

## **DREAMING HUMAN BEING ANIMAL – the confounding of language**

**Beth Carruthers © 2007 – A talk at Nature Matters, York University**

### **Title slide**

I am certainly not the first person to observe that at the core of our urgent “eco-crisis” lies a dominant Cartesian ontology, nor am I the first to suggest that what is required in response is a radical ontological shift of a kind that would return the human to a profound awareness of dwelling within, rather than without, a world of complex and intertwined relationships. Monika Langer, more than 17 years ago, commented that not only do we need “a radically different ontology”, but that adopting such an ontology “would mean a profound transformation of our conception of alterity and, in keeping with that, a fundamental alteration in our relationships with the non-human other”. [Langer, 1990]

This morning I’d like to consider language in the context of human-animal relations as offering the possibility of both exclusion and inclusion. Language, as we in Western culture conceive of it, is the fine point on which balances our special status, and in this special – and superior – status rests our belief in our place of authority in the world. If language is a source of our separation, perhaps language may also help undo that separation.

### **Slide 2 – Babel and text**

There is perhaps no other question so central to our ways of being in the world, as that of our animal status, and no finding that would have such potential to disturb the order and business of our lives, as would a profound apprehension of our relationship and conduct within, rather than without, the family of animals. The human/animal and its twin culture/nature divide together run like an unstable fault-line through Western culture – underground, out of sight and with the potential to shake down our carefully constructed mythologies of self, of world and the cultural systems and infrastructure resting on them.

Western culture has always been very concerned with separating the human from the animal, the human from “nature” – and so we might ask “what is a human”?

In taxonomic terms, a human is a hominid, “a primate of a family (Hominidae) which includes humans and their fossil ancestors” [OED]. The species *Homo Sapiens*, as Giorgio Agamben tracks in *The Open*, is defined as that which recognises, or knows, itself as human. Linnaeus, the “founder of modern scientific taxonomy”, in fact found little to otherwise distinguish humans from other primates, leading to the above definition. [Agamben 23]. It is humans who decide what it is to be human.

Of course, difference exists between and among beings – but there is arguably as great a difference between an orangutan and a man as there is between a raven and a blackbird. A raven is not blackbird, and a wolf

is not a fox – there is difference, but no vast divide. So it was important to find some other way to make an absolute distinction between man and beast, and although he could find no physical difference of significance, Linnaeus believed that “Man is the animal which the Creator adopted as his favourite, reserving him for a nobler existence”.

This idea was not new. The Greeks, while believing that Soul was everywhere in the world, were very afraid of death as a final event, and so argued that man possesses something special, a rational soul, an undying spark of divinity not subject to death, decay or the corruption of the world. SPEECH was the utterance by the tongue of the rational soul, and so only the human could have speech, or language, as we now call it. Language, as an expression of the rational soul, separated man from beast.

Later on, the Church took up this idea and in the Middle Ages, the hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being also acknowledged Soul in the world, but that only “Man” had that spark of divinity that placed him next to the angels before God. The Church was also very concerned to divide man and beast.

Here is a wonderful definition of beastliness from the Medieval Bestiary, as quoted by Joyce Salisbury:

### Slide 3 - Beastliness

There were any number of rules and definitions created by the Church intended to clarify the distinction between human and animal – rules of conduct, of what and how one might eat, rules about sexual behaviour. It was not always an easy distinction to make, since at this time the world itself was alive, full of meaning and portents; animals were often the bearers of these, as well as exemplifying moral qualities. People believed animals spoke. The world was still an expression of the sacred and belonged to God. If you did not behave respectfully in your relations with the divine creation, there would be consequences.

It is important to note that all was not opposition when it came to humans and animals. A significant argument on behalf of interspecies communication and language from the early Renaissance is an essay called *The Language of Animals* by philosopher Michel de Montaigne, who in the 16<sup>th</sup> century wrote:

... 'tis not to be supposed that nature should have denied that to us which she has given to several other animals: for what is this faculty we observe in them, of complaining, rejoicing, calling to one another for succour, and inviting each other to love, which they do with the voice, other than speech? And why should they not speak to one another? They speak to us, and we to them...

#### Slide 4 - Descartes

Not long after de Montaigne, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Descartes had brought us the absolute separation of soul from the world and the mechanising of all non-human life. Men still had a Rational Soul, but now the Rational Soul of man becomes the only real thing in the world. To think is to be. For Descartes, nothing other than the human thinks, therefore everything not-human is, simply, not. Recalling that to think is also to speak, and speech is the utterance of a Rational Soul, Descartes became famous for the force with which he insisted that animals had no speech like that of men and therefore no souls and that animals were literally “soulless automata” whose cries were also quite automatic.

