, a naturalistic posture (one that takes naturalism to indicate a mechanical, causal, and material world, i.e., Descartes’ extended world) would mean that the critic adopting it understands the world to exist the way we (learned to) experience it: as a world of entities, with attached characteristics, discretely located in time and space. In this posture, entities are relational only to the extent that, like billiard balls, entities “bump into” one another, which causes change. However, a naturalistic posture ignores (or, at least, seriously neglects) internal or personal relations.

A critic working in the personalistic posture, in contrast, understands that the personal mode of being-in-the-world includes not only our experience or apprehension of that being-ness, but also that ontological mode per se. Kohák writes that from a personalistic perspective, “A world . . . does not mean a set of entities but rather a meaningful constitution of what is as an interrelated whole” (6-7). A personalistic approach to cultural critique would mean, then, that the critic adopts “a fundamental shift in posture to one which takes relations of value and meaning, not relations of spacetime and causality, as fundamental” (5). To paraphrase Josiah Royce, to be, from a personalist perspective, is to be uniquely related to a whole. Ontologically, a world is a constitution of inter-personal relations of value and meaning.
Not only is it the what of being-becoming that matters in the personalist posture; more fundamentally, how beings-in-the-world relate to one another is primary. At bottom, Kohák continues, theoretically conceiving the world as structured by personal relations is an acknowledgement of the truth, goodness, and unity of all beings, simply because they are, as they are, each in his [sic] own way. That is the fundamental sense of speaking of reality as personal: recognizing it as Thou, and our relation to it as profoundly and fundamentally a moral relation, governed by a rule of respect. It is in that sense that any consistent ethic must be personalist and doubly so—according to all beings the respect due to persons and recognizing the model of community of persons which Kant described as the ‘kingdom of ends’ as the root metaphor for understanding the moral sense of reality. (128)

This “rule of respect” is conceptually similar to Martin Buber’s “I and thou” notion wherein persons are understood as ends and none ought to be treated as means. Kohák explains that the “I and thou” concept is essentially a personal relationship. . . .The authentic relations between beings is the personal encounter of mutual respect, with its cognitive counterpart of a quest for empathic understanding and its ethical presumption of a fundamental order of a moral law rather than that of individual or collective utility. (210).5

Thus, the personalist critic will orient his or her practices around actualizing an intersubjectively, thus radically relational, community of persons guided by a rule of respect.

**Toward a Fuller Democratic Community of Interpretation**

In an intersubjective community of persons, how and to what extent humans ethically express their relation with other animals ought to be a central issue for cultural critics. The
freedom to choose between possibilities, on the part of humans, often conflicts with the freedom to choose for nonhuman animals, and an articulation of that tension is important for a fuller democratic critical practice. Put simply, this issue involves theoretically conceiving human and nonhuman agency in relation with one another. Luca Parisoli’s discussion of freedom is a personalist one and can assist concerned critics conceptualize the exercise of human agency in relation with nonhuman persons in an intersubjective community of persons. Although his is an argument concerned with the freedom of human persons, I argue that expanding Parasoli’s notion of freedom to nonhuman persons is fruitful for developing a fuller democratic critical practice in an intersubjective community of interpretation.

Parisoli extends the Franciscan definition of person—the idea that “a person is necessarily free” (2)—and understands freedom as a metaphysical relation: “There is a special freedom (a metaphysical freedom) that is the groundwork of human dignity, in that human dignity is the manifestation of personality in the world” (2). He suggests that “the person is conceivable only because he is free: the very person is freedom” (21). Freedom, in this strong sense, aligns with the personalist idea that person is a mode of being. Both are, at bottom, ontologically manifest. Freedom, then, is not a quality attached to the being of a person; it cannot be stolen or severed: it is the very being of human-ness. As such, dignity, as the person-al manifestation of free persons, is also inherent.

