

Philosophy Imprisoned

*The Love of Wisdom in the
Age of Mass Incarceration*

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Chapter Thirteen

Prisoners

"They're Animals" and Their Animals

Drew Leder with Vincent Greco

In the United States we now cage over two million men and women in our prisons and jails. Billions of animals likewise live in prison-like conditions, raised for eggs and milk production before their slaughter. The relationship between human prisoners and animals will form the subject of this chapter.

In its first section, "They're Animals," we will discuss the way criminals are viewed in the social imagination. They are often typified as animalistic, predatory and savage—and this leads to, and justifies, modes of harsh treatment otherwise reserved for non-human beings. The second section of the chapter is entitled "Their Animals." Here we turn toward more positive, if still complex and paradoxical, relations between prisoners and the actual animals with whom they interact.

The authors of this piece draw on complementary modes of expertise, with one a philosopher trained in phenomenology (Drew Leder), the other an incarcerated individual (Vincent Greco, hereafter VG) who is educated, a writer, and has spent some thirty-two years in the prison system, and currently resides at the maximum-security Jessup Correctional Institution in Maryland. We also draw on comments from other JCI prisoners participating in a philosophy class which raised these topics.

THEY'RE ANIMALS

A common, stereotypical view of criminals is that they are somehow subhuman. They and their crimes are "savage" and "bestial." They are "predators," or in a term fashionable in the 1990s to describe young gang members,

“superpredators,” radically impulsive and brutally remorseless.¹ In short, the “criminal” is related in the social imagination to the “animal”—not actual animals, who are diverse in their species-nature, and often complex and highly social beings, but the animal-as-imagined, savagery unconstrained by reason or morality. In Mason’s words, “We call someone an ‘animal’ when we want to insult and debase him or her. . . . We describe horrible human beings as ‘animals,’ ‘beasts,’ or ‘brutes’ (an old word for ‘animal’) when we want to describe their egoism, insatiable greed, insatiable sexuality, cruelty, senseless slaughter of nonhuman beings, and the mass slaughter of human beings.”²

This imagery is used in prosecutorial appeals to judge and jury; in media descriptions of crimes and their suspected perpetrators; in everyday conversations where fear and anger are expressed, mingled with incomprehension: “What kind of animal would do such a thing?”

In the United States this metaphoric dehumanization goes hand-in-hand with long-lived racial stereotypes. People of color, such as African Americans and Hispanics, have historically often been viewed by European Americans as less than fully human, justifying enslavement and other modes of oppression and mistreatment.³ It is no accident that such groups are focused upon by the “criminal justice” system, and consequently vastly over-represented in the prison population.⁴ This discriminatory treatment—with, for example, blacks incarcerated at six times the rate of whites—has been related to what criminologists call “black threat,” or “minority threat”—the notion that such “others” are peculiarly dangerous and in need of control.⁵ In the popular imagination a violent or drug-related crime will often conjure up images of a black perpetrator, who in turn is thought of as savage and predatory.⁶ This equation of *criminal—person-of-color—animal* leads to inhumane and disproportionate patterns of incarceration which then seem to confirm the existing stereotypes.

In our Jessup Correctional Institution class, Michael writes, “The prisoners that stalk their victims, rape, molest, rob, murder—certainly act as animals in the wild.” Arlando Jones III (Tray) talks about how sometimes it is necessary to act savagely—for example, when living in a violent neighborhood, protecting territory in the drug game, or stuck in a maximum security (yet insecure) prison. It is a “jungle,” and human beings can be reduced to a Darwinian struggle for survival.

At the same time, as our discussion—and our sustained interaction over the years—has made clear, people in prison are first and foremost *people*—reflective, emotional, and subject to the same fears, pressures, and social and economic influences as are “non-criminals.” In fact, any attempt to reify this boundary is doomed to fail—ordinary people are likely to commit criminal acts in the course of a day, and “criminals” have done many worthy things in their lives. In the words of classmate Zaeed Zakaria, “We are humans just

like anyone else But in an instant these same people have made a poor decision or got caught up in something . . . in the blink of an eye this person’s past is forgot and (they are) viewed as an animal—they become less than human—this person is treated if they were born in prison and had no life prior to this one.”

