

# On the gift of animals and how to return it

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Animal ethics is an ongoing debate about whether non-human species are to be included in the moral realm of human societies. This debate presupposes metaphysical clarifications of what exists ontologically but also what are the necessary relations for this existence. Shepard (1997) answers these questions by arguing that “animals made us human” and thus, our kinship to and co-evolution with animals shaped our being and becoming humans, not just naturally but also culturally. In this essay, I will defend Shepard’s position by supporting it with arguments from anthropology and philosophy. I will explain how Western thinking departed from an animal-infused cosmology and in which ways this limits the group of animals that Shepard has in mind. The essay concludes with the argument that it is a factual mistake of the Western cosmology to dismiss the encounters Shepard puts forward and this implies normative consequences for the role human beings should play for other animals.

Shepard postulates that the distinct way of being human is already in its origin related to animals. When the human species evolved about three million years ago, they were latecomers in the process of animalistic life that has already lasted 600 million years. The shared biological continuum of life makes it undeniable that animals exist within human beings at least as their ancestors. But, Shepard argues that also the process of distinguishing ourselves as species required other animals in form of observations and encounters: the human mind evolved from the perceptual abilities that we inherited from primate ancestors and improved by studying animal traces in form of faeces, bones and other marks (Shepard 1997, p. 24). Our ears developed to listen to animal cries, and the arising mental capacities for recognizing patterned sound provided us with the neural basis for the visual recognition of the world (Shepard 1997, p. 155). Further, food planning was adapted and learned from plants and animals who lived seasonally, and the change to an omnivore diet led people to mimic bears and pigs to find food (Shepard 1997, p. 23).

As new omnivores, humans first depended on eating the remainders predators left over. For the next one million years, humans improved their hunting abilities with animals not only as targets but also role models<sup>1</sup> (Mithen 2022, pp. 209-10). Thereby, human predators and their prey constantly co-evolved through an increasingly adapted mind to trick or protect oneself from the other (Shepard 1997, p. 19). Shepard argues that for the human mind, it was this process of hunting that led to a higher awareness of ourselves: dissecting humans and other animals enabled us to discriminate ourselves from the other and our own species from other species, but also established a kinship through seeing similarities in the opened bodies and acknowledging a world containing a plurality of life forms (Shepard 1997, p. 31). This new kinship was the driving factor for developing the capacity to project subjectivity into animals which further improved the skills of humans to predict prey behaviour and cultivate the human-animal link in anthropomorphism<sup>2</sup> (Mithen 2022, pp. 212-3). Here, Myers (2007, p. 147) poses the question of why the capacity of projection is presumably only present in humans and no other predators. I think that Shepard (1997, p. 17) answers plausible by signifying the risks of such an evolved brain: it makes bad decisions more likely and requires a long time to be developed as well as additional energy.

The increased brain size was accompanied by the ability of the mind to mentally reconstruct the world and provide the chance to transport signs and information in space and time. This was enabled by the acts of classifying and identifying, and animals were among the first objects for training this mental discourse and targets at the same time according to Shepard (1997, pp. 54, 97). Once the world could be internalised, our language capacities evolved to convey intentions or mental images to fellows, a process which was inspired by the surrounding animal sounds (Shepard 1997, p. 87). This point of Shepard can be made more explicit by following the work of Abram (1996, p. 53): our language originates in our sensuous receptivity to the sounds of the natural environment which can still be seen in children, who do not learn language through grammar only but by making sounds mimicking the surrounding soundscape. Thus, language evolved as a holistic system of relations that mirrored the perceptual matrix of the world including animal sounds, so that its inner logic reflects the complex logic of ecology (Abram 1996, p. 58). This basic level of meaning in language underlies the semantics linguists analyse

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<sup>1</sup>For example, the hunting methods for seals of Inuit are essentially identical to those of the polar bear (Kahn 2001, p. 21).

<sup>2</sup>I define anthropomorphism as the attribution of personality traits typical for human beings to non-human beings and objects (Midgley 1998, p. 125).

today apart from its animate nature (Abram 1996, p. 55). Evidence for this can be found in Indigenous languages, like the one of the Khallam culture where linguistic patterns remain responsive to the sounds of the land in which the speakers are embedded (Mueller 2017, p. 166).

