

## CHAPTER ONE

### IF HORSES HAD HANDS...

Tom Tyler

But if horses or oxen or lions had hands  
or could draw with their hands and accomplish such  
works as men,  
horses would draw the figures of the gods as similar  
to horses,  
and the oxen as similar to oxen,  
and they would make the bodies  
of the sort which each of them had.

—Xenophanes of Colophon, *Fragments*, p. 25<sup>1</sup>

The term ‘anthropomorphism’, Greek in origin, initially referred to the practice of attributing human form or traits to the deities. Xenophanes’ fragment is usually taken to be a wry criticism, aimed principally at Homer perhaps, of this fanciful tradition. Characterising the divine as an assortment of capricious and petulant individuals is, Xenophanes seems to be suggesting, risible. His contention that cattle or lions or horses, given the opportunity, would project their likenesses in a similarly parochial fashion is in effect a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*.<sup>2</sup> The Christian anthropomorphite heresies of the fourth and tenth centuries were similarly condemned for their overly literal reading of certain passages in the Old Testament (“His all-seeing Eye”, “His everlasting Arms”, *etc.*) and for their ensuing attribution to God of a corporeal form (Herbermann

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<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell once made a similarly sardonic observation regarding not animals but the psychologists who study them: “Animals studied by Americans rush about frantically, with an incredible display of hustle and pep, and at last achieve the desired result by chance. Animals observed by Germans sit still and think, and at last evolve the solution out of their inner consciousness.” (Russell 1927, p. 33).

<sup>2</sup> See Holtsmark (1994, p. 6B). Hume has Philo, in a similar spirit of gentle mockery, imagine a parallel scenario in which, on “a planet wholly inhabited by spiders (which is very possible)”, the idea that the world is spun from the bowels of an “infinite spider” is taken seriously (Hume, p. 51). For a more cautious reading of Xenophanes’ tantalising fragment, however, see Leshner in Xenophanes 1992, pp. 24–25, 89–94.

*et al.*, 1907–14). It wasn't until the mid nineteenth century that the term 'anthropomorphism' moved closer to its contemporary meaning and began to refer to the practice of attributing human characteristics to entities other than deities, such as abstract ideas or "anything impersonal or irrational" (OED, 'anthropomorphism'). This came to include animals, and one of the earliest recorded uses in *this* sense occurs in George Henry Lewes' *Sea-Side Studies*, first published in 1858, in which the author warns against attributing 'vision' or 'alarm' to molluscs (pp. 255, 341).<sup>3</sup> "As we are just now looking with scientific seriousness at our animals, we will discard all anthropomorphic interpretations", he says. Lewes' caution, and his use of the term 'anthropomorphic', was the beginning of a particular kind of vigilance that has endured, and indeed flourished, both in scientific and philosophical discourse.

Today the term 'anthropomorphism' is used in any of three distinct ways. With decreasing regularity it is employed in its very literal sense to refer to the practice of attributing physical human *form* to some non-human being, as did the Christian anthropomorphite heretics. Secondly, it refers to the over-enthusiastic ascription of distinctively human *activities and attributes* to real or imaginary creatures, a practice frequently encountered, for instance, in children's stories. Rupert Bear and his chums, anthropoid one and all, invariably dress in carefully pressed jerseys and blazers, and enjoy flying kites, foxing dastardly pirates, and solving all manner of seemingly impenetrable mysteries. The third use is the one most frequently encountered in scientific and philosophical literature, and refers to the practice of attributing *intentionality, purpose* or *volition* to some creature or abstraction that (allegedly) does not have these things. This particular charge of anthropomorphism is frequently levelled at doting animal behaviourists or sloppy evolutionary theorists who are careless in the terminology they employ. The suggestion that a particular aspect of a species has been 'designed' by nature, or that evolution has been teleologically 'working toward' some ideal type, fall under this heading.<sup>4</sup>

It has tended to be those intent on what Lewes called "scientific seriousness" who have most objected to anthropomorphic language in the discussion of animals. The entomologist John Kennedy, a vocal critic

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<sup>3</sup> This text is cited in the OED, and briefly discussed in Midgley (1983, pp. 128–9).