This then justifies harsh and inhumane treatment of the inmate. Shaylor gives a striking example from the solitary confinement unit in a California women’s prison:

Guards speak to and about the women as though they are sub-human. A pamphlet, produced by the Warden’s office . . . lists times for daily “feedings.” Guards constantly use racial epithets, many of which are gendered, to refer to the women. They call the prisoners “dogs,” “niggers,” “bitches,” “whores” and “black bitches;” women refer to their cells as “cages.” When women are denied privileges, they are put on what guards refer to as “dog status.” . . . The fostering of a perception of prisoners as less than human allows state employees to deny the women any semblance of dignity and to abuse them without compunction.⁷

It would be unfair to simply demonize the correctional officers—they too are under fierce institutional pressures, and dehumanizing the prisoners may be an emotional coping strategy. Yet, paradoxically, the cruel behavior exhibited by guards, institutions, and by extension, the larger society, may itself be said to be inhuman, or at least inhumane. It is not simply the prisoners, but we all, who are reduced when we sanction such mistreatment.

Zoos, Circuses, and Factory Farms

If prisoners are viewed as animals, what does that make prisons? JCI’s Zaeed Zakaria compares them to zoos. “Zoos in essence are prisons designed to cage the wild animals in, to confine and restrict and to manipulate for one’s purpose. It is a way to show . . . how one group has power over another.” A story was told in class about an inmate who—when groups, including college classes, legislators, and judges, would be taken on tour of the prison—would jump about, scratching his body and making monkey noises. This was his ironic commentary on being held and exhibited like a caged animal, as he simultaneously adopted and refused this role.

Jeremi Lewis of our class was reminded more of the circus. “The guards frown down on us and speak to us as if we lack an understanding or compassion. . . . We are prodded, humiliated and subjected to strip searches which are dehumanizing, as is being encaged. We are to them amusement like circus tigers jumping through hoops of flame as the sound of the whip echoes in the ear.”

In zoos and circuses animals are displayed for the entertainment of the general public. We see this to some extent in the plethora of TV shows and movies that feature criminals being captured by police, or confined in prison, all for a salacious thrill, the satisfaction of seeing good triumph, and/or the curiosity that leads us to peer into dark places. Now and then our collective gaze thus penetrates through the bars and barbed wire. However, for the most part, prisoners are hidden away from the public view. This deprives prisoners not only of freedom, but of rights and protections, even the fundamental right to be seen, heard, and remembered. Hidden away, so too are the abuses to which they are subjected. The brutalities described by Shaylor above might not survive a thorough "airing" in the press.

Foucault writes about how the public spectacle of punishment—torture and execution exhibited for the entertainment and edification of the general public—gave way after the eighteenth century to a system of largely hidden punishments. Instead of publically inflicting pain on the body of the condemned, that body is confined within institutions of "discipline" that meticulously order and document its movements through space and time. Prisoners are kept under a system of constant surveillance and micro-regulation. "Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile bodies.' Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and decreases these same forces (in political terms of obedience)." ⁸ Foucault not only traces out this disciplinary control over human beings within the modern penitentiary, but as exercised in the school, army, hospital, asylum, and factory.

Though he, himself, says little about disciplinary institutions for animals, Foucault's analysis can be extended to the modern factory farm. As Cole writes,

Many intensive "farming" practices are similarly suggestive of the production of docile bodies through spatial distribution, surveillance and "correction." Technologies of confinement such as battery cages, "broiler" sheds or "veal crates" all share the motif of "correcting" nonhumans for their "wasteful" use of energy (read: feed, for which read: economic cost) to sustain their own biological processes. Mutilations are designed to ameliorate the economic costs of "aggression" that result from confinement technologies (that is, result from the actions of the human captors who design, build and maintain them), such as the amputation of horns, tails or beaks or the "clipping" of teeth. ⁹

