



Wonder and environmental virtue

Liezl van Zyl



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Rosalind Hursthouse, “Environmental virtue ethics” (2007):

- There might be a virtue of being rightly disposed with respect to wonder and
- Such a virtue would involve “being disposed to feel wonder the right way, towards the right objects, for the right reasons, to the right degree, on the right occasions, in the right manner, and to act accordingly.”
- It could form an important part of an environmental ethics insofar as it is explicitly concerned with our relations to nature.

Questions:

1. Could there be a virtue of being rightly disposed with respect to wonder?
2. What role does it play in environmental ethics?

The emotion of wonder

Affective component

- pleasure, delight, surprise, excitement, often in response to sensory experience



Cognitive component

- curiosity, attentiveness, interest in, response to something wonderful



Wonder and Conservation



Van Zyl's Golden mole
Chrysochloris zyli

Wonder in Environmental Ethics

Kathleen Moore:

“The same impulse that says, this is wonderful, is the impulse that says, this must continue. A sense of wonder that allows us to see life as a beautiful mystery forces us to see life as something to which we owe respect and care. If this is the way the world is: extraordinary, surprising, beautiful, singular, mysterious and meaningful; then this is how I ought to act in that world: with respect and celebration, with care, and with full acceptance of the responsibilities that come with my role as a human privileged to be a part of that community of living things. Wonder is the missing premise that can transform “what is” into a moral conviction about how one ought to act in that world” (The truth of the barnacles, 2006)

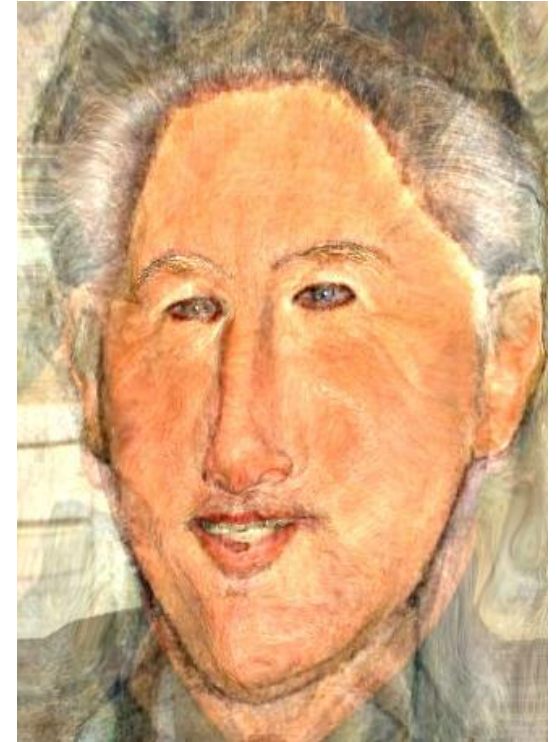
My suggestion

Wonder plays a role in environmental benevolence that empathy plays in traditional benevolence

Geoffrey Frasz, “Benevolence as environmental virtue” (2005)

‘Traditional’ Benevolence

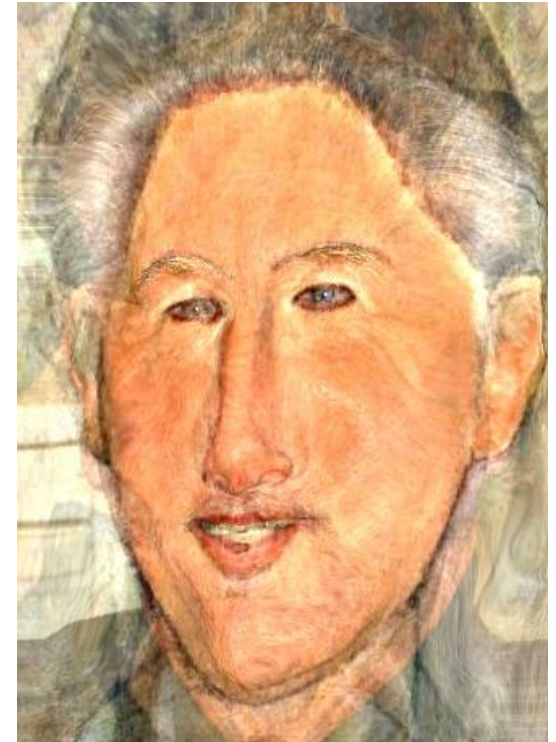
- A family of virtues that involve a direct concern for the well-being of others
- includes compassion, friendship, kindness, and generosity
- involves moving beyond acts of immediate self-interest to acts for the interest of others
- fosters a community in which its members can flourish



Traditional benevolence requires a capacity to “**imaginatively dwell** on the condition of the other”, being open to the concerns, interests, goals, and needs of others.

