

## **From Over the Horizon: Animal Alterity and Liminal Intimacy beyond the Anthropomorphic Embrace**

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### **Introduction**

The opposition between a vision of human-animal difference and a vision of human-animal similarity frames much of our thinking about nonhuman animals. The former has it that while human and nonhuman animals may be alike in certain respects, they are nevertheless fundamentally dissimilar in terms of some defining qualities, or the characteristics deemed most important or most relevant to the context of comparison, whether their cognitive, affective or social capacities, their sentience, self-consciousness or subjectivity, their symbolic or linguistic abilities, their basic physiology or intrinsic moral worth. This is the discontinuity thesis, which posits not just difference but an irremediable distance between human and nonhuman animal, an existential schism or ontological gulf separating two different forms of life, corresponding to distinct modes of existence. In this vision, animals are always to some degree absent, unknown and unknowable for human beings, hence animal otherness or alterity is irreducible. The contrasting position has it that whatever their specific differences, humans and nonhuman animals are essentially similar kinds of being, fundamentally alike in terms of the characteristics or qualities that are most important or most relevant for the purposes of human-animal comparison. This is the continuity thesis, which posits not just similarity or likeness but a fundamental ontological proximity and co-

presence of human and animal lives, wherein different species are understood as diverse but related forms of a common mode of existence in a shared lifeworld.

Many of the central discussions and concepts in human-animal studies are shaped and underpinned by the tension between these ways of thinking about animals and human-animal relations, between notions of animal alterity and proximity. This article traces this tension through the concepts of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, which are so pivotal for debates in the field, noting that discontinuity positions are frequently aligned with anthropocentrism and evaluated negatively, while continuity positions are aligned with anthropomorphism and evaluated positively. It is argued that this is too simplistic, and that the ontologies of presence and absence, knowing and unknowing, that underpin conceptions of human-animal continuity and discontinuity are more complex than this dualistic vision allows. Therefore, rather than aligning animal ontologies under two overarching ethical poles, this article will unearth some of the ways in which ontologies of proximity and distanciation can take unexpected forms, and argue that a counter-intuitive case can be made that ontologies of distance, absence and discontinuity, far from being indissolubly linked with anthropocentrism, may in fact proffer a different kind of non-anthropocentrism and a distinctive vision of human-animal intimacy. Moreover, it will be argued that this provides an important corrective to the colonisation of difference and the erasure of alterity that is an unintended consequence of the ontologies of co-presence and proximity that underpin both the practice of anthropomorphism and its theoretical articulations.

### **The Sceptical Renunciation**

Anthropomorphism is one of the most pivotal concepts in the field of human-animal studies. The word refers to the misattribution of human characteristics to nonhuman entities, and its early usages referred mainly to the tendency to imagine

gods and deities in human form (Malmorstein 1937, cited in Daston and Mitman 2005, 2; Taylor 2011, 266). It acquired a broader meaning and became more prominent in the context of the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution, whence it was deployed to castigate those who persisted with the practice of attributing human-like motivations and intentions to natural phenomena, in ignorance or defiance of the emergent scientific worldview with its stricter distinction between human subjects and natural processes (Sax 2011, 31; Evernden 1992). This use of anthropomorphism as a disparaging accusation of intellectual naivety, self-indulgence, superstition or infantilism, and thus as something to be scrupulously avoided by anyone who considered themselves rational and sensible, became deeply inscribed within modern and scientific ways of thinking. It remains the dominant normative use of the term, ensuring that ‘something of the religious taboo still clings to secular, modern instances of anthropomorphism’ (Daston and Mitman 2005, 2).

The modern renunciation of anthropomorphism was closely bound up with the scientific revolution, which saw the rise of a more consistently human-centred worldview, in which human beings were increasingly hailed as the source of all meaning and value, and nonhuman entities in all their diverse forms correspondingly ascribed the status of ‘things’, whose value was reduced to the instrumental value of providing resources for human exploitation (Thomas 1983, 29; Steiner 2005, 135; Nimmo 2011, 60-61). This trajectory is clear in the history of the use of animals in experimental science, for example, where the powerful taboo against anthropomorphism was used to cultivate a form of extreme scepticism that was ready to deny animal consciousness and suffering against all evidence of the senses. The paradigmatic example of this attitude is the 17th century philosopher and scientist René Descartes, who – notwithstanding some attempted revisionist accounts – is widely regarded as a decisive figure in establishing anthropocentric scepticism concerning animal consciousness as a

core element of respectable scientific practice, and who was therefore ‘pivotal in elaborating the foundations of a view of radical discontinuity between humans and animals’ (Crist 2000, 211). In his *Philosophical Letters* he develops the view that the mind or ‘soul’ is exclusively a possession of human beings, thus:

There is no prejudice to which we are all more accustomed from our earliest years than the belief that dumb animals think. Our only reason for this belief is that fact that we see that many of the organs of animals are not very different from ours in shape and movement. [...] I came to realise, however, that there are two different principles causing our motions: one is purely mechanical and corporeal; [...] the other is the incorporeal mind, the soul, which I have defined as thinking substance. Thereupon I investigated more carefully whether the motions of animals originated from both these principles or from only one. I soon saw clearly that they could all originate from the mechanical and corporeal principle, and I thenceforth regarded it as certain and established that we cannot at all prove the presence of a thinking soul in animals (Cited in Crist 2000, 211-12).

The corollary of this for Descartes, as Gary Steiner (2005, 135) outlines, is that:

Nature is taken in its essence to be pure corporeality, which for Descartes is fully explicable in terms of inert mechanism. Whatever is pure corporeality or mechanism is not worthy of moral respect [...] To the extent that Descartes considers animals to be mechanism and nothing more he is committed to the view that animals can be used like any natural resource, without moral scruple.

