THE HUMAN ANIMAL

You may have noticed the phrase “non-human animal,” or the association of animality with humanity in this chapter. This is no mistake, and goes far beyond the implications of the animal liberation movement or of my own beliefs (insofar that I would include it here selfishly). I’ve done this because it is essential to view humans as the animals that we are.

Seeing ourselves as animals is hard to understand at first; through religious ideologies and pervasive tradition, we have unfairly asserted ourselves above the other animals of the Earth on the basis that we are more special than they are. This was harder to realize in the times when kings were believed to be divinely chosen to rule, or that God himself specifically created us as we are now—before any theories of evolution cast doubt on the authenticity of these ideas.

In our contemporary setting however, it is now acceptable to challenge those beliefs. Humans are animals just like dogs, cows, fish, or crustaceans. Owen Flanagan, a renowned philosopher of the mind and human nature, published *The Problem of the Soul* explaining the problem he has with traditional images of humanity and human nature and attempting to promote an alternative way of thinking about oneself. Although I think he comes off as rather dismissive of the held beliefs of those with faith, it is genuinely a good read on modern mind science and how that conflicts with our understanding of free will and our goal(s) as a species. I recommend giving it a try if you’re into philosophy books—this one isn't particularly dense and is certainly easier to read than, say, that of Kierkegaard or Heidegger. (It has diagrams! I love it when philosophers include visual aid)

Regardless, Flanagan offers us some reasoning as to why humans ought to be considered within the realm of animality. First, is the old association to religion and the doctrines that boosted our ego over other animals of the Earth—they were “God’s gift to us” to care for and utilize how we please, after all (/s). Then, with the “death of God,” the question of divine right came under fire. We can decide for ourselves. Flanagan admits that it isn't easy to rationalize ourselves as animals, given that: “The nature of any thing, a human being included, is not easy to grasp. We are animals who can know things, but our own nature is hardly transparent to us,” and; “We are story-telling animals. We make sense of things through stories, and stories, especially when bundled together, generate grand pictures. We picture ourselves and our world through stories, grand stories.”9 What even is the nature of animality? How exactly are we so different from them that we can dismiss their existence or feelings just because we are capable of greater knowledge? When we don’t even understand *ourselves*, we become obsessed with finding “the truth.” But we forget that we are social beings. We make sense of life and time through socializing, or telling stories. Stories are captivating and convincing to us, yet we *are* fallible beings. In the assumption that we are special because we are *more than* the other animals we interact with, we lose empathy for them. We isolate ourselves from them and suddenly it becomes easy to overlook their beauty, their suffering.

Whether or not you agree that we are part of the animal kingdom doesn’t matter to me as much as the consideration for their experiences as beings. If there’s any takeaway from this chapter, I want it to be that one. From here on I will be referring to “animals” in the traditional sense as “non-human animals,” and in regard to all beings, I simply default to “animals,” or just “beings.” Just know that I explicitly mean humans are included, for we all feel pain and experience joy.