CAFO's (Confined Animal Feeding Operations) thus operate as extreme disciplinary institutions. Animal bodies are caged, fattened, impregnated, medicated, and in various ways forced and tracked along a production line that leads to slaughter. ¹⁰ Along the way they suffer the frustrations of their most ordinary instincts, such as that of a chicken to walk about and spread its wings. They are nutritionally deprived, and/or overfed, often developing se-

vere anatomical problems and diseases as a result. Families are separated, social systems disrupted. Unable to establish a normal social order, animals struggle to survive in stressful and overcrowded conditions. Their consequent aggression is treated by the "mutilations" Cole mentions above, such as slicing off chickens' beaks using a hot knife.

Comparisons to human incarceration are not difficult to make. In the United States prisoners often live in overcrowded conditions, packed together in barracks, or with two inmates inhabiting a small cell built for one. Stress, aggression, and disease are the result. In one telling example, the Supreme Court recently ruled that conditions in the California prison system, holding nearly double the amount of prisoners it was designed for, violated the inmates' constitutional rights. In his majority opinion, Justice Kennedy notes, among many other such details, "A correctional officer testified that, in one prison, up to fifty sick inmates may be held together in a twelve- by twenty-foot cage for up to five hours awaiting treatment." ¹¹ A lower court had called it an "uncontested fact" that "an inmate in one of California's prisons needlessly dies every six or seven days due to constitutional deficiencies." ¹² Extreme overcrowding, insufficient facilities, the lack of adequate care for those with physical and mental illness, resulted in a high suicide and death rate.

All this is reminiscent of factory farm conditions—for example, that of egg-laying hens confined six-to-eight in a single small wire-mesh cage, with a single worker monitoring as many as 150,000 chickens. ¹³ Some bird "wastage" through disease and death is deemed an acceptable cost given the economic efficiency of large-scale egg production. Similarly, human wastage is too often deemed acceptable in our prisons, given the aim of disciplining those disruptive to the social order. The yield in behavioral docility is also complemented by economic utility. Not only do inmates constitute a population of cheap labor producing goods for state governments, but their very warehousing generates significant wages and profits for construction companies, food servicers, telephone companies, correctional officers, municipalities, and, increasingly, private corporations who are contracted by the state to build and run for-profit prisons. ¹⁴ Incarcerating one inmate can cost/generate some \$40,000 a year—that's a lot of eggs.

Along the way, the inmate experiences caging and a disordered sociality comparable to the CAFO-confined animal. Rather than seeking a "restorative justice" that might reintegrate offenders, we remove them from family and community and place them in overcrowded conditions among hundreds or thousands of other criminals, producing what can be a chaotic and dangerous environment. The struggle to survive in such conditions and establish a "pecking order" can lead to gang affiliations and individual violence. All this calls forth more intrusive disciplinary measures such as prolonged solitary confinement, essentially a form of torture that can cause or exacerbate mental

and physical illness.¹⁵ In a circular logic, when treated as animals humans can respond to their caging in “animalistic” ways, confirming the stereotype of criminals and justifying more restrictions and punishments.

One might ask whether it is worse to cage animals or humans. Peter Singer has argued that under some conditions animals suffer more than humans because of their cognitive limits—for example, when being taken to a veterinarian an animal may panic, not understanding that treatment will be brief and salutary. In other conditions—for example, having cancer—an animal may suffer less, unafflicted by anticipatory dread.¹⁶ Which applies here? Recently, Arlando Jones III (Tray), has told me, unsolicited, that human suffering from incarceration is clearly worse. “Humans just need more space than other animals. It’s fundamental to the human spirit.” Yet at another time, perhaps in another mood, he has also said, “My space ain’t too restricted because I think of myself as on an odyssey. I take the stoic outlook—my space is supposed to be restricted but my ideas don’t have to be, and that’s where I find all my freedom.”¹⁷ Perhaps both sides of this paradox are true—that the more abstract, projective modes of understanding available to humans can be a source of great suffering—when incarcerated one reflects on all the rich possibilities of life slipping away—and yet this same intellect can build to expand lived space, establishing a sense of mental and spiritual freedom unavailable to the caged animal.

