Reviews


Introduction

The multitude of issues surrounding anthropomorphism in contemporary human-nonhuman animal relationships is set out beautifully in the final two essays of Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman’s collection. In the penultimate essay, Mitman traces a history of the changes in the methods of studying the elephant population of East Africa. The shift that Mitman outlines is from Richard Laws’ quantitative analysis undertaken from the sky—which allowed for a head count but did not acknowledge the nature of the relationships between individual animals—to Iain Douglas-Hamilton’s study of elephant communities, which required a more close-up examination of how individual animals related to each other in their social groupings. Mitman traces how the differences between these analytical models affected conservation—with Douglas-Hamilton individualizing the elephants (he gave them “human” names), his foregrounding of “personality and emotion,” and his using close-up photographs of individuals (p. 183) taken as a step toward an acknowledgment by researchers of the “moral standing and rights of elephants” (p. 188). Anthropomorphism in this scenario can work to help the animals survive in that it creates closer bonds between us and them; indeed, in recognizing that elephants have a social life, the concept of us and them begins to break down altogether.

A Collection of Essays

However, such recognition of the lack of difference between humans and animals—what we term anthropomorphism—also creates dangers for the animals, and this is the focus of film-maker Sarita Seigel’s essay, the last in the collection. Siegel takes us through the production process of her film, The Disenchanted Forest, which is about the rehabilitation of formerly captive orangutans in Borneo. Just as Mitman’s essay reveals two versions of elephant research, so Siegel describes her filming at two kinds of rehabilitation centers. In Camp Leakey, a traditional site, the animals interact with tourists all day. Siegel notes, “it was immediately clear that allowing former captives to continue living acculturated human lives did not provide a useful remedy for orangutans whose lives had been severely disabled...”
by captivity” (p. 204). These animals are too human—they remain the figures of our anthropomorphic imaginations. In the second center at which Siegel films, Wanariset Orangutan Reintroduction Project, the animals are “retaught” to be orangutans through a process that recognizes the human-like suffering these animals have undergone. The animals are taught to eat leaves and—in preparation for their eventual release into the protected forest—which leaves they can eat.

What Siegel traces in her discussion are the dangers and benefits of anthropomorphism. Clearly, it is our perception of the orangutans’ human-like qualities that has created these captive animals in the first place: It is why people want to remove the animals from their own environment and take them into human ones. However, returning the animals to the wild does not simply mean an end to such humanization: Paradoxically, it might seem, Siegel shows that, in retrieving their animal natures, what is also revealed is the human-ness of these animals. They have suffered as human children might suffer if forcibly removed from their mother; they are taught to be animal much as we might see human children’s education as having a crucial role in their learning to be human. In this scenario, anthropomorphism is simultaneously a danger to the orangutans and part of what might help to save them. Siegel recognizes that, as a film-maker, anthropomorphizing the animals helps her in telling (and selling) her story, a story which might in turn raise awareness of the animals’ plight.

In just these two chapters, then, anthropomorphism individualizes the animals, thus leaving room for their “rights” to be asserted in ways that are denied by quantitative surveys; it creates a sense in which they are us, which can work to their benefit, but can also take away their animal difference; it allows stories to be told about these animals that we might recognize and engage with; it reminds us that they can suffer like us. Dominion, the imagination, morality, and storytelling all meet up in anthropomorphism.

Other essays in Daston and Mitman’s important collection take us through different ways of thinking about anthropomorphism. Some are historical. Wendy Doniger uses Indian myths as a way of thinking about the possible meanings of anthropomorphism, while Daston compares and contrasts the ideas about subjectivity and objectivity in medieval angelology and late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century comparative psychology. Paul S. White traces the place of anthropomorphism—and its opposite, the threat of human degeneration—in Victorian scientific practices. Evolutionary biology is the focus of two essays by Elliot Sober and Sandra D. Mitchell. Sober, citing empiricism as a “prophylactic” against “a priori prejudice” (p. 97), challenges nineteenth-century comparative psychologist C. Lloyd Morgan’s axiom:

In no case may we interpret an [animal’s] action as the outcome of the exercise of a higher psychical faculty, if it can be interpreted as the outcome of the exercise of one which stands lower in the psychological scale. (p. 86)

Mitchell offers an interesting survey of some of the limitations and uses of anthropomorphism in ethology, while recognizing the role of anthropomorphism in questions of the moral equality of animals.