<sup>4</sup> For an engaging discussion of evolution and 'design', which meticulously avoids this pitfall, see Dennett (1995, especially Part I).

of anthropomorphism, has objected to it precisely because it is, he says, unscientific (1992).<sup>5</sup> Amounting to a kind of modern day animism, or vitalism (pp. 3–4, 9, 13–14, 157, 159), anthropomorphism assumes more than it explains by unthinkingly attributing all manner of mental states to animals (self-awareness, thought, purpose, mental images) without demonstrating that these states exist (pp. 157–60). In short, Kennedy argues, when looking at animal behaviour anthropomorphism confuses function with cause (p. 166). As such, it is a fatal mistake for any enquiry (p. 31) and a drag on the study of the true mechanisms behind animal activities (p. 5).<sup>6</sup> Even beyond any narrowly defined scientific endeavour, there is a sense in which anthropomorphism is always seen as a mistaken approach. Implicit within the very concept of anthropomorphism is the idea that uniquely human traits are being attributed to creatures or beings to whom (or which) they do not belong. Indeed, if it were believed that the traits in question might possibly be shared, if God or molluscs might have that particular quality or characteristic in common with humanity, there would be no need to draw attention to this state of affairs with such a unique and highly specific term: the inquiry would instead be an open question concerning degrees of commonality (we will return to this in a moment). Anthropomorphism, as the reckless assignation of human traits to the brutes, is a projection, a kind of fetishism that is entirely inappropriate in any genuinely analytic enterprise. The very suggestion that a theory or approach is ‘anthropomorphic’ is, implicitly, always an accusation.

There appear to be two distinct hazards here. On the one hand such anthropomorphism is in danger of demeaning humans by failing to appreciate their unique traits. The psychiatrist and psychotherapist Willard Gaylin detects just this tendency in the animal rights movement:

The purpose of the people in this movement is not to diminish *Homo sapiens* but to protect the beast. They do so by elevating animals, often endowing them anthropomorphically with features the animals do not possess. Their purpose is noble—to protect helpless creatures from unnecessary suffering—but one untoward consequence of this decent enterprise

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<sup>5</sup> Kennedy seems unsure whether anthropomorphism is best characterised as a *virus* in need of a cure (pp. 160 and 167) or *vermin* that should be driven underground (p. 157), but by all accounts his antipathy is unequivocal.

<sup>6</sup> The claim that animals are conscious, for instance, is not a scientific one, Kennedy asserts, because it cannot even be tested (p. 31).

is a reduction of the distance between the nature of people and that of animals. Animal rights advocates constantly emphasize the similarity between the human and the subhuman in a worthy attempt to mitigate our abuses of the subhuman. But in so doing they seriously undermine the special nature of being human (1990, p. 11).<sup>7</sup>

Leaving aside the question of Gaylin's incautious use of the term "sub-human", does anthropomorphism risk ignoring the "special nature" of being human? Does it misrepresent what is distinctive and perhaps even superior in humanity? The flying of kites, or wearing of blazers, are hardly the only areas in which humans have excelled over their animal kin, after all.

On the other hand, it might be argued that we are not doing any favours to the animals either. By focusing on that which the animal shares with the human we are in danger of missing all that is peculiar and proper to it.

We try so hard to show that chimpanzees, or monkeys, or dogs, or cats, or rats, or chickens, or fish are like us in their thoughts and feelings; in so doing we do nothing but denigrate what they really are. (Budiansky 1998, p. 194).<sup>8</sup>

An oft-recounted equine example furnishes a good illustration. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in Berlin, one Wilhelm von Osten, an elderly schoolmaster, presented to the public and scientific community a horse who, he claimed, possessed extraordinary mental abilities approaching those of a human being. Clever Hans, as he was known, communicated with von Osten, and with anyone else who cared to

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<sup>7</sup> Gaylin's book, *Adam and Eve and Pinocchio: On Being and Becoming Human*, styles itself as a "necessary corrective" to the lack of confidence that the human species currently has in itself, and is an attempt to "reacquaint ourselves with our nature" (inside cover and p. 10). See especially the Prologue, 'What's So Special About Being Human', which, one should notice immediately, is not a question but a declaration (pp. 3–19). The penchant for ignoring the specific concerns of animal rights activists by focusing instead on the purported effects for humans, or on the alleged motives of the human activists themselves, is common amongst those unsympathetic to their views. For an instructive discussion of this "denial of the animal", see Baker (1993, pp. 211–217).

