Environmental philosophies series

Edited by Andrew Brennan

Philosophy, in its broadest sense, is an effort to get clear on the problems which puzzle us. Our responsibility for, and attitude to, the environment is one such problem which is now the subject of intense debate. Theorists and policy analysts often discuss environmental issues in the context of a more general understanding of what human beings are and how they are related to each other and to the rest of the world.

This series examines the theories that lie behind the different accounts of our environmental problems and their solutions. It includes accounts of holism, feminism, green political themes and the other structures of ideas in terms of which people have tried to make sense of our environmental predicaments. The emphasis is on clarity, combined with a critical approach to the material under study.

Most of the authors are professional philosophers, and each has written a jargon-free, non-technical account of their topic. The books will interest readers from a variety of backgrounds, including philosophers, geographers, policy makers and all those who care for our planet.

Ecology, Policy and Politics
John O'Neill

The Spirit of the Soil
Agriculture and environmental ethics
Paul B Thomson

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Environmental Culture
The ecological crisis of reason
Val Plumwood

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and social engagement with respect for what is studied. When Darwin speaks of the Galapagos as 'the great laboratory of evolution', or when Humboldt speaks of rocks and pumice as speaking the history of the earth, we are encountering a practice of treating nature as active in the production of knowledge, as inviting the attentive observer to receive her disclosures.[45] The dialogical paradigm stresses instead communicative methodologies of sensitive listening and attentive observation, and of an open stance that has not already closed itself off by stereotyping the other that is studied in reductionist terms as mindless and voiceless.

Anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism

But is it not anthropomorphic and irrational, hopelessly romantic and unscientific, to talk of nature in this way, in terms of agency, communication and so on? A time-tested strategy for projects of mastery is the normalisation and enforcement of impoverishing, passifying and deadening vocabularies for what is to be reduced and ruthlessly consumed[46]. This seems to be the main contemporary function of the concept of anthropomorphism, especially to the extent that it aims to delegitimate intentional description of non-human others. As I argued in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, there is no good logical reason why we should not speak of the non-human sphere in intentional and mentalistic terms, as we do constantly in everyday parlance, and would hardly be able to avoid. I will argue here that there is no good basis for the general claim that speech is invalidated by anthropomorphism merely on the ground that it attributes intentionality, subjectivity or communicativity to non-humans. And we do not have to make any major adjustment or 'stretching' of the concept of agency to count earth others and nature as agents if, for example, we understand by an agentic being 'an independent centre of value, and an originator of projects that demand my respect'.[47] So what is the problem in these ways of speaking according to the anthropomorphism charge?

We need to distinguish various senses of anthropomorphism, including general and specific senses. The general concept and charge of anthropomorphism, as Mary Midgley has argued,[48] is in its usual sense and definition thoroughly confused. It is ambiguous as between attributing to non-humans characteristics humans have, and attributing to non-humans characteristics only humans have. Both senses are problematic, in slightly different ways, when used to support the claim that the attribution of characteristics such as subjectivity to animals must be anthropomorphic. The first sense, that something is anthropomorphic if it attributes to non-humans characteristics humans have, presupposes that there is no overlap of characteristics between humans and non-humans. That is, it assumes a

hyper-separation of human and animal natures and attempts to enforce upon legitimate representations of non-humans such a radical discontinuity. This sense should clearly be rejected, not only because it is based on a demonstrably false assumption of radical discontinuity, but because it can be used to delegitimate virtually any depiction of non-human subjectivity that made sense to us. The second sense of anthropomorphism – attributing to non-humans characteristics only humans have – is not open to this objection, but is open to the further objection that its use to delegitimate the attribution of subjectivity and other contested characteristics to non-humans is simply question-begging. It assumes just what is at issue, what opponents of mechanistic models contest, that non-humans do not have characteristics such as subjectivity and intentionality humans also possess.

As Midgley notes, the focus of this sense of the concept tends to be otiose and human-centred. If something is to be faulted for attributing to non-humans characteristics they do not have, it is sufficient to point out that this is an inaccurate way of representing them, and the inaccuracy itself provides (in a suitably veridical context) sufficient independent ground for rejecting such an attribution. Unless there is a good reason for addressing the question of similarity to humans, it is simply anthropocentric to go on to bring every source of comparison and focus of assessment back to humans and to the question non-human similarity or difference from them, as the concept of anthropomorphism tends to do. Beyond the confused senses of anthropomorphism I have discussed above, the features being problematised under that description can often be better characterised in terms of anthropocentrism rather than anthropomorphism (see Chapter 5). But in the same way, the charge of anthropocentrism cannot be used in a general way to delegitimate representations of non-humans as communicative subjects; charges of anthropomorphism require much more work to situate and establish as damaging than is usually accorded them.