Though the overt brutality that tended to accompany this and which characterised the scientific treatment of animals in Descartes’ time is now culturally effaced and hidden from public view, a disdain for anthropomorphism remains very much entrenched in scientific discourse and knowledge-practices and is still widespread in late modern technoscientific societies. As Lynda Birke (1994, 46-48) has argued, the cultivation of an attitude of anthropocentric scepticism remains a key element in notions of scientific ‘objectivity’ and in the construction of scientific identities, as manifest in the emotional distancing techniques that are incorporated into routine practices wherever animals are used in research laboratories. While in

the context of intensive animal agriculture the Cartesian view of animals as ‘pure corporeality or mechanism’ which ‘can be used like any natural resource, without moral scruple’ (Steiner 2005, 135), has been materially realised in the mechanisation and industrialisation of mass slaughter. The clear historical and philosophical connections between anthropocentric ontology and cruel or exploitative practices have in turn driven a sustained critique of anthropocentric orthodoxy throughout the field of human-animal studies, central to which has been a reappraisal of anthropomorphism as a vital critical resource for thinking against the grain of anthropocentrism.

Numerous scholars from human-animal studies, as well as natural scientists sympathetic to more interpretatively nuanced approaches to studies of animal behaviour and cognition have contributed to a concerted rethinking and rehabilitation of anthropomorphism in an attempt to contest its status as little more than sentimental delusion (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Mitchell, Thompson and Miles 1997; Asquith 1997; Crist 2000; Alger and Alger 2003; Irvine 2004; Hearne 2007; Vitale 2011). This is not just a matter of theory or data; proponents of the new anthropomorphism are able to draw upon a vast and intricate history of anthropomorphic forms of thought and belief among non-Western cultures and peoples, as well as some spheres of modern and contemporary human-animal relations and interaction where anthropomorphism has continued to thrive. Indeed, as James Serpell puts it, despite its intellectually maligned status, ‘anthropomorphism is the normal and immediate response of the vast majority of people to animals’ (1996, 172). In modern societies anthropomorphism is most visibly prevalent in the practice of living with domestic companion animals or ‘pets’, where the animals are often regarded and treated as individual subjects or nonhuman persons with their own unique personalities and biographies (Serpell 1996, 106-7; Fox 2006; Charles and Davies 2008). Extensive efforts have been made in recent decades to re-evaluate such everyday anthropomorphisms as

legitimate knowledge-practices which, though empirically fallible in any specific instance, are not a priori less valid than the forms of anthropocentric scepticism that remain embedded in the modern scientific worldview.

In a broad sense the reappraisal of anthropomorphism is consistent with work on 'situated knowledges' in science studies, which challenges the doctrine that science is the universal and exclusive legitimate form of knowledge, by showing how science is not monolithic but multiple and heterogeneous, and just one of many possible ways of knowing, the efficacy and appropriateness of which are always socially and politically situated and relative to context (Haraway 1988). We would not tend to believe that science should be the arbiter of the meaning of a poem, whether a work of art is beautiful or significant, or how to judge a person's character. Indeed the social interpretations that constantly enable us to make sense of the meaningful actions and intentions of those around us have little to do with science; hence to treat such phenomena as akin to data in a scientific experiment, with our own interpretations treated as hypotheses, would be to misapply scepticism in a manner that would profoundly blinker and inhibit us by excluding the interpretive competence that is intrinsic to our ability to participate in social life, and which has evolved in organic interconnection with our existence as social beings. For the proponents of anthropomorphism, the same kind of inappropriate application of scepticism characterises anthropocentric notions of human-nonhuman discontinuity, wherein we repress or refuse to acknowledge the interspecies intersubjectivity that is otherwise tangible, experientially given and open to view in our embodied encounters with other animals. Anthropomorphism, it is argued, though fallible, provides a vital way for us to free ourselves from this self-imposed myopia.

One prominent form of the discontinuity thesis against which the new anthropomorphism pits itself, is the conviction that human language is unique in facilitating the kind of abstract semiotic communication that makes our

immersion in a social world of intersubjective meanings and symbolic interactions possible, so that language ‘has constituted the “official” barrier between humans and nonhumans’ (Irvine 2004, 120; Trachsel 2010). This in turn makes possible a dualism in which language-endowed human beings are grasped as social and cultural subjects whereas nonhuman animals are held to inhabit the object-world of nature, or viewed as proto-humans in a state of animality from which humans are deemed to have ascended, entering into a qualitatively different state of being in an evolutionary process which is cast as both progress and liberation. This idea and the fundamental human/animal distinction it entails has recurred time and again throughout the history of Western philosophy (Steiner 2005). Critics have pointed out that the consistent result of such thinking is to reinscribe the core ontological structure of Descartes’ philosophy, in which humans alone are subjects possessed of mind and subjectivity, in what is otherwise a mechanistic universe, with animals thereby relegated to the status of ‘beast machines’ lacking any ‘inner’ subjective experience (Crist 2000, 211-217; Plumwood 2002).

Another form of neo-Cartesianism that flows from this is the social constructivist approach, which is essentially agnostic about animal subjectivity but follows a sceptical rationale whereby, because we cannot verify our beliefs about the ‘inner’ experiences of animals in the way that is deemed possible with other human beings by means of language, our beliefs about animals must therefore be regarded as purely speculative and very likely to be projections of our own conceits onto the animal. This view was given one of its most influential expressions by the sociologist Keith Tester, who controversially argued that:

Animals are nothing other than what we make them. Society invests animals with moral significance and presses codes of normative behaviour. Society uses animals to understand itself. [...] Animals are a blank paper, which can be inscribed with any message and symbolic meaning that society wishes (1991, 42, 46).

