

Notes

- 1 *Hamlet*, II.ii.306–12.
- 2 *Paradise Lost*, Book IV.1.621. It is worth noting the implausibility of this remark in relation to (say) beavers or birds with young.
- 3 *As You Like It*, I.i.12–16.
- 4 *Love's Labour's Lost*, IV.ii.27.
- 5 *Essay on Man*, Epistle ii.1.1.
- 6 A process admirably traced in Boakes (1984).
- 7 I shall say no more about this arm of the divergence here, having treated it fully elsewhere (Midgley 1979, 1981, 1984). However, I have not previously stressed so explicitly the relationship between the two arms, which I think to be a very important one.
- 8 The oddities of this approach, and especially the misuse made in it of the concept of anthropomorphism, are further discussed in Midgley (1983) chapters 8–12. See especially p. 115.
- 9 Excerpts from D. R. Griffin (1984) *Animal Thinking* are reprinted by kind permission of the author and the publisher, Harvard University Press.
- 10 Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, vol. iv, p. 313.
- 11 Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, closing pages to Part V (1911–12, I: 115–18). See also two letters by him, to the Marquess of Newcastle (23 November 1646) and to Henry More (5 February 1649) in Descartes (1970). These selections are conveniently reprinted in Regan & Singer (1976). For Descartes' general sceptical and ego-centred method, see his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation 1, and the *Discourse on Method*, Chapter 4.

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4 *Animality, humanity, morality, society*

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Humans as animals

Animals have always been central to the process by which men form an image of themselves . . . the animals supply examples for the mind as well as food for the body; they carry not only loads but also principles. . . . The first metaphor was animal . . . the essential relation between man and animal was metaphoric. Within that relation what the two terms – man and animal – shared in common revealed what differentiated them. . . . What distinguished men from animals was born of their relationship with them. (Berger 1971, pp. 1042, 1043; 1977, pp. 504, 505.)

The crux of the explanation of the apparent universality of animals as images of the profoundest symbolic significance would seem, I argue, to lie in the fact that 'the animal' is both within us, as part of our enduring biological heritage as human beings, and also by definition, outside and beyond human society. (Willis 1974, p. 9.)

We are not just rather like animals; we are animals. Our differences from other species may be striking, but comparisons with them have always been, and must be, crucial to our view of ourselves. (Midgley 1979, p. xiii.)

The brute creation provided the most readily-available point of reference for the continuous process of human self-definition. Neither the same as humans, nor wholly dissimilar, the animals offered an almost inexhaustible fund of symbolic meaning. (Thomas 1983, p. 40.)

These statements – by an art historian and critic, a social anthropologist, a philosopher and a social historian, respectively – indicate an apparently unanimous interest in the notion of 'animals as metaphor'. They are somewhat randomly drawn from an outpouring of writings over the last 20 years or so, in a wide variety of disciplines, on the perennial Great Question: what is human nature? Most of this literature has been concerned, not with the 'metaphor' issue, but with the basic, empirical and positivist question most simply posed as, how animal is man? In this chapter I make no attempt to answer the question, but rather pursue the anthropologically more fundamental issue of the different ways in which people in different societies ask and answer it. In other words, I am interested in the cultural variation in definitions of 'humanity' and 'animality', and in constructions of 'animals' and animal society as metaphors of human morality and society.

The history of constructions of 'nature' in the West, and of changing attitudes towards animals, has been traced recently by Thomas (1983) and Serpell (1986).

Medieval and Renaissance theology and philosophy – rooted in the Bible and Aristotle, and confirmed by Descartes, Spinoza and Kant – were wholly anthropocentric: nature was created for the interests of humanity, 'every animal was intended to serve some human purpose, if not practical, then moral or aesthetic' (Thomas 1983, p. 19). Man, made in the image of God and endowed with reason, was fundamentally different in kind from other forms of life, which he was entitled to treat as he chose.

In the early modern period the growing scientific interest in natural history led to a recognition of the physical similarities between humans and other animals. Moreover, 'the growth of towns and the emergence of a new industrial order in which animals became increasingly marginal to the processes of production' (Thomas 1983, p. 181) engendered an awareness of moral duties owed to animals. Anthropomorphism began to replace anthropocentrism. When Darwin caused a confrontation between the two perspectives, the intellectual battle was already won.

The recently renewed debate on these issues has closely followed advances in research, notably in those disciplines concerned with animal behaviour and consciousness: ethology, primatology, sociobiology and psychology. There has been new movement on that frontier of the human sciences touching on the difference, if any, between humans and other animals.