<sup>8</sup> Note that *this* objection to anthropomorphism on the grounds that it demeans animals, is not quite the same as those which are often directed at chimps' tea parties or similarly degrading instances of performing animals. Such protests, necessary and well-founded though they are in their own terms, do not constitute an argument against anthropomorphism *per se*, since they fail to apply to performances which do *not* so obviously demean an animal (cinematic representations of faithful collie dogs adept at child rescue, for example). For an illuminating discussion of chimps' teaparties, see de Waal (2001, pp. 1–5).

make his acquaintance, by tapping his right forehoof an appropriate number of times, or by nodding or shaking his head to indicate yes and no. Amongst his many feats were the ability to pick out coloured cloths, to tell the time, solve complex mathematical equations, identify musical intervals and scores, read and spell (though admittedly in German only), and even answer questions about European politics (Pfungst 1965, pp. 18–24).<sup>9</sup> A hoax was suspected, but a committee of thirteen respected professionals—including a psychologist, a physiologist, a veterinarian, a director of the Berlin zoo, and a circus manager—certified that Hans was not responding to cues, intentional or otherwise, from his trainer or any other person (Rosenthal, in Pfungst, p. *x*). Incredible though it seemed, Hans appeared to possess a power of abstract thought uncannily close to that of humans, and pretty well educated humans at that.<sup>10</sup>

After extensive and meticulous experimentation by Oscar Pfungst, the psychologist charged with the task of undertaking a serious scientific inquiry into Hans' abilities, it was eventually found that questioners were, by means of their body language, unconsciously providing subtle, almost undetectable cues, to which Hans was responding. As Hans tapped his hoof observers tended to tense up very slightly in anticipation of the correct answer, and then, when he reached the right number of taps, they relaxed, or provided other inadvertent cues which he noticed.<sup>11</sup> This finding was taken to indicate that Hans was exhibiting none of the complex cognitive faculties that had been claimed for him, and the case has been considered a cautionary tale for animal behaviourists ever since. This rather perverse conclusion ignores the fact, however, that Hans was actually demonstrating a fantastically keen ability to read the attitudes and behaviours of those around him, an ability far exceeding that of the trained human scientists conducting the experiments. In fact, Hans was so good at this that even when Pfungst had discovered his secret, and intentionally tried to suppress his own cues, Hans was still able to ascertain the correct answers (Rosenthal, in Pfungst p. *xii*). The anthropomorphic attitude shared by Hans' enthusiasts and detractors

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<sup>9</sup> For brief discussions of both Hans and Pfungst, see Budiansky (1998, pp. *xxx–xxxv*) and Griffin (1992, pp. 24–26).

<sup>10</sup> "Experienced educators" declared his development to be equivalent to that of a human child aged about 13 or 14 (Pfungst 1965, p. 24).

<sup>11</sup> Pfungst actually constructed an elaborate instrument to amplify the questioner's head movements and measure their respiration (Rosenthal, in Pfungst, p. *xii*).

alike blinded them to his truly impressive talents. Hans *was* ‘clever’, after his own fashion, and the error had been to characterise his abilities in terms of human faculties. The objections to anthropomorphism which argue that it demeans either human or animal suggest, then, that significant differences between the two are being ignored. Jacques Derrida, the philosopher who, above all others, has sought to highlight diversity and heterogeneity, has suggested that flouting such differences amounts to “blinding oneself to so much contrary evidence”, and is, in fact, just “too asinine” (*bête*) (Derrida 2002, p. 398). Anthropomorphism, it seems, is a disservice both to man and to beast, and an affront to true scientific or philosophical thought.