To ask, though, who is worse off may disguise the fact that both situations cause great suffering and often in similar ways. Up until now this article has referred to “humans” and “animals” as if separate categories, but of course humans *are* animals. Guenther argues that without acknowledging this we cannot fully understand the destructive effects of solitary confinement:

What the opposition between humane and inhumane treatment fails to grasp is the degree to which it is not primarily as *human beings*, with a presumably inherent sense of dignity and freedom, that we are affected by solitary confinement and sensory deprivation, but as *living beings*, sensible flesh, with corporeal relations to other embodied beings and to an open field of overlapping experience in a shared world. It is as *animals* that we are damaged or even destroyed by the supermax or SHU, just as our fellow animals are damaged or destroyed by confinement in cages at zoos, factory farms, and scientific laboratories.¹⁸

We have come full circle. This section is entitled “They’re Animals.” This turns out to be true, but not in the sense with which we began—that criminals are different, *subhuman*—savage, bestial, brutish—but the opposite—that criminals are animals *insofar as they are human like ourselves*. As Guenther writes, prisoners as people are also animals, living beings, sensible flesh, in corporeal relations with other embodied beings and a shared world. Yet for the purposes of discipline and punishment, that world is radically truncated.

Not only isolated from family and community, the incarcerated person is permitted little contact with the natural world of trees and rivers, flowers and fields, and with those non-human animals with whom we share the earth. However, and happily, this is not the whole story.

THEIR ANIMALS

Though living in a largely denaturalized environment, often one in which (nonhuman) animals are forbidden for sanitary and security reasons, nonetheless prisoners have such trans-species encounters and relations. We might think of these animals as themselves bandits. They sneak across fences, steal food, break the rules. In a sense they share in the inmates’ own incarceration. In another sense, they are wild and free in a way that may lead to prisoner envy. They may also be feared, loathed, or respected—and sometimes loved. We will briefly survey a series of such encounters, focusing on personal accounts from JCI, particularly those of co-author Vincent Greco (VG), and ranging from tame creatures to wild; state-sponsored programs to illicit encounters; the scampering rat to the soaring bird.

Pests and Pets

There were five or ten groundhogs running around the institution. When I was exercising, there was a groundhog who crawled under the fence and sat right next to me. Another time I saved a cricket—put it on the grass. If you’re in tune with yourself you become in tune with how special life is, no matter how small. The same Creator gave both humans and animals life.¹⁹

The prisoners describe such relations with a varied range of wildlife (and “lowlife”): skunks, foxes, bugs, cats, fish, rabbits, mice, rats, among others. The rodents in particular can be viewed by inmates and staff alike as pests. To keep them out and himself protected, VG himself had to build a small-scale version of his own prison:

I found that I had to have a three-foot-high door board and use steel wool as barbed wire across the top to block the mice and rats from entering the cell and eating all our food. At night I would hear the mice or rats climbing the door board only to run into the barbed wire—some tried their paws—but never succeeded.

Such highlights the unsanitary, even disease-ridden, conditions that can be found in many penitentiaries, conditions from which, of course, the prisoners have difficulty escaping.

At the same time even these pests can become pets. “Prisoners were breeding rats. They made elaborate cages and plastic running tubes in their

cells. I suppose we could call these animals prison hamsters and guinea pigs" (VG). Michael writes, "(I) discovered a mouse eating my commissary. Stayed up one night and captured it with a trap—I let it go on the tier but it came back to my cell the next night. After about thirty days of chasing the mouse I was able to wash it and feed it *every* night. After about sixty days the mouse actually came on my bed and rested. . . . I went on lock-up and to my surprise I did not miss the sunshine, the yard, recreation, TV, population—what I did miss was my pet mouse."