Turning to the place of animals in “daily life,” James Serpell looks at animals in the human, social world as having an evolutionary—health-giving—role. Cheryce Kramer turns to a very different aspect of our everyday lives—the media—to show how central are
images of animals to the image banks that are creating the electronic wallpaper of our contemporary world. The animals in Tim Flach's photography, Kramer writes, "represent sentiment in the age of its digital proliferation" (p. 167).

As I hope that this very swift survey shows, Daston and Mitman's collection opens up questions about anthropomorphism by a variety of means. By tracing the ways in which animals are humanized in mythic; historic; scientific; domestic; and filmic contexts, the essays reveal some uncomfortable facts about anthropomorphism—not least of which is its extreme complexity. The most interesting question that returns again and again in the collection is how far anthropomorphism is a fair description of what it is that we say animals do. What if the animals are like us? What if we don't have to translate them to be like us, but they are actually like that already? What if an infant orangutan's suffering is just like a human infant's? What are the implications of that? Are we still being anthropomorphic?

Special Issue of a Journal

In his special issue of the journal Parallax, entitled "Animal Beings," Tom Tyler takes this question and turns it around: "What kind of animal, though, is this human being? In what kinds of animal being does the human animal engage? What is it to be, rather than to represent, an animal?" (p. 1). Apart from Derek Gatherer’s useful survey of key debates about the place of culture in evolutionary biology, the essays in this special issue focus less on the scientific aspects of the question of human animality than on cultural representations. Indeed, Tyler’s own essay reads scientific works by Richard Dawkins, Edward Tyson, and Carl Linnaeus about human differences from, and similarities to, other primates—alongside literary material by Kafka, Borges—to propose a new classification for the human. His suggestion is that Homo sapiens be renamed Pan bimanus, the two-handed chimpanzee.

In a similar vein, Lisa Uddin uses Roland Barthes’ A Lover’s Discourse as a way of thinking about our attempts to communicate with animals, with Koko the gorilla as her example. Hélène Cixous’ short story about the arrival of a cat traces the challenges to selfhood that the cat brings. In her reading of Marie Darrieussecq’s Pig Tales, a novel in which a woman is transformed into a pig, Anat Pick traces a challenge to "post-Holocaust liberal discourse" (p. 52), in which the human exists in splendid isolation from animals. Instead, Pick uses her reading of Darrieussecq’s novel to propose that the human is “always already an altered state” (p. 50). In his essay, Simon Glendinning goes even further and turns to reading itself to revise the assertion that that act is apparently human and related to our special interiority.

Cary Wolfe turns to visual art to trace a post-human conception of the human in the work of Eduardo Kac. Margot Norris attempts to trace a way in which literary representation might break down the separation of human and animal. She does this in an analysis of Albert Camus’ L’Etranger in which, she argues, the central character lacks the intention that we assume a truly human character to have and in a reading of J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace, published in 1999, in which the central human protagonist is represented as being simply one among the other animals. This is a fascinating attempt to read for conceptions of human subjectivity that do not rely on liberal humanist—or even naturalist—ideas; however, one thing gets lost in Norris’ reading of Disgrace, that is, Coetzee’s self-reflexivity—his writing about art while creating art. This is most pronounced in his The Lives of Animals,
first published in 1999, the same year as *Disgrace*. I was left with a question: is establishing points of sameness between humans and animals really the best way forward? Or, as Carol J. Adams states in Tyler’s fascinating interview with her, “do we have to have similarities established in order to stop harming animals?” (p. 121).

**Conclusion**

Can we not be different from animals and still live on equal terms with them? This is a question, I think, that in very different—opposite—ways, these two collections of essays ask us to ask ourselves. Using a variety of materials, the essays offer numerous possible answers but remind us that the boundaries—and the sites of similarity—between humans and other animals are points at which some of our most interesting thinking takes place.

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