There have been two main responses to these attacks on anthropomorphism. First, it has been argued that discussion of animals will *inevitably* involve anthropomorphism, and that it is therefore not something about which we should complain too loudly. Interestingly, Kennedy himself has emphasised this point. He suggests that anthropomorphic thinking is “built into us”, and that we could not abandon it even if we wanted to:

It is dinned into us culturally from earliest childhood. It has presumably also been ‘pre-programmed’ into our hereditary make-up by natural selection, perhaps because it proved to be useful for predicting and controlling the behaviour of animals. (1992, p. 5)<sup>12</sup>

Stephen Budiansky too suggests that anthropomorphism is a hardwired, evolved trait, arguing that

Natural selection may have favoured our tendency to anthropomorphize... Being good at thinking “what would I do in his position” can help us calculate what our rivals may be up to and outsmart them... (O)ur tendency to anthropomorphize the animals we hunt may have given us a huge advantage in anticipating their habits and their evasions. (1998, p. *xviii*).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See also pp. 28–32.

<sup>13</sup> Kennedy and Budiansky get themselves into something of a pickle here. On the one hand they are both inclined to suggest that the predisposition to anthropomorphize is ‘hardwired’ (genetically determined). Kennedy even calls it “human nature” (p. 155). On the other, though, they are both of the opinion that we should try our damndest to transcend this decidedly unscientific inclination (see Kennedy pp. 160–68 and especially Budiansky pp. 192–94). They are rather vague as to precisely *how* we might engage in this literally superhuman overcoming, however, a point that the primatologist Frans de Waal delights in pointing out (de Waal 2001, p. 68). The contradiction here seems to arise from a clash between competing objectives. As serious-minded

This explanation of the inevitability of anthropomorphism, and the evolutionary advantage that it bestows, suggests a second potential defence of the practice.

The psychologist Gordon Burghardt has suggested that “anthropomorphism can be a pragmatic strategy” which “aids in formulating testable hypotheses” (Burghardt 1985, pp. 916, 905). Excessive rigour in avoiding potentially misleading terminology produces, he suggests, *rigor mortis* in attempts to devise pertinent research questions, and so investigators should feel perfectly free to ask, for instance, “‘Well, if I were a rat faced with this problem what would I do?’ or ‘Does that monkey want his rival to think there is a leopard in that tree?’” (p. 916).<sup>14</sup> The data used in formulating working hypotheses should arise, he argues, from all manner of sources, including one’s own prior experience, anecdotes, imagining being the animal, insight from observing one’s maiden aunt, *etc.* (p. 917). Burghardt calls this “critical anthropomorphism”, and suggests that it is both useful and healthy for the purpose of speculative enquiry just so long as we remember that we are not seeking to verify postulated characteristics or attributes, but using this strategy as an exploratory, investigative tool (pp. 916–18). Variations on this pragmatic approach are recommended by the primatologist Frans de Waal (who calls it “heuristic anthropomorphism”)<sup>15</sup> and the philosopher Daniel Dennett (who calls it “the intentional stance”; 1987).<sup>16</sup> Even Kennedy and Budiansky, who call it “mock anthropomorphism” (Kennedy 1992, pp. 9, 158–59; Budiansky 1998, pp. 33–36), consider it a useful “metaphorical” mode of thinking about the development of particular species, or of the processes of evolution. All these writers issue stern warnings about the dangers of conflating anthropomorphic *language* with anthropomorphic *thinking*, however.<sup>17</sup>

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scientists they find themselves obliged to provide a plausible (*i.e.* evolutionary) explanation for humankind’s evident and persistent anthropomorphism, but as card-carrying humanists they also feel bound to assert the possibility that humans can transcend this genetic programming (in order the better to pursue the goal of scientific objectivity, of course). Kennedy encapsulates this tension when he suggests that the anthropomorphic disease “cannot be cured completely” but, with the right treatment, “need not be fatal” (pp. 167, 160).

<sup>14</sup> Burghardt’s *rigor mortis* quip (p. 908) is borrowed from Griffin (1981).

