Chapter 5 describes an African ethical system that features non-dualistic thinking, relational social reality, and communitarian bioethics and theories of justice. The concluding chapter reiterates the centrality of Tangwa's studies as a guide to orchestrating an integral approach to enriching the bioethical principlism of Beauchamp and Childress with decolonized articulations of African moral thought. *The Critique* puts two comprehensively distinctive ways of thinking about bioethics on equal footing for dialogue in pursuit of an authentically global bioethics. This ultimate goal of a global bioethics is achieved by adding a fifth life principle of the sacred interconnectedness of all creation. Buyondo argues for a more comprehensive and holistic normative sense of solidarity extending ethically to all systems of life, institutions and nations, biodiversity, and ecology. This platform offers a firm foothold for addressing the morally challenging episodes and patterns of exploitation that historically characterized relations between Africa and the West.

There are not many books that address bioethical principlism from an African perspective, but a recently published text offers an interesting comparison and informative insights into Buyondo's work: *Womanist Bioethics: Social Justice, Spirituality, and Black Women's Health* (2025) by Wylin D. Wilson, an African American bioethicist. Her study of bioethics from the perspective of Black women in the U.S., especially in the rural South, begins with the experience and harm of slavery. The Black church is a key context for her analysis of Black women's lives and beliefs. Buyondo's study makes no reference to African American thought, culture, or religion with respect to bioethics; Wilson makes no reference to African thought, culture, or history in hers. What the two have in common is the critique of the inadequacy of the bioethical principles set forth by Beauchamp and Childress in the context of Black existence. Yet, their analytical approaches are distinctive: Buyondo grants equal footing to Western and African approaches to bioethics as a mutually enriching dialogue, whereas Wilson's project is a focused augmentation of bioethics with womanist (or Black feminist) principles. In both cases, their analyses are centered on Black communal life and concerned with Black suffering, especially experienced as a consequence of bioethical indifference to the violation of Black personhood and the vulnerabilities of Black people in the delivery of healthcare.

Buyondo provides an extensive bibliography, but there is no index. His text would have benefitted from more careful editing for grammar and syntax in order to make his rather lengthy sentences more readable. The title of the book as printed on the title and copyright pages is *The Critique of Bioethical Principlism in Contrast to a Black African Approach to Bioethics*. However, a different version of the title appears on the book's cover: *The Critique of Bioethical Principlism in Contrast to an African Approach to Bioethics*. The word "Black" is omitted; this is a serious inconsistency that needs to be corrected one way or the other.

Although Buyondo's training in Catholic moral theology is evident in an occasional footnote or sentence in the book citing Catholic theologians, Christian faith is not a major theme in his critique of bioethical principlism, nor does his comprehensive treatment of African moral thought, beliefs, and bioethical practices seem to be informed by any investment in Christian faith or tradition. However, this text would be of great interest to readers who seek deeper appreciation of the influence of culture on the relevance of bioethical principles and practices.

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Biology

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PLAYING POSSUM: How Animals Understand Death by Susana Monsó. Princeton University Press, 2024 (English Translation). 264 pages including index. Hardcover; $19.94. ISBN: 9780691260761.

Modern, and particularly Western, humanity seems to regard death and mortality with deep ambivalence. On the one hand, there is the tendency to excessively dwell on it, marked by an obsession for safety and frenetically risk-proofing life as much as possible. On the other hand, both human and nonhuman death is sanitized, with human mortality a near-taboo to even ponder. In theological scholarship, there is renewed interest, and several new titles published, in what is often termed the "Problem of Animal Suffering," as well as philosophical and psychological interest in the cognitive processes of animals. Susana Monsó, philosopher and associate professor at National Distance Education University (UNED) in Madrid, has provided new insights that bridge these issues with her recent book on the capacity of animals to understand death. Written for a general audience, it is engaging, mostly avoids excessively technical language, uses endnotes to improve readability, and is marked by humor, and clear compassion and empathy for the animal subjects she addresses. Each chapter begins with a narrative about the approach to death of specific animal species that frame her subsequent argument.

Monsó's intention, as a philosopher, is to contribute to the field of comparative thanatology—the study of animals' relation to death—by framing this book within "a relatively young branch of philosophy known as the *philosophy of animal minds*" (p. 4). She argues that prior

scholarship that largely denies the capacity of animals to understand death is based on anthropocentric biases excessively focused on grief, and she uses empirical evidence that many animals, at varying levels, *do* possess an understanding of death.

