

Introducing Animals As Living, Breathing, Thinking, Feeling

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When I was young my mind was littered with fascinating infatuations with animals. From laughing along with talking pets in movies to observing quarreling squirrels from my bedroom window, I've always longed to obtain a closer, more intimate perspective of the many wondrous animal worlds. My obsession with films like *Homeward Bound* and *Air Bud* wasn't just an obsession with anthropomorphized creatures but also an engaging opportunity to feed my desire to have relationships with nonhuman animals. I remember imagining the thoughts of blue jays that would eat out of my mother's bird feeder in the mornings. I remember wondering if my friend's dachshund had a secret love affair with the pug across the canyon. But many people would say these childhood thoughts are dangerous. They would mark my thinking as naive anthropomorphism that leads to false conclusions and oversimplifications. But is this such a harmful ambition—to become more acquainted with my animal friends? Although (as argued by several scholars and scientists) there are indeed dangers in the excessive use of anthropomorphism, there are more dangers in the complete failure to recognize the concept as having any measure of legitimacy. When used properly, anthropomorphic thinking can serve as an important introduction to the animal-to-animal relationships humans partake in every day and help develop practices of kind treatment to animals.

Anthropomorphism is defined as the attribution of human qualities to nonhuman things. In context of most discussions about anthropomorphism, these so-called human traits usually fall

under the umbrellas of reason and intent. The act of making reasonable decisions in complex situations and the act of doing something out of a specific intent such as guilt, revenge, love, etc., are acts generally ascribed to humans. Whether these behaviors strictly belong to the human species is an entirely separate discussion. The fact is that in modern day society, we frequently see the attribution of these traits to nonhuman animals.

There are a number of scholars who oppose the varied uses of anthropomorphism in our everyday culture. In the chapter “Neoteny in American Perceptions of Animals” of *Perceptions of Animals in American Culture*, Elizabeth Lawrence illustrates the dangers of a type of anthropomorphism called neoteny. Lawrence defines neoteny as “the retention of youthful traits into adulthood”(57). Throughout her piece she uses examples of Disney characters like Mickey Mouse and Bambi the deer to testify that there is a massive neotenization of animals in the media. Her considerations of this issue lead her to a negative conclusion: “Among the explanations for why we in Western culture, and particularly in contemporary American society, neotenized our animals as we do is our need to *gain a sense control* over them. As docile and playful ‘children,’ they may be relegated to a separate category, without full citizenship in our world”(Lawrence 70). Although an unfortunate idea to admit, this conclusion is a true and important one. No one wants to admit to an inherently species-centric attitude towards animals and crave to control them, but Lawrence’s observation is one to be considered. While I agree with the fact that humans portray animals as children as a way to maintain themselves on top of an imaginary species hierarchy, I do not believe it’s that simple.

Neoteny of animals in popular culture also serves as a way for children to easily relate to nonhuman beings. It is an opportunity for children to see animals as accessible, and not merely as wild, savage creatures ravaging the rainforest for their prey. When I was a child, this form of

anthropomorphism sparked my interest to learn more about them. I clearly remember the day I first saw *Air Bud* (a film in which a boy becomes best friends with a furry golden retriever who has a keen ability to play basketball), I ran over to my neighbor's house and started making conversation with his German shepherd. I wanted my own Air Bud. I longed for a dog friend whom I could trust. The movie glamorized a child's friendship with his nonhuman pal, which inspired me to make connections with the animals in my own life. After being exposed to these sorts of films, my desire to make more animal friends only grew stronger.

In hindsight, it's obvious that neoteny and anthropomorphism triggered my ambitions to have relationships with animals. Without it I do not believe I would have had any interest in understanding animals at all. If all I knew about animals was encyclopedic information on their habitats and mating rituals—the kind of information that dangerously lacks any sort of healthy anthropomorphism—I doubt I would have wanted to create bonds with these seemingly strange creatures. Ultimately, I would not give them the amount of respect I give them today. It's easier for a human, especially a child, to empathize with someone that is similar to her. When a child sees the sophisticated Little Bear on television packing finger sandwiches and lemonade in a picnic basket and bathing happily in the sun with his multi-species friends, and she later sees a brown bear at a local zoo, she is inclined to take an interest in the animal since she has seen a depiction of it in a different form. Although giving children the idea that bears talk, laugh and drink tea on plaid red picnic blankets is dangerous in terms of false information (whereby certain misconceptions could potentially lead to someone getting mauled by a bear), it is beneficial in that it gives kids an initiative to want to learn about animals. In the future, after being inspired to learn about animals, the people who were once children fascinated with imaginary talking

creatures will have gained a more developed, mature understanding of animals from the exploration and research they have done.

While I see neoteny as a positive doorway into different animal realms, Lawrence sees it as posing multiple threats to the animals. She argues that “in popularizing an image of big-headed, pop-eyed, green-vested, fat-bellied frogs frittering away their time, for example, the obvious message is that we do not take the species seriously. It may follow that we can more easily continue to drain their swamp habitats without compunction, for we have no sense of responsibility toward their domain as we do toward our own”(71). Here, Lawrence emphasizes the fact that the neotenization of animals leads us to care less about them, and eventually exploit them. I could not see it any more differently. I believe that by distorting the images of animals to look similarly to human children, we develop sympathy for them early on. We are able to connect with them easier. This recognized connection and sympathy often develops into empathy for how our society treats animals and encourages us to treat them kindly.