The debate has been particularly fierce recently around sociobiology, whose practitioners have seemed to argue an extreme position, that there is little or nothing important in human culture that does not have biological, hence animal roots.¹ Not surprisingly, there has been a strong reaction to this from some social and cultural anthropologists, who seem to have a vested interest in a particular predefinition of the frontier. They take it for granted that humans are a special kind of animal, uniquely possessed of 'culture' in the sense of a system of meanings and symbols: all that is cultural, hence specifically human, is the domain of anthropology; all that is animal, unless it forms part of human culture, is not. Such anthropologists cannot accept that animals have 'culture' in this sense, nor that culture and its variations and complexities can be understood as products of evolutionary adaptation under natural selection. For them, human nature is cultural diversity.

In recent and widely read discussions of the moral relations between humans and animals, philosophers such as Midgley (1979, 1983) and Clark (1984) have reviewed the debate, but they have tended to present it in terms of an opposition between polar extremes: the 'blank-paper', all-is-culture libertarianism of the anthropologists and sociologists, versus the biological determinism of ethologists and sociobiologists. Rightly castigating both positions as shallow and simplistic, they have chosen to steer something of a middle course between them, urging those studying both animal and human behaviour to adopt a 'more carefully philosophical' approach (Clark 1984, p. v).

Of course, the extreme views attributed to each side in the debate are caricatures. Rebuttals of the naive and extravagant claims of the early sociobiologists have forced many to modify their ambition of annexing the social sciences, while redefining their discipline as 'behavioural ecology' or 'socio-ecology' (see Foley

1986). As for social and cultural anthropologists, among whom I include myself, it is not so much that we do not hold a 'blank-paper' view of humanity, but that as anthropologists our perspective on, and interest in, the problem are rather different. Apart from a few who have taken an extreme 'cultural' stance, and a few who have jumped wholeheartedly on the sociobiology bandwagon, most of us have stood aside from the debate. Our detachment is perhaps due to a sensation of *déjà vu*: when we hear the arguments, we are reminded of experiences in the field, of debates we have witnessed or in which we have participated, in some New Guinea men's house, or (in my case) huddled around a smoky fire in a felt tent on top of a mountain in Iran; debates about whether dogs understand what people say to them, whether bears can talk, whether camels bear grudges, how wolves learn to attack from both sides of the flock at once. . . . What interests anthropologists about such debates is less the 'scientific accuracy' of the answers than the context of the discussion and the relevance of the terms of the debate to human social relations.

In other words, when anthropologists hear philosophers (or others) speculating on the animal nature of humanity or moralizing about 'animal rights', we cannot but locate their views in the cross-cultural context to which some philosophers have remained remarkably blind. As anthropologists we do not ask how far humans are animals – that is, how far they share with animals basic drives such as aggression, fear and sexuality – though we grant this to be a major philosophical and ethical problem; nor do we ask how far animals are conscious, social, moral, cultural or articulate. Rather, we are concerned with how these questions are constructed in different societies; that is, with where different societies locate their humanity. We stand back to ask: is the Great Question – What is human nature? – a *universal* question? What sorts of answers are given, and is the question asked and answered in ways that are related to other aspects of culture and society? For us, the views of modern Western philosophers are just further examples of cultural variation, which need to be explained in both social and historical terms.

Too often the question has been posed (by anthropologists among others) in the form: how does humanity perceive nature? This carries the 'common-sense' presumptions that nature is an objective given, and further, that humanity is one, a species with a common nature despite cultural diversity. However, it has long been established that notions of both nature and humanity are highly variable and changing cultural constructions, and that in many societies they are not constructed at all.

Totemic thought

How do other peoples phrase the problem of humanity? With the less philosophically inclined, we have to search in categories, metaphors, and modes of socialization. One widely accepted premise (see, for example, Leach 1982, ch. 2 and pp. 116f.) is that in every society children have to learn how to distinguish Self from Other: and 'people like me' (kin and friends) from 'people not like me'

(strangers, enemies and witches); and 'people' from 'not people' (usually animals). Freud noted (of European society) that 'children show no trace of arrogance which urges adult civilized men to draw a hard-and-fast line between their own nature and that of all other animals. Children have no scruples over allowing animals to rank as their full equals' (quoted by Hines & Bustad 1986, p. 5). It appears, moreover, to be established that

during the first years of life [children] do not appear to be able to make a clear distinction between humans and non-humans, and even as early as two years of age will begin responding socially towards animals such as family pets and treating them, to all intents and purposes, as if they were persons. (Serpell 1986, p. 139, see also ch. 11).