The way animals influenced our becoming during the evolution of the mind also influenced how our psychology develops within an individual lifespan. For Shepard, children are not just more attuned to animals than adults but also recapitulate the mental history of human-animal interplay during their development: humans transcend their innate animality through replaying evolution, from sitting like monkeys as babies to overcoming the fear of water from a time when our ancestors left the sea (Myers 2007, p. 28). Vetlesen (2023, p. 51) questions this theory as it is highly controversial today, but I think Shepard's point is not lost if one instead maintains that the identity-formation of children benefits from encounters with other animals or even requires them for healthy social development. In particular, Myers (2007) argues that the first phase of the self-development, where a subjective "I" arises from an understanding of oneself as unity with agency, can be linked to the significance of animals for children<sup>3</sup>: in encountering animals, children experience the agency of an animal through its motions and actions. Here, the children can distinguish animate from inanimate objects and thus, recognise the distinct agency of the animals, which defeats a possible objection that children are not able to recognise agency but rather project their own agency into animals through anthropomorphisation<sup>4</sup> (Myers 2007, p. 85). Thus, a sense of distinctness is formed while encountering other forms of life whose experiences are never felt by oneself, and self-consciousness develops from this as the reflection of the ideas of otherness and subjectivity upon oneself (Myers 2007, pp. 62-3). Also in the further development of children, animals play an important role qua distinct beings because they can symbolise traits like anger, hope or fear; not in a cultural manner but a way of our shared animality, so more directly and not deliberately concealed as in cultivated adult humans. Hence, children are able to capture the feelings in the other more easily and internalise them as constituents of their self through performing them actively in play (Shepard 1997, p. 83).

As a final step, Shepard argues that animals were not only our evolutionary makers but also informed our cultural development. With increasing self-understanding and -

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<sup>3</sup>Myers' conclusions are based on studying a school class of young children who were regularly visited by zoo animals and pets, so without encounters with "fully" wild animals.

<sup>4</sup>Myers (2007, p. 11) also reports that the children act less affectively and with less talking to the animals than one would expect in the case of anthropomorphisation.

reflection as well as the formation of social bonds and communities, cosmologies arose to serve as a common source of meaning and orientation to the more-than-human world (Mathews 2021, p. 7). The killing involved in our foraging past invited humans to understand the principle ecological teaching: to be alive means staying inside a shared instrumental web of relations including dying with and for others, and this is not optional but necessary as mortal beings and becoming (Haraway 2022, p. 517). Humans became aware of their dependence and inferiority to other animals, and the requirement for physical and empathetical proximity with the other animals in hunting also advanced the appreciation of the inner animality in ourselves as an enabler of successful hunts (Abram 1996, p. 87). It is therefore no surprise that the human ideas of ultimate meaning rotated around the wisdom of the ecological significance of other forms of life for the human condition: as totemic cultures, our ancestors recognised certain non-humans as part of their social community where humans were the younger brother with the least experience of all (Shepard 1997, p. 293). Other animals were the mediators between the world and humans, laying down the order of existence and designing the social matrix we inhabit<sup>5</sup> (Ingold 1994, p. 12). Myths heavy in animal symbols were formed to conserve this wisdom and helped increase a sense of connection to the living cosmos, whereas animal masks were utilised to make the shared animality a visible aspect of ourselves and demonstrate the worldly division of power into many strongholds (Shepard 1997, pp. 94, 133).

This account shows me that the evolutionary and cultural significance of animals was the enabler of pre-Western cosmologies but, at the same time, their core. Thus, it became a reinforcing feedback loop of cherishing the gifts of animals while benefiting from their ongoing significance for us. However, more “civilised” cultures increased their independence from nature and started to break the kinship to animals, fuelled by the diminished conditions for and seeking of encounters with the other (Vetlesen 2023, p. 39). Indeed, this lack of willingness to accept the significance of animals and human limits became the core of our Western cosmology today: starting with Plato, the animalistic part of the human soul was seen as a threat to instead of an enabler for human agency, and the rise of monotheistic religions ended the worship of animals in favour of a human-like god (Shepard 1997, p. 138). In the emerging Hebrew Genesis, nature became subordinated by its human masters leading to a loss of ecological humility and a rather narrow spiritual

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<sup>5</sup>Today, this totemic thinking can be found in many Indigenous cultures. For example, Kimmerer (2015, pp. 3-5) tells the creation story of Skywoman of the Haudenosaunee in which animals help humans form the earth on the back of a turtle, whereas Kahn (2001, p. 21) reports that the Koyukon actively seek knowledge from animals and cooperate with them for mutual advantage.

perspective including humanity only (Shepard 1997, p. 194). Animals were described as voiceless and unable to say their names to humans. Instead, Adam gave them their name so that language became a purely human gift and power (Abram 1996, p. 67). Language lost contact with its animalistic origin and became purely a set of words fixed by convention, a sort of code representing the perceived world for humans by humans<sup>6</sup>.