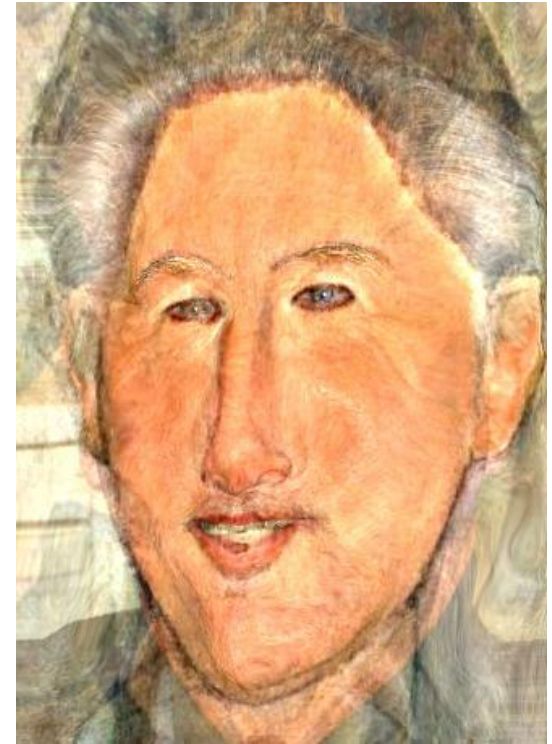
‘Imaginative dwelling’ has two functions:

1. Allows the agent to discover what the other person needs in order to flourish, given his character, beliefs, values
2. Motivates her to act with the best interests of others in mind.

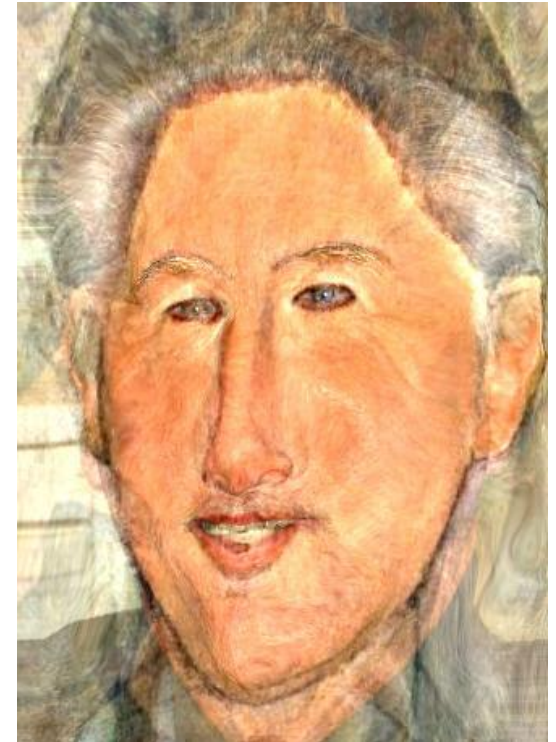


Environmental benevolence

- Requires extending sphere of concern to nonhuman others, including domesticated and non-domesticated animals and plants, entire species, ecosystems, biogeographic zones.
- Requires moving beyond human interests, “rejecting human chauvinism and notions of human superiority” and
- recognizing “an extended environmental community”



Environmental benevolence requires further expanding the capacity for **imaginative dwelling**.



But what does this capacity for imaginative dwelling involve?

“Imaginative dwelling” in traditional benevolence

Empathy: taking the perspective of others, imagining what they are experiencing;

- **Cognitive component:**

allows an understanding of the concerns, interests, goals wishes, needs of others and

- **Affective component:**

Involves a concern for their well-being – motivates

Problem for Frasz’s extension:

Empathy is not possible in the case of nonhuman animals, plants, ecosystems, etc.

Could **wonder** play the role in environmental benevolence that empathy plays in traditional benevolence?

- **Cognitive component:**

Allows an understanding of needs and interests of natural entities

- **Affective component:**

An enjoyment and appreciation of the object, which motivates benevolent actions

Problems: Wonder, like empathy, can be misdirected...



Wonder, like empathy, can be biased...