However, various rather more complex formulations of the relation between people and animals are possible, and are indeed found. For example, the straightforward Cartesian dualism familiar to the West, yielding the series of homologous oppositions culture : nature :: people : animals (:: male : female :: reason : passion . . .)² is perhaps historically rare – and indeed the denial of it is currently popular: people *are* animals, animals have rights like people. In other cultures a continuum may be constructed, or a more complex series of distinctions. For example, 'people' are divided into some that are 'like us' and others that are 'like animals'; or 'animals' are divided into 'tame animals' that are 'like people' and 'wild animals' that are not; or 'tame animals' are divided into 'pets' that are 'like people' and 'livestock' that are not. The various distinctions may be treated as analogies: each Other may be likened to each other: 'strangers' are 'wild animals' and 'witches'. . . . As Douglas (1975, p. 289) suggests,

in each constructed world of nature, the contrast between man and not-man provides an analogy for the contrast between the member of the human community and the outsider. In the last most inclusive set of categories, nature represents the outsider.

However, these analogies remain metaphoric, they are not identifications. Strangers, even witches, are in some ways 'people', and 'wild animals' have something in common with 'tame animals'. What interest us are the markers that are introduced to distinguish these metaphorical analogues from each other, and from 'people like us'.

In considering cultural constructions of relations between people and animals, and the use of animals as metaphors for human society, we are of course in the anthropological realm of 'totemic thought'. Lévi-Strauss (1964, 1966) has argued that animals figure so commonly in totemic discourse, not as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Fortes proposed, because they are good to eat, but because they are good to think with. He also maintained that systems of classification of animals are not, as Durkheim and Mauss (1963) suggested, derived from social categories, but rather that categories drawn from a system of classification of nature are employed to express the nature of relations between human groups and individuals.

If this argument (that animals are good for thinking) is valid, and I think it is, then we need to enquire further, thinking to what purpose? Clearly, that purpose is not just classification and the creation of order, but also teaching and learning morality – or, as Tambiah puts it, 'to forge a system of moral conduct and to resolve the problem of man in nature' (1969, p. 457, cf. Fernandez 1971).

Animals, or rather cultural constructions of them, are used as metaphors for this moralizing and socializing purpose in two rather different, even contradictory, ways. Sometimes certain animals are idealized and used as models of order and morality, in animal stories and myths (cf. Sperber 1975). The animals are treated as agents and social beings, with motives, values and morals; and differences between them and people are implicitly denied. By contrast animals are sometimes represented as the Other, the Beast, the Brute, the model of disorder or the way things should not be done. Animals are ideal for both of these purposes, because they can be seen to perform the same basic functions as people (eating, excreting, moving, copulating, being born, giving birth, dying, . . .) in ways that people conceivably could, yet which are forbidden to them by the rules that are fundamental to any cultural and moral system. It is 'culture' in this sense that separates people from other animals.

Animals are good to teach and learn with, particularly in those central areas of life clouded by taboos and inhibitions. It is not so long ago that the realities of sex and procreation were so unmentionable in the English family that children were gently initiated into the harsh truth through stories of birds and bees and the stork. As Serpell (1986, p. 139, referring to Sharefkin & Ruchlis 1974 and Blanchard 1982) points out, children

can readily relate to real or imagined feelings in animals, when they often have great difficulty in relating to or comprehending the feelings of other people. This fact is clearly recognized by the authors and publishers of children's literature who frequently use anthropomorphic animal characters, rather than more realistic images, as a medium for conveying social values and rules.

In effect such animal stories serve a threefold purpose: through *non-human metaphor* they allow teachers and learners to avoid articulating difficult or embarrassing truths about humanity; at another level they *create a distinction* between humans and other animals; and they *reinforce human morality* by giving it a 'natural' basis.

Sapir (1977) has suggested a caveat to what he calls Lévi-Strauss' 'shibboleth' that animals are good to think with: fine, he says, but only when there are animals about. I would question this: there are always animals about, even if they exist only as *images in the mind*. My caveat, or rather elaboration of the 'shibboleth', would be that animals are good to think with, and good to teach with, but the way in which they are used (and thought of) varies both with people's familiarity with them and also with the availability of other possible human models, other ethnic groups, classes and social categories, either for emulation as ideals or for derogation as Others.

Human-animal relations of production

Familiarity with animals is a function, I suggest, of aspects of the economic system, or at least of the nature of *human-animal relations of production*. A Marxian classification of social and economic systems by *mode of production* is not apposite, since its central component, comprising *human* social relations of production, does not take account of relations of production between humans and animals, the feature I want to examine here. More useful, I suggest, is to cast a Marxian frame around the classic typology of production systems, which *are* characterized by specific human-animal relations of production. These systems are hunting and gathering, pastoralism, agriculture and urban-industrial production.