The author compares the responses to death in animals as either *stereotypical* (innate, automatic, rigid, linked to concrete sensory stimuli) or *cognitive* (learned, under cognitive control, flexible, not linked to concrete sensory stimuli); these responses can vary among individuals. The former is widespread in nature, such as in ants who carry their dead outside the colony. The latter is Monsó's principal interest. She (correctly, I think) negatively critiques the anecdotal nature of published studies that often lack experimental controls and base their conclusions on a single animal sample, because "the anecdotal method is the one that most favors anthropomorphism" (p. 44). The press accounts, in the author's narrative of a whale who was said to "grieve" the loss of her dead calf while carrying its corpse for seventeen days, also illustrate this. Monsó contends that anthropomorphism can err both in an anthropocentric view that would seek to diminish the cognitive capacity of animals, or in the opposite view, one that would deny that any human-typical characteristics can be found in animals at all.

Monsó is also critical of the intellectual error that adopts the "human experience as the gold standard against which we compare all animal behavior around death" (p. 51). That an animal does not conceive of death as a human would, does not mean that they lack a cognizance of death. Rather, many animals can intellectually understand *nonfunctionality* and *irreversibility* as the "minimal concept of death" (p. 76). And, as mentioned before, an anthropocentric focus on *grief* in animals' understanding of death, Monsó argues, diminishes the genuine role of animal emotions in how they process death, causing us to misinterpret their varied, unique responses.

A concept of death in nature, according to Monsó, is a "holy trinity" of "three fundamental causal factors: COGNITION, EXPERIENCE, and EMOTION" (p. 109). Interestingly, she finds that the more "social" animals, who tend to have higher levels of all three, are also K-strategists, species who tend to have few offspring that require investment of huge amounts of parental care to reach maturity. This seems to suggest that the "costly" impact of an offspring's death makes a cognitive understanding of it an evolutionary benefit to species survival. That said, not all social animals meet the requirements of the "holy trinity," such as insects that are highly social but cognitively simple. Nor do some non-social species, including large predators that are generally solitary, fail to meet these requirements. It serves as an interesting rubric to view how animals understand death, however.

Most readers will be fascinated by the penultimate chapter on violence in the animal kingdom as a force for how animals understand death, a topic that has previously been given scant academic attention. The discussion of predation is especially interesting. Predators understand that their killed prey are dead, and, in fact, view this death with great *joy*, not as a loss, but a gain, an emotion as powerful as that of the loss of a mother's young. Even animals who "play" with their prey, like cats, cognitively know when death occurs and what they did to accomplish it. Certainly, repeated hunts (and failures to kill prey) provide the experience to verify death. This experience, along with emotion and cognition, fulfills the three components of the "holy trinity."

Here I found it easy to think of biblical allusions to God's delight in his provision of prey for his created animals and in the power and "wildness" of behemoth and leviathan in the *Yahweh* speech to the biblical Job. Humans, of course, are a predatory species, so, at the risk of reverse-anthropomorphism, I do wonder if the enjoyment of many humans in hunting and fishing is less a reflection of a loss of prelapsarian kindness than a connection we share with many animals, and one that has led to the continuation of our own species.

Monsó's work will appeal to those interested in ethology, and philosophers will like the consistency of her philosophical arguments. Science-oriented readers will appreciate her significant use of empirical evidence to reach conclusions. Monsó is to be applauded for the breadth of animal species she uses to illustrate her points, beyond primates and familiar pet animals to include, for example, whales and the opossum referenced in the title.

Christian readers may have a mixed response to this work, based on some of the author's concluding comments. Monsó makes scant mention of theological implications, except as they relate to anthropomorphism; in fairness, this was her intent. Those interested in theological anthropology will have some misgivings about her conclusions related to human death. Monsó correctly asserts that "we are probably the only animal with a notion of the inevitability and unpredictability of death" (p. 208) and "the only animal with complex death-related rituals and symbolic representations of death" (p. 207). But then she concludes, regarding the concept of death, "We're not a unique species. We're just another animal" (p. 210). In fact, despite a recognition that humans have underestimated the capacity for animals to understand death, our uniquely human conceptions of death, including the possibility of a continued existence in eternity, are *inherently* different from animals. The Resurrection and the view of death as a "defeated enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26) are foundational to Christianity,

and the *imago Dei* is a distinctive that makes human processing of death more than that of "another animal."