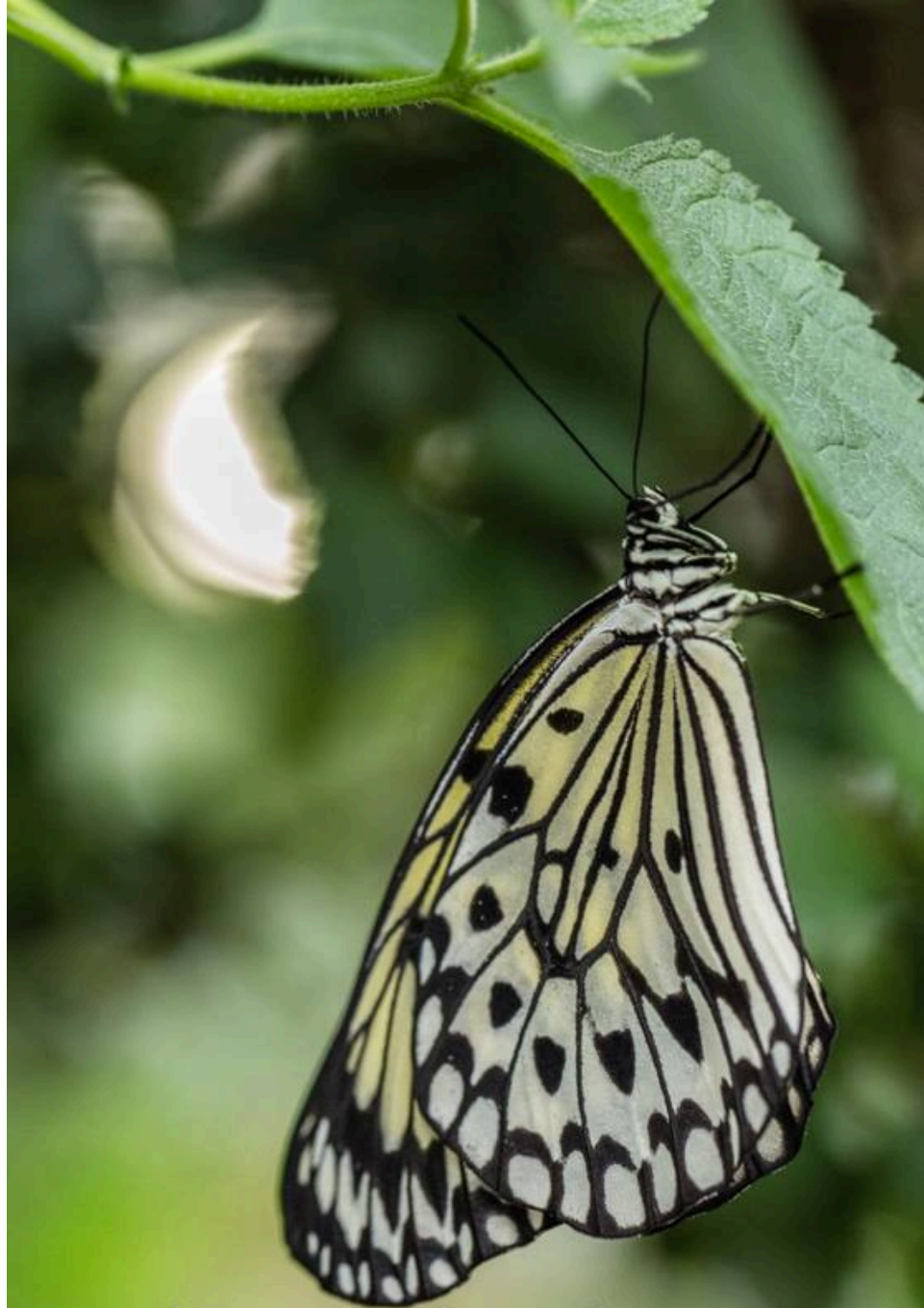


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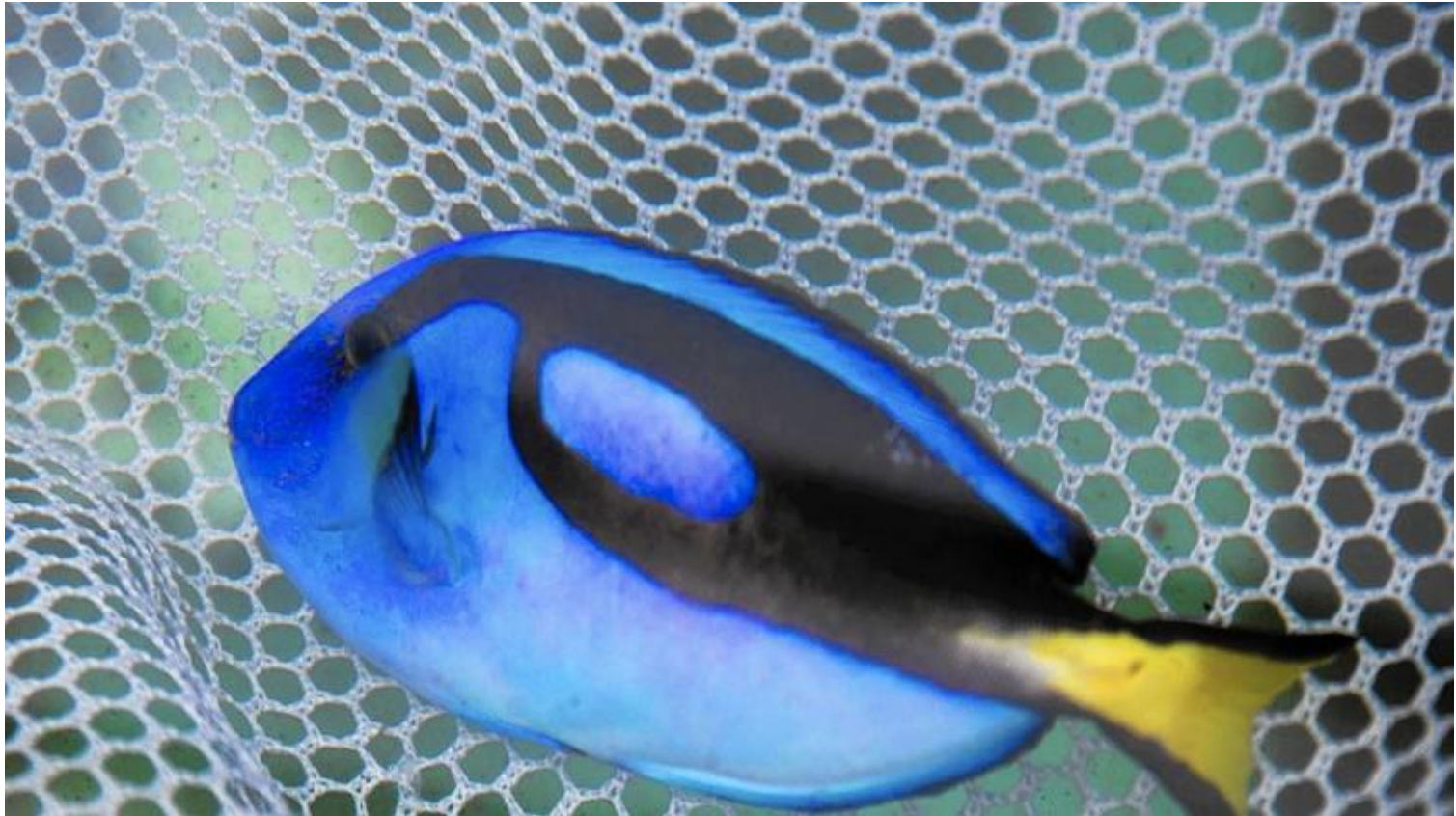
Spotted hyena





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... and it can motivate us to act in ways that are inappropriate or wrong.



