

Toward the More-Than-Humane

Why People Need to Embrace the Values of Nature

Jonathon Keats

The autobiography of our species is inscribed in the geological record. From the advent of agriculture to the accumulation of microplastics in the Great Coral Reef, our story is a narrative of planetary dominance, often tragically destructive.

Geologists have given this autobiography of humankind a title. It's called the Anthropocene. The ending has yet to be written. The words we select could have as much impact as our deeds. They might have such impact because our deeds rest on assumptions underlying all that we say.

As we reassess human activity in the present, and consider how to verbalize a world beyond the Anthropocene, we need to begin by reexamining words that are etymologically related to 'human'. One word especially needs attention. The word is 'humane'.

What is notable about this word is that it expresses an ideal, evoking the best in us as human beings. One person might be good at math. Another might be good at athletics. But to be humane is to be good in a more holistic sense, in a way applicable and accessible to all people.

The problem is that the lexical focus on humans implicitly excludes all other life forms from consideration. In fact, references to the humane reinforce the artificial distinction that humans have created to separate us from and elevate us above everyone else on planet Earth.

What we need lexically and conceptually is a more-than-human version of the humane. There are attributes of all animals, not only humans, that are good. There is also goodness in plants. Some attributes might be more fully developed in our nonhuman kin than in ourselves (just as some people are more humane than others). We should consider this expansively inclusive view of goodness when we aspire to be the best we can be.

There's a long and widespread tradition of attributing human qualities to nonhuman animals, who are cast as representations of or symbols for those attributes. The lion is said to be courageous, the ant, diligent. These nature-based symbols often derive from observation, but they operate at a level of abstraction that has nothing to do with the animals, let alone our relationship with them. Proverbs and fables are traditional genres of instruction in which people are the exclusive audience and subject, served by animals merely as a rhetorical device. Sometimes the characterizations can be slanderously inaccurate, especially those of creatures who have inconvenienced people, such as wolves and rats.

The Library of the More-Than-Humane

The terminology used in these genres reduces the qualities of nonhuman animals to human ways of being. To call a lion courageous may be loosely accurate in terms of animal behavior, but diminishes what is noble in the lion to the subset of those qualities that are already recognized and valued by people, excluding everything else from consideration. In other words, the leonine character in a fable may instruct us to be courageous, but we never learn what it would mean to be the best that a lion can be. And we certainly don't find out from fables what it would mean to be as cooperative as a wolf or to have a rat's expansive sense of reciprocity. Our speciesism stunts our morals.

What is needed is a new level of human aspiration that takes the more-than-humane as an ideal. This requires us to appreciate the values that all other animals have, and also the values that are found in plants and fungi, and to collect them into a comprehensive description of goodness.

Each species will be good at some things, often better than other creatures (including us). Cheetahs run faster than sloths. Succulents are more resilient than ferns. Humans are better at math than bees (or maybe not). These aptitudes are important to recognize, because only when all of us strive to be the best at what we're good at, and support what others are good at so they can do it well, can the planet flourish as a whole. However, flourishing also depends on all of us striving to practice the universal values that are found in each and every organism (even if some species or individuals of those species show them more clearly than others, or even if some species have a stronger tendency to practice them due to one or another accident of evolutionary history). If all humans can strive to be humane, then all creatures including humans can strive to realize a greater goodness.

Biologists can support this effort by investigating qualities we may have overlooked in other beings. (For instance, how do termites reach consensus? How do mesquite trees nurture the land they stand on through their rootedness?) What is true of macroscopic life also applies to microbes. (Is there an ethical dimension to quorum sensing, in which bacteria manifest a relationship stronger than love for their neighbors?) Adopting these behaviors or attributes of them is not an act of biomimicry. It's simply a matter of recognizing and reabsorbing the collective moral intelligence or wisdom co-evolved by all life on Earth.

We already have plenty to work with, simply as a matter of being in the world and living with other animals and plants and bacteria since the time when all of us shared a common ancestor. Some more-than-human values are latent in proverbs and fables, which derive from traditional ecological knowledge and preserve that knowledge beneath their cultural pretensions. Many more values can be found in the traditional ecological knowledge still active in indigenous communities, and the ecological knowledge held by all of us who spend time with our nonhuman kin.

The Library of the More-Than-Humane

Given the urgency of the situation we're in, all that we know needs to be collected right now to be interpreted and implemented by philosophers and legal scholars and policymakers. We need a library of more-than-human ethics.

It's up to all of us to contribute books to this library. The books should not only contain words, but also images. They should seek to represent values in their physicality and the behavioral aspects of interacting with them. They should enlarge our ideas by enhancing our language and vice versa.

For too long, people have either embraced the toxic implications of social Darwinism as an excuse for eugenics, or treated nature as a pariah for fear that allowing nature to influence our values would make human civilization red in tooth and claw. This is a false dichotomy. Just as we can essay and reach consensus on human goodness by emphasizing the best in our species and excluding the worst, we can do the same when we take all creatures into consideration, and consider ourselves to be one of myriad manifestations of life. When we do so, we'll find a much richer set of values for all to aspire to, and we'll find ways in which to live more compatibly with all the other species on Earth.

The more-than-humane is all around us, awaiting attention. Embracing the more-than-humane is foundational to how we bookend the Anthropocene.

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