This is underpinned by a Kantian epistemology entailing a conception of phenomenal meaning as separate from and autonomous of a noumenal realm of ultimately unknowable things-in-themselves. Thus the animal as it exists in-itself is forever absent to us and unknowable, it is argued by social constructivists like Tester, so we should refrain from making ontological statements about animal subjectivity at all, or at least admit that our anthropomorphic perceptions of animals are as self-referential and potentially self-deluding as our tendency to see human faces in the clouds.

### **The Anthropomorphic Embrace**

The interconnected tenets of scepticism, dualism and constructivism have been challenged by scholars who have drawn upon the turn to corporeality and the senses across the social sciences to stress the material, multi-sensory and profoundly embodied nature of interaction. Emphasising the many extra-linguistic dimensions of meaningful communication, including gesture, bodily comportment, facial expression and vocal intonation, language has been decentred as the privileged medium of communication and repositioned as just one element in a much broader spectrum of embodied interaction and communicative intercorporeality. Arluke and Sanders for example argue that ‘language is overrated as the primary vehicle of cognition and coordinated social interaction [...] The presumption that language is essential in order for an actor to experience empathy with others, construct viable lines of collective action, and engage in cognitive activities is, at best, debatable’ (1996, 79). In this vision, it is not just language that carries meaning and facilitates understanding, but rather, living bodies are themselves semiotic and replete with meanings, and language itself is material and bodily, consisting of material inscriptions, corporeal performances and embodied communicative actions (Shapiro 1990; Sanders 1993; Arluke and Sanders 1996; Myers 2003; Alger and Alger 2003; Sanders 2003; Irvine 2004).

Within sociological human-animal studies these approaches have been developed predominantly through ethnographic studies of human relationships and interactions with domesticated animals, either companion animals or working animals. This focus is unsurprising given that this is the sphere in which human-animal interactions are most readily accessible and amenable to both observation and participation for most people; those who live or work with animals have the opportunity to establish the routinised forms of interaction that give rise to the kinds of embodied understandings that are given such emphasis in these approaches. The possibility of meaningful interspecies understanding is thus posited as relying upon a sustained and iterative mutual accommodation at the point of encounter between different forms of life, in the context of regular interaction. It follows that there is little of significance to say about the nature of more fleeting encounters, perhaps with unfamiliar animals, in terms of this approach. Put simply, one must gradually learn to understand an animal, and that learning process is essentially bodily and kinesthetic - one learns to perceive and to feel the meaning of an animal's behaviour, its qualities of movement, its vocalisations and expressions, firstly by learning the corporeal 'grammar', as it were, of the species, and then by learning through embodied interaction the more idiosyncratic 'habitus' of the individual animal (Shapiro 1990; Sanders 1993; Brandt 2004). Only then can we claim to know an animal, not because we have penetrated an otherwise inaccessible interiority and gained knowledge of the animal's 'mind', but because we are entangled sufficiently in the animal's embodied life to grow intimately familiar with its way of being in the world and with its intrinsically communicative corporeality or embodied consciousness; thus:

The understandings we derive in our encounters with companion animals are found largely in our connection to them built up over the course of the routine, practical, and empathetic interactions that make up our shared biographies [...] In

other words, through understanding the bodies of animals we actively construct a view of their minds (Arluke and Sanders 1996, 78).

Those keen to underline its significance as an alternative to anthropocentric scepticism will often refer to this interactionist, phenomenological and intercorporeal model of interspecies knowing as a form of anthropomorphism. But properly understood it is not so much a reassertion of anthropomorphism as a challenge to the dominant framework in which this concept is embedded. Strictly speaking, the term ‘anthropomorphism’ presumes that certain human characteristics are exclusively human, and the central point of this work is to challenge precisely that, to show that mindedness, intentionality, subjectivity and self-hood, social communication, culture and complex cognition, are not exclusively human but distributed throughout multiple species. A growing abundance of empirical research in cultural primatology and cognitive ethology affirms a strikingly similar conclusion (De Waal 2001; Boesch 2003; De Waal and Tyack 2003; Bekoff 2004).<sup>1</sup> It follows that the interpretative understanding of an animal’s behaviour in ‘human-like’ terms may not necessarily involve the projection of uniquely or essentially human characteristics onto the animal, as ‘anthropomorphism’ presumes, but rather an openness and attentiveness to characteristics that are in fact shared with the animal, which is an important distinction.

Extending this logic, Kay Milton (2005) has suggested that such interspecies interpretive practices are better referred to as ‘egomorphism’ in order to jettison the Cartesian baggage of ‘anthropomorphism’. For Milton, egomorphism denotes not the projection of *human* characteristics onto nonhuman animals, but the perception in other animals of characteristics of *oneself* as a living being, that are to some extent shared with other forms of life. Others have

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<sup>1</sup> For a more in-depth engagement with ethological and primatological studies of animal being and subjectivity and with the relationship between scientific and interpretative ways of knowing animals, see Nimmo (2012).

proposed the term ‘critical anthropomorphism’ as a way to distinguish careful practices of embodied interspecies interpretation grounded in interaction and informed by relevant knowledge of the animal’s physiology and natural history, from ‘sentimental anthropomorphism’ as the careless attribution of erroneous human motivations to an animal on the basis of inattentive observation (Fisher 1991; Burghardt 1991; Irvine 2004). Frans De Waal (1999) similarly distinguishes between ‘anthropocentric anthropomorphism’, which ‘naively attributes human feelings and thoughts to animals based on insufficient information or wishful thinking’ (260), and ‘animalcentric anthropomorphism’, which uses human experience as a sensitising metaphoric tool with which ‘to look at the world from the animal’s point of view, taking its *Umwelt*, intelligence, and natural tendencies into account’ (266).<sup>2</sup>