So language became an absolutely singular and defining human trait separating human from animal, and the human from a mechanical, clockwork kind of world, or nature, which Descartes’ contemporary Francis Bacon declared must be tortured to reveal her secrets to the betterment of mankind.

In 1861, after Darwin had rocked a few boats with his theory of evolution, Max Muller offered the following in a series of lectures on the science of language:

There is in man a something. I am not afraid to call it for the present an occult quality, which distinguishes him from the every animal without exception. We call this something reason when we think of it as an internal energy, and we usually call it language when we perceive and grasp it as an external phenomenon. No reason without

speech, no speech without reason. Language is the Rubicon which divides man from beast, and no animal will ever cross it. I may express my conviction that science of language will yet enable us to withstand the extreme theories of the Darwinians, and to draw a hard and fast line between man and brute.

It is helpful at this point to more closely consider what language might be to us now, in a more secular world. It is also important to ask once again whether or not language really is peculiar to the human.

Language, as we have more recently defined it, is the faculty of abstract thought, the ability to imagine – to imagine forward, to extrapolate, to propose possible worlds and consider possible results of following through on choices. Yet, we have no real way of knowing that other animals do not have and use both imagination and abstract thought - although I personally suspect that most, if not all, animals do. It's a tricky little argument, this business of who has reason and imagination, since the kind of abstract reasoning that produces the argument for human special status is itself a production of the thing it seeks to prove as evidence of that special status. The argument circles back on it self. In his recent book *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben reminds us that in what he calls “the anthropological machine”, because the human is presupposed every time, there is always a specific exclusion and a specific inclusion. We define the human by what it is not, and we use this definition to measure what, or whom, is human.

## Slide 5 – Noske

Anthropologist and philosopher Barbara Noske, in considering the human/other-than-human relationship, points out that not much has changed since Descartes.

The argument for language, as we conceive of it as conferring a special human status, might in reality hinge not so much on what it is, this ability for abstract thought and imagining, but rather on what we can do, and have done, with it. We have created a definition of superiority defined by what we believe to be our very particular abilities as beings. We have done, is enclosed ourselves in our own small world; we have imagined ourselves not so much outside, but inside – insulated from an enviroing world, from the intimate bodied community of relationships among beings in that world - and, in being so isolated, we imagine ourselves disengaged from choices and behaviours which, since our self-enclosed world is indeed an imaginary construct, in very fact impact and resonate in the vast world of other beings and forces of which we are, beyond all possibility of denial, a part.

We have effectively “othered” ourselves, become almost completely self-absorbed and self-referencing. We are asleep to the perceptual worlds of other beings, to their ways of knowing. We see the others, when we see them at all, at a distance, through filters of isolated human interest. Eyes cast back on ourselves, we are busy dreaming the human.

Now might be a good time to take a look at what language might offer were we to consider it from another perspective, open the field, open our eyes and intelligence wider, and rather than seeking evidence of exclusion, instead seek common ground and that most important aspect of life in the world – the unfamiliar intimacy of interrelationship within a world of difference. Mostly, it's difficult to get ourselves to throw open our doors in this way, because it means letting go of reference points we depend on to mark the boundaries of a human centred world in which we believe we have control, and ultimate authority. Can we welcome a world that is much, much wider, mysterious and wonderfully strange?

### Slide 6 – Anthropomorphising

Before I begin the next bit, I want to acknowledge that discussions of animal/human relations seem inevitably open to concerns or accusations of anthropomorphizing. In light of this, I take the view that in attempts to understand, or encounter, another being or culture, one naturally moves toward the other through an active “imagining” oneself into the other’s world; and that anthropomorphizing might be better defined as the bringing of, or the attempt to bring, the non-human into the human construct in order to critique, assess, or otherwise measure by a human yardstick the being, the communication, the perception and the culture of what is not human. We cannot really enter the being, the perceptual world of a non-human, but might acknowledge mystery and difference, and by cultivating a much needed humility, allow ourselves

to enter into something like what anthropologist Tim Ingold refers to as “a relationship of trust” [Ingold, 69].

I have also been making generalised observations about the human, but not all human cultures dream the human outside the animal, outside a mutually environing world. To some human cultures, non-humans are interpreted as differently bodied beings within a shared world.

Although impossible to really know the other, the relationship is central to dwelling, to being-in-the-world. Complex stories and traditions are woven about animal/human relations that involve mutable boundaries, which at times disappear entirely.