There is no reason why this strong definition of freedom could not also apply to nonhuman persons. That is, freedom is a strong descriptor of being. Charles Hartshorne’s process-oriented definition of freedom as “contingent self-making” (in Dombrowski, 61) supports an extension of Parisoli’s notion of freedom. Understood from a personalist perspective, freedom is one expression of that mode of being called person. To be a person is to enact
freedom. For the personalist critic, agency is that active purposiveness persons practice to create and select from novel, open-ended possibilities. Given this understanding, human and nonhuman persons are all agents. The implication for the cultural critic is that because all persons are metaphysically free, as Rufus Burrow argues, they deserve respect given their inherent dignity:

Each being warrants moral consideration and is owed duties. In this sense we may say that reality is value-fused. The significance of this is that, if I take it seriously, it means that *I have a moral relation with all being*, a point which implies I should respect all beings because of their inherent dignity. And it means I ought to work to develop such a relation. (28)

In other words, the move toward a truly democratic critical practice theoretically includes all free beings in the community of persons, obliges the critic to recognize them as deserving of respectful ethical consideration, and compels the development of that relation in practice. This strong sense of freedom, then, can be understood as *freedom-for* others in a community of persons.

Metaphysical freedom is a general description whereas free will (i.e., agency) is a particular manifestation of it. In other words, the strong sense of freedom (freedom-for) is the *sine qua non* of agency, which is one of its particular manifestations. Agency, from this perspective, is *freedom-to* or *freedom-from*. Two considerations are important here. First, agency, as Parasoli notes, is an evaluative practice, which means that each person is the “core of each normative activity”--that is, agency “has the capacity to establish the aim and values to follow for each person” (5). This notion of agency assumes a particular subjectivity structure. It is never centered, though, as subjectivity is conceived in the Enlightenment sense. Rather, subjects are radically related, always already constituted in interaction with others’ subjectivities.
and extant societal constructs. Understood this way, subjectivity is a shared phenomenon on a primordial level—an unconscious, pre-reflective level—and is always in the context of families, groups, communities, cultures, and societies. Those intersubjectively constituted contexts, in turn, inform the constitution of (inter)subjectivities. Thus, knowledge, judgments, and actions are always evaluative and come in personal form, but they are constituted in intersubjectivity; they are not subjective, but are *intersubjectival*.

This notion of primordial intersubjectivity supports Kohák’s claim that we discover “norms of good and evil” rather than create them ourselves, privately and/or relativistically. Similar to Josiah Royce’s “community of interpretation,” Kohák suggests that our judgments, our norms, and our ethics are not arbitrary, not “just subjective,” and far from relativist. Instead, they are “something we discover in the function of the community of persons” (11)—that is, judgments, norms, and ethics are intersubjectival and radically relational. Persons, in relation with one another, constitute the basic relations of value and meaning in the universe and, in so doing, intersubjectively discover the moral and ethical yields of that process of world-constitution *in situ*.

Second, agency is not just a characteristic or attribute of a person; rather, it is a practice that is actualized in personal action. Thus, each person enacts agency, but that enactment is shaped by extant circumstances (e.g., material and ideal, actual and possible, systems and other persons). In other words, as part of a community of persons, exercising my agency is always constituted in relation with others exercising theirs. It is this interaction that is always already limited by metaphysical freedom. Metaphysical freedom is *both* the basis for the possibility of agency (i.e., freedom-to and freedom-from) and the ground of ethics (i.e., freedom-for others). Thus, metaphysical freedom acts as a limit on agency in that *freedom-to* or *freedom-from* is
always shaped and presupposed by *freedom-for*. In other words, agency is always already free at a metaphysical level, but it is limited in the sense that the power to choose to adhere to the good (or not) is *also* freely exercised. Metaphysical freedom (*freedom-for*) is the boundary that gives agency (*freedom-to, freedom-from*) its intentional structure.

A helpful illustration of this notion of metaphysical freedom as an ethical limit on agency is found in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s philosophy and practice of nonviolence. Because King recognized the inherent dignity that is manifest in all metaphysically free persons, he practiced restraint with respect to his agency. Rather than responding in kind to oppression and the violent choices of others by imposing his own choices on them in the form of violence, King chose, instead, to recognize that their dignity as persons (their metaphysical freedom) necessitated the restraint of his free will. King chose to adhere to an intersubjectival conception of the good (indeed, a personalist conception⁷) that would not allow him to ignore the boundary of dignity around metaphysically free persons by violating it with a violent exercise of his own will—*even when his own dignity was violently attacked*. King’s *freedom-for* others always took primacy over his *freedom-from* them or his *freedom-to* respond violently to them.