<sup>15</sup> deWaal identifies three types of anthropomorphism: “animalcentric”, “anthropocentric” and “heuristic” (2001, pp. 74–78). See also pp. 37–42 and pp. 320–21.

<sup>16</sup> See also Dennett 1996, pp. 35–54.

<sup>17</sup> The psychologist Randall Lockwood has also discussed this constructive method, which he calls “applied anthropomorphism”, including the important safeguards that

Both the objections to anthropomorphism (that it denigrates human and animal) and the responses they have elicited (that it is inevitable and informative) are superseded, or rather preceded, by a more fundamental question. This concern, which renders problematic the very notion of anthropomorphism, has been articulated most clearly by Heidegger. During his second lecture course on Nietzsche, Heidegger points out that, in order even to raise “suspicions” (*Bedenken*) concerning anthropomorphism, one must assume that one knows “ahead of time” what human beings are (Heidegger 1984, pp. 98–105).<sup>18</sup> To be able to claim that a characterisation or representation of some being assigns to it a quality or state that is actually distinctively human, one would need to know just what it is about human beings, in themselves, that makes them the kind of being they are. But this question concerning the nature of human beings, the question “*Wer ist der Mensch?*” (who is man?), is one that, according to Heidegger, is rarely even properly asked, and has certainly not been answered satisfactorily. Without posing and answering *this* question, any suspicions concerning “humanization”, as well as all refutations tendered, do not even make sense. They amount, says Heidegger, to mere “idle talk” (*Gerede*), to “superficial and specious discussion” (p. 102).<sup>19</sup> Heidegger is right to argue that the very claim that anthropomorphism is a potential danger for philosophical enquiry depends on far more than has been adequately established. This is true of anthropomorphism both as a term and as a concept, if we can separate the two for a moment.

There can be no doubt that there are certainly cases when behaviour that might usefully be described as distinctively human is attributed

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he believes must be set in place in order to prevent it from becoming an anthropomorphism of a less benign kind (Lockwood, 1989). Kant himself takes a similarly pragmatic approach, suggesting that it is beneficial to study nature (or the Author of the world) *as if* it had systematic and purposive unity (desires, volitions, understanding, etc.). This “subtler anthropomorphism” (*subtilerer Anthropomorphismus*), as he calls it, is a useful regulative principle of speculative reason, provided we remember that we are only applying an idea of such a being, not establishing knowledge of it (Kant 1964, A700–01/B728–29/pp. 568–69). See also his discussion of “symbolic anthropomorphism” (*symbolischer Anthropomorphismus*) (1953, §57–58/pp. 123–28). On the varied uses to which self-consciously constructive anthropomorphism has been put, see Mitchell *et al.* (1996) and Daston and Mitman (2005).

<sup>18</sup> Heidegger uses the terms *Vermenschung* and *Vermenschlichung*, translated by Krell as ‘humanization’ and ‘anthropomorphism’ respectively.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, this does not stop Heidegger from levelling precisely this accusation of anthropomorphism at Nietzsche’s notion of the will to power. See Ansell-Pearson (1997, pp. 109–117).



to animals. Rupert has already helped establish this much for us. It is unfortunate, however, that a special term—‘anthropomorphism’—has been appropriated to describe this practice. There is an asymmetry in place here that renders the expression prejudicial. What of those occasions when behaviour characteristic of bears is erroneously attributed to humans? Or to wolves? Or fish? How often does one encounter accusations of ‘arktomorphism’?<sup>20</sup> The very fact that there are no equivalent terms for other species seems to imply that there is something rather special about humans, bursting as they are with a host of unique qualities that we can’t resist attributing to other beings. If occasion arises when it seems important to point out that bears don’t *really* indulge in the kinds of activities practiced by Rupert, it would perhaps be more informative, and less hasty, to draw attention to these errors in their specificity (“hold on, real bears don’t wear clothes!”), rather than unnecessarily entangling the revelation in loaded terminology. My suspicion is that simply by employing the term ‘anthropomorphism’ one has already adopted a set of unexamined assumptions about human beings, and begun to engage in Heidegger’s *Gerede*.<sup>21</sup>

