To prompt my own thinking ahead of this workshop’s dialogue on “multiple ways of being and knowing” in our shared “living Earth community,” I attempt in this exploratory piece to work out themes related to the following question: How might an individual today choose actions that celebrate the plain fact that each of us is a member of a species that has only sometimes, and not often lately, been a responsible member of the Earth community?

My framing of these issues focuses particularly on the importance of different forms of humility (hence “humilities” in the title). I suggest that different forms of humilities are needed because each of us is a member of human-centered communities that have, whether intentionally or not, produced diverse harms beyond the species line that many individuals within our own species and, in particular, the major institutions of modern industrialized societies have long celebrated rather than condemned.

My framing also foregrounds our obvious animality, although again I want to spur my own thinking by using the plural “animalities” since lives on this planet are unbelievably diverse and always embedded in a more-than-animal context (I’m referring here to both those nonhuman lives we name with words like “plant” and, also, “the material world” when this latter phrase is meant as a reference to parts of the universe that our host culture overwhelmingly treats as non-living and thus mere resource for our use).

My experience over the last half-century has suggested to me that no rich form of “self-actualization” by our type of living being is possible when humans claim to be separate and superior, as happens through language habits like “humans and animals.” I take human exceptionalism to be the dominant narrative of our time even though in our received wisdom traditions there are many profound formulations about recognizing the importance of both human and nonhuman “others” whenever any human individual or group seeks full self-actualization. I offer here a few forthright statements that make plain how important such wisdom is—the first is from Viktor Frankl.

[S]elf-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence.  

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1 Here’s the definition of “human exceptionalism” I used in my 2013 Animal Studies—An Introduction (p. 8): “Human exceptionalism is the claim that humans are, merely by virtue of their species membership, so qualitatively different from any and all other forms of life that humans rightfully enjoy privileges over all of the earth’s other life forms. Such exceptionalist claims are well described by [James] Rachels as “the basic idea” that “human life is regarded as sacred, or at least as having a special importance” such that “non-human life” not only does not deserve the same degree of moral protection as humans, but has “no moral standing at all” whenever human privilege is at stake.

A pair of comments from Thomas Berry takes the issue well beyond the species line.

[W]e must say that the universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects. … Indeed we cannot be truly ourselves in any adequate manner without all our companion beings throughout the earth. The larger community constitutes our greater self.\(^3\)

**Beware Bootlegging.** I also use the plural “self-actualizations” in the title and in this paper because I intentionally want to call out another issue—it does not follow that one’s own notions and/or attempts at self-actualization provide any sort of paradigm by which the self-actualization of other animals, whether human or not, can be measured. Instead, I go forward on the assumption that, in any group (and this gathering would provide a paradigmatic example of the following), there will be different forms of self-actualization—one widely successful form appears in service traditions, others in meditation traditions, and yet many others in which individual humans have found a way to stand outside the obvious penchant for self-preoccupation that individuals in our own species so often exhibit and thereby to have approached particularly fulsome forms of self-actualization.

Based on the personal and communal experiences that have led me to describe issues as I do above, and based on the challenges I tried to meet in my previous book-length projects (both single-author publications and the two edited collections *A Communion of Subjects* and *The Elephant in the Room*), I am currently finishing (hopefully) a book that will carry the title *The Animal Invitation: Science, Ethics, Religion and Law in a More-Than-Human World*. This book is an attempt to say what five different human domains—science, ethics, religion, law, and education—might look like if we took our animality seriously.

To introduce the issue a bit more as well as to give you a feeling for the book’s writing style, I include next the opening two paragraphs of the book, after which I will try to sketch out ways in which I think each of the four eminently human efforts described in the subtitle—science, ethics, religion and law—must always be living efforts (this claim, which is by no means novel in regard to any of these four domains, is related to how I discuss our own animality throughout the book). In my closing comments below, I will address both formal and informal education because this theme is a meta-topic, as it were, of the chapters addressing science, ethics, religion and law. Here are the opening two paragraphs of the forthcoming book:

> Animals invite us. This world-constituting fact is true whether we are talking about humans inviting humans, or, the focus of this book, nonhumans inviting human awareness, co-existence, appreciation, and even awe. One domain after another of our human existence, including often our daily lives, reveals the astonishing variety and depth of these invitations.

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It is both of these features—variety and depth—that are, tellingly, reflected in the human domains we know as “science,” “ethics,” “religion” and “law.” Admittedly, the great variety of approaches, which has spawned many different ways of talking and thinking about the animal invitation, reflects both deep acknowledgements and facile dismissals. Considered alone, the variety is revealing, for it reflects basic features, especially the finitudes, of our human capacities. But it is the depth evident in many humans’ recognition of the animal invitation which, though less commonly encountered than diversity, reflects best the fecundity and vivifying power of human thinking and action. As this book will show, human possibilities, narrow and broad, play out in the depth and variety of responses to the animal invitation that are evident in different human groups’ claims of identity, community, compassion, awareness, self-delusion, self-inflicted ignorance, and so much more.