Where there are rats there are cats. One day we found a litter of cats, about a day or two old, in the bottom of the elevator shaft; the mother had died. I climbed down and got them out and I took one back to my cell. She had to be fed with an eye-dropper but she grew up just fine eating tuna from the kitchen. I had the cat—Spud—for several years . . . I built her shelves so she could jump around the cell and left the T.V. on for her when I went to work.

After several years I decided to free her. I sent her home to my mother after a big fanfare and party. I still have the picture with her and me in the visiting room with a sign saying "Spud makes parole." (VG)

As Guenther writes above, person and animal meet "as *living beings*, sensible flesh, with corporeal relations to other embodied beings and to an open field of overlapping experience in a shared world."²⁰ Prisoner and pet are incarcerated together, share the same food and conditions. At the same time, they liberate each other—*Spud makes parole*—but also, in a sense, *Vincent Greco makes parole*—because they meet in a relationship that unfolds outside the prison context. The prisoner, often thought of as "animal," shines forth his humanity by acts of caring. The animal, in this case Spud, is free of the judgments that a human might make. He does not see Greco as a prisoner or criminal—simply as a friend and caregiver. Dwelling in an institution that ceaselessly reinforces one's criminal identity—that you are defective or malicious or threatening, or evil—the animal's gaze help's one reclaim one's self, both expressing and transcending self through care of another.

However, another aspect of the close relationship between prisoners and their animals is their shared vulnerability to unconstrained and arbitrary modes of power. Greco recounts how one prison ordered mounds of kitty litter to help keep down the rat population. But at another time,

the prison administration decided they wanted to get rid of the cats. They told us at 9:00 in the morning that we had until 2:00 to have someone pick up our pets or the SPCA would get them. My mother could not make it until after work. The Assistant Warden said I had to tell my mother to pick him up at the SPCA. What was unknown was that the SPCA's policy is to immediately euthanize feral cats. My mother went only to find that my cat had been killed. (VG)

In his article, "Killing Time on the Prairie," Mobley writes about a Colorado prison inhabited around the edges by a colony of prairie dogs to which he and many others had become devoted. When it was learned the animals were under threat from the authorities, the prisoners contemplated a food strike or work stoppage. Provisions were stockpiled in case of lock-down or riot. Nevertheless, in the name of safety and security, the entire prairie dog colony was one day exterminated. Mobley, understanding the parallel relationship between the prisoners and animals, and their co-vulnerability to carceral cruelties, by then had become a vegetarian. "After a time it didn't feel right for me to support any "system" that treated living beings in impersonal, mass-produced ways."²¹

JCI Service Dog Program

One of the ways in which prisons have helped both "humanize" and "animalize" their environments is through prison-based animal programs (PAP's).²² These have taken a variety of forms, including the rehabilitation of animals for community adoption; the training of service dogs for the visually and hearing impaired and those suffering from movement or cognitive disabilities; the supplying of companion animals as inmate-pets; caring for injured wildlife who are then released; the taming of wild horses; various forms of farming; even the breeding and protection of endangered species.²³ Survey results suggest that a majority of states have some such program in their prison system, with dogs the most popular animal in use.²⁴ This recently appeared at JCI in the form of a program run by Canine Partners for Life, founded in 1989 to train service and home companion dogs for people with cognitive and physical disabilities. (Most PAP programs are facilitated by outside organizations, with the prison's cooperation.) As Greco writes,

Bud, Jakster, Smidget, and Riblet came into the institution as eight-week-old puppies. Needless to say JCI was immediately transformed. Some prisoners, including myself, have not interacted with dogs (pets) for over thirty years. We did not realize just how much we missed it. While it must be acknowledged that there are people who just don't like dogs, and in addition who believe that prison is not a place for dogs, I can see the upbeat effect that the dogs have on our community.