The objection here is to more than just the terminology, however. We can, in fact, go further than Heidegger’s claim that we have not yet adequately answered (or even asked) the question ‘who is man?’. The designation of any quality or attribute as distinctively human, a designation required by the concept of anthropomorphism, is unwarranted, I would argue, even were we able, by means as yet unknown, to identify a characteristic or attribute as being uniquely human. It is dangerous and misleading to suppose that attributes or behaviours ‘belong’ to the creatures who display them, even in those cases where these creatures seem to be the only ones who exhibit a particular quality. This point is perhaps best demonstrated by an example of convergent evolution, the phenomenon whereby the same adaptation is evident in entirely unrelated species. Bats (order *Chiroptera*) are well known for their distinctive means of navigation: sonar, also known as ‘echolocation’.<sup>22</sup> This ingenious ability is so different from anything experienced by humans

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<sup>20</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary includes an entry for ‘zoomorphic’, a general term intended to cover any and all cases in which “the form or nature of an animal” is attributed to something, although even this is principally used only of “a deity or superhuman being”.

<sup>21</sup> See Plumwood (2001, p. 57).

<sup>22</sup> For accessible accounts of bat sonar see Dawkins (1986, pp. 21–37), or, more concisely, Fenton (1998, pp. 27–32).

that it has even prompted the philosopher Thomas Nagel to claim, notoriously, that it is literally impossible for us to imagine what it is like to be a bat (Nagel, 1974).<sup>23</sup> But as Richard Dawkins has pointed out, sonar is by no means unique to bats. It has evolved, independently, in two different genera of birds, in dolphins and whales, and, to a lesser extent, in shrews, rats and seals. Even in bats it has (probably) evolved on two quite separate occasions, in two distinct groups (Dawkins, pp. 94–97).<sup>24</sup> It was first suspected that bats could “see with their ears” in the eighteenth century (and confirmed in the 1930s), whilst it was not verified in dolphins until the 1950s (Fenton, pp. 24–27). This contingent historical fact, concerning the order in which different instances of sonar were discovered, gave scientists no reason to suggest, thankfully, that dolphins are ‘chiropteromorphic’. That a trait has been identified in only one class of creatures *thus far* is no guarantee that it is unique to that class of creatures, be they bears, bats, or life forms more alien still.<sup>25</sup> The fact that, to date, the only creatures who have been observed exhibiting trait *x* are human beings, does not justify the claim that trait *x* is fundamentally and uniquely human, no matter how clever or intellectually advanced it is. It is not inconceivable that aliens might land tomorrow who engage in all kinds of activities and behaviours that had, up until that point, only appeared on earth when humans practised them. It would be a little perverse to claim, I think, that those extra-terrestrials were presumptively ‘anthropomorphic’ in their behaviour, especially if it subsequently transpired that they had evolved those same advanced traits and abilities long before the ancestors of *Homo sapiens* had thought to come down from the trees.<sup>26</sup> Better,

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<sup>23</sup> For a range of replies see the sustained discussion in Dennett (1991, pp. 441–48), a rather quirky response by Hofstadter in Hofstadter and Dennett (1981, pp. 403–414), and a speculative but illuminating treatment by Dawkins (1986, pp. 33–36).

<sup>24</sup> Dawkins also points out that, *pace* Nagel, even (blind) humans make some use of echoes in order to find their way about (p. 23).

<sup>25</sup> For a lively discussion of the ‘how and why’ questions of convergent evolution, with intriguing examples, see Gould (1980), or Dawkins (1986, pp. 94–109). Both writers point out that, strictly speaking, even the most remarkable cases of convergent evolution do not result in absolutely (genetically) identical adaptations. But the convergence is frequently so close that only wilful pedantry would insist that the functions were different in each case.

