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anthropomorphism,
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anthropocentrism

susana monsó

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How Animals
Understand Death

Susana Monsó

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Anthropomorphism, Anthropectomy, and Anthropocentrism

In strict terms, anthropomorphism is just the attribution of human qualities to something or someone. Thus, we can describe the Christian god as an anthropomorphic god, for he has a human form (even though the religious doctrine postulates this the other way around, establishing that we are the ones shaped like gods). The famous faces of Bélmez* are also anthropomorphic figures. In its most literal etymological sense, anthropomorphism is neither good nor bad; it simply consists of assigning a human quality to a specific entity.

However, in comparative psychology and in ethology, that is not how this term is typically used. When a scientist criticizes us for anthropomorphizing an animal, she's not just implying

* A supposedly paranormal phenomenon in which face-shaped stains mysteriously appeared on the floors of a house in rural Spain.

that we're interpreting her behavior in human terms, but also that we're making a mistake. Anthropomorphizing Tahlequah is not just attributing human qualities to her, but attributing human qualities *that she lacks*.

Even though this is the common use of the term in these disciplines, it's a somewhat problematic notion, for it suggests that all human qualities are exclusively human. But, of course, we know that this is not the case. Not just because we obviously share many morphological and physiological characteristics with other animals (like our spine, organs like the heart or lungs, hormones, etc.), but also because many psychological capacities that used to be considered uniquely human, like tool use, deception, or altruism, have been uncovered in many other species.

Given that in the past we have often erred when assuming that certain capacities were exclusively human, philosophers Kristin Andrews and Brian Huss believed it was necessary to coin a term that captured that error and that would thus serve to complement the notion of anthropomorphism. They suggested the term *anthropectomy* (from the Greek words *ánthropos*, meaning "human," and *ektomía*, "to cut out").¹⁷ Anthropectomy would be the other side of the coin with respect to anthropomorphism. If anthropomorphism is the mistaken attribution of a human-typical characteristic to an animal, anthropectomy would be the mistaken denial of a human-typical characteristic to an animal.

What is crucial about the term that Andrews and Huss coined is that anthropectomy would be an *equally grave* error as anthropomorphism. Thus, if we attribute a concept of death to Tahlequah or we say that she is grieving, and it turns out that we are wrong, then we are anthropomorphizing Tahlequah. But if we say that Tahlequah lacks a concept of death or is not

grieving because these are uniquely human capacities, and it turns out that we are wrong, then we are anthropectomizing Tahlequah. Both mistakes are equally serious, and there is no reason to fear one over the other. They are both false descriptions of reality. Therefore, even though comparative thanatologists do well to fear anthropomorphism, they should also be aware of anthropectomy.

Anthropomorphism also needs to be distinguished from *anthropocentrism*. In its most general sense, anthropocentrism refers to a bias that leads us to consider our own species as the center of the universe. It's the tendency to think that, given that we are the most important thing from our perspective, we must be the most important thing in general.

Anthropocentrism can manifest in different ways depending on the context. Most of our cities, for instance, follow an anthropocentric urban planning, for they systematically ignore the many nonhuman species with whom we share a space; not just our pets (which are for the most part not massively taken into account either), but the thousands of wild species that inhabit and are adapted to the urban environment, as is the case of rats, cockroaches, pigeons, sparrows, squirrels, racoons, etc.

In science, anthropocentrism also manifests in various ways. Although according to its popular image science offers objective facts about the world, the truth is that this is an activity that is carried out by humans, and as such it is also a target for our biases and is heavily influenced by our values. The topics that we decide to study, the ones that have the greater chances of getting published or receiving funding, are not random, but rather obey our human interests. For this reason, the relevance of studying the mind and behavior of animals is often justified with reference to some human value, like our interest in uncovering the evolutionary origin of our psychological capacities

or what distinguishes our mind from that of the remaining species.

Comparative thanatology cannot escape the influence of our human values either. In this discipline, the study of animals' behavior and reactions surrounding death is often justified by an appeal to the importance of discovering the evolutionary origin of our own funerary practices and attitudes toward death. Even though this is of legitimate interest, it's important to point out that a question doesn't necessarily become more interesting when it can be explicitly related to us and our values. Perhaps you, the person reading this, find the question of how animals experience and understand death fascinating in and of itself, independently of what it can tell us about ourselves. If that is the case, welcome to the club.

In addition, we must remember that the study of other animals' behavior doesn't have to give us clues about the evolution of our own capacities, even in the case of closely related species, such as the other great apes. Chimpanzees, bonobos, orangutans, and gorillas are not "less evolved" humans. They are species with whom we share common ancestors, but at no point in our evolutionary past were we chimpanzees, bonobos, orangutans, or gorillas. Consequently, even though studying them can give us some answers about our own evolution, they are not a direct window into our evolutionary history.