Royal blue tang

Hursthouse (2007):

If we think and feel, not that nature is wondrous but that Disneyland or the Royal Family of Windsor are, that the other animals are not, but we are, that the seas are not but swimming pools on the twentieth floor of luxury hotels are, and act accordingly, then we will act wrongly, just as we do when we fear pain to ourselves but not to others.

But is it possible to feel wonder towards the right objects, in the right way, etc.?

Self-indulgence, and other objections

Holmes Rolston's example:

a benefactor makes a large donation to the Desert Fishes Council because he “sometimes enjoys an experience of wonder when he sees rare fish”.

- Rolston: the benefactor values the experience of wonder rather than the object of wonder.
- Involuntary
- Unstable
- Unreliable source of motivation
- There are better ways to motivate environmental protection: A sense of duty

Two kinds of wonder

These objections hold with regard to one kind of wonder, but not the other.

- Surprise-wonder (astonishment, curiosity)
Kant: "*Verwunderung*"
- Appreciative wonder (admiration, contemplation)
Kant: "*Bewunderung*"

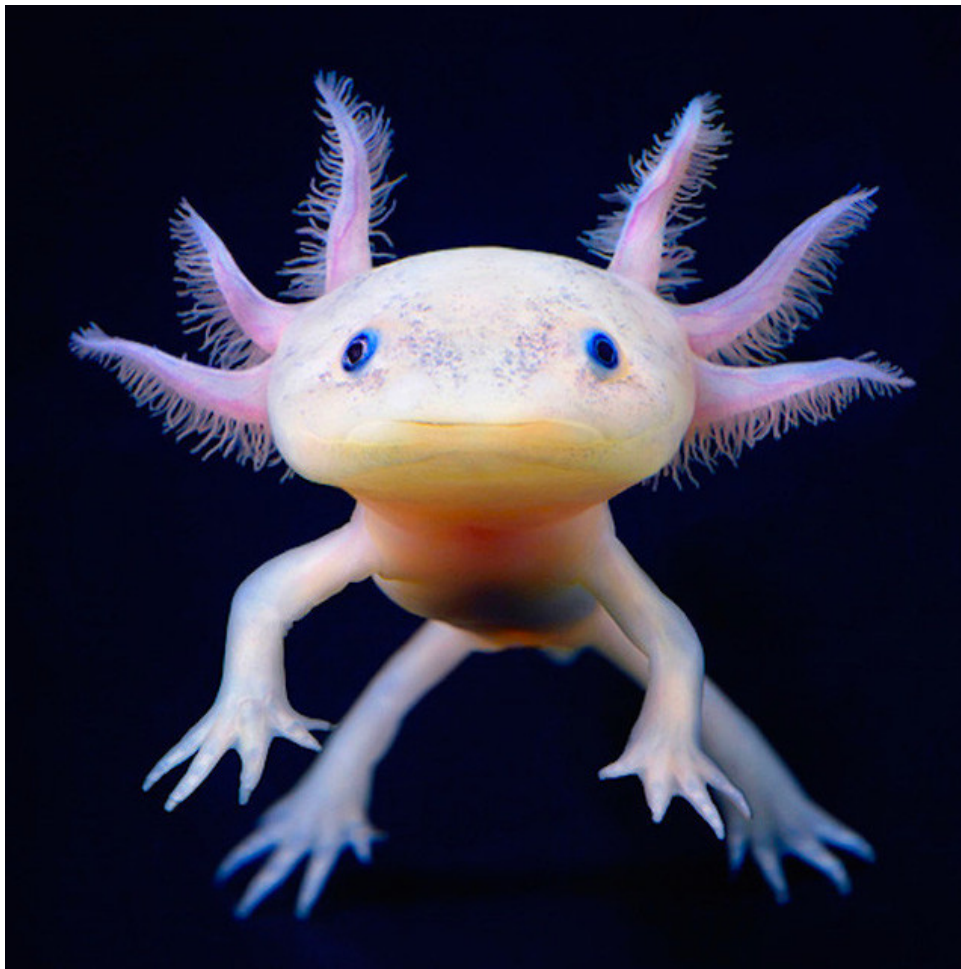
Surprise-Wonder (Descartes, Smith, Bacon)

Wonder, as an intellectual passion, has a role in stimulating scientific inquiry.

“[Wonder arises] when something quite new and singular is presented... [and] memory cannot, from all its stores, cast up any image that nearly resembles this strange appearance”
(Adam Smith, *History of Astronomy*, 1795).