According to many North American First Nations creation stories, there was a time when birds, fish, animals and humans differed only in shape and skin covering, and had the ability to transform themselves at will. All living beings were unified and animals could take on human form, just as humans could become animals, birds, fish, and mythical creatures.

### Slide 7: Abram

Language, as I now propose we consider it, is not an abstraction so much as it is communicative meaning, embodied, subtle – “resonating”, as David Abram says, “with other bodies” in the world. While there is much that is common in bodied language – as is especially easy to see among mammals – there is also difference, and it is because of this

difference that we must be so open to possibility. The form of a language, as communicative meaning, depends greatly on the kind of bodied beings that we are, and the kinds of things we need and want to communicate.

### Slide 8: Gesture and Language

According to which studies one reads, communication is:

- 60 - 80% "body language" (conscious and unconscious)
- 15 - 30% tone of voice
- 5 - 10 % words

These studies from psychology have been devised to investigate and understand inter-human communication, but are useful when extended to interspecies communication, where we do not rely on words. Other animals also rely extensively on formal gestures, such as stamping, tail, whisker and ear movements, as well as on vocalizations we are not always able to hear.

### Slide 9 – Language 2

We might also think about communication – for the sake of convenience – as broken down in the following way:

#### **Gesture:**

- consciously learned, cultural, or unconscious - such as eye-blinks and eye contact . Not always easily understood even across different human cultures

**Haptic:** – which is touch. Very easily understood across cultures and species.

And **Vocalisation:**

- not always understood among different human cultures and varying greatly among species, vocalization is dependent upon the kinds of bodies beings have
- tone of vocalisation
- words (perhaps only human, but this is unknown, as other beings, such as whales, appear to use syntax and other forms common to human language)

### Slide 10 - TOUCH, HAPTIC senses

I believe that touch, haptic communication, is extremely important, although we humans in this culture tend to starve ourselves in this regard. It may also be the most universal, the most easily understood among differently-bodied beings.

### Slide 11 – TOUCH, HAPTIC senses

### Slide 12 – Charlie and Biscuit, Chico

Charlie Russell, in his work of more than 45 years with Grizzly bear in his studies of bear/human cohabitation, notes that bear seem particularly sensitive to body language in communication. Body language and touch have been a large part of communicating and

establishing a relationship of trust with these bears – who are quite “wild”, as we understand the word.

The video clip I am about to show you is a piece from an artist friend and colleague in Vancouver – Sandra Semchuk. The title is *Bear – In the Absence of Acceptance*. It’s a collaboration with Charlie Russell and a bear. I won’t say more about it now, because I wish it to speak itself.

**Video – Bear**

**Slide 13 - Lopez**

Can we acknowledge, navigate this strangeness and difference without objectification? Can we filter perceptually for a common ground among differences, for the shared?

We know how a particular being – for example, a bear – appears to us, but how can we really know how we appear to the bear? That the human/non-human interface is territory that requires navigation seems apparent, and if we persist in leaving out the other side of the discussion, of the relationship – or not even acknowledge that such a thing exists, then we are well and truly outside, and alone. Indeed, Western culture has for some time seen no need to negotiate with world and other. We have come to embody a walled city, ringed by an outside much greater than the inside and that we now consider so foreign to who and what we are, that we cannot conceive of it. The outside feeds us, waters us, warms us – all unseen and unknown as it might be for itself. Sleeping while life – and death – go on about her, the princess, dreaming in the tower, awaits the awakening kiss.

We choose how the human is constructed, our ways of perceiving and of acting in the world, which means we can choose to change. The extent of a shift, or conversion in our systems which would bring us alongside non-humans in a shared ontology is surely no greater than that required to perceive of world and other as mechanism, no greater than that required for dualist thought, or even for linear perspective. We are less set in our ways than we like to think we are. Rather, if we do not change and adapt quickly to something, it is because we as yet perceive little value to ourselves in doing so.

What is required for change is a radical humility and a willingness to be one among many. This would involve some discomfort in addition to loss of status and of the privileges which go with it. There are likely to be, however, compensations that we cannot even imagine without going there.

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Merleau-Ponty, in his essay *Eye and Mind*, touches on the joining of self and other, self and world. He speaks of the others with whom he is embodied and with whom he “haunts a single, present, and actual Being”. Resonating with his ideas of the “Flesh” of the world, such a connecting, an intertwining of Being, would hold within it the intimate interrelations and presencing of beings in the world and of the world itself. Isis Brook, in exploring this notion of Flesh, explains that “the reality of our situation is being environed, being engaged in an embrace, not as an optional extra – a lifestyle choice – but just how it is”.

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