Here I follow a suggestion made by Ingold, who points out that higher animals can *act*, and that 'in this capability resides the potential for animals to be *tamed* by man: that is, to enter into social relations of domination defined by man's subjugation of the animal's will to suit his own purposes' (Marx 1964, p. 102). Marx, he reminds us, 'denied the possibility of this form of relationship between man and animals on the grounds that animals lack will', and therefore classified domestic animals alongside primitive tools, as instruments of labour (Marx 1930, p. 172). This, Ingold rightly objects,

is to relegate animals to the status of mindless machines. In truth, the domestic animal is no more the physical conductor of its master's activity than is the slave: both constitute labour itself rather than its instruments, and are therefore bound by social relations of production. (Ingold 1980, p. 88, also 1979, 1983.)

The specific relations he considers are those involved in the three aspects of domestication he distinguishes as taming, herding and breeding. Except when he describes (only half-seriously) the relations between Chukchi pastoralists and their herds as involving 'class exploitation' (Ingold 1980, p. 234), he does not pursue Marxian categories in the context of human-animal relations. I suggest we should do just that.

At the extremes, of simple hunter-gatherer bands on the one hand and urban-industrial society on the other, Marxian categories of human social relations of production also apply to those between humans and animals; in the intermediate types (peasant agriculture, pastoral nomadism and ranching) we shall find that things are rather different.

Hunter-gatherers live in complementary relations with the other animal species in their environment, not particularly close to any of them, but with an extensive knowledge of the habits of all species. Objectively they are predators, but hunters' relations with their prey are often culturally constructed as ones of reciprocal exchange and co-operation in the mutual production of each others' existence. In this respect at least, such relations resemble those entailed in Marx's notion of the Germanic or communal system.

Some hunters tame certain animals (such as dogs or reindeer) to help with the hunt. Individual animals are taken out of their natural species community and

subjugated to provide labour for the human production process. These, unlike other tamed animals that hunting peoples also frequently keep as pets, are treated as slaves, their feeding and reproduction under the control of their human masters. This 'slave-based' or 'ancient' system of production relations between people and animals also characterizes those cultivators who use draught animals.³

More-extensive livestock-rearing by pastoralists involves animals that are not tamed but are herded in communities and following their natural inclinations to move, congregate, graze and breed. Again, these are subservient to and controlled by human masters, but the relation is like a contract or transaction in which the masters 'protect' the herds in return for a 'rent'. This resembles the Marxian conception of feudal relations between lord and serfs.

Ingold makes a clear distinction between 'tamed' and 'herded' animals. The former enter 'social' relations with their owners, whether as helpers in the hunt or as farm labour; the latter have only ecological relations with their masters – but here he is writing of the carnivorous pastoralists of the north (Ingold 1980, pp. 88f.). Most pastoralists keep livestock for both milk and meat, hence they have both social and ecological relations with them. However, farmers and pastoralists, like hunters with their 'tamed' animal labour, often conduct a variety of relations with animals. For example, farmers keep herds for meat and milk, pastoralists rear 'tame' animals for household and transport purposes, and both farmers and pastoralists may hunt 'wild animals', both game and predators.

In ranching, the modern form of pastoralism, human-animal relations are again different. Animals are herded in large numbers, extensively, and with no close personal relations with the owners of the ranch. They are considerably more autonomous than in pastoralism: in earlier, more-open ranching the animals were in effect undomesticated, and ranged, grazed and bred with no control other than the annual round-up for branding, castrating and the 'extraction of surplus'. In later, closed systems there is more control, exercised not under the contractual system inherent in pastoralism, but by use of superior force (even violence) and technology (Ingold 1980, pp. 235f., Strickon 1965). These seem to me typical – paradoxically for a modern offshoot of capitalism – of Asiatic-Oriental relations of production. Indeed, the cattle 'barons' of the Texas ranges should perhaps be termed 'sultans' – or 'moguls', like their oil-rich successors.

Urban-industrial society, finally, is dependent for animal products on battery- or factory-farming. The animals that feed us are reduced to machines, kept in artificial conditions in which the concern of the owners is profit through cost-effective organization of the animals' productive labour and reproduction. These are clearly exploitative relations on classic capitalist lines (cf. Serpel 1986, ch. 11).

In all this the relations discussed have been those of the (usually) male owners and the animal labour. Among the various simplifications and omissions necessitated in a chapter of this length, I have left out of account the intermediary human workers, the hired herdsmen, cowboys, butchers and other members of the owner's family. Nor have I considered the possibility of zoomorphic animal

views of their human masters (Ingold 1980, p. 36). My concern is rather with how, in these various systems of human-animal relations of production, animality and humanity are socially constructed, and with the ways in which animals are used metaphorically, as Others or models.