These more nuanced understandings are undeniably valuable; not only because they explicitly problematise the anthropocentric assumptions embedded in ‘anthropomorphism’ as usually understood, but also because they retain the possibility of using the term in a critique of practices of interspecies meaning-making that are characterised by an inattentiveness to animal being. What even these more nuanced understandings still share with less sophisticated forms of anthropomorphism, however, is the attempt to bring animals near, to render them familiar and knowable, in order to establish their essential likeness and continuity with ourselves, in an assertion of ontological proximity which is taken to be the foundation either of ethical relations or of knowing per se.

A common argument in this connection is that anthropomorphism – though perhaps limited or flawed – is ultimately inescapable, and provides our only way of relating to other animals, because as human beings we will always perceive nonhuman animals in terms of what we know, and what we know is only

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<sup>2</sup>The concept of ‘*Umwelt*’ is developed in the work of Jacob von Uexküll (1909) and refers to animals’ unique sensory perceptions of their environments.

ourselves and our own experience. As John Kennedy laments, ‘anthropomorphic thinking about nonhuman animals is built into us. We could not abandon it even if we wished to’ (1992, 5, cited in De Waal 1999, 264). But by implicitly separating epistemology from ontology – questions of how we come to know the world from questions of the nature of the world that shapes our knowledge – and privileging the former, this reinscribes the dualism of noumena and phenomena which is the essential architecture of scepticism; though anthropomorphism is posited as a partial solution, a sort of analogical bridge to others, this is really no more than a compassionate twist on the same conceptual framework. It also assumes that we truly know our own selves, our own being, which presupposes the sort of relatively unified, coherent, self-transparent – in short, *knowable* – self, that is central to Cartesian rationalism and the obverse of its scepticism. But there seems little reason why such sceptical logic, once employed, should not equally apply to our own being; when we ‘introspect’ do we not face a complex maelstrom of fleeting sensations, fragmentary impressions, half-formed thoughts and contradictory emotions on which we impose meaning, no more immediately graspable and coherent than the world beyond? Thus to avoid reinscribing the architecture of anthropocentrism and the Cartesian humanist subject in these ways, we must eschew the initial separation of knowledge from world that underpins the sceptical insistence upon inescapable self-referentiality.

The identification of an underlying anthropocentric architecture does not exhaust the critique of anthropomorphism, however. For while it is true that a commonplace motive for raising the charge of anthropomorphism pejoratively is to enact a Cartesian-rationalist policing of the human/animal boundary, this is not always the case, as Val Plumwood argues:

The question of anthropomorphism can often be raised with some greater validity in the context of the denial of difference which is a key part of structures of subordination and colonisation to which animals are subject. The charge of anthropomorphism may then legitimately draw our attention to a loss of

sensitivity to and respect for animal difference in humanising representation (2002, 59).

This speaks to the core concern of this paper, namely, that even in its more sophisticated and critical re-articulations, anthropomorphism ultimately manifests a humanising and colonising dynamic, asserting proximity and similarity at the cost of eradicating distance and alterity. There are important resonances here with the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1969) and Jacques Derrida (1999, 2000), for whom alterity is understood not as difference in positive terms, but as necessarily absolute and irreducible. The implications of this overarching conception of alterity as radical otherness are sometimes overlooked by scholars focused more narrowly upon what each of these writers had to say specifically about animals and ethics. What is most of interest in this case, however, is that for both thinkers, despite their differences, alterity must ultimately be either respected in its incommensurability, or negated by transformation into the self-same (Levinas 1969, 121). As Susan Sencindiver explains: ‘For Levinas and Derrida, the hospitality towards the other is unconditional, the ethical obligation infinite; and to prevent converting and vitiating the other, defined by and for itself, into an other-than-self, they contend that otherness must always be recognised as Altogether-Other’ (2014, 1).

It follows that the attempt to assert relatedness through continuity with the other and to establish and measure the extent of similarity and difference with respect to self and other, is to bring the other into the orbit of the self in a kind of ontological narcissism that negates the very alterity it seeks to recognise and understand. Significantly, this inverts the usual logic whereby establishing continuity with the other is taken to be the essential ground of ethical relations, and ‘othering’ is regarded suspiciously as a preparation for unethical transgression. On the contrary, on this Levinasian view, it is precisely the acknowledgement of the other as other, as absolute and incommensurable, hence

as existing in-and-for-itself rather than in-relation-to-oneself, that is the true ground of ethical relations. Indeed the presumption that the other is knowable, similar beneath their difference, and essentially ‘like me’, is a quintessentially unethical relation as it subsumes the other to one’s own horizon of understanding.

If the impulse for this kind of colonising appropriation of alterity was intrinsic to relations of intimacy, as might well be supposed, then this would present an insuperable problem, and could perhaps justify the kinds of liberationist stances that regard all forms of human-animal intimacy as forms of domination. That is not the intention here however; rather, I want to articulate a different kind of intimacy, which I believe exists at the margins of contemporary human-animal relations, and which – though subordinate and liminal – has not entirely disappeared. It is an intimacy predicated not upon co-presence but instead upon the maintenance of distance, rooted in an intuitive recognition that the intimacy of proximity tends to inadvertently colonise otherness and render it invisible or mundane, transforming alterity into identity. This suffocating movement is eschewed by what I want to call liminal intimacy, or intimacy at a distance, for which closeness lies not in possessing or bringing near, nor in knowing as such, but instead in a relational being-with-otherness that is comfortable with degrees of unknowing. The following sections seek to further articulate and develop this by exploring some parallel and related ideas across a range of literature and examples.

