

Animals Aren't Children nor Automatons: Facing Distasteful Realities Through Examining My Own Animality

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There's a tendency within Western human society to either anthropomorphize or mechanize animals, treating them either as mini-humans or as autonomous machines. Both of these attitudes are exceedingly unhealthy once you actually look at them in-depth, enabling people to mistreat individual animals and entire species under guises of "empathy" or "righteousness" depending. For examples of what I'm talking about, just look at the ways in which humans will go out of their way to eradicate keystone species because, instead of viewing them as living, thinking creatures, they simply equate them to livestock-killing machines; on the other side of the coin, you can also easily see the ways in which people will twist themselves into pretzels to defend Mr. Snuffykins the Fourth's little kitten adventures outside unsupervised, eradicating the local wildlife and spreading disease with reckless abandon, because "it's what he wants!"

One of the most obvious side effects of identifying as nonhuman within a nonhuman system is the way it effects my understandings around animals. Coming face-to-snout with my own animality has forced me to rethink so many of the perspectives I was taught surrounding animals when I was younger, turning previously asserted societal truths into much more dubious claims when they're looked at more closely. It's also caused me to have empathy for animals that might not have existed in the same way otherwise: it's not that I think I can magically put myself in the shoes (or rather, the paws) of other animals that I encounter, but instead it's that I feel a kinship to non-human animals for their differences from humanity. I see myself in them and in doing so, I can also recognize important realities that surround them.

Animals are not humans. Animals are not machines. Animals are animals, and that comes with an existence and emotional economies and understandings wholly different from those which humans experience. When I was younger, I claimed to love animals, and I certainly wasn't lying in that I felt strongly for animals. But that emotion was nestled inseparably from the societal understandings of animals that I'd grown up with, entangled in a mess of anthropomorphism that I didn't recognize until well into

adulthood. I supported my parent's decision to have outdoor cats because, "I can't imagine being cooped up like that!" and "pets like cats and dogs know how to take care of themselves outside!" I couldn't strongly supporting hunting, trapping, fishing, or anything of the sort, because, "how can someone just go out and kill animals like that?" I refused to have any opinions on insect-based diets because I didn't understand why they were different ethically from meat-based diets, because "if it's bad to eat meat because you're killing animals, then isn't it bad to eat insects because you're killing them too?"

I wasn't entirely ignorant, just naïve and too trusting of what I had been taught about animals growing up. But as I got older, I was more and more often discovering exactly how much my own instincts crossed over into the messy territories I'd previously disavowed or avoided entirely.

I'll be honest—I have the territorial instincts of an overprotective dragon and the prey drive of a hunting dog that's been bred for the job over several hundred years. This is a nasty combination when you put them together and something I've had to recognize and take responsibility for in my day-to-day life. These aren't my only ugly instincts, of course, but taking these two in specific by the horns is what kickstarted this process of realization for me.

Prey drive involves not just the stalking and chasing, it also involves the killing. The former two are easy to handle, but the latter can be something that's hard to run through a standard society moral sieve—not only do you have to get through any sort of internalized issues you may have with the idea of death and killing for food overall, but now you also have to be cognizant of the overarching importance of death and the cycles of life. It's the startling realization that things can't live forever, and also that things *shouldn't* live forever. Death, in some ways, is a tool to sustain life, both in a literal sense of hunting and eating, and in a metaphorical sense of sustainability. It's not something to be avoided or shunned.

Territorial urges are less traditionally "ugly," but some of the emotions that tie into them often can be quite nasty. It's less the urges themselves that are important here, and more the recognition that these urges are oftentimes unhealthy and unproductive when you're living in the body of a group-oriented social primate. Seeing

how my own urges could be personally destructive to the point where indulging them was virtually never an option gave me that last piece of the puzzle I needed to realize that animal instincts, including those outside my own, aren't these sort of magical, pseudo-divine Gift of How Mother Nature Knows Best. I'd never realized it before, but there's this sort of mysticism that most people attribute to animal instincts, even on domesticated animals—there's an underlying idea that Animals Know Best. And this realization just snowballed into a larger perspective on how much and how often people fuck up understanding animals.