That said, I suspect the author's intent is to broaden the reader's moral universe in respect and empathy for the animals who provide us food, labor, clothing, and companionship, and for all the animals who populate our natural environment. To this end, Monsó adds a valuable, entertaining, and elegant addition to the field of comparative thanatology. For a Christian, it does not threaten the uniquely human understanding of death to know that many animals also have their own understanding, often rather sophisticated. Instead, it provides the opportunity for even greater wonder and praise toward our Creator, in which the intricacy shown in "the work of His hands" (Ps. 111:7) calls us to deeper care and compassion for the fauna we are called to steward.

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THE SEXUAL EVOLUTION: How 500 Million Years of Sex, Gender, and Mating Shape Modern Relationships by Nathan H. Lents. Mariner Books, 2025. 336 pages. Hardcover; $32.00. ISBN: 9780063375444.

Biologist Nathan Lents's newest book on the sex lives of animals, *The Sexual Evolution*, is neither written from a Christian perspective nor written to a Christian audience. Nevertheless, this book offers a convicting call for Christians to join a rapidly growing boundary-crossing conversation: *What does nature reveal about morality?*

Lents is an accomplished scientist and thoughtful writer who recognizes the unsteady ground on which he treads: "Believe it or not, this book is not about values; it is about biology" (p. 11). However, I don't believe it. There are multitudes of fascinating topics in biology worth writing about, yet Lents has chosen a topic that inevitably flows from biology to ethics. Lents's primary message can be summarized in his repeated *is-ought* phrase: "Nature loves diversity. We should too" (pp. 40, 233). By placing human sexual behavior in an evolutionary context of living things, vertebrates, mammals, primates, and great apes, Lents proposes that we ought to accept a more inclusive concept of human sexual ethics, arguing for the moral equivalence of heterosexual and homosexual behavior, sex within marriage and sex without, and sex with one person and sex with many. Lents is, in his words, "forcefully pulling up a chair" (p. 4) for biology to join the discourse on human sexual ethics. In my opinion, this important interdisciplinary conversation is long overdue.

As biologists, Lents and I agree on many things in general. Sex is a biological category, not a social one. Lents helpfully uses the term "gametic sex" to refer to the sperm and egg producers of life and "biological sex" to mean the other aspects of reproductive biology beyond simply what gametes one makes (things such as internal and external anatomy, hormones, and hormone receptors). And while sex is based in biology, gender—how one chooses to present their sexual identity to the world—is a social construct. Too often Christians treat the words "sex" and "gender" as synonyms, which is neither linguistically accurate nor helpful when trying to understand the complexities of human sexuality. I also support Lents's compassion for marginalized people, specifically those with disorders of sex development, people whose anatomy does not easily fit into rigid categories of "male" and "female" and whose existence and intrinsic value ought to be affirmed more often in religious conversations about sexual ethics.

Ultimately, Lents provides a well-evidenced argument that (1) homosexual behavior is *natural* (i.e., found throughout the animal kingdom among normal populations), (2) homosexual behavior is *adaptive*, meaning it persists in animals because it provides some biological benefit, and (3) sexual behaviors are about far more than reproduction—animals have sex to strengthen social bonds, establish hierarchies, and just because it feels good. Each of these points is convincingly made and each one counters a common myth believed by many Christian thinkers. We have been caught relying on outdated and incorrect scientific facts when we argue that same-sex behavior *et cetera* is wrong *because* it is unnatural or maladaptive.

Lents is careful to describe animal behavior according to our best current understanding. However, in one case, he gets the facts wrong—and wrong in a way that reveals how dangerous his project can be if his logic and arguments are correct. In his exploration of sexual monogamy, Lents calls our attention to the many *socially* monogamous species that are *sexually* promiscuous. In doing so, he is making the implicit point that fidelity and promiscuity are morally equivalent because both are natural and adaptive. One of his examples is the jackdaw, a highly intelligent bird that forms lifelong pair bonds between mates. Lents suggests that pair-bonded females *willingly* seek out extra-pair copulations with neighboring males. However, according to the article Lents himself cites, this is not what happens.[1] Male jackdaws watch the nests of their neighbors and when the resident male leaves, they will invade and attempt to copulate with the vulnerable female. Importantly, the female *resists* the interloper. Their violent struggle can result in significant injuries to the female and sometimes the destruction of her eggs.[2] Studying animal behavior reveals the disturbing biological fact that pursuing *sex through violence* is also natural and adaptive. Nature loves diversity. *We should too?*