### **Intimacy and Distance**

In his influential essay *Why Look at Animals?*, first published in 1980, John Berger argues that, prior to what he calls ‘the rupture’ of modernity and industrialization, animals ‘were with man at the centre of this world’ (2009, 12), before articulating a striking narrative of the gradual disappearance and marginalisation of animals from human life, by which he means their ontological

and existential disappearance. In outlining the multiple dimensions and technologies of this disappearance, Berger argues not just that animals have been made culturally and physically distant, or that they have been removed from our lives, in the way that Keith Thomas (1983) for example argues that animals were progressively removed from view in everyday life by the processes of urbanisation. On the contrary, for Berger animals are more centrally in view than ever before. In zoos, aquariums, safari parks and animal documentaries, for example, we often have a less obstructed view of animals than would be conceivable without the assemblage of numerous technologies, and yet the animal itself is irremediably out of focus; indeed the clearer our view of the animal the more invisible it becomes. The key to this paradox, for Berger, is that the existential significance of the animal has been almost entirely negated, because what he calls ‘the look of the animal’, meaning our relational awareness of the animal’s unique phenomenological and experiential world, comparable to our own yet different in ways that can never be entirely known, has been dissipated along with a sense of the animal’s autonomy and agency. The significance of the animal’s gaze has been marginalised in proportion to the extent that animals have become always the observed rather than the observers:

In the accompanying ideology, animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are (Berger 2009, 27)

If any development might appear to contradict this thesis then the obvious candidate would be the proliferation of domestic companion animals; how can animals be said to have ‘disappeared’, when increasing numbers of people live together more closely in non-instrumental relations with animals than ever before? But Berger dismisses pets as ‘creatures of their owner’s way of life’,

which cannot offer the ‘parallelism of their separate lives’ that was central to the existential relationship with animals prior to ‘the rupture’. This is because ‘in this relationship the autonomy of both parties has been lost’ (2009, 25); the owner has become psychologically dependent upon the animal for certain aspects of his or her self-identity, Berger suggests, while the animal has become almost entirely physically dependent upon the owner.

There are many aspects of Berger’s argument that are problematic. His sweeping view of human relations with companion animals, for example, is difficult to sustain in light of numerous studies grounded in ethnographic research which have suggested that ‘pet-keeping’ encompasses diverse forms of human-animal relations, by no means all of which resemble Berger’s model (Fox 2006; Charles and Davies 2008; Podberscek, Paul and Serpell 2000). It also implies too sharp a conceptual distinction between the wild and the domesticated in a way that ultimately rests upon a humanist conception of human beings as separate from nature. I do not want to endorse or defend these aspects of Berger’s essay, nor many of its historical and empirical claims. But underlying his account there is nevertheless a nuanced sense of how proximity may paradoxically abolish a kind of intimacy that is predicated upon distance and alterity, which I think is worth retaining. It is valuable because in making the case for distance, difference, and what Berger calls ‘the parallelism of separate lives’ (2009, 15, 25) it pulls against the tendency to rather uncritically equate anthropomorphism with human-animal intimacy, and anthropocentrism, conversely, with distance. Indeed, it would be unsurprising according to this latter way of thinking if Berger were to disdain anthropomorphism as a consequence of his dismissive attitude toward pet-keeping relations, but this is not his position; on the contrary, Berger regards anthropomorphism as a residue of a relationship between humanity and animals that has been lost:

Until the nineteenth century, anthropomorphism was integral to the relation between man and animal and was [...] the residue of the continuous use of animal metaphor. In the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them. And in this new solitude, anthropomorphism makes us doubly uneasy (2009, 21).

So the familiar conceptual schema is not operating here; rather than physical and social proximity and the sharing of time, space, and lived activity being equated with intimacy, the closeness which these factors would seem to facilitate is negated by the wider asymmetrical relationship in which the human being effectively controls the animal's conditions of existence. This control, and the erasure of the animal's autonomy and agency it involves, is held to destroy the possibility of an authentic encounter with animal alterity as such, and thus to hollow out the intimacy that might otherwise accompany the proximity of shared lives.

In its apparent reliance upon some underpinning notion of animal 'freedom' as absence of human control, this might be read as a romantic critique of animal domestication, and again perhaps as broadly consistent with some variants of a liberationist approach to human-animal relations, wherein 'the wild' becomes translated into 'the free'. But Berger is quite clear that the 'rupture' he refers to, and which initiated the epochal marginalisation and disappearance of animals, took place in the modern era – he refers in particular to the transformations of the nineteenth century – and not with the Neolithic revolution or the historic domestication of animals (2009, 21-23). Indeed, if there is a hero at all in Berger's narrative, it is not the hunter-gatherer of human past or present, who eschews the domination and control of animals through domestication, but the peasant, who lives closely with domesticated animals. For Berger the relationships between peasants and their animals combine proximity and distance, or presence and absence, in a way that is very difficult for the modern urban

sensibility to comprehend, because we have come to utterly counterpose these concepts and to separate out the ways of seeing they are bound up with; thus:

Animals came from over the horizon. They belonged there and here. [...] This – maybe the first existential dualism – was reflected in the treatment of animals. They were subjected and worshipped, bred and sacrificed. Today the vestiges of this dualism remain among those who live intimately with, and depend upon, animals. A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant, and so difficult for a stranger to understand, is that the two statements in that sentence are connected by an and, and not by a but (2009, 15).