The radically relational notion of intersubjectivity and the articulation of freedom as the ground of ethics that personalism offers can help guide concerned critics. When all beings, human and nonhuman alike, are acknowledged as persons who are metaphysically free and dignified, humans’ agency ought to be limited by that freedom. Put another way, *freedom-from* the reality of nonhuman persons and our relations with them or *freedom-to* ignore that radical relatedness would violate a personalist ethic, which is based in *freedom-for* others in a community of persons. That is, the personalist critic will consider that metaphysical freedom is a limit on critical agency enacted in the form of cultural analysis and practice. *Freedom-for* human
and nonhuman others in a widely conceived community of persons is the ethical basis of the personalist conception of a truly full democratic critical practice that will produce knowledge, judgments, and action consistent with it.

**Some Concluding Thoughts**

Since our animal kin cannot speak for themselves, we need to recognize our obligation to speak for them, to protest the heedless slaughter of whales and seals as much as the moral scandal of the needless suffering of laboratory animals and the brutality of the ‘biomechanism’ approach to raising food animals. (Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 213)

In this article I have described a philosophical perspective, *personalism*, which I suggest offers a guide for a fuller democratic critical practice, one that theoretically extends the ethical boundaries of who is included in the community of persons. Reconceived in personalist terms, *person* is a *mode of being* constitutive of value and meaning, and the critic working in the personalist posture recognizes that “primary meaning relationships are person-*al*, not impersonal, that humans are not the only person-*al* beings and that the person-*al* is not private and arbitrary” (Kohák 11). The radically relational posture avoids anthropocentric and speciesist orientations, which exclude some or all nonhuman persons from the community of persons. The unmistakable solidarity of beings-in-the-world calls on concerned critics to consider where they draw the line with respect to who is owed moral consideration and to whom we, as human persons, owe respectful action. If that line between human beings and all others shifts (or is erased), the critical ground from which we practice will also shift dramatically. What happens or, better, what is possible when the identity of human being is no longer constructed in opposition to, or on the backs of, all other beings? This is not a rhetorical question—not a question that makes an
argument in the form of a question—it is a theoretical question whose responses have significant
cultural, political, and ethical implications.

The personalist perspective is call to concerned critics to join “a beloved community, one
that includes all forms of intelligence as our partners in some way” (Peters 258). As cultural
critics, then, our ethical obligation to other animals comes from our compassionate recognition
of our kinship with them in a community of persons who constitute the whole in terms of value
and meaning. “This recognition involves a softening of the heart,” Peters suggests (259). That is,
whether and to what extent we include nonhuman others in a community of persons worthy of
ethical consideration ought not (indeed, cannot) depend on our ability to know them or them us.
Relinquishing our epistemological justifications for including other animals in our ethical
considerations can have far-reaching consequences:

The refusal to probe inner life can lead in the more militant direction of depriving all
beings of an inner life (some forms of behaviorism) or in the wilder and superior
direction of granting an admirable but inaccessible innerness to all creatures, of giving,
like Emerson or Whitman, a welcome to the universe--democracy in the best, full sense.
(Peters 259-260)

The issue is not epistemological, then: it is ethical and moral.

The ethical and moral question challenges us to fend off our anthropocentrism and
speciesism by confronting “an otherness that does not know it is other” in order seriously to
include in our considerations “creatures whose ability to enter into community with us is
obscure” (Peters 244, 230). Because all beings are agents in that each being, each person, is an
end (rather than a means), the conditions of existence for those agents can be made better or
worse by their interactions. And, concerned cultural critics can create better conditions for other animals through a personalist political praxis:

While the social and ecological realities are not transparent, they are clear enough to begin to take informed and decisive action. Our knowledge will deepen in practice, only in and through political struggle, and cannot mature in the study and seminar room. It is not about unilateral application of a pre-formatted theory to social relations and struggle; rather it is about learning and improving on theory from conditions of experience and practical application of knowledge. (Best 35)

A personalist perspective as part of the critic’s ethical framework and political practice offers a promising avenue for positively impacting human-nonhuman animal relations in a radically related community of persons.