Understanding that death wasn't the awful, horrible thing I'd been taught to view it as and that animals were neither the innocent, magically-knowing beings nor the unfeeling killing machines that they were portrayed to be forced me to rethink a majority of the perspectives I had on animals. In my adulthood and my introspection into my animality, I also gained a larger feeling of, as some might put it, "global citizenship," or of having a responsibility to the people, animals, and environment around me to do as much good as I realistically could in my day-to-day life and planned future.

In the past, I'd justified my inaction towards certain problems and my apathy towards them with my "love" for animals. I hadn't considered a larger perspective in part because I hadn't wanted to and the cognitive dissonance of doing so was just too awful to bear. If I loved cats and my parents let my own cat outside, then surely my cat belonged and wanted to be outside, because the only other option would be that my parents would be putting my cat in danger, which would obviously never happen since I loved him and also he wanted to be outside anyways so he must be fine. That was the sort of loops of circular logic I was stuck in and unable to claw my way out of, where I was using my own emotions and the perceived emotions or desires of animals in order to justify my family's behavior and my own lack of intervention.

This was obviously happening on a much broader scale than just with my personal family cat (who ended up being, unfortunately, lost to a predictable and avoidable death from being outdoors), and was something that was occurring on all levels of my ways of understanding animals and the environment. I loved animals, so I couldn't be pro-hunting, because hunting killed animals, and killing/death was always

bad. I loved animals, so I couldn't be pro-ethical farming and ethical slaughter for the same reason. The list goes on and on.

But what's ethical doesn't always equate to what makes us feel the most warm and fuzzy in our hearts, and that was the lesson I learnt. People can't interact with animals like they're fellow humans, because that just sets everything up for disaster: no matter how much I love a dog and a dog wants my triple-chocolate chocolate-chip cookie, it's my moral duty to tell the dog no and not give them the cookie. The dog has emotions and intelligence, but the dog is not a human, and the dog does not wholly understand what eating the cookie entails (sickness or death). We can treat singular animals with compassion while still not treating them like humans.

In the same vein of thought, we can't afford an endless well of compassion and gentleness to everything. We can't live a life where we all hold hands/paws/fins with the animals and sing a silly song and no one ever dies or is eaten. When we try to do so we end up doing so much more harm than people realize: the feral cat populations exploding across the United States are causing ecological damage on an untold scale. But instead of culling these colonies, people insist on either encouraging them or enacting trap-neuter-release programs, which will take too long functionally to mitigate the damage without additional assistance via local containment programs (including the containment of non-adoptables). But people don't want to give their money (tax or otherwise) to help such programs, because that would be engaging with the issue too closely—instead they're content to protest any sort of culling on the sidelines, native wildlife's dwindling populations and local environmental endangerment be damned. This is just one of the most relatable examples, but believe me when I say there's plenty more out there.

My empathy and affection towards animals have only grown stronger as I've gotten older. When I have the chance to be compassionate to animals, I am! But with that said, loving and relating to animals does not give me a "get out of jail free" card to use empathy nor a misconstruction of morality in order to disengage from the distasteful realities of existence and the responsibilities I have by being in a human body. I can't bury my head in the sand and go out feeding ibises in the street because they're peckish, while ignoring the fact that I'm acclimating them to human presence in

an area where they can (and should) reliably forage for themselves; I can't plug my ears and bad-mouth the annual lionfish hunts of the year because I think the fish are pretty and shouldn't be killed, even though they cause massive damage to the coasts; so on and so forth. Animals are not humans. Animals are not automatons. Animals are animals, and they need to be treated as such, with all the complexities that entails. I'm lucky in that viewing and examining my own animality has enlivened my perspective on animals as a whole to allow me to do such.