In the following four sections, I raise the issue of whether our astonishing achievements in science, ethics, religion and law are (i) helpfully seen as **eminently animal achievements**, and (ii) better understood when each of these four domains is discussed primarily as an ongoing commitment of our kind of animal that **must** be understood and experienced as “living now” rather than “eternally fixed” or “absolute truth.” Correspondingly, treatment of any of these domains as irrevocably fixed defeats what can be thought of as the vivifying and enabling genius of each of these living domains as a human achievement. I suggest in the book, then, that it takes truly living, responsive forms of each of these human achievements to move individual humans in the direction of full actualization of our human animality.

**Human Science in a More-than-Human World.** That our sciences have organic features is strongly hinted in the long and constant history of changes and shifts in ideas and governing paradigms over centuries. Organic features of many sciences are also seen in the unbelievable rate of new discoveries in recent decades, for these discoveries have produced shifts in particular scientific communities’ dominant ways of thinking. I want to add, though, that since my impression (perhaps this is only the result of my “education”) remains that the western science tradition in some ways does not feature “living aspects” quite as fully as do ethics, religion and law, I will ask others at this conference if they also have such an impression.

**Working out our human ethics in a more-than-human world.** I’m only too aware that ethics has long been taught in the western intellectual tradition as a set of answers to questions like “what is the right thing to do?” and “what does it mean to be a moral and/or good person?” Having taught ethics now for 20+ years, I do not think such formulations are helpful, nor do I think these formulations reflect that ethics is, and **always needs to be, very alive indeed.** For this reason, I have come to see such views of ethics as a failure to detect the true heartbeat that takes place as we embrace, develop and seek full actualization of our human ethical abilities. A question that does prompt us to hear better the heartbeat of our ethical abilities is what I have come to call “the root question” of ethics, namely, “who are the others?” This is a short (in the sense of “abbreviated”) version of what is, in our daily lives, a more complicated version of this root question, which can be stated in a variety of ways—here’s one version that I think captures some of the animal and human genius of the abilities we call “ethics”: “Who are the others about whom I should care given that I have finite abilities and there are, as a practical matter, many other limits on my ability to care?”
The principal point in the book’s chapter on ethics is that such root questions, and of course the abilities that we use in pursuing our own answer, reflect what can only be described as *eminently animal abilities*. I do not mean to suggest with “eminently” in the prior sentence that each and every kind of animal features the high-level abilities we call ethics—my guess is that only some animals do (caring about “others” is more common, I suspect, in mammals, but there is much to suggest that some birds and a variety of non-mammals also have some feature in their life that, in effect, can be described as a version of “who are the others?” question).

In this chapter, I suggest that one *cannot* understand an ability of the ethical sort without affirming that ability’s animal origin and nature. As a segue to the following comments about humans’ spiritual/religious awarenesses, let me add that I have come, after a half-century of studying religious traditions, to think that much, if not all, of great value in our religious traditions follows from the eminently animal nature of ethics—high on my list of such interesting aspects of religious traditions I would include the role of narrative, a sense of how pervasively our worlds feature sacredness and gift in connection with real places and other living beings, and the insightful observation that relational epistemologies are crucial to each of us recognizing much of who we are.

**Working out human religion.** Here I tread on sensitive ground—I do this intentionally *and reverentially*, recognizing that there is no single definition of religion that I might employ to argue that “religion must be alive in order help humans self-actualize.” As I get older, I’m less inclined to preface the following claim with “mea culpa,” but perhaps I should as a way to underscore my theme of “humilities”—much that is called “religion” fails to help “adherents” or “believers” self-actualize (in the sense I use this term in these short comments). But our spiritual/religious domains seem to me after a half-century of immersion in studying religion to be a basis for respecting religious awareness as *truly living in every sense* that I am an animal now “living.” There are, for example, in religious individuals and communities, relevant finitudes, fragilities, organic births and deaths, and so much more.

**Working out human law.** Law (by which I mean “legal systems”, of which there are at least seven distinct major traditions and obviously many different minor variations) may also seem, like science, somewhat of a challenge to fit into the living paradigm. Yet any study of comparative law makes it obvious how fully *constructed* each individual legal system is, and such “construction” has features that are easily discerned to be “living” in the sense that I’m using that broad term in this short paper. This can be seen in these two comments by Robert Cover.

> To live in a legal world requires that one know not only the precepts, but also their connections to possible and plausible states of affairs.⁴

> Law is the projection of an imagined future upon reality.⁵

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The need for stability in legal systems, especially as they are part of complex societies, creates features and pressures that tend to make legal systems “conservative,” “predictable,” and subject to forces that easily and often have made enactment and enforcement of “law” the prerogative of reactionary forces. A kind of “reaction” that we may not see easily is apparent in Cicero’s epigrammatic comment that “we are all, in the end, slaves of the law that we might be free.”