It can certainly be argued that what I have described in this article—the move toward a fuller democratic critical practice—is idealistic, overly hopeful, and ultimately impractical. This hopefulness, however, is not wishful thinking, and it does not entail an imprudent adherence to “merely” abstract ideals at the expense of realistic action. As Calvin Schrag has argued so eloquently,

the praxis of hope . . . situates hope in the region of social formation and transformation. In this region the phenomenon of hope shows itself as a horizon of social consciousness, bearing implications for the wider cultural life of man. Understood within this modality, hope is the site from which the thought and action of interacting social selves transform the present in response to an envisioned condition of life in the future. (269)

Hopefulness from this perspective does not replace practice; it is practice. This praxis-oriented approach understands that there must also be room in our critical practices for the notion that
ideas have agency (perhaps as Peirce understood ideas), and that an ideal has intentionality and volition—\textit{that ideas, at the very least, have a generative power.}\, An exclusive focus on practical technique and the absence of an ideal seems to me unlikely to yield much. As Alfred North Whitehead pointed out, “when ideals have sunk to the level of practice, the result is stagnation” (2).

Imagining a critical practice that could create a society that consistently does not dominate, exploit, and annihilate others (of different species, genders, cultures, classes, races, ages, etc.) is a good place to start practicing an analogous politics. Even though people might always employ means to oppress, exploit, and annihilate others, philosophically and theoretically conceiving a critical practice that can create a society that does not reinforce and amplify those relations seems to me as important and as politically constructive a critical project as any. A critical practice conceived in personalist terms opens up what I argue is the possibility of the most fully democratic conception of cultural critique and political practice imaginable. My hope is that this article moves toward actualizing that conception and practice.
Works Cited


Dawkins, Marian Stamp. *Through Our Eyes Only? The Search for Animal Consciousness*. 

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Conceiving Person


These characteristics are commonly claimed by humans as uniquely human and, when attributed to nonhuman animals, considered an anthropomorphizing move. However, in light of compelling evidence to the contrary, acknowledging these characteristics in nonhuman animals cannot justifiably be described as anthropomorphic. Until and unless significant evidence to the contrary emerges, characteristics like cognition and emotion cannot be considered uniquely human and, without that claim to uniqueness, a claim of anthropomorphism has no legitimate support or warrant.


Whether, or to what extent, insects, plants, rocks, planets, etc. constitute persons is an issue certainly prompted in this discussion. Addressing this issue with the attention it deserves, however, is outside the scope of this article.

This philosophical perspective points beyond Gary Francione’s criteria for moral inclusion of nonhuman animals. In a recent interview with Columbia University Press, Francione emphasized his position in *Animals as Persons* that nonhuman sentience--or perceptual awareness on the part of nonhuman animals--is the key criteria for humans to commit to not treating them as means to our ends. Perceptual self-awareness can be understood, from Francione’s perspective, as nonhuman animals knowing themselves as individual beings with self-interests. For human animals to recognize and honor this, moreover, we also need to know that it is true for nonhuman animals that they possess self-awareness. Both aspects of this ethic rely on epistemological criteria. A personalist posture, in contrast, relies on ontological criteria, jettisoning the need to know on the part of cultural critics if (or which) nonhuman animals possess self-awareness.

It is important to note that law, for Kohák, does not mean something abstract, universal, and fixed. Rather, a moral law is always already concrete in relations between persons and is universal to the extent that it finds its basis in the particular.
Josiah Royce developed the notion of a “community of interpretation.” Royce’s conception reflects Charles Sanders Peirce’s metaphysical notion of *thirdness*. For Peirce, any relation between two entities cannot be understood as a simple dyad; rather, the relationship always requires a third element: the framework or structure of meanings, truths, laws, assumptions, and expectations within which the relationship occurs. In general, the *third* is the structural framework that molds the relation (it is important to note, too, that the structure may be emergent in that it is initiated and constituted by the exigencies of the relation). Royce extended this idea by conceiving of a *community of interpretation*, in which persons share a framework of meanings, laws, beliefs, customs, practices, desires, memories, and hopes, to which they refer and/or aspire in all their relations with one another.