Empathy for nonhuman beings is a significant dynamic in using anthropomorphism in a constructive way. Many proponents of anthropomorphic thinking stress the importance of empathizing with animals without jumping into behavioral assumptions. Randall Lockwood provides a definition of this empathetic approach in his chapter “Anthropomorphism Is Not a Four-letter Word” in *Perceptions of Animals In American Culture*. He calls it “*applied anthropomorphism*: the use of our own personal perspective on what it’s like to be a living being to suggest ideas about what it is like to be some other being of either our own or some other species”(49). This important concept that Lockwood presents is the key factor when considering the appropriateness of anthropomorphism. Although we will never fully know what it is like to be someone else, the closest approximation we can achieve can come from the use of an

empathetic projection (Lockwood 49). On multiple occasions in my life, I have witnessed pets being scolded for doing something “troublesome,” such as getting into the trash, disposing of bodily waste on the living room carpet, etc. During these scoldings, where often times a human’s finger was waved in the pet’s face along with harsh-sounding “no’s!” and “bad boy’s!” I imagined what the pet was feeling by drawing from my experiences of being scolded by someone for doing troublesome things. When I got in trouble for calling my brother a mean word or sneaking Oreos before dinner, I felt embarrassed and ashamed. This experience was the closest thing I could compare to how the pet was feeling in a similar situation. Scientific conclusions cannot necessarily be drawn from these empathetic projections, but it is certainly a starting ground for scientific inquiry.

Even with Lockwood’s concept of applied anthropomorphism, there are those who still deny its legitimacy entirely. Frans de Waal responds to this denial of anthropomorphism in his book *The Ape and the Sushi Master: Cultural Reflections by a Primatologist*. In the chapter, “The Whole Animal: Childhood Talismans and Excessive Fear of Anthropomorphism,” he coins the term “anthropodenial,” which is “the priori rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals when in fact they may exist. Those who are in anthropodenial try to build a brick wall between themselves and other animals”(69). De Waal criticizes those who blatantly ignore the fact that anthropomorphism can be used as a beneficial scientific tool. He claims that those in anthropodenial take the hazardous risk of evading important information due to their resistance in simply asking if there are similarities between human behavior and animal behavior. It’s dangerous for us to follow our misplaced sense of narcissistic species supremacy because it creates a fear to explore possible similarities. If an ape has lost its appetite due to the loss of a relative, but a scientist rules out the possibility of the ape being able to grieve because it

“wreaks of anthropomorphic thinking,” the scientist will not be able to help the animal nor will he be able to draw accurate observations. As emphasized by Jeffrey Masson in his book, *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals*, “to conclude without study that [the animal] has no feelings or cannot feel is to proceed on a prejudice, an unscientific bias, in the name of science”(xix). By ruling out anthropomorphism, we rule out an enormous amount of inquiry, stifling the ability to apprehend potentially significant information leading to coherent understanding of animals (de Waal 66).

Not only in this anthropodenial do we deprive ourselves to recognizing and appreciating the animal for its whole self (de Waal), we also neglect realizing that the animal indeed is a living being—like ourselves. Those in anthropodenial make arguments that tend to lead towards conclusions that animals have no commonalities with humans, which then inevitably creates the assumption that we should not necessarily respect those creatures as we would a person, because they are not people. What is overlooked in several interpretations that animals are different from ourselves, is the fact that animals have feelings. Most people who oppose anthropomorphism do a poor job of emphasizing this statement’s truth. This all is extremely dangerous because it refuses to fully acknowledge the fact that whether humanlike or not, animals are living beings who suffer and feel, as do we. This commonality alone should be enough to dedicate proper treatment to nonhumans.

The disregard of existing similarities, I believe, leads us to treat animals exploitatively. Animals and humans are different—there is no doubt about it. But more important to recognize are our commonalities. There is a serious difference in reaction when a dandelion is plucked from the moist earth and when a cow is slit down the throat in an assembly line. The dandelion’s reaction is, well, nonexistent. The cow’s reaction is similar to how a human would react in the

same situation. In anthropodenial, we forget that animals do employ suffering and pain, as do we. An essential point must be stressed in this case that “animals feel anger, fear, love, joy, shame, compassion, and loneliness to a degree that you will not find outside the pages of fiction or fable”(Masson xxiii). Although we do not know to what extent their suffering is similar or different to our own, we know it exists. In anthropodenial, we forget that whatever the intent (or lack there of) an animal has, one thing is true: they are living, breathing, thinking, feeling. They are beings—as are we.

Anthropomorphism is not just a cheap projection of so-called human emotions upon nonhuman animals, but it is a helpful introduction to the relationships between us and other beings. When I was a young kid, my fascination with neotenized animals in the media inspired me to formulate compassionate relationships with animals. These relationships helped me empathize with nonhumans and strive to learn more about them—who they really are, aside from their basketball-playing, tea-drinking counterparts. This empathic approach of applied anthropomorphism (Lockwood) helped me to embrace constructive forms of anthropomorphism and reject anthropodenial (de Waal), a state that has led many people into ignoring obvious similarities between us and other animals. By accepting and using applied anthropomorphism, I have been able to recognize the maltreatments of animals in our society and have made major lifestyle decisions to benefit the best interests of animals. Anthropomorphism has been constructive to me (and surely to many other people) and to the animals themselves in this fashion. Although arguments against anthropomorphism are important and worth reflection, their complexities tend to eliminate a common sense principle: we are all animals, and no matter our differences, we all deserve to be treated with respect.

Works Cited

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