Animals as metaphor in different production systems

Nomadic hunter-gatherer societies are usually homogeneous, with low population density and few human Others in the environment. Human groups are expected to follow the same basic moral rules, though they may be involved in relations of ritual exchange or raiding. However, animal species – and, indeed, other features of the environment – provide a treasury of contrasts for the modelling of difference. Interspecific differences are an apt metaphor for differences between human groups or individuals, with the neat intellectual contrast that while animal species cannot interbreed, human groups 'must'. This is Lévi-Strauss' classic understanding of totemism in the context of exogamous lineages, typically among hunter-gatherer societies. At the same time various animal Others may be used for teaching morality: the !Kung, for example, deprecate eating alone as the behaviour of a lion. Discussion of animal metaphor in such societies leads into further classic anthropological questions concerning taboo, sacrifice, and ideas of common ancestry, but I will not pursue these further here.

Settled farmers, typically, see themselves at the centre of a series of circles of decreasing familiarity: from home, farm and village to the wild periphery where danger threatens. Leach (1964), Tambiah (1969) and others, developing a theory of taboo, have given detailed accounts of farming societies in which such social-spatial classifications are assimilated to a homologous series of animal classes. For example, the degree of edibility of the animals (taboo: edible within limits: normally edible: inedible) corresponds with the degree of sexual availability of humans at the same social distance (prohibited by incest taboo: restricted sexual access: marriage preference: the unknown). In such systems not only are draught animals (ox, buffalo or horse) metaphorically 'slaves' in our scheme of relations of production, but they also correspond to the animal category 'edible within limits' and the social category 'restricted sexual access': while livestock (pigs, cattle or sheep), kept 'under contract' for their edible products, and hence approximating 'serfs' in our scheme, correspond to the social category 'preferred for the marriage contract'.

The distinctive feature of pastoralism is that two communities, one human and one animal, coexist in what is usually described as a relation of symbiosis, but which I have characterized as feudal relations of production between lords and serfs: the owners protect and control their herds, extracting 'rent' in the form of produce, wealth values and (on ritual occasions of sacrifice) meat. For the most part pastoralists live in a homogeneous social environment that is almost as empty of human Others as that of hunters. Settled, agricultural or urban society is glimpsed from afar, if at all. Animals, by contrast, are more immediately avail-

able as models than in any other type of society. Pastoralists are thus a particularly interesting case. The implications of their relations with their animals for their conceptions of humanity have been remarkably neglected by their ethnographers, who have focused on the economic and ceremonial, but rarely on the cognitive and metaphoric, uses of animals.

Intellectually, the pastoralist symbiosis with livestock has two edges. Whether they are thought of as part of human society or humans as part of theirs, they provide an ideal model for humanity. However, as is shown for instance in Evans-Pritchard's classic description of the 'bovine idiom' of Nuer discourse on social relations, it seems that although on one level the distinction of humans from animals is being denied and their identity explicitly affirmed, on another level a distinction is made. This again comes out clearly in Evans-Pritchard's (1940, p. 37, 1956, pp. 258–60) account: the herds are replicas of human society, yet they are matrilineal and uxorilocal (the cows are the stable core of the herd), whereas their human counterparts organize themselves in patrilineal, virilocal terms (the men are the stable core of the community). Humans and animals are identified at one level but differentiated at another. For Willis (1974, pp. 9, 120, cf. Beidelman 1966),

The image of the symbolic animal is therefore necessarily a dualistic image, structurally homologous with the duality in human society and the human self between the real and the ultimate ideal, the actual and the longed for, even if subconsciously. . . . The distinctive peculiarity of animals is that, being at once close to man and strange to him, both akin to him and unalterably not-man, they are able to alternate, as objects of human thought, between the contiguity of the metonymic mode and the distanced, analogical mode of the metaphor. This means that, as symbols, animals have the convenient faculty of representing both existential and normative aspects of human experience, as well as their interrelation: what is beyond society, the ultimate ends of action, and the incorporation of such values in the structure of social perception and relations.

I would argue a different point: it is because pastoralists live in the closest intimacy with their herds, and because the herds 'naturally' are organized in ways that their owners cannot but construct as matrilineal and uxorilocal, that the pastoralists must organize themselves patrilineally and virilocally, in terms that thus define the 'animality' of the herds.

