

## The problem with anthropomorphism

There is a structural issue at stake when we talk about anthropomorphism. Satire has used it as a form of critique, both to reflect human absurdities, as in *Alice in Wonderland*, and to mask the intention behind the difference of the animal skin: any Warner Brother's cartoon. "What, these beasts? How can one be offended by the actions of a white rabbit, Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, or Yogi Bear, they are just doing what animals do...in drag, in a car, in a pork-pie hat and vest."

The term 'animism' I propose as an alternative term to anthropomorphism and as an approach, but there is a problem due to its more literal translation of objects/animals containing a soul. If we can relate 'soul' to a universal connectedness in a very literal biological/chemical way this term of animism may work, but I think that is asking a bit much of the word. To avoid any reference to religious implications anthropomorphism may alleviate this situation in that it openly acknowledges the act of placing meaning/significance onto the object/animal. But the term animism is more honest in its implications. What the distinction anthropomorphism suggests is the superiority of the Homo sapiens seen in the failings of the object/animals to mimic our actions. This is the suggestion of a binary culture, us versus them, though the imagery relations between the two are an actual further separation between the species. By attaching human traits to animals we imply that they are like us, which moves beyond association.

With anthropomorphication, we place significance on the animal's action as a rational thinking being, and, more importantly, emphasise that these creatures are thinking and behaving like us. This implies that without the anthropomorphication they would not ordinarily act like us this way. This may be quibbling over finite matter of speech but by inferring animals act and think like us, like Homo sapiens, we take on a hierarchical approach to our environs. Animals are not allowed to act as themselves and in order to relate to us, they must take on our mannerisms.

The most obvious time that animals would have any interest in behaving/catering to human emotions is purely for the self-beneficial selfishness of domesticated animals. These terms are problematic in that they imply the creature has a sense of the 'self'. I do not want to argue one way or another on this point (the issue of animal and the Self), but I would like to point out the problem with the animal/human reflection.

'Anti-altruism' seems the only appropriate term to address the situation. Otherwise, suggesting good will regarding the acts of a pet animal ignores the fundamental interaction that first lead to the relationship between the specific human and animal; the training of a dog, treats for the dolphin, etc. establish a chain of supply and reciprocation. Better to state the similarities we have to them. For, as zoologists discover more traits that relate the animal kingdom to homo-sapiens, it is easy to be lulled into the lazy thought that animals are more like us than we thought: gay penguins, frisky, murderous dolphins, signing apes, talking dogs. But these are all human labels ("gay", "frisky", "murderous"), inferring significance where there may be none. And really, why shouldn't animals murder, communicate, and fornicate? Haven't we studied these behaviours before in our own species? Aren't we animals? The interest lies in the comparison to our own behaviour. This comparison infers otherness, difference and, usually with our amusement, condescension towards the creature with which we see characteristics in common. Though I hesitate to regard animism as an appropriate relation due to its religious implications of the soul, the commonness, the non-hierarchical relational interaction the term suggests better represents the world we live in. A rabbit is a rabbit and behaves as a rabbit, loath as I am to lose Bugs Bunny and his absurdities; it is better for the rational understanding

of the world that he disappears.

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