It is associated with a distinctive bodily feeling:

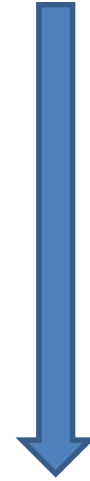
“that staring, and sometimes that rolling of the eyes, that suspension of the breath, and that swelling of the heart.”



Objects of wonder: things or occurrences that are novel, unfamiliar, extraordinary, or unexpected



Surprise!



Curiosity & Attention



Knowledge

A deficiency in wonder results in ignorance:

“... it is good to be born with some kind of inclination to wonder because it disposes us to the acquisition of sciences...” (Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*)



Excessive wonder, the “sickness of the blindly curious”, also results in ignorance

A form of self-indulgence:

To escape the doldrums of the affluent life, people seek out such experiences in surf-riding, sky-diving, auto-racing, polymorphous love-making, jazz, LSD, war, and the like” (Parsons, 1969).



Although it is good to be born with some kind of inclination to wonder because it disposes us to the acquisition of sciences...

... yet we ought afterwards to endeavor as much as we can to be rid of it.

(Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*)



Why there cannot be a virtue of wonder:

Instability: it begins in surprise, which depends on ignorance, and so naturally decreases with time.

“we wonder only at what appears rare and extraordinary to us. And nothing can appear so to us except through our having been ignorant of it or through its being different from things we have known” (Descartes, 1649, Article 75)

Unreliability: Wonder is an involuntary and spontaneous emotional response

There are **alternative ways** of acquiring knowledge.

a particular [state of] reflection and attention to which our will can always bind our understanding when we judge that the thing presented is worth the trouble (Descartes, 1649, Article 76).

Appreciative wonder

Does not rely on ignorance and surprise

Requires attentiveness,
and an openness to new forms of value

Involves appreciation of the object

A different emotion? Or a more mature form
of the same one?

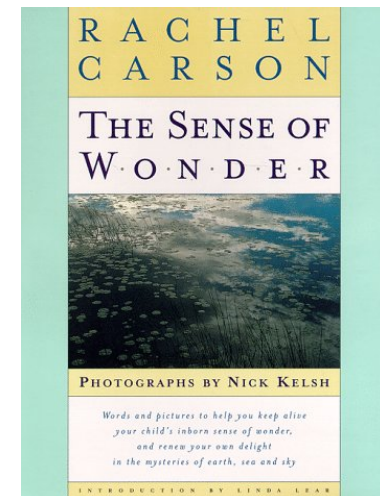
Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (1965)

Objects of wonder: Not only things that are unusual, unfamiliar, extraordinary

Capacity for wonder does not depend on ignorance and surprise but on an **attitude** she adopts quite deliberately:

“For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind. One way to open your eyes to unnoticed beauty is to ask yourself, ‘What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?’” (*Sense of Wonder*, 1965).

Pleasure not associated with novelty or surprise; aesthetic pleasure, appreciation of inherent qualities of the object.





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Flowers, the early buds of leaf or flower from any tree, or any small creature reveal unexpected beauty and complexity when, aided by a lens, we can escape the limitations of the human size scale (*Sense of Wonder*, 1965).