Engels argued long ago, following Morgan, that the domestication of animals and the emergence of pastoralism, with the development of wealth in animals, led to the replacement of matriliney and matriarchy by patriliney and patriarchy, which he called 'the world historical defeat of the female sex' (1972, p. 129, cf. Morgan 1877, p. 345). It seems to me equally plausible to argue an intellectualist explanation for the prevalence among pastoralists of patriliney and patriarchy: human pastoralist society necessarily constructs itself in this way to provide an otherwise absent distinction of humanity from animality.⁴

In this respect, again, ranching contrasts markedly with pastoralism. Ranching,

it will be recalled, is characterized by 'Asiatic' relations of production between the owners and the semi-wild herd community. One of the most powerful modern myths is that of the cowboy, the aggressive, macho, gun-toting individualist, engaged in competitive struggle not only with the human and animal predators (rustlers and Indians, and the wolves and bears of the wild), but with the very steers and broncos of the ranch. This struggle, no doubt influenced by the circuses, tournaments, bear-fights and bullfights of European tradition, has been glorified in the modern rodeo, where man and beast are matched as opponents in a ritualized – and gratuitously cruel – 'taming' of the wild.⁵

Urban-industrial society, complex, differentiated and dense, offers a wide variety of human Others: different classes and ethnic groups are all stereotyped for emulative or pejorative use by teachers or parents. In a society which offers little experience of what animals are 'really' like, they become stylized or idealized humans: hence the role of pets, zoos, and animal toys, the prevalence of animals in children's stories, and the universal success of both animal cartoons and wildlife documentaries. At the same time animal metaphors of 'bestiality' proliferate, focusing particularly on 'vermin', but also on factory-farmed livestock, with special emphasis on the pig (cf. Serpell 1986, ch. 1, Leach 1964). The animals of the mind remain with us, while real animals have become marginalized. As Berger (1977, p. 123) points out,

the marginalisation of animals is today being followed by the marginalisation and disposal of the only class who, throughout history, has remained familiar with animals and maintained the wisdom which accompanies that familiarity.

He means peasant farmers, but I would add pastoralists.

The marginalization of animals is not complete, of course. Pets are at the centre of modern urban society, but there they are treated as fellow-humans, just as humans very close to each other sometimes treat each other as 'pets'. Pets are found in all kinds of societies, as Serpell has recently shown, but it is surely significant that there has been a recent shift in Britain and the USA towards giving pets human names, the final reversal of the Nuer mode of naming people after favourite livestock.⁶ At the same time their sexual and dietary habits have been radically transformed: they are almost all spayed or neutered, and are taught to develop a 'taste' for human-defined flavours in artificial (canned) food. Any manifestation of 'animal' behaviour is embarrassing and checked.

The role of pets is complemented by animal toys, wildlife films and zoos. Berger notes that earlier animal toys were few and mainly stylized and symbolic: now they are highly realistic. 'The manufacture of realistic animal toys coincides, more or less, with the establishment of public zoos' (Berger 1977, p. 122). Enormously popular documentary films bring into the urban home vivid visual and aural images of wild animals – the wilder and more 'natural' the better.

However, in zoos the 'real thing' involves another marginalization, an artificial representation. Zoo animals have no need to hunt for food or to fight for mates, all is supplied. There is no competition with other animals or with

humans, hence the indifference displayed by most zoo animals to their human visitors – quite the opposite of their attitude in the wild. The animals are objectified and individualized. Even when there are groups – a troop of monkeys or a pride of lions – these groups are artificially isolated from danger and competition.

Whether pets or zoo animals, the 'live' creatures we observe in urban society are treated as individuals, as specimens; and urban society also individualizes and marginalizes people. Children are taken to zoos and are shown wild-animal films, ostensibly to teach them about the 'natural' life of animals. However, in effect zoo animals provide the metaphors for learning about the social life of humans. In zoos and documentaries what children (and adults) are most interested in is the display by animals (especially primates and higher mammals) of recognizably *human* behaviour and personality characteristics: feeding, copulating, mothering, playing and fighting.

It is the same with animal stories. From Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* to George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the stories are not about animals as such, but about the cultural rules, relationships and problems of human society. In the world of Donald Duck, as Berger (1977, p. 665) says, 'the pettiness of current social practices is *universalized* by being projected onto the animal kingdom . . . their physical features apart, these animals have been absorbed into the so-called silent majority'. The attraction of Shultz's Snoopy is his humanity. Even Richard Adams' *Watership Down* and *The plague dogs*, and to a lesser extent *Shardik*, which come closest of all to depicting 'what it is really like' to be a rabbit, a dog or a bear, are at base, and explicitly, about *human* problems and power relations. As Orwell (1970, p. 459) himself declared, however, 'the true struggle is between animals and humans'.⁷

Anthropomorphism and ethnocentrism

The obverse of the role of animal stories in our society is played by moral philosophers in their discussions of human nature and animal rights. Part of the concern of writers like Midgley is the misconception, in popular Western discourse, of animals as evil. She argues (Midgley 1979, 1983) that humans are capable of worse and more-motivated evil than animals, hence that the use of animal models of 'beastliness' and 'brutality' is inappropriate and unfair; and that the degree to which humans are animals can be assessed in terms of 'natural' characteristics such as aggression.