Many contemporary students of animal ethics would have no compunction in calling this an unsustainable contradiction. It may well be, but interestingly Berger sees this contradiction as a kind of ‘wisdom’, the basis of which he believes ‘is an acceptance of the dualism at the very origin of the relation between man and animal’ (2009, 36). A note of caution here, since ‘dualism’ has during the last quarter of a century become almost wholly negative in its connotations, as one theoretical paradigm after another has sought to overcome this or that dualism. As Berger uses it here, however, it does not signify the unwarranted separation into two discrete domains of something that should properly be grasped more holistically or monistically, but rather the holding together of two logically contradictory ways of thinking about something, rooted in an intuitive recognition that the complexity and multiplicity of the thing exceeds linear logical reasoning. Rather than a failure of critical thinking then, dualism as used here – and a better term perhaps would be liminality – denotes a certain kind of subtle sensibility which, rather than faithfully following through the logic of either one or the other side of the duality, thereby negating the other, is instead content to live with their co-existence in dynamic tension. Thus, animals are both like and unlike, present yet always partially absent, familiar yet unknowable, near to us yet far away; this duality is intrinsic to the sensibility of being-with-otherness that I call liminal intimacy.

### **Autonomy and Alterity**

Although Berger focuses on peasants as ‘the only class who, throughout history, has remained familiar with animals and maintained the wisdom which accompanies that familiarity’ (2009, 36), his argument is haunted by hunter-gatherers, and has some interesting parallels in Tim Ingold’s (1994) ‘indigenous’ account of the shift in human-animal relations bound up with the transition from nomadic hunter-gather subsistence to settled pastoralism, which he posits as fundamentally a shift from relations of trust to relations of domination. At the heart of this is the question of animal autonomy or agency, or more accurately, the human perception of the animal’s power or lack thereof to make a difference to them in ways that matter. According to Ingold many hunter-gatherer cosmologies involve a belief that an animal is not simply discovered by the hunter during a hunt but chooses to present itself to him as part of an ongoing reciprocal relationship between that species and the hunter (9-10, 14-15). If the animal is treated disrespectfully, subjected to cruelty or avoidable pain, or if its meat is either wasted or not shared equitably among the community, then the animal has the power to withhold itself from the hunter in future, so that he may go hungry. Hence despite a successful hunt culminating in the killing of an animal, when understood in terms of the hunters’ own cosmology this is not a relationship of domination, but one of trust, since the animal retains agency in the relationship:

The hunter hopes that by being good to animals, they in turn will be good to him. But by the same token, the animals have the power to withhold if any attempt is made to coerce what they are not, of their own volition, prepared to provide. For coercion, the attempt to extract by force, represents a betrayal of the trust that underwrites the willingness to give. Animals thus maltreated will desert the hunter, or even cause him ill fortune. This is the reason why [...] the encounter between hunter and prey is conceived as basically non-violent. It is also the reason why hunters aim to take only what is revealed to them and do not press for more (Ingold 1994, 14-15).

For farmers, in contrast, however affectionately the animals may be treated and cared for, they are essentially subject to the farmer's control. There is no belief that the animal has the power to withhold what the farmer requires of them, hence there is no reciprocity in the relationship, rendering trust redundant (16-17).

It should hardly need to be said that we do not have to endorse the specific characterisations of hunter-gatherers, farmers, peasants or pet-keepers posited by either Berger or Ingold, in order to recognise that at the heart of these accounts is a perceptive argument about the pivotal importance of conceptions of animal autonomy in human-animal relations. For Ingold the erasure of animal agency involved in domestication constitutes the negation of trust and the imposition of domination, as reciprocity is replaced by dependence and control (1994, 16). While for Berger the progressive marginalisation of animals which occurs through industrialisation and the proliferation of the Cartesian machine-view of animals destroys the notion of animals as autonomous beings with parallel lives that enabled animals to offer a unique 'companionship to the loneliness of man as a species' (2009, 15).

What risks negation in the transformations outlined in these accounts is not just agency and autonomy, I want to argue, but also alterity. Ingold's farmers do not need to trust the animal because by virtue of their domination of the animal they presume knowledge of every relevant facet of the animal's existence. Similarly, with Berger's pet-keepers, the owners assume that there is no relevant dimension of the animal's life and experience that is not transparent to them, rendering the human-pet relationship not a companionship in the existential sense but a relationship of co-dependence. In both cases the erasure of alterity is intricately bound up with the imposition of relations of control, domination or dependency; but I would argue that, rather than merely their corollary, this erasure is an actively constitutive element of these relations. In other words, the negation of otherness is a performative way of seeing which contributes to the enactment of

a certain kind of human-animal relationship. Thus, while it may be more or less prevalent in different kinds of structural human-animal relations, the erasure of alterity is potentially present in a range of interspecies relationships and practices. From this point of view, the well-intentioned anthropomorphic impulse to bring animals near risks an unwitting enactment of the modernist tendency to treat the world as ‘raw material for humanization’ (Haraway 1991, 198).

Liminal intimacy in contrast is predicated upon the maintenance of a tension between knowing and unknowing, familiarity and strangeness, in which intimacy consists in respecting, living with and even cultivating distance and alterity, rather than seeking a closeness that would obliterate these; it implicitly recognises the fragility of authentic encounters with the other, and the colonising tendencies intrinsic to proximate intimacy. An example of this is the practice of indigenous Sámi reindeer pastoralism discussed in Hugo Reinert’s (2014) ethnography in the Norwegian Arctic. Reinert explains that ‘as a result of their mobile and largely free-ranging life, reindeer occupy an ambiguous position [...] appearing neither fully domesticated nor fully wild, the animals slip between descriptive and normative categories’ (2014, 50). While this is perceived by non-herders as a problematic lack of control which leads to the reindeer ‘consuming crops, breaking fences, disturbing livestock, disrupting gardens, invading urban space, colliding with cars or buses, and so on’ (50), for the herders themselves ‘the apparent lack of control also represents more than an absence; it involves active effort and the extension into new conditions of a positive ethical commitment on the part of herders to the reindeer they herd’ (50-51).