The “we” here is, of course, the human group alone, and this claim is made despite the recurring fact that human groups now use, and seemingly forever have used, “law” (developed legal systems) to subordinate not only nonhuman animals and the more-than-human Earth, but also marginalized, politically powerless human groups.

Animal law today challenges such a narrow construction of law, but suffice it to say that public policy circles today remain as autistic as ever on the “animal question.” There are changes afoot today by which the living features of law can be seen, but since characteristically “the political trumps the legal,” public policy today remains only a shell of its possibilities for the more-than-human world.

**Some final comments on human education.** The education theme is, as noted above, a meta-theme in the book—perhaps this is also true of the publications by members of this group. In my 2013 *Animal Studies—An Introduction*, I worked with both formal and informal education, both of which I think are summed up by the observation of the English philosopher Stephen Clark: “one's ethical, as well as one's ontological framework is determined by what entities one is prepared to notice or take seriously….“ I entered the academic world because, for me, it is a place a daring, and so much so that at its best, the academic world fosters critical thinking that allows for self-criticism such as Theodore Roszak’s “But then let us admit that the academy has very rarely been a place of daring.” David Orr adds another dimension to this discussion that takes the issue across the species line—“The truth is that without significant precautions, education can equip people merely to be more effective vandals of the earth.”

One way in which our society has been equipping “educated humans” to be “effective vandals” (or, in Aldo Leopold’s phrasing, “conqueror of the land-community” rather than *plain member and citizen of it*) is division of humans from other animals. This framing defeats us even as it prompts ignorance that leads to great harms to other animals and their local communities. Teachers and students who insist on language that foregrounds a “human/animal dualism” seem to me to have less chance, often none at all, of seeing themselves well or counseling other humans in ways that lead to greater prospects of self-actualization. Why do I suggest this? Because our evident mammality, primatehood, and ape-ness are radically (that is, at the root) denied by the dualism.

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6 There is an important argument that indigenous legal systems are not well described by my generalizations here.
7 The source is “The Speech of M. T. Cicero in Defence of Aulus Cluentius Habitus, which can be found at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/ (see paragraph LIII, paragraph 146).
A key feature of our local formal education—the two-part division of “higher education” into the sciences, on the one hand, and the “arts and humanities,” on the other—continues to foster the notion that human possibilities are truly paradigmatic for. I think this is one reason that the “sciences” and “the arts and humanities” are, upon examination, run in ways that benefit only some humans, not all. In effect, the two-part university has features that legitimize human exceptionalism in a more-than-human world—this is one way that it equips us to be effective vandals of our shared world. But there is another way as well that education vandalizes, namely, the forms of formal education where the ideology “all humans matter” masks harms to many human animals as well. Thus, in the book, I suggest that teaching about science, ethics, religion and law in virtually all mainline institutions today present a face of human-exceptionalism that goes beyond harms to nonhumans and their communities because, ironically, formal education in practice continues to holds in place the privilege of only some humans.

A Near-Term Task. I have come to think of our personal and social tasks as finding ways to re-assert our animality even though these fundamental features of our lives are hidden in plain sight, as it were. These animal abilities are, I suggest, the very condition of our (i) doing science fully and well, (ii) pursuing living forms of ethics, (iii) fostering diverse opportunities for spiritual and religious awareness that are truly alive and free, and (iv) creating legal systems that make create for ourselves and project a future of responsible membership in the larger community.

A Longer-Term Task. My sense that we can do such work by returning to a full, gracious acknowledgment of our own animality needs, I think, to be supplemented by affirmations of the fact that “our larger community” includes more than animals alone—insights about the plant world are cascading into our awareness again by virtue of creative scientific work, and our connection to the whole earth is, of course, something that many small-scale cultures have long known. I think the senses of “gift” and “community” found in writers such as Robin Wall Kimmerer, Richard Wagamese, and Linda Hogan reveal that our human forebears knew a great deal about setting the stage for the emergence of a larger community and forms of self-transcendence that such a community offers and thereby helps make our own self-actualization possible and fuller.

Let me end on notes that are intentionally provocative and personal—I have come to think of such denials as cowardice in the face of reality. I am an animal, and so are members of my human community. I love them not in spite of their animality, but because of their animality. And I have come to recognize that I cannot “know myself,” nor it seems to me can any human come to know their own life possibilities well, without coming to terms with the plain fact that we are now and have always been and will always be animals. I think by acknowledging our animality we can open up key possibilities for self-actualization. This is why the current book attempts to explore our scientific, ethical, religious and social sensibilities that permit forms of life and a rule of law that are fair to all members of our extended, larger community.