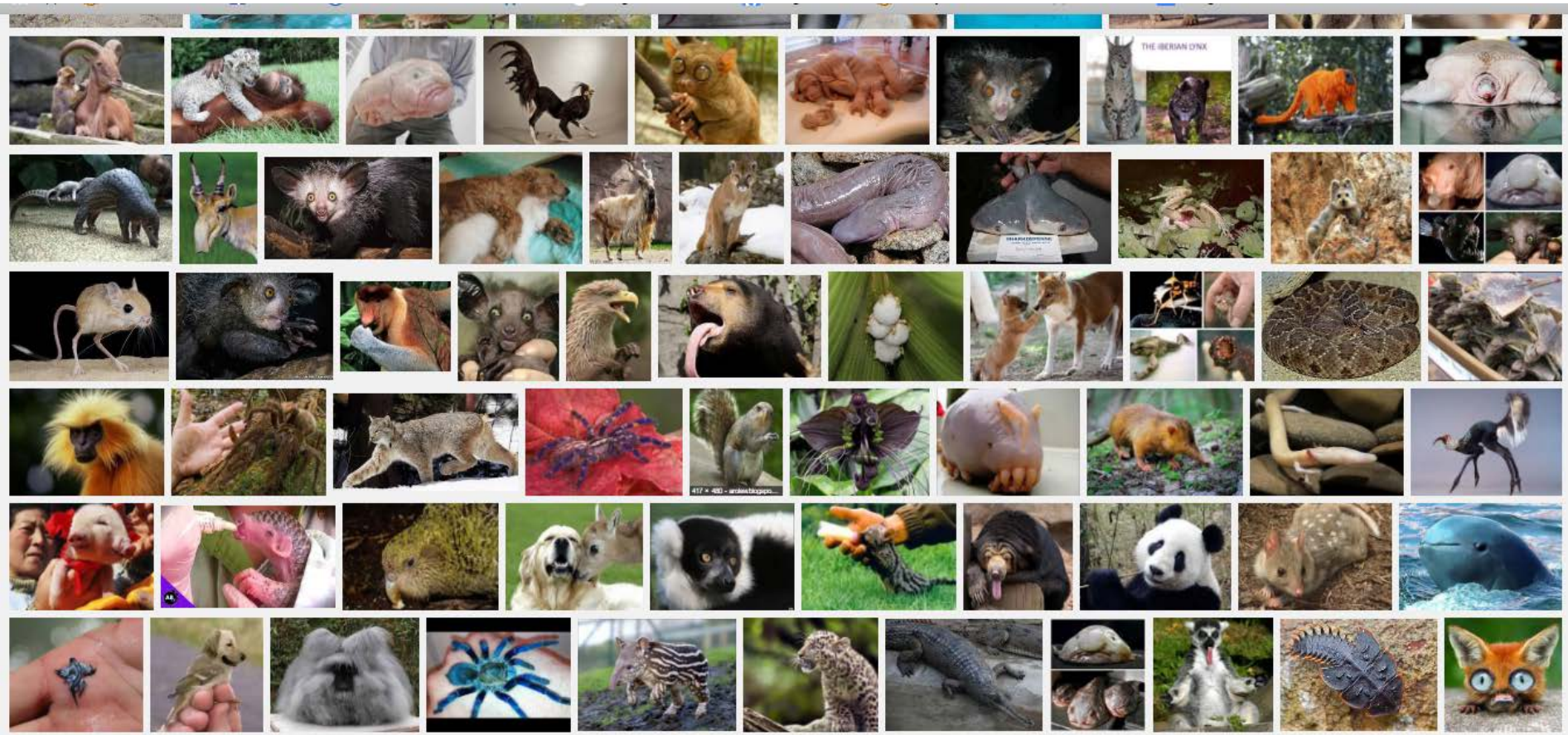


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Wonder relies on a **prior judgment** that certain objects are valuable and worth attending to.

But it also requires a willingness to be surprised by the object, to suspend judgment – **openness or receptivity**

Suggests a **pluralism** of value: there are various (possibly infinite) ways in which an object can be wonderful



Surprise Wonder

Surprise



**Curiosity
Attention**



**Knowledge
Value judgment**

Appreciative Wonder

Value judgment



**Decision to
pay attention**



**appreciation,
knowledge**

What kind of knowledge?

Surprise-Wonder leads us to ask:

“What sort of thing can that be?
What is that like?” (Adam Smith,
History of Astronomy)

Placing things in their proper
categories and discovering causal
mechanisms.



What kind of knowledge?

Appreciative Wonder...

“...does not see its objects possessively: they remain ‘other’ and un-mastered. Wonder does dwell in its objects with rapt attentiveness.... Wonder ... rests in its objects, once they are judged in some way *worthy* of wonder” (H.W. Hepburn, 1984)

Understanding the object’s way of life, how it achieves its goals, how it contributes to the life-processes of other things, etc.



The role of emotion and appreciation in Carson's wonder



“The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction. Wonder and humility are wholesome emotions, and they do not exist side by side with a lust for destruction” (*Silent Spring*, 1962, xix).

Wonder and environmental benevolence

My suggestion: Wonder plays the role in environmental benevolence that empathy plays in traditional benevolence

- **Cognitive component:**

Allows an understanding of needs and interests of natural entities

- **Affective component:**

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Empathy and Wonder

- rely on initial judgment that the object/other is worthy of our attention and consideration
- require an **openness or receptivity**, a willingness to suspend judgment and to learn something new about the object/other thus...
- ... allowing a particular kind of **understanding** of the object/other
- affective & evaluative component, which **motivates** action
 - In empathy: concern for the good of the other
 - In wonder: appreciation of the value of the object

Empathy vs Wonder

Empathy: relies on **similarity**, allows an understanding of thoughts, feelings, desires of beings who are very much like us.

Required for traditional benevolence

Implication:

Environmental benevolence (including compassion, friendship, kindness and generosity) is not an extension of traditional benevolence. It is a different set of virtues altogether.

Do the (traditional) virtues of compassion, friendship, kindness and generosity have environmental counterparts?

Wonder: made possible by **difference**, allows an understanding and appreciation of beings and things that are very different from us

