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Postscript

In early February 2017, as this book was nearing completion, there were two separate mass strandings at Farewell Spit, a narrow sandspit at the northern end of Golden Bay on New Zealand's South Island. A total of 650 pilot whales were washed ashore, with over 300 of them dying despite a concerted rescue effort that succeeded in refloating some, while others were eventually able to conquer their exhaustion and swim back out. In the immediate aftermath of the strandings, beachgoers were warned to stay away from the dead whales, whose decomposing bodies, repositories for built-up gases, were in danger of exploding. Rescue teams were called upon for a second time to help with the clean up, distributing themselves among the whales and popping them like balloons to let the noxious gases out.

Sad spectacles of this kind are by no means uncommon occurrences. At the end of 2015, 337 sei whales died in a Chilean fjord in what was the largest ever recorded beaching of whales of this species (Evans 2017). On a different scale but still a record, twenty-nine sperm whales were found stranded in February 2016 alone on the shores of Britain, France, Germany, and the Netherlands (Evans 2017). Going back in time, there is substantial historical evidence of whale strandings worldwide, some of which were fearfully interpreted as apocalyptic portents, while others provided welcome opportunities for the exercise of royal authority: in medieval Denmark, says the American conservation biologist Joe Roman, 'all stranded whales were royal fish [since the king] owned the shore', while 'as far back as the fourteenth century, English and Scottish royalty had similar prerogatives over whales stranded or hunted along their coasts' (2006: 50).

It is still not known what causes whale strandings, although theories abound, several of them as distressing as the occurrences themselves. One almost certain factor is stress, however defined,¹ while another is the temporary disruption or sudden malfunctioning of whales' otherwise efficient 'biosonar' systems, complex echolocation devices designed to steer them, often for vast distances, through the ocean depths (see Chapter 1). A still more upsetting possibility is that whales – a nurturing kind – tend to protect one another, especially when one or more of them is in trouble, so the stranding of one whale can quite easily lead to the stranding of scores, even hundreds, at a time. There is an almost sacrificial dimension to this, reminding us perhaps of the time-honoured 'victim role' performed by animals, who die that we might live, and whose sanctified bodies come to operate as both material and symbolic substitutes for our own (Scholtmeijer 1993). There is thus something archaically satisfying, as well as viscerally upsetting, about the human witnessing of whale mass strandings – as if some kind of cleansing ritual is being enacted right in front of us; and as if, even though we may not be directly responsible for it, we are complicit nonetheless. This resonates to some extent with both Derrida's work on *sacrifice* – especially the much commented-on notion that 'the animal' must be sacrificed in order to create the conditions of possibility for 'the human' (Wolfe 2003) – and Agamben's work on *bare life*, which in Laura Hudson's useful gloss is 'neither precisely human nor animal [but emerges] at the moment that the concept of "the human" is produced through the separation of human from animal within the body of the human being' (Hudson 2008: n.p.; see also Agamben 2004). It should go without saying here that animal life (Agamben's *zōe*) is not *synonymous* with bare life, but can be *reduced* to the exploitative conditions that govern it: for example, via the powerful idea of the 'killable' animal (Lopez and Gillespie 2015).

These debates, which are central to human–animal studies as a philosophical field, inevitably raise the issue of animal rights – an issue that some might well see me as having studiously avoided in this book. I should probably make my own position clear here. Paola Cavalieri, one of the most vocal champions of animal rights today, dramatically announces that 'the history of human relationships with other cetaceans can [...] be seen as a genocidal history', suggesting that there is nothing in the term 'genocide' which 'logically prevents it from being applied to nonhuman beings' as well (2017: n.p.). Based on this

appalling history, she further contends, it is possible to see whales and other cetaceans in terms of bare life, the extermination of which she interprets as nothing other than 'the actualization of [human or animal] victims' liability to be killed' (n.p.). This then provides the basis for her defence of cetacean rights, which, after the work of the American legal scholars Anthony D'Amato and Sudhir Chopra, she argues 'must be raised from the sphere of bare life governed by instrumental calculations to [a] favoured realm where rights and prerogatives apply' (n.p.). Rights need to be extended to cetaceans, she believes, insofar as they have a legitimate entitlement to personhood, which in turn suggests that new forms of global governance need to be found that take the regulation of human–cetacean relations away from the former hunting nations, which still dominate international bodies such as the International Whaling Commission (IWC).