Reinert understands this in terms of the way in which pastoral Sámi animal ethics incorporates ‘situationally specific rules that take into account both the mobile, liminal quality of the animals themselves, and the varying degrees of control humans can (and should) exercise over them’ (51). This in turn is part of ‘a framing overall responsibility, to protect the autonomy and independence of the

reindeer; that is, to preserve their ability to exit the coordinates of human control. [...] Behavior that damages this ability [...] is understood, to some degree, as a violation of the unspoken pact between humans and reindeer' (51). One manifestation of this is that herders are reluctant to provide animals with artificial feed, even in very harsh winters and when food is scarce, for fear of making the reindeer too dependent on humans over time and slowly depriving them of their autonomy; this would be 'a sort of disrespect, or violation, which risked transforming the reindeer into something they were not, jeopardising their integrity and independence' (52). Reinert grasps this as an ethics of 'cultivated distance', which 'patrolled and delimited the presence and influence of the humans, in deference to the maintenance of a partial entanglement: an entanglement whose partiality, vitally, must be preserved', and in which 'distance was managed and cultured, as an element of moral obligation toward certain nonhuman others' (52).

A somewhat different articulation of a kind of non-proximate or liminal intimacy is found in Priska Gisler and Mike Michael's (2011) discussion of the history of the horseshoe crab, or *Limulus Polyphemus*. With reference to Donna Haraway's (2003; 2008) concept of 'companion species' as a way to think about relational processes of hybrid emergence, or 'becoming-with' animals through mutually constitutive 'intra-actions' (Barad 2007), Gisler and Michael point out that the iconic companion species in Haraway is canine, and suggest that the horseshoe crab 'is not, for most people, a good candidate for the status of companion species' because 'the seeming distance between human being and horseshoe crab – evolutionary, historical and social – suggests associations that are thin, alien, and highly distanced, as opposed to the thick, "intimate", short (though always complex and surprising) associations that characterise the relations between human and dog' (2011, 131). They therefore argue that the

concept of companion species needs some reworking and extension in order to be fully applicable to limulus.

In particular, for Gisler and Michael ‘companion species’ implies a kind of active reciprocity which is difficult to identify in the relations between people and horseshoe crabs; instead with limulus there is what they refer to as a ‘more elongated’ and extensively mediated companionship, or ‘a distanced co-presence’ (2011, 132). Moreover, for Haraway the temporal and affective dimensions of interactions between companion species are marked by ‘surprise’, the unexpected that arises in interaction, rendering it unpredictable and eventful in ways that are both ‘dangerous’ and ‘delightful’; indeed this possibility of ‘surprise’ is a consistent feature of ethnographic accounts of human-canine play, and is often identified as central to what makes such activity meaningful as intersubjective interaction (Shapiro 1990; Sanders 1993; Bekoff and Byers 1998). In human relations with the horseshoe crab however, ‘the intensity, speed, and reciprocity of interaction necessary for such surprise is somewhat less in evidence’ (Gisler and Michael 2011, 133). Gisler and Michael suggest that this therefore requires a modified notion of reciprocity, alongside an attentiveness to a different modality of affectivity, which ‘lies not within the sentimental anthropomorphising of animals but in a deeper understanding of the interactions between human and nonhuman’ (ibid.). They propose that central to this deeper understanding is what one might tentatively call ‘wonder’, encompassing ‘a sense of the sublime, of bemusement, of coincidence, of “ungraspability”, of ambiguity, of irony’ (ibid.). Crucially, in the relations of ‘distanced co-presence’ or ‘companionship at a distance’ that enframe this sense of ‘wonder’, the irreducible otherness of the nonhuman is not colonised by an intimacy of proximity but maintained, respected, and infused with a sense of awe.

A final example of human-animal relations that might be thought of as involving a form of liminal intimacy can be found in honeybee apiculture or

beekeeping. As I have argued elsewhere (Nimmo 2015, 186-189), though an account of beekeeping as simple animal exploitation is of course possible, it involves glossing over many of the specificities of beekeeping practices and of honeybees as a form of life, for the sake of critical consistency. Examined for their own sake, bees in managed hives do not fit easily into the categories of either 'wild' or 'domesticated', and there is a long cultural history of representations of beekeeping not as a kind of farming but as a more hybrid and mutual endeavor involving a form of interspecies exchange – or in Haraway's (1992, 86, 90) terms a 'conversation' – that is mediated through the space of the managed beehive. As Claire Preston (2006, 34) points out, bees 'consent to inhabit artificial hives which have been devised for them, but their relationship to man is better conceived as symbiotic, with each species benefitting from certain behaviours and capabilities of the other'. Though bees have sometimes been understood as a kind of 'livestock', as 'fuzzy herbivores with wings' (Buchmann & Nabhan 1997), this is belied by a closer look at the beehive itself, which notably is not the equivalent of a factory farm or a fenced-in field, but is better grasped as a human-nonhuman assemblage that mediates a negotiated intra-action between species (Nimmo 2015, 189).