The categorical difference between animals and humans was manifested in modern times by Descartes' dualism of mind and body, where the mind determines us as a rational substance excluding animality (Derrida 2008, p. 72). For Heidegger, only humans have a "Dasein", a world where they see "something as something (valuable)", which arises from being-towards-death that the animal lacks categorically. Therefore, animals are "weltarm" and reduced to living machines, unable to value things (Derrida 2008, pp. 143-5). Ethologists like Tinbergen reinforced this idea of "animal machines" by explaining the response of animals as caused by pure stimuli (Vetlesen 2023, p. 25). Thus, humans act while animals only react.

On a cultural level, this categorical difference materialised through labelling totemic myths as insults degrading humans to animals and thus, depriving humans of their essence as rational beings. Instead, myths were disenchanted and turned towards humanity itself: culture became distinct from nature, and the mystical wisdom of a living cosmos was replaced by scientific inquiries where objective perception instead of subjective encountering is seen as the right way to knowledge (Vetlesen 2016, p. 69). As a result of this scientism, the biological and evolutionary significance of animals for humans became intolerable: deprived of any telos, natural selection in evolution is considered to be about the elimination of unfit forms. Thus, progress arises only through mutations so that no prior species can have significance (compare Jonas (2001, p. 51)).

On a psychological level, the arising lack of significance of animals inspired Freud (1955, pp. 126-7) to state that "children have no scruples over allowing animals to rank as their full equals. [...], they no doubt feel more akin to animals than to their elders [...]". This kinship manifests itself through the animalistic impulses in children governed by the id, and it becomes the core challenge of socialization to channel these animalistic urges toward civilizing ends (Melson 2001, p. 35). The arising ego is oriented toward human culture only while in mental sickness, humans orient themselves back towards

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<sup>6</sup>For example, it strikes me that the Indigenous Potawatomi language includes an animate-inanimate distinction for all nouns which extends agency to non-human beings (Kimmerer 2015, p. 51), whereas modern English does not provide this possibility so that an animal is either an objective "it" or at most an anthropomorphised "(s)he".

their animalistic phases (Myers 2007, p. 38). Thus, becoming human is about overcoming rather than extending the own intrinsic animality (Ingold 1994, p. 5), at which identity becomes an individual lifestyle choice dependent on our taste, education and geographical location (Shepard 1997, p. 72).

Finally, the enforced insignificance of animal lives in Western societies led through modern domestication to the creation of a new category of animals. Here, animals derived from their wild ancestors were not just incorporated into a system of mutual utility, as in early pastoralism, but genetically adapted to the capitalistic needs of effective food and cloth production. Free from any humility or responsibility, modern anthropocentrism buys into the idea of “Cartesian machines”, available for systemic exploitation (Nibert 2022, p. 268). This is prevalent in zoos where individual animals are extracted from their ecological niches and marginalised to impotent cultural symbols within an artificial environment (Crary and Gruen 2022, p. 109), and even more obvious for pets. Following Freud’s idea of animal-transcendence during maturing, pets are considered at most as “material” to practise responsibility and kindness directed towards humans later in life (Myers 2007, p. 26). For this purpose, dogs and cats are often bred to stay in a juvenile status to be willing to please and entertain but are abandoned once they stop obeying or become inconvenient (Tuan 2022, p. 223).

The anthropocentric Western cosmology with its implications for the significance of animals is, thus, in strong opposition to the cosmology Shepard pictures as evolving from his historical account of how animals made us human. It follows then that if the Western cosmology is correct, Shepard’s account of animals’ significance for humans is somewhat defeated, but this also applies vice versa. In fact, I want to defend Shepard by defeating the Western cosmology using the work of Mathews (2021, pp. 169-70) and her insight that the Western idea of cultural freedom to choose a cosmology independent of relations to the non-human world is flawed. In particular, the current degradation of nature, increased mental illnesses and the lack of belongingness in Western societies is a strong indication that the Western cosmology is not an evolution from but a misunderstanding of the animal-induced and -infused cosmology of a living cosmos within which the necessary relations between humans and animals were established and cherished. As a consequence, it should become obvious that the evolutionary kinship to animals, as proposed by Shepard, is not just plausible but necessary to acknowledge for the long-term flourishing of a culture in a given ecosystem. The cosmos as an animated whole becomes the ontological prerequisite for being alive because it holds the interrelations necessary for materialising oneself. In contrast, Western thinking undermines life itself and is, thus, self-defeated

because it denies the whole by cutting the kinship to animals.