Required for environmental benevolence

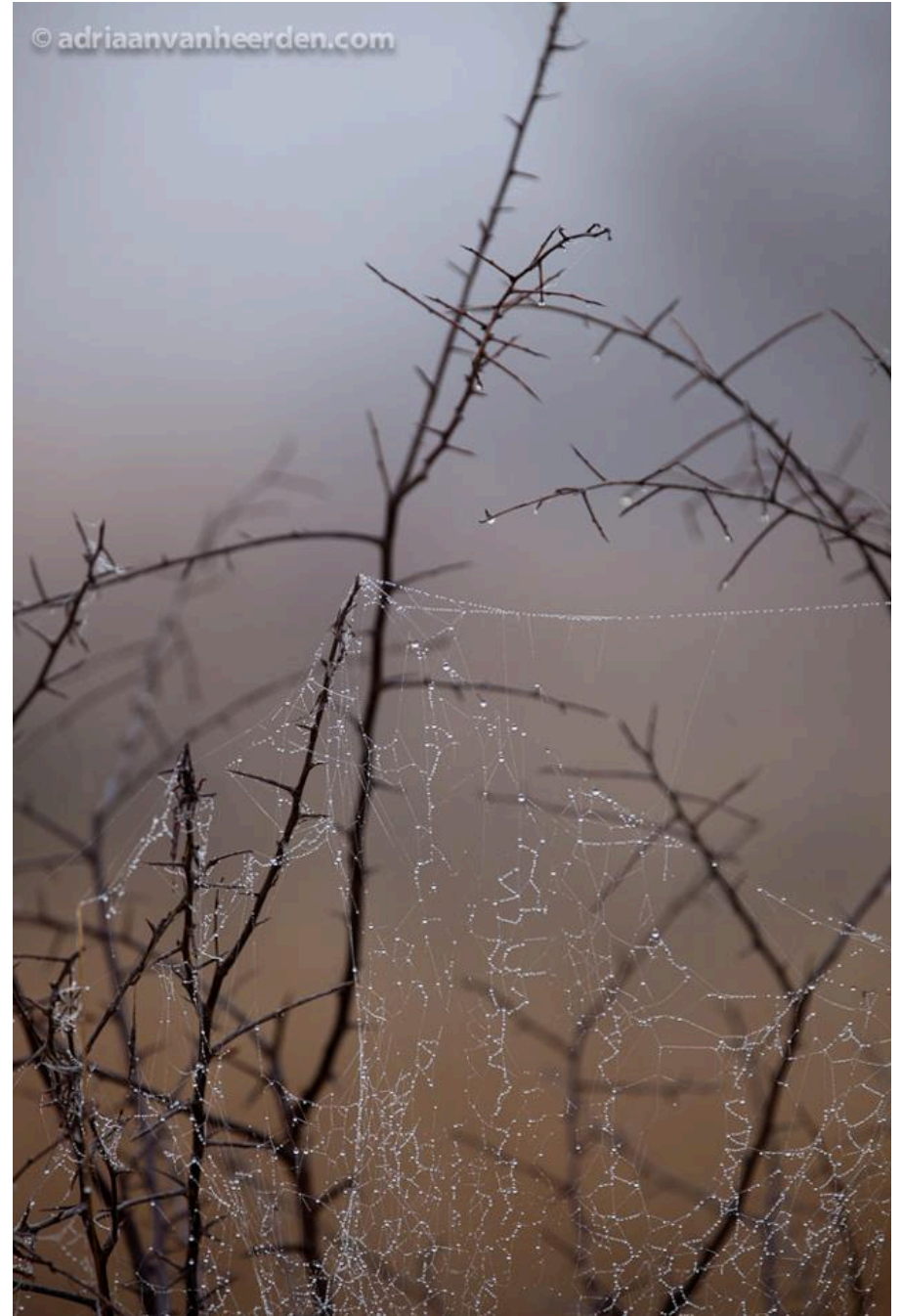
Environmental generosity

disposition to give freely to promote the good of the environment, without expecting a personal benefit



Environmental kindness :

the disposition to be careful not to damage or destroy wonderful things in nature.



Environmental 'compassion': the disposition to respond to the environmental destruction with distress and a desire to stop it.