The critic of representing animals in intentional or communicative terms often draws on another sense of anthropomorphism, which we might call weak anthropomorphism,[49] that makes it very hard or impossible for representations of non-humans to avoid being assigned the label anthropomorphism. In this weak sense the fault of anthropomorphism is located in the presentation of non-human communication 'in human terms', from a human conceptual location. Any representation of speech-content for a human audience will have to be an interpretation in terms of human concepts, and in that weak sense, a background level of anthropomorphism is always likely to be present. What is much more difficult to demonstrate is that anthropomorphism of this background kind, in the weak sense of employing a human conceptual apparatus or

conceptual location, is necessarily harmful or invalidating, or that there are no practices which can counter it. The question is not whether or not some degree of humanisation of perspective is present in any particular human representation of non-human agency or communication, for it always will be at the background level, but how damaging it is, what is its meaning, and what practices could be used to counter it if and where it needs to be countered?

Where the charge of anthropomorphism can lead to the application of more stringent standards to the representation of non-human communication than are used to judge the success of comparable human representation, it is itself liable to the counter-charge that it is anthropocentric. Arguments of this kind are often advanced to show that any representation of non-human communication is rendered illegitimately anthropomorphic because of problems of translation and indeterminacy, although similar problems are familiar in the representation of human cultural difference. There are parallel difficulties for both cross-cultural and cross-species representation: a weak cross-cultural analogue to background anthropomorphism is involved in virtually any translation project, for example, and in any attempt to 'bring over' one culture's forms into another's. To avoid delegitimating all such attempts, we would need to distinguish the impact of weaker and stronger forms of anthropomorphism, just as we need to distinguish weak and usually harmless forms of anthropocentrism from strong and damaging forms (see Chapters 5–6). Weak forms are unavoidable but not necessarily harmful, while strong forms may be damaging but are by no means inevitable. As with anthropocentrism, the confusion between the two forms gives rise to the illusion that damaging forms are inevitable.

A further problem with this translation argument is that, although it looks as if this sense appeals to a concept of anthropomorphism different from the objectionable general one, it is in danger of degenerating into a similarly weak and general form. To bring this out, we need to ask, what is the contrast class? What mode of representing, animal subjectivity or communication, beyond its bare recording without any attempt to convey a meaning or place in, say, an animal's life (as in commentary-free films of wolves howling or whales making sounds), would not be subject to this kind of objection? Any representation for a human audience will have to be, in some sense, an interpretation in human terms, just as any representation of a non-European culture's speech for a European audience would have to be in European terms, in the sense that it will have to try to locate the meaning of the speech in terms of the closest equivalent forms of life. The problem we run into here is the problem familiar from the case of representing human cultural difference, of translation and

indeterminacy.[50] There are many well-known traps and difficulties in such representation and in establishing or assuming equivalence in forms of life. There can be real problems in representing other species' communicative powers or subjectivities in terms of human speech, but they do not rule out such representation in any automatic way.

A commonplace motivation for raising the charge of anthropomorphism is a rationalist-Cartesian policing of human–animal discontinuity, to maintain the human observer's distance from and indifference to the animal observed. Biologist Marian Stamp Dawkins[51] argues, against the reductionist view that there is no way humans can come to know non-human experience, that we can use the same method for non-human experience that we use in the human case, namely entering into the 'same-but-different' world of another similar but differently-situated individual. In general though, what is required here, as for the case of crossing anthropocentric boundaries I discuss in Chapter 5, is a double movement that seeks to understand both similarity and difference 'in dynamic tension'[52]. Although there is in response to the dominant Cartesian-rationalist stress on discontinuity often a need to provide a counterstress on continuity between the human and animal, there may still be a point in more specific and limited senses and charges of anthropomorphism. 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.