The Warden's decision to place the dogs in D-building was calculated. Historically it has had a reputation for violence and placing dogs in that environment has contributed to the reduction of violence. In fact the program seems to enhance consciousness toward humanity awareness. Animals have a real calming effect on a community and that seems to be even truer for a closed prison community. (VG)

JCI Warden John Wolfe (an appropriate name) is a big supporter: "I know the dog program has had an overall positive impact on both the inmate

population and the staff because it brings a sense of normalcy to the situation. . . . Pets bring comfort, joy and companionship to peoples' lives."²⁵

This positive take is echoed by prison administrators across the country. Of sixty-one respondents to a national survey, sixty said that they would recommend such programs to fellow administrators, reflecting a remarkable unanimity (the only dissenter expressed concerns that the program had not proved revenue-generating). When asked to identify any negative aspects associated with the program—for the inmates, staff, or facility—60 percent reported *none*.²⁶

The many benefits of these PAPs noted by administrators and/or prisoners include a calmed environment, which can reduce the incidence of aggression;²⁷ the development of inmate vocational skills contributes to experience with goal-setting and practical problem-solving and an enhanced sense of responsibility and discipline. At the same time these human-animal interactions grant more freedom for the expression of feelings, including those involving love and tenderness not easy to access in a harsh prison setting. Toxic anger and self-hate built up over the years, and reinforced in a penal environment, can be diffused when caring for, and being cared for by an animal.²⁸ The result is an embodied relation-based therapy that might not be achievable just through talk or religious ritual.

Trust and loyalty, or the lack thereof, is a component of the darwinistic social milieu of prison. I suppose everyone has been betrayed by a thought-to-be-friend or lover. However, how many pets have actually turned on us? The loyalty of a dog is next to none. . . . I've also seen one person who became a caretaker of a dog and it seems to help resolve the guilt he (many of us) feel over not being with our loved ones during their time of need. . . . Being a caregiver to an animal in such an enclosed environment parallels to some degree the experience of care-giving to a sick loved one. (VG)

The number of "stakeholders" thus brought together and benefitted is impressive. The prisoner, caring for a pet, is reminded of his/her younger self, and of loved ones, able to care for them vicariously. The affection directed from and toward an animal can transcend racial divisions, and the division between prisoners and correctional officers. The common project is endorsed by warden and inmates alike. The animals themselves, while confined in an unnatural setting, can also benefit from sustained care and attention (and sometimes PAPs use animals who would otherwise be euthanized). According to one account, "inmates produced exceptionally well-trained dogs, a result that may be linked to the amount of time that inmates can devote to the dogs."²⁹ And this of course will also benefit the animals' future owner, struggling with a disability.

I guess waiting for a year while your canine partner is being trained in the prison is like being in prison and waiting for a year-long delayed release. Try placing yourself in the shoes of someone confined to a wheelchair or bed, who will be receiving a significant amount of freedom because prisoners are training their canine partners. . . . Programs like this reflect the humanity of prisoners. Sometimes we are portrayed as selfish people who have no regard for the law. However, these present a different image, for (prisoners) have given up a considerable amount of time and effort to train dogs in order to give some unknown people a sense of independence and freedom. (VG)

Thus, even while locked up, the inmate can connect with, even help liberate, those on the outside. In doing so, the trainer not only changes internally (one man said, "as the puppies improve, you improve yourself as well"),³⁰ but also changes others' views, helping to reconnect inmates with the larger society. It's harder to say of prisoners "they're animals" when seeing them with their animals.

The Geese

Drive to JCI and one is surprised to see the otherwise grim environs livened by the unexpected presence of geese flocking on the grass by the outer parking lots, squatting or waddling about the prison yards, as if transforming them for an illusory moment into the picnic grounds of a public park. Donald Gross explains:

I've defended the geese in prison against abusive prisoners and guards by thoroughly explaining to them that this Jessup area is the geese's sanctuary. This area, behind these prisons, has been designated as one of the geese's migratory stops on their way down south as they left Canada. There's a reservoir out back which was made for them, and food is placed out daily. They're protected in this area which is why they remain and breed here. So for real, we're violating *their* space.

I've gotten into arguments with inmates and officers in regards to me feeding the geese. Their arguments consists of I shouldn't feed them because they shit everywhere and it's like walking through a minefield. My reasoning is that the administration/police shits down on us on a daily basis metaphorically by denying us what we're supposed to be getting, so don't mis-direct your anger at the geese for being what they are.