Returning to domestication, it becomes clear now that domesticated animals and pets are deprived of their independence and distinctness as they lost their relations to their wild place including the social bonds to fellows. However, the significance of animals for our becoming requires their (in)difference to us: the more indifferent, the better, and the more variation encountered, the more we develop ourselves. If animals lose their otherness and are bred to obey us as pets, they lose their identity but also their significance for us to in becoming human (Vetlesen 2023, p. 56). As consequence, children visiting zoos are unable to fully grasp agency in the other, and the lack of otherness in pets makes most of us comfortable with defending the anthropocentric stance of the Western cosmology later in life (Tapper 1994, p. 57). Thus, I agree with Shepard that wild animals are the most important creatures for nourishing a proper cosmology and explaining our evolutionary kinship because only these animals evolved in their own manner and are suitable counter-players to the human species. In contrast, highly domesticated animals like pets should mostly be seen as surrogates for wild animals serving as affection outlets in our increasingly isolated lives within urban environments<sup>7</sup> (Tuan 2022, p. 230).

The final aspect I want to explore is the consequence of the defended cosmology when it comes to the significance of humans for animals. This presupposes that animals can have something as significant for them, that they are value-able. With life as the centre of all existence in this cosmology, it can be argued with Jonas (2001, pp. 90-1) that even the simplest organisms materialise value in form of their self-concern of the continuation of life. Thus, all life is value-able, irrespective of their degree of consciousness, other abilities, or instrumental relations with others (Mathews 2003, p. 62). Drawing on Jonas and Mathews, we should hence be confident in acknowledging the value-ability of animals but also what specifically is significant for them because the required evidence is related to the essence of life which we share with all beings. I want to stress that this does not demystify the otherness of animals, like in plain anthropomorphism, but acknowledges that our human body, as one exemplar of the plurality of living bodies, is empathic and attuned to the living cosmos at large: gaining knowledge requires us thus to come in contact with the subjectivity of the other by making our own body available for embodied

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<sup>7</sup>However, I want to make the qualification that even zoo animals and pets can mediate a sense of vitality and agency which is required for the first steps of self-formation. Melson (2001) supports this idea, and I also read Shepard to grant this point in as much as children in urban environments would otherwise lack encounters with any sort of non-human beings. The issue arises first if these encounters remain the only ones during maturing because of the anthropocentric bias it conveys.

communication and responses of the animal (Despret 2022, pp. 554-5).

As a first insight, we are able to realise that each animal has a lifeworld, what Uexküll calls “Umwelt”, so that what is significant for an animal becomes a function of the place the animal is situated (Evernden 1999, pp. 79, 152). On a metabolic level, this indicates human significance for all domesticated animals because they are surrounded by us and attuned to us as food providers, but also insects like mosquitoes and ticks might see a significance in human beings qua living systems providing nourishing blood. In addition, domesticated animals were selected according to the level of the animal’s ability to predict human behaviour (Coy 1994, p. 81). Thus, it could be argued that humans have significance in the biological and cognitive composition of bred animals similar to the historical co-evolution of humans and wild animals, though through enforcement. Similarly, certain wild animals living close to or in cities like deer and birds, like pigeons and ravens, engage with human beings. Their behaviour accustoms to our presence and proximity for which reason deer living in recreational forests are different from fellows living in remote areas. Thereby, this difference might influence their flight behaviour towards all predators. It is, though, questionable whether this trait is passed on to future generations so that humans influence the evolution of these animals. In contrast, it seems very clear to me that the vast majority of wild animals established themselves in ecological niches without the participation of the human latecomers and neither do they necessarily consider us as prey, so we are not directly significant for the becoming of or being these animals.