I have argued that any position, any set of ideas about human nature and the relation of humanity to animals, is a function of economic imperatives, on the one hand, and the social and political environment on the other. This argument is by no means novel: it is supported, for example, by Thomas (1983, p. 189) in his *Man and the natural world*, where he traces changing constructions of 'nature' in England from 1500 to 1800, showing among other things not only that accepted attitudes reflected current practices and class differences, but also that early pressures for reform – for example, opposition to battery-farming – were

motivated by self-interest. The modern case for 'animal liberation' is put in similar terms (Rowan & Tannenbaum 1986, p. 32, discussing Singer 1976, cf. Serpell 1986).

Thomas locates his discussion very carefully within particular cultural contexts, and at the same time is aware of how far other cultures and other times ask other questions and give other answers. Some philosophers seem to lack this perspective and betray a remarkable ethnocentricity. Midgley (1979), for example, in her stimulating but at times infuriating *Beast and man*, asks about 'the roots of human nature', but for her, 'humanity' – 'we' – are 'civilized Western man', and particularly the 20th-century, urban middle class. She uses 'man' – 'humanity' – very freely in this sense. Sometimes she is more explicit: referring, for example, to the idea of man the hunter as morally equal to wolf the hunter, she commits the following solecism: 'There are tribes [*sic*] that do think this way, but it is Western thought that I am exploring' (Midgley 1979, p. 31). This is later compounded by a standard philosopher's (Freudian?) myth of 'primitive man' with 'weak inhibitions' and consequent sense of guilt: 'the preoccupation of our early literature with bloodshed, guilt and vengeance suggests to me that these problems occupied man from a very early time' (Midgley 1979, pp. 40f.). Elsewhere in the book, 'modern man' and 'our own society' are reiterated without regard to cultural variation. In the concluding chapter there is a defence of 'anthropomorphism' – the imputation of human (but implicitly 20th-century, urban, middle-class) emotions and perceptions to other animals – with a consideration of various other possible 'morphisms'; it is significant that 'ethnomorphism' is not among them (Midgley 1979, pp. 344f., cf. 1983, ch. 11, Serpell 1986, pp. 138f.).

Moral philosophers look to ethology to tell them what animals are 'really' like, in order to discover what is natural about human behaviour. Referring to researchers such as Lorenz, Berger (1971, p. 1043) insists: 'Today animals are studied in laboratories and the findings are used to excuse, in so far as they are philosophical and popular, our present social nature'. Behaviourists, he says, 'imprison the very concept of man within the limits of what they conclude from their artificial tests with animals' (Berger 1977, p. 664). As Leach (1982, p. 99) puts it,

ethologists tend to describe their observations in language which takes the anthropomorphic analogy for granted. They regularly assert that the significance of an observed action is *symbolic* (rather than functional) and they start with a basic assumption that emotions and attitudes are just as much observable characteristics as colours or structures.

Ethologists and sociobiologists, whether working with ants or with chimpanzees, do not appear to be able to tackle the fundamental anthropological problem of translation. Wittgenstein's remark that 'if lions could speak, we could not understand them' has been quoted in relation to the problem of human cognitive relativity (Bloch 1977, p. 283, see also ch. 2, this book), but it is more directly relevant here. If, in describing behaviour in an alien *human* culture in terms

derived from our own, we run the constant risk of misrepresenting or completely mistaking thoughts, emotions, meanings and motivations, how much more is this likely to be the case when describing *non-human* behaviour, when an articulated language of 'native categories' is not even accessible for translation, and the only terms available are those of human language, and indeed those of a particular human culture. Modern philosophers and ethologists rightly decry the medieval anthropocentrism that stressed the uniqueness of humans and permitted the exploitation of animals, but they should not be allowed to resurrect the equally egregious – and unscientific – error of anthropomorphism, which not only treats animals as humans but also, by ignoring human cultural differences, privileges as supremely 'human' the cultural categories of the investigator.

Moral philosophers should surely be asked to be 'more carefully anthropological' in their approach to the question of the animality of humans, and to consider the possibility that the question is not a universal one and that the answers that are offered have a social and cultural context.