The end

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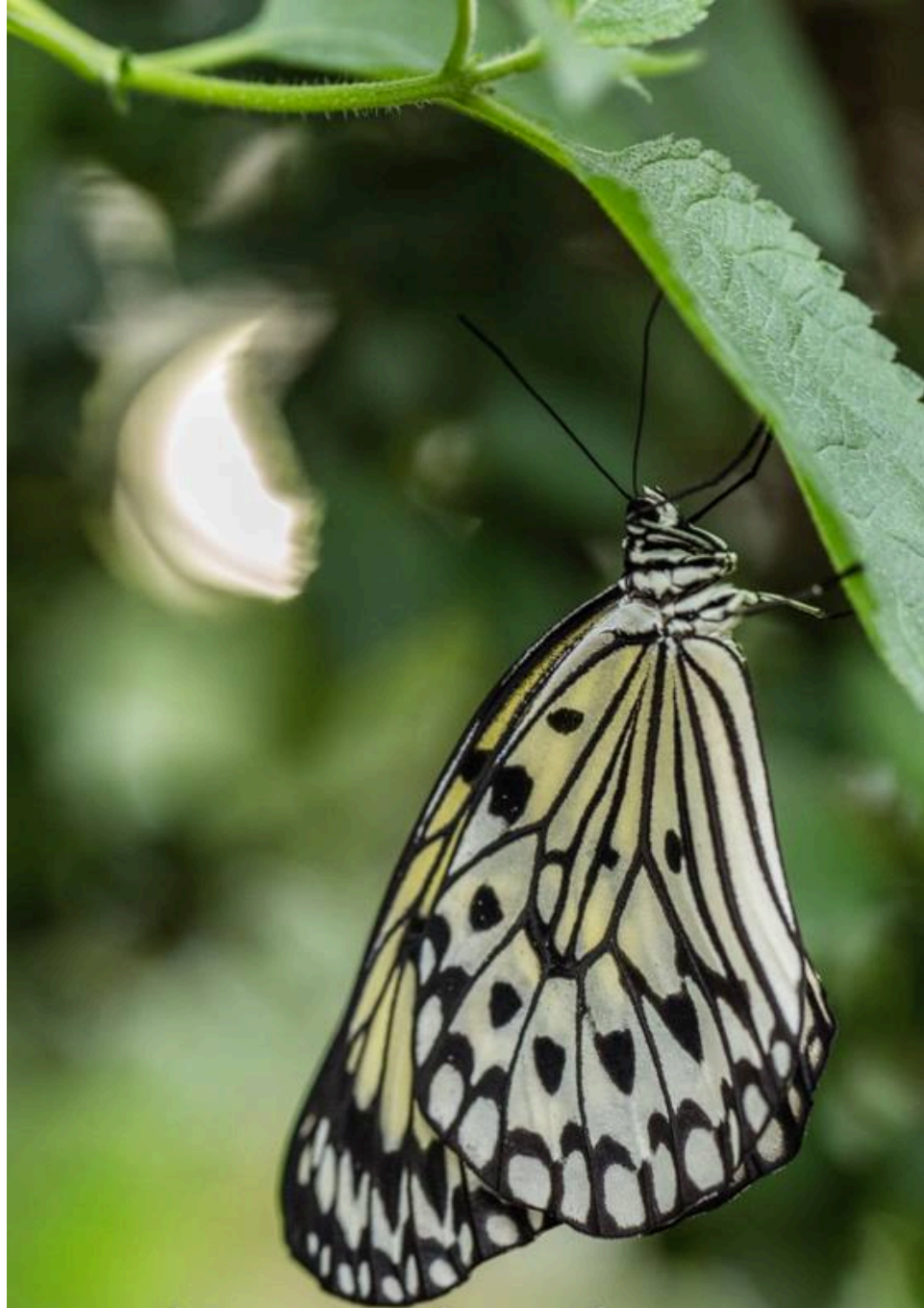
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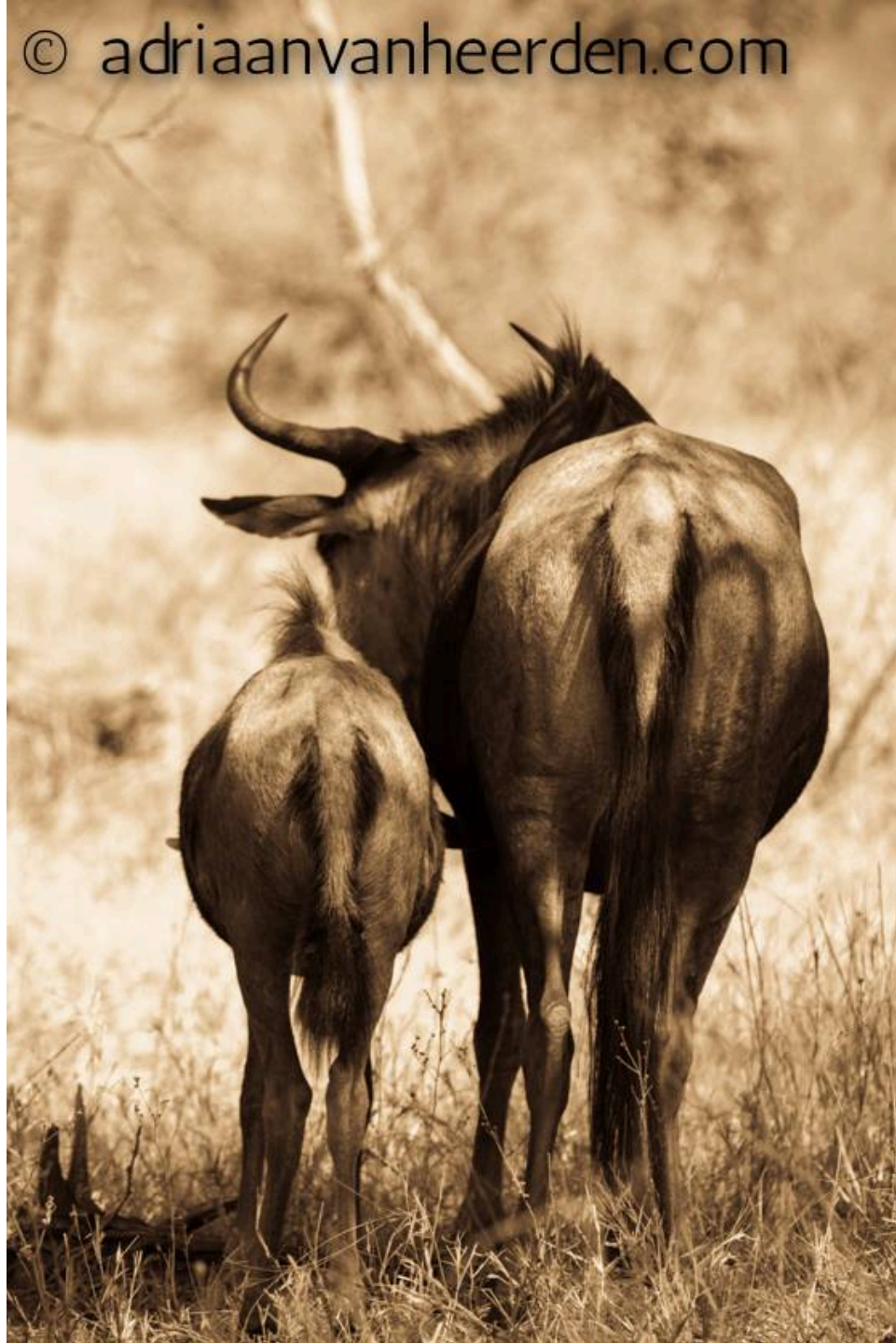
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