Overall, this descriptive answer to the question indicates only a low significance of humans for most animals. As a second insight, however, I contest that this is not all this question implies. Animals gifted us our becoming as human species and maintain gifting themselves so that we can continue to flourish. It might be immediately objected that this implication, that animals gift themselves, contradicts the idea of agency and “Dasein” in animals that I want to defend. However, I think that this rests upon the wrong understanding of gifting: in Western societies, gifts are necessarily seen as free items of recognition or affection. But, the essence of a gift as understood in this context is its creation of a set of relationships with reciprocity as currency, though not necessarily symmetrical (Kimmerer 2015, p. 28). Gifting becomes a cyclical economic bond that acknowledges our participation in and dependence upon the realisation and flourishing of others. The gift of animals implies therefore the normative obligation for us to think about how we can return the favour and increase our significance to animals.

The least we can do is express gratitude and stay in awe of the evolutionary and ecological role animals play. But, I follow Vetlesen (2023, pp. 245-6) to suggest more:



as participants in the living cosmos, we can grasp the fact that all life involves bodily vulnerability to the other and the whole. This is a given for all of us through the necessity of ecological interrelationships and becomes a condition of our existence where value resides. Thus, vulnerability is a value-laden fact about the living cosmos, and our morality, enabled by the gift of mind from animals, asks us to return the gift in form of responsibility for the vulnerability of the other<sup>8</sup>.

Native cultures, tied to a place and ecological thinking, practise these forms of gifting already by following the idea of “let live, make die”<sup>9</sup>, and I would propose that our culture should follow their lead. This is not to suggest returning to our foraging past: we do not live in nature anymore, nor are our genes prehistoric as they alter under the influence of the changing environments (Mathews 2005, p. 69). What is rather required for us is not just to unlearn seeing culture as a product of humans only but also to drift towards one that is ecologically informed and cosmos-enhancing. This includes that instrumentalising actions involving animals need to be properly learned and executed, life needs to be synchronised with the seasons of nature, and the necessity of the whole for the existence of the individual animal needs to be cherished (Mithen 2022, p. 207). Here, we need to set aside the objective-seeking bias of a scientific worldview which separates knowledge from responsibility and find solutions within the available range of encounters of a place-bound culture (Vetlesen 2020, p. 162).

In addition, the fight against human-inflicted mass extinction has the potential for returning the gift in form of responsible action because of the risk of losing the plurality and stability of the whole. Braverman (2015) paints a picture of the complexity of conservation practices which often involve difficult moral decisions, and it goes beyond this essay to discuss them in detail. I think that the more important aspect here is to ground all conservation actions in the mindset of ecologically-informed responsibility: it needs to be recognised that species are tight to their place in the ecosystem and that all animals require agency to flourish and stay meaningful for the system.

In conclusion, I presented Shepard’s proposition that “animals made us human” as the idea that the human mind, self and language depend on a brain composed of layers

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<sup>8</sup>This should not be confused with asking for kindness to individual animals as proposed by philosophers like Singer. Such views fail to acknowledge the cosmological dimension of life where instrumental connections are the enabler of a flourishing life.

<sup>9</sup>For example, Aboriginal cultures have mystified kangaroos to promote the kangaroo’s survival (Mathews 2021, p. 168), and the Klallam in North America return the bones of the first salmon of the season to the river as a token of respect for the individual who gifted herself (Mueller 2017, p. 231).

of an evolutionary past that is closely related to observations of and encounters with animals. Here, each species with its distinct way of being - being an other to us - is an actor in the evolutionary story of life including our own becoming and flourishing. I further showed that with the increasing complexity of our mind, human culture developed around a cosmology closely linked to this evolutionary kinship to animals. Here, humans participated as much as acknowledged their place in a living cosmos in which death is no less essential than life and interrelationships are not only possible but necessary for their flourishing. This implies that the culture-nature divide is historically non-existing, and I contrasted this with the modern Western cosmology that arose from cutting all ties to animals as well as our inner animality to arrive at a world order of human superiority. In this process, culture became about humans only while animals lost their significance and became increasingly instrumentalised through domestication. I argued that domesticated animals and particularly pets lost thereby their otherness which deprives them of the ability to make us human. In a second step, I rejected the Western cosmology because of its ecological inadequacy in favour of the animal-induced cosmology resulting from the evolution of humans through the gift of animals. Based on this cosmology, I finally identified that our significance for animals is historically minor but normatively, we should return the gifts of animals by utilising our animal-gifted minds and responding to the vulnerability of cosmic life with moral responsibility. This makes the adaption of ecology-informed cultural practices as important as conservation measures against human-inflicted mass extinction: animals have made us human, but with their decline, the knowledge about ourselves and how to behave ecologically diminishes - the consequence would be extinction, human extinction.

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