Anthropocentrism is a bias that leads us to believe that we are the center of the universe, but it also works like a pair of innate blinkers that prevent us from seeing beyond our own perspective. This anthropocentrism is implicit in a great deal of studies in comparative psychology, which don't just aim to answer questions with our interests in mind, but also often follow methodologies that highlight the difficulties we have in abandoning our *sapiens* way of seeing the world.

Let's take as an example the famous mirror self-recognition test. This experiment was designed by Gordon Gallup and is used to determine whether animals have the capacity to recognize themselves, which would be evidence of a form of self-awareness.¹⁸ In the original experiment, captive chimpanzees were isolated from other group members and placed in a cage inside an enclosure on their own for two days. After this, a mirror was placed in the enclosure and the chimpanzees' reactions observed. The apes first reacted to their reflections as though they were other chimpanzees and carried out social behaviors like vocalizing or displaying. However, as the days went by, these social behaviors disappeared and the chimpanzees began to behave as though they were recognizing themselves in the mirror, using it to inspect or groom areas of the body that they usually don't have visual access to, like their nose, the inside of their mouth, or their anus.

In order to test the hypothesis that they were recognizing themselves, Gallup decided to go one step further. The chimpanzees were anaesthetized and a red dye was used to place an odorless mark on their forehead and behind their ear. Before they woke up from anaesthesia, the mirror was removed from the enclosure. When the chimpanzees awoke, they didn't notice anything strange and went about their day as usual—something that radically changed when the mirror was reintroduced into the room. In that moment, they began to insistently touch their marks, as though they were asking themselves what in the world that thing on their face was, which would prove that they were indeed recognizing themselves in the mirror. Gallup interpreted these results as evidence of a form of self-awareness in this species.

Although passing the mirror test shows us that the subject has learned how to use a mirror—which is, we might add, not

a trivial task—and that she possesses at least the capacity to recognize her body, an animal can fail this test for reasons that have nothing to do with a lack of self-awareness, but rather with the fact that they are not humans. For instance, gorillas tend to fail this test, which has been linked to the fact that, unlike us, members of this species tend to avoid eye contact with conspecifics, as it is considered a threat behavior.¹⁹ For this reason, they might not pay sufficient attention to their mirror image to realize that it corresponds to their own movements.

Other species may fail this test because they are not predominantly visual animals like we are. For instance, dogs fail the mirror test but pass an analogous test based on olfaction.²⁰ In this experiment, dogs were presented with urine samples corresponding to themselves and to other dogs, and they were found to spend less time smelling their own samples. However, if a weird olfactory “mark” was added to their own urine, their interest in it skyrocketed. This suggests that they can discriminate their own smell, which would also be a form of self-recognition.

Despite these problems, the mirror test is usually considered the gold standard in the study of animal self-awareness, which evidences an anthropocentric perspective that makes it difficult for us to appreciate that other animals can recognize themselves primarily through other senses. Not only this—the mirror test also presupposes that the tested animals *care* about their appearance in one way or another, for something like this is necessary for them to have the motivation to interact with the mark that has been placed on them. However, it’s not immediately clear that other animals are vain enough to care about their own looks. Whether or not they do care will be related to their evolutionary history and their particular ecology.

For example, in a recent study, a species of fish, the cleaner wrasse, was found to be capable of passing the mirror test.²¹

Although one in principle would not expect something like this from a tiny little fish, when one learns how this species makes a living, these results appear much less surprising. These fishes feed off the parasites that they visually detect on the skin of other fishes, and the mark that was put on their throat mimicked the size, color, and shape of one of these parasites. When there was no mirror, the little fishes would ignore the mark, but when the mirror was brought back in they immediately started to try to remove the mark by scraping their bodies against the substrate. In the world of these fishes, this mark is something worthy of attention, but this does not have to be the case for all animals. For others, perhaps an unexpected smell in their pee or their fur is much more interesting and attention-grabbing than having a little grime on their forehead. The fact that we struggle to understand this is only proof of the anthropocentric glasses with which we look at the world.

In comparative thanatology, anthropocentrism manifests in a similar way, through the adoption of human experience as the gold standard against which we compare all animal behavior around death. Thus, we can distinguish on the one hand an *intellectual anthropocentrism*, which is the assumption that the only way of understanding death is the human way, and on the other hand an *emotional anthropocentrism*, which consists of presupposing that the only way to emotionally react to death is the human way.²² In the next two chapters, I will discuss in detail these two forms of anthropocentrism and defend a view of what we can do to ensure that we leave them aside.

We have now seen the potential biases that threaten comparative thanatology. Given its methodology and its object of study, this discipline is especially prone to anthropomorphism. However, the obsession with avoiding this bias can increase the chances of falling prey to anthropectomy, and there is no reason

to fear this bias less than anthropomorphism. Similarly, anthropocentrism also constitutes a grave risk, for it is a subtle bias that may however greatly influence the methods of study and the phenomena that are considered to be of scientific interest. Therefore, the same care that scientists usually take to avoid anthropomorphism must also be put into avoiding anthropocentrism. When it comes to interpreting cases like Tahlequah's, we must be sure not to attribute more than is warranted, but also not less than we should.

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