In effect, the ideas of many moral philosophers and sociobiologists are part of the same tradition as are animal stories for children, with their ancestry in the bestiaries and fables against which the philosophers inveigh. They both represent, as Sahlins (1976a, p. 106) has written of sociobiology, kinds of modern Western 'Scientific Totemism'. They are not interested in cultural variations, which are embarrassing to their simplistic and ethnocentric arguments. They differ from children's stories in that the latter do not pretend to a universality, and are not trying to teach what animals are 'really' like, whereas the philosophers, and the sociobiologists in particular, know or say nothing of cross-cultural variation in the cultural construction of humanity and animality, which has been my central concern in this chapter.

Notes

An early draft of this chapter was part of a lecture delivered at the Center for Middle East Studies and the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Austin; it was also presented at a seminar in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. I am grateful for helpful comments received on both occasions, and also to Tim Ingold for his extensive comments and criticisms. The faults in the present version remain my own.

- 1 See, for example, Wilson (1975, 1978), Dawkins (1979), Sahlins (1976a), Bock (1980), Leach (1982, ch. 3) and Geertz (1984, pp. 268f.).
- 2 See various chapters in MacCormack & Strathern (1980), and Ortner & Whitehead (1981); cf. Midgley (1983, ch. 7).
- 3 Andrew Turton reminds me that the Romans classified slaves as *instrumentum genus vocale*, and cattle as *instrumentum genus semi-vocale*; other 'tools', e.g. *plaustra*, wagons, were *instrumentum mutum* (see Varro, *De re rustica*).
- 4 This argument was suggested in Tapper (1979, p. 293) and is elaborated in a forthcoming paper.
- 5 See Lawrence (1982) on the rodeo, and Lawrence (1986) on bears; cf. Azoy (1982) on *buzkashi* in Afghanistan; Douglass (1984) on bullfighting in Spain.

- 6 Serpell (1986); see Lévi-Strauss (1966, pp. 204f.), Thomas (1983, ch. 3) and Sahlins (1976b, p. 170) on the naming of pets. Levinson (1972) and his followers take a much more positive perspective on the role of pets in modern urban society; see Hines & Bustad (1986) and Katcher (1986).
- 7 Animals in fiction are discussed briefly by Burt & Harding (1986).

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5 'Animal' in biological and semiotic perspective

THOMAS A. SEBEOK

Whatever else an animal may be, it is clear that each is a living system, or subsystem, a complex array of atoms organized and maintained according to certain principles, the most important among these being negative entropy. The classic statement emphasizing this fact is to be found in Schrödinger's famous book, *What is life?* (1946, p. 77), where he addresses an 'organism's astonishing gift of concentrating a "stream of order" on itself and thus escaping the decay into atomic chaos - of "drinking orderliness" from a suitable environment'.

The importance of Schrödinger's formulation, with its stress on the generation of order, seems to me to derive from two crucial implications. First, in invoking the notion of entropy, which in statistical mechanics is fundamental to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, it authenticates that life conforms to the basic laws of physics (Ling 1934). Secondly, since negative entropy is closely coupled with the notion (or, more accurately, a notion) of information - that which 'embodies, expresses, and often specifies order' (Medawar & Medawar 1983, p. 205) - it demonstrates the salience of semiotics to an understanding of life. Schrödinger himself (1946, p. 79) hinted at the latter when he remarked on the power of a group of atoms - he called them a 'tiny central office' - to produce 'orderly events' in the isolated cell, and then went on to ask: 'do they not resemble stations of a local government dispersed through the body, communicating with each other with great ease, thanks to the code that is common to all of them?'

If the subject matter of semiotics 'is the exchange of any messages whatever and of the systems of signs which underlie them' (Sebeok 1985, p. 1), the amount of information is 'a measure of the degree of order which is peculiarly associated with those patterns which are distributed as messages in time' (Wiener 1950, p. 21). In short, life couples two transmutative processes, one energetic or physical, the other informational or semiotic. The former has to do with the conversion of low-entropy articles, integrating energy flowing from external sources, into high-entropy waste products disgorged into other open systems; the latter points to the transformation of signs into (as a rule) more-developed signs (an identification of organisms with signs that goes back at least to Peirce 1868).

There are two additional striking properties of life. One of these is hierarchical organization (cf. Bonner 1969, Salthe 1985). This is a universal characteristic which life shares with the rest of the cosmos and which defines, in the overall architecture of the universe, its position on a continuum of scale between the vanishingly small (leptons, photons and quarks) and the indefinitely large (galactic superclusters).

The second conspicuous property lies in the contrast between, and fundamen-

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