A more valid concept of anthropomorphism we might appeal to here would treat it as analogous to, say, certain ways of criticising eurocentrism which would object to representing the non-European other in terms of a European norm. This sense would enable an argument that the mode of representation adopted in particular, specific cases denied or did not respect the difference of animals and represented them in terms of a human model. This is certainly possible, and indeed often happens. When a monkey is dressed in human clothes, made to ride a circus bicycle and ridiculed as a degenerate form of the human, when in the same representation the animal's own differences and excellences are denied or neglected, we clearly have a highly objectionable form of anthropomorphism, which is also likely a form of anthropocentrism. Notice though that this kind of patronising and difference-denying anthropomorphism is by no means inevitable in the representation of non-humans in intentional terms, and that it expresses a colonising dynamic. The concern about lack of respect for non-human difference can validly extend to cover even well-

meaning animal rights attempts to assimilate animals within the model of the person, in contexts where there has been no associated attempt to deconstruct the person/property dualism formative of liberalism.

As in the case of the human other, so in the animal case such representations must always raise questions about simplifying and assimilating the other. However there can be no general argument that such cross-cultural perspectives presenting another's viewpoint are deceptive or illegitimate. Cross-species representation, like cross-cultural representation, is not automatically colonising or self-imposing, and may express motives and meanings of sympathy, support and admiration. Rather, specific cases have to be argued on their merits, not just in terms of the alleged intrusion of non-indigenous or human impurities, but in terms of the kinds of insights they present or prevent and the moral quality of their representation. We need to put into place here practices which can counter colonising tendencies in these contexts. For example, representation should keep in mind the distinction between claiming to *be* the other rather than to represent an other's perspective, to see or speak *as* the other rather than to see or speak *with* or in support of the other.[53] In the case of translation and indeterminacy, counter-practices could require an effort to note non-equivalences in forms of life and to treat difficulties about translation as sources of uncertainty and tentativeness. Using the problems of such an approach as a model, we might expect an appropriate methodology for dealing with cross-species conceptual difference and translation indeterminacy to be one which stressed corrigibility and open expectations. Dealing with both human and non-human cases of translation indeterminacy requires openness to the other and careful, sensitive, and self-critical observation which actively seeks to uncover perspectival and centric biases.

A related argument would be that, although non-humans do have intentionality, subjectivity and communication, the representation of that communication in the terms of human speech is always invalidly anthropomorphic, depicted in excessively human terms. This however seems to demand perfection and to be over-general, and we could appeal to the parallel phenomenon of cross-cultural translation to argue that not all translation efforts are doomed. Miscommunication and assimilationism is not the inevitable outcome, although there are as in the human case better and worse translation attempts. There are weaker and stronger senses here again: an unwarrantedly eurocentric depiction of another culture's customs and speech would fail to note these difficulties as sources of uncertainty or tentativeness. An appropriate and modest way to deal with indeterminacy in non-human as well as human cultural contexts would be to note uncertainties and present alternative interpretations of problematic cases. The problems of representing another culture's or another species communication however pale before the enormity of failing to represent them at all, or of representing them as non-communicative and non-intentional beings. This is an incomparably greater failing.

Beyond these specific contexts, the charge of anthropomorphism is a pseudo-scientific, rationalist convention which tries to reinforce human/nature dualism through an enforced conformity to hyper-separated vocabularies. This dualism of speech complements the dualism of nature and culture in hegemonic concepts of autonomy, rationality, and property. If our dominant concepts of technoscience and economic rationality are ones that treat nature as a nullity, it is small wonder that the outcome of their enormous growth and progress as a force for remaking the earth is a progressive nullification and decline of nature. It is well past time we abandoned the sado-dispassionate scepticism about animal minds and the anthropocentric Cartesian double standards that insist that the mindfulness we can airily assume for humans must be rigorously 'proved' for non-humans (a task that can easily be made impossible to succeed in by a variety of strategems of exclusion).There is no reason to identify this kind of scepticism with rationality. A more generous methodology or stance that is fully within our rational powers opens the space for fuller kinds of recognition and possibilities for relationship with the more-than-human world which sceptics dismiss as impossible or irrational. In the present context of ecological destruction, where we desperately need ways to increase our sensitivity to and communicativity with the others of the earth, should we insist on retaining monological methodologies and sophistries like the myth of anthropomorphism that were designed to facilitate exploitation? Should we, in the context where we have the possibility of developing a more generous narrative and dialogical form of rationality that allows more sensitivity to the other, bend and strain our reasoning faculties to keep our options confined to the old reductive models? If this sado-dispassionate stance is rationality, it is a form not well adapted to its own or to our survival.