The geese thus inhabit the boundary between the wild and the tame, the rejected and the welcomed. The JCI area serves as a designated sanctuary. However, unlike the service dogs, these creatures are not condoned by the administration, nor always the prisoners. But when Donald Gross says "don't mis-direct your anger at the geese for being what they are" he seems also to be speaking of himself—"the administration/police shits down on us on a

daily basis.” The geese shit, but not on him. In fact, they give him access to his place seen not only as a carceral environment, but a protective sanctuary.

Greco has taken up a similar battle, absorbing his own lessons:

Many people hated the geese because they defecate all over the compound. Nevertheless, most people enjoy the goslings (born in late April or May—a sign of Spring) and the parents’ dedication to them, beginning with sitting on the eggs for a month or two, regardless of how people try to shoo them off. Then after they are born the parents’ dedication to the goslings is truly intriguing. Also I believe that some people have mixed feelings of this amazing act of nature because of their own relationships with their parents. One thing I can say for sure is that I never saw a parent goose physically abusing or just plain ignoring one of their goslings. They are extremely attentive and dedicated parents.

I, of course, love to feed the babies. They will come and eat right out of your hand. . . . I had to be careful because many people still disliked them. One day the Warden was walking with some staff and I was coming out of the building and my goslings saw me and they ran right up to me and stopped bobbing their heads for the food. I tried to play it off but they snatched me out. (VG)

Through the geese, Greco gets to *see* the caring and nurturing parent—one that many inmates have missed out on. He also gets to *be* that parent, feeding the babies. In this shit-filled environment such nurturing shines forth as a gift given to—and from—the goslings.

Zaeed Zakaria comments:

When I first seen a goose my eyes widened and my heart began to feel joy because I was looking at a creature Allah created. I felt sincere peace, but more so I was inclined to feel humble and to feel compassion. Why? I don’t know why, but I also felt envious of this creature. Not in a bad way but more so as one admires a plane as it flies overhead with a destination. These geese, these living, breathing creatures of God, know from where they came, they know where they are going, they have an aim, a goal. We know from where we came but then life stops. No direction, no goal. The geese have chosen this destination—a destination in which I find no liberty.

The paradoxes are dizzying. The geese, migratory creatures capable of flying thousands of miles, have chosen to settle for much of the year at JCI—the very place to which the prisoners are unwillingly bound. In an urbanized world (JCI lies in the Washington, DC–Baltimore area), the prison offers a sliver of green space. This “maximum-security penitentiary” does actually provide some security for the birds, even if not always for the inmates—Jessup prisons have been the site of many stabbings. This place that tears inmates away from parents and children is for the geese a family breeding ground.

While such ironies can seem cruel, they can also be experienced, as the above quotes attest, as redemptive. For indigenous peoples, totem animals, associated with the tribe, channeled by the shaman, can provide a spirit of help and guidance. Animals, after all, possess special skills, sensitivities, and powers that humans do well to access.³¹ The geese can similarly be seen as nature’s or Allah’s gift to an otherwise grim JCI, teaching about sanctuary, family nurture and the “real sense of liberty” associated with flying to a destination, whether that remains ever unknown or right here at JCI.

In ancient India, the *hamsa*—often translated as “swan,” but more accurately a species of wild goose—is associated with the transcendent spirituality of the renunciate.³² The *hamsa* is reputed to be able to separate milk from water, representing the power of spiritual discrimination. Its soaring flight, as the world falls away far beneath, exemplifies the freedom attained by the enlightened being. In my study with the prisoners of inspiring works of philosophy and spirituality I have sensed the essence of the *hamsa*, as our discussions soar and dip, fly over and beyond all the bars and barbed wire, before coming again to settle right where we are. Maybe the JCI geese accompany our journey.