It is difficult to disagree with Cavalieri's last point about the IWC, which is now widely seen as one of the most incompetent regulatory bodies in recent history (for a suitably derisive account of its many inconsistencies and misdemeanours, see Burnett 2012). The rest of her argument, however, is problematic on several different fronts. First and foremost, it is difficult to see how rights discourses can actually help cetaceans, based as these discourses generally are on the automatic, or at least uncritical, extension of *human* principles (e.g. the principle of individual freedom) into the *animal* domain. Second, as Cavalieri herself admits, the doctrine of human rights, even if it is extended to the domain of non-human animals, raises the question of *which* animals are considered to be qualified. Here, Cavalieri sensibly avoids the thorny debate around human/animal sentience, only to seek refuge in a hazy notion of intentionality, whereby the primary 'criterion for access to the enjoyment of human rights lies [...] in being an agent, that is, an intentional being that cares about its goals and wants to achieve them' (n.p.). This seems tantamount to according entitlement to the entire animal kingdom, not just to those animals that are deemed to share certain characteristics with human beings – which is itself a dubious criterion, for the reasons just given above. Third, Cavalieri's universalizing discourse of rights fails to recognize important cultural differences, for example, those surrounding aboriginal subsistence whaling, the grounds for which she summarily dismisses as an example of an atavistic appeal to 'cultural traditions' that stands in the way of a 'consistent

application of undisputed moral doctrines' (n.p.) – as if it were enough to make a moral doctrine 'undisputed' simply by saying that it is. Finally, Cavalieri misreads Agamben in suggesting that animal life is, in effect, bare life: Agamben says no such thing, and, although it might be possible to question in turn some of Agamben's working distinctions, it is simply not right to use his arguments to make a case for 'ascribing fundamental protection to [all] defenceless beings' (n.p.), with 'defencelessness' again serving as an example of a human characteristic being uncritically projected onto the animal domain.

My point is hopefully made, but where does this leave us with cetaceans? The best preliminary move – for me at least – might be to recognize that whales are not like us at all, even if we co-inhabit the world with them (and with other animals). Here, I am partly following the Australian philosopher John Rundell, who argues that one of the founding principles for a new ethics of human–animal relations should be the recognition that 'we are largely unknown to one another' (2012: 18). Elaborating on this, he says that 'we, as humans, cannot enter the worlds of dogs, falcons or horses [still less the non-domesticated world of whales], even though they enter our own on our terms, for training, work [or] companionship. They have their own relationality, their own world and dynamics, which cannot be simply summed up in terms of our imagined [...] reconstruction of them through behavioural, ethological, or evolutionary sciences' (18–19). I would agree with this, as with the Levinasian conclusion that Rundell draws from it: that acknowledging the otherness of the Other can be the basis for acting responsibly towards the Other, not so much in terms of 'the fast, technically instituted time of progress, but [rather in] slow time – the time for different kinds of imaginings, reflection, contemplation, relationships and non-relationships with both human and non-human subjects' (Rundell 2012: 20; see also Levinas 1996).

I trust that this book, scattered though its speculations are, has opened up at least some of these disparate imaginings and reflections, which, in true melancholic fashion, are as likely to generate hope for a different kind of future as they are to feed despair in face of what appears to be an eternally self-perpetuating past. The point in any case is not to project our own fears and aspirations onto whales, although history has shown that we have been adept at doing so, but to try to understand the different worlds they inhabit, which are profoundly implicated in but by no means reducible to the world we

all share. This ‘multispecies’ world – to use a term that has become common currency within animal studies – is based on the acknowledgement that there are many other forms of life besides the human, and that our lives are entangled with those of a multitude of different organisms whose existences are linked, whether directly or indirectly, to human social worlds (Helmreich and Kirksey 2010). However, the term ‘entanglement’ hints at a proximity that may not exist, a companionship that may turn out to be illusory. Whales, after all, are hardly companionate creatures, however much we might try to persuade ourselves that we share several important characteristics with them; nor are their worlds commensurable with our own, however much we might try to convince ourselves that these worlds are all effectively one and the same. Finally and most importantly, there is nothing inevitable about the modern capitalist world that has produced the figure of the melancholy whale any more than the historical slaughter of actual whales was an inevitable product of the needs of modern industrial capitalism. Perhaps – to return to the beginning of this book – it is time to consider conceptual alternatives to ‘saving the whales,’ and to turn our attention instead to transforming the social and economic conditions that have historically governed our subordinating relationship with non-human animals, as well as with the human others that we either knowingly or involuntarily subordinate to ourselves.

Note

- 1 The most common dictionary definition of stress is ‘exposure to unpleasant conditions with adverse effects’ (quoted in Broom and Johnson 1993: 58), while more scientific approaches examine the physiological consequences of exposure to these conditions, generally known in the scientific literature as ‘stressors,’ and the wide variety of so-called ‘stress responses’ that these equally variable conditions enact (58). However, scientists also readily admit that stress is, at best, an inconvenient term of convenience. That animals suffer is a fact, and that they suffer from something we might call ‘stress’ is also a given; but what *kinds* of stress they suffer from, and how that stress can be alleviated, is much harder to resolve. To date, most of the work on cetacean stress has focused on captive animals; see however Higham, Bejder, and Williams (2014) for some useful discussions of the possible causes and effects of stress on cetaceans in the wild.

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