Notably beekeepers typically describe their activities in terms that are distinct from those of either farmers or pet-keepers, and in which the language of control is characteristically absent. We may be sceptical of this, but if we want to maintain that the inter-corporeal understandings and everyday knowledges of pet-keepers and others who live and work closely with animals should not be dismissed in the name of scepticism, 'objectivity' and detachment, then we should surely practice the same forbearance with respect to beekeepers and not be too quick to dismiss their lived ontologies out of hand and to assert a superior understanding on the part of the critical theorist. With this in mind, it is significant that the complexity of honeybee colonies and their highly sensitive

interrelationship with the local environment means that there are always more contingencies at work in determining the fate of the colony than the beekeeper could hope to master. Thus beekeepers routinely make exhaustive preparations and take all possible precautions, hoping that this will be enough to see their bees thrive, produce abundant honey, and survive the winter, but there is no guarantee of this; bees cannot be compelled to produce honey, and even the most seasoned beekeepers will have encountered disappointment and failure, sometimes inexplicably (Nimmo 2015, 186-192). Consequently beekeepers tend to be acutely and respectfully aware that in their interactions with bees they are engaging with a dynamic and living alterity that is always partly unknowable. Or as one beekeeper eloquently puts it, ‘the bees know what they are doing: our job is to listen to them’, which means ‘never thinking of them as if they were mere machines created solely for our benefit, instead of highly-evolved, wild creatures, with whom we are privileged to work’ (Chandler 2009, 34).

### **Conclusion**

This article has critically examined how the tension between visions of human-animal similarity and continuity, and visions of human-animal difference and discontinuity, has tended to frame thinking in human-animal studies around the pivotal concepts of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism, underpinning a recurrent equation of the continuity thesis with anthropomorphism and of discontinuity with anthropocentrism. The genealogy of this has been explored by retracing the process through which widespread anthropomorphism in ways of perceiving and thinking about animals was suppressed and rendered taboo by the rise of a more consistently human-centred worldview associated with the scientific revolution, Cartesian rationalism and industrial modernity. This involved a sceptical denial of animal subjectivity and a policing of anthropomorphism that has been bound up with the rationalisation of cruel and

exploitative human-animal relations and practices in the modern era. Against this background numerous scholars in human-animal studies have been driven to engage in a reappraisal of anthropomorphism as an alternative to the human-centric orthodoxy. This has often involved challenging the linguacentrism that has served to entrench anthropocentric notions of human-animal discontinuity, stressing instead the profoundly embodied nature of communication and interaction as forms of inter-corporeal intersubjectivity which do not necessarily exclude nonhuman animals. It has also been accompanied by some efforts to develop distinctions between more 'critical' and 'sentimental' or 'anthropocentric' and 'animal-centric' forms of anthropomorphism.

While acknowledging the value of these more critical understandings, this article has argued that the equation of continuity with anthropomorphism and discontinuity with anthropocentrism results in an oversimplistic alignment of these positions in terms of contrasting ethical poles. It has suggested that a more nuanced understanding is needed, which is sensitive to how these positions are underpinned by ontologies of presence and absence that are irreducible to a binary framework. In particular, in its overwhelming focus on the critique of anthropocentrism, human-animal studies has tended to underplay the problems of anthropomorphism, which has typically been treated as a relatively benign source of potentially erroneous interpretations of animals, rather than as a way of knowing that is more seriously problematic. Addressing this, this paper has argued that anthropomorphism is not just human-centric in its own right, but that it involves an ontology of co-presence and proximity which, by seeking to bring animals near in an ontological sense, manifests a colonising dynamic that inadvertently erases difference, otherness and alterity. A different conception of intimacy has been articulated as an alternative, which is not the intimacy of proximate knowing but a more counter-intuitive intimacy at a distance, or liminal intimacy, understood as a relational being-with-otherness that is comfortable with

degrees of unknowing and which maintains a dynamic tension between presence and absence, similarity and alterity.

The article has sought to further articulate this by exploring some parallel and related ideas and arguments across a range of literature and several examples: These have included John Berger's (2009) narrative account of an 'existential dualism' at the heart of the human-animal relationship, which he believes has all but disappeared in the modern epoch along with a sense of animals as the autonomous subjects of separate lives; Tim Ingold's (1994) analysis of the transition from hunter-gatherer subsistence to pastoralism as a transition from reciprocal 'relations of trust' to 'relations of domination'; Hugo Reinert's ethnographic account (2014) of how an 'ethics of cultivated distance' shapes Sámi reindeer pastoralism in the Norwegian Arctic; as well as Priska Gisler and Mike Michael's (2011) analysis of the sense of 'wonder' that infuses the relationship of 'distanciated co-presence' or 'companionship at a distance' that characterises human relations with the horseshoe crab. The final example was that of beekeepers' understandings of their bee colonies as expressions of a dynamic and living alterity that always partially exceeds our horizon of understanding.

Common to each of these examples is some notion of human-animal relations in which the intimacy of mutual being-with-otherness-at-a-distance emerges as a lived alternative to the colonising tendencies of proximate intimacy, restoring the sense of animals as in some sense absent, autonomous, and irreducible to human understandings. In these examples this otherness is not a basis for indifference, objectification or negation, as in the dominant framing of discussions around anthropomorphism in the field, which equate distance and discontinuity with anthropocentrism. On the contrary, difference in these cases becomes the condition of possibility of a companionship at a distance that eschews the anthropomorphic embrace wherein the price of human-animal continuity is a world without radical otherness. Instead, for these liminal ways of

thinking and being with animals, the extent to which the animal is like or unlike us loses its central importance; what matters is that the animal exists, that its existence is entangled with but radically irreducible to our own, and that we are privileged to encounter and partially share this other existence, albeit at a distance.

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