CONCLUSION

“They’re animals.” This is the place where we began—the social caricature of prisoners as savage, bestial, subhuman. Ironically, the result of being so viewed is to remove prisoners from actual contact with their animality, and relations with the animal world. That is, they are captured in a geometrized, technological place of forbidding architecture and razor wire—one that offers little contact with beauty, sensual pleasure, or wild nature. Prisoners are lucky if there is one straggly tree in an otherwise barren yard—after all, that tree represents a security hazard, a place where people might hide, or weapons be forged. This is a “dehumanized” world, yes, but largely insofar as it is “denaturalized.” In a sense, the prison environment is *all too human*.

Thankfully, this can be somewhat relieved by the presence of animals. Possibilities of cross-species communication—care, affection, protection, growth and learning—breathe life back into the institution. Prisoners and animals find and rescue one another, an unlikely conjunct.

Or is it? With billions of animals caged in factory farms, and millions of people caught up in our cancerous carceral growth, perhaps these are natural partners. They provide each other mutual aid, one by one.

Yet, one by one isn’t sufficient. It is important to shift the character of dominant institutions by seeing through and beyond the dominant ideologies that subserve them. As Nocella writes, “Simultaneously working to end both racism and speciesism is difficult, but it is essential. . . . Just as speciesism

underlies the agricultural-industrial complex, racism underlies the U.S. criminal justice system and prison-industrial complex.”³³ All such “isms” are variations on a fundamental *reductionism*. Prisoners, and/or people of color are reduced to “animals” or “animal-like.” But actual animals are in turn reduced to mere meat-production machines, as if they are devoid of feeling, cognition, social bonds—that is, they are *de-animalized*. Seeing prisoners and animals in loving relationship fortunately shatters all this falsity.

NOTES

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9. Matthew Cole, “‘Animal Machines’ to ‘Happy Meat’? Foucault’s Ideas of Disciplinary and Pastoral Power Applied to ‘Animal-Centred’ Welfare Discourse,” *Animals* 1 (2011) 86.
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16. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 59–61.
17. Drew Leder et al., *The Soul Knows No Bars: Inmates Reflect on Life, Death, and Hope* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 7.
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22. Gennifer Furst, “Prison-Based Animal Programs: A National Survey,” *The Prison Journal* 86.4 (December 2006): 407–430.
23. Janet Lai, “Pet Facilitated Therapy in Correctional Institutions,” Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Women, Correctional Service of Canada, April 1998, accessed May 28, 2013, www.csc-ccc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/fsw/pet/pet-eng.shtml; Kirk Johnson, “Raising Frogs For Freedom, Prison Project Opens Doors,” *New York Times*, Sept 28, 2012.
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25. Vincent Greco, “Canine Partners for Life Graduation Ceremony,” *Jessup Correctional Institution Outback Observer* 2.11 (Sept/Oct 2012).
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Chapter Fourteen

Organizing Dead Matter into Effective Energy

Andre Pierce

While it is a depressing fact that a large number of Ebony (Black) males are incarcerated, this large sum represents a potential power that can transform everything including institutions, ideas, communities, and lives. Unfortunately, this potential power has largely remained untapped, never given focus and organization, thus existing as a form of dead matter. There are several factors that account for our potential power remaining unharnessed and at times self-destructive. One factor is an identity crisis that is marked by a form of tribalism.

We tend to become tribal when we enter prison in an effort to create a sense of community, as well as for protection. We experience a degree of cultural shock, isolation, and fear during our incarceration. We attempt to overcome such cultural shock, isolation, and fear by forming cliques with people who are from our local areas. These cliques provide us a sense of community, as we are able to bond over familiar events, stories, people we know, and local areas. Such cliques not only provide us a sense of community, but also protection, as there is strength in numbers. We can count on our cliques to "hold us down if some drama pops off." However vital these township bonds may be, they represent a form of tribalism that keeps us divided and at times, warring with one another.

Another accounting for our failure to harness our power and unify, is the various prison identities that encompass different systems of values and codes of ethics, which are, at times, hostile to each other. These prison identities fall in three categories: reformed prisoners, convicts, and street niggaz.¹ Reformed prisoners have made, or are on an attempt to make, a complete self-transformation in order to lead a law-abiding life post-release.