<sup>26</sup> Exactly when this ‘descent’ occurred has been a matter of intense debate. Gould manages to combine discussion of convergent evolution and the existence of extra-terrestrial intelligence in his essay ‘SETI and the Wisdom of Casey Stengel’ (Gould 1985). Briefly, he suggests that the existence of the former (on earth) makes the latter (elsewhere) a possibility.

at this stage at least, to recognise and identify the quality in its own right, and to leave as an open or empirical question its manifestation (or not) in diverse beings.<sup>27</sup>

Anthropomorphism, both as term and concept, imprudently starts with the human, even though the whole question of the nature of the human has yet to be determined. Anthropomorphism as a notion is, in short, anthropocentric, in a particular sense. This variety of anthropocentrism is not one that necessarily implies human superiority. We need not understand the various species—the mollusc, the bat, the bear, the dolphin—as existing in some kind of hierarchy, at whose summit humanity sits. But by invoking anthropomorphism as a term, one is inevitably committed to thinking humanity *first*. By relying on anthropomorphism as a concept, one places the human *foremost*. The ‘centrism’ of which one is guilty is best considered, then, not in spatial terms, as a hierarchy, but in temporal terms, as a pre-eminence. *Anthrôpos* is here central not in the sense that it is higher, but in the sense that it is primary. Anthropocentrism is a kind of species narcissism, an obsessive love of self. Just as the narcissist is self-absorbed, self-centred, so the anthropocentrist is species-centred (‘anthropo-centric’). Anthropocentrists, like Narcissus, have eyes only for themselves. This ‘first and foremost’ anthropocentrism, this species narcissism, which is evident far too often in philosophy and contemporary critical thinking,<sup>28</sup> is the foundation on which the notion of anthropomorphism rests, and is in turn sustained by its continuing invocation.

Those who believe in anthropomorphism, those who see it about them in the discourses of science and culture, whether they are the Kennedys and Budianskys who desire to eliminate it, or the DeWals and Burghardts who see a need to preserve it, are, we might say, modern day anthropomorphites. These anthropomorphites see animals being transformed, being given human form. They believe that they see a transmutation, a metamorphosis, taking place: the Animal cast in the image of Man. With this belief, though, they maintain a faith in an originary distinction between Human and Animal. Like

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<sup>27</sup> Midgley develops this point more fully when she discusses the possibility of understanding moods and feelings in both human and nonhuman creatures (Midgley 1983, pp. 129–33).

<sup>28</sup> It is characteristic, for instance, of a certain hasty phenomenology which inscribes too quickly a distinction between ‘humanity’ and ‘animality’. See Bataille (1989, pp. 17–25) or Heidegger (1995, pp. 176–273), whose work I discuss more fully elsewhere (Tyler 2005).

their mediaeval forebears, their perspective on the world starts with the human. Appeal to the notion of anthropomorphism breezes over awkward questions concerning the nature of the human, or rather, it implicitly takes these questions to have been answered. It dashes on to examine animals afterward, in second place, as if humanity and animality were not conceptualised and constituted mutually and simultaneously. This ‘first and foremost’ anthropocentrism should never be our starting point. If, by relying on the notion of anthropomorphism, we preclude the possibility of recognising or discovering new kinds of human-animal continuity we are condemned to a particular kind of anthropocentrism which restricts what we can think both about human being and about the being of other animals.<sup>29</sup> If, on the other hand, we suspend this assumption, this implicit and uncritical prior belief in human uniqueness, the very notion of anthropomorphism fails to make sense. Budiansky, a dedicated anthropomorphite, suggests that anthropomorphism betrays a “lack of imagination” on our part as we struggle to imagine what it would be like to be something else (1998, p. xvii). Truer to say, perhaps, that the very belief in anthropomorphism betrays a lack of imagination on the part of those so thoroughly wedded to the idea that they are, first and foremost, human.

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<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that a scientific or philosophical endeavour which adopts an investigative strategy that is broadly in line with what was called ‘critical’ or ‘heuristic’ anthropomorphism might not be productive or illuminating. Far from it: Lockwood lists a series of cases “where an anthropomorphic perspective has been helpful” (1989, pp. 52–55), and Dennett has explored in depth just how productive this approach can be (1987). Characterising this strategy as a form of “anthropomorphism” (Lockwood does, Dennett does not), however, is in danger of leading researchers and readers alike into adopting an anthropocentric perspective which is at odds with the possibility of keeping the question of human uniqueness open.

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