



Anthropomorphism ... and why not? by Polly Healy

Anthropomorphism carries many important implications. For example, thinking of a non-human entity in human ways, rendering it worthy of moral care and consideration.

It is interesting that we do not assign human qualities to every object we encounter. We do so when we recognise similar physical traits to ourselves – facial features probably being the most important, then perhaps human-like movements.

Scientists / Biologists

In the science community, the use of anthropomorphism is traditionally condemned and belittled. This is easy to understand of them since scientists are often using animals for research.

Biologists rely upon observable evidence. They avoid assumptions that animals share any of the same mental, social and emotional capacities of humans.

In other word, to endow animals with human emotions is a scientific taboo.

However, not to do so risks missing something fundamental about animals and humans. Apes and some birds are also tool-makers – they have individuality and brains. They have the ability to sense and reason.

Anthropomorphism in practice:

It can be recognised that those of us lacking in social connections with other people, might be motivated to seek out connections with animals. It helps us to simplify and make sense of complicated entities – providing solace and company.

We use anthropomorphism, most successfully and without further thought, to entertain our children. We use this in the form of books and cartoons: Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, Donald Duck and Goofy, for instance. These are characters manifested in human appearances, voices and emotions.

In 1992, it was pointed out by vet, [Bruce Frogle](#), that both humans and cats, for instance, have identical neurochemicals, with regions in the brain responsible for emotion.

[Robert Plutchik](#) wrote that humans display 8 basic emotions:

1. Fear
2. Anger
3. Sadness
4. Joy
5. Anticipation
6. Surprise
7. Disgust
8. Trust

We could think of others, such as confidence, courage, kindness, acceptance, jealousy, envy, stress, shame and love.

All of these can be seen within the social structures of ants, bees and termites; the territorial displays of protectiveness and strength of swans; or the gregarious displays of desirability from male birds such as peacocks and birds of paradise; quintessential deceit of the tree frog and certain butterflies, the disingenuous behaviour of the cuckoo, or the defensive mimicry of certain butterflies and moths.

Animal and bird behaviour often mimics that of humans. Monkeys are clever, malicious, playful, deceitful and abject fornicators. Donkeys are cautious - not stupid - and are both jealous and generally unsociable. Wolves are bold, despotic thieves, and yet co-operative within a group.

Many animals are as territorial as humans. Birds and mammals can display homosexual and transgender behaviour, often found with Flamingos and Black Swans.

Jealous warbler females competing for a male will smash their rival's eggs, whilst the male warbler may have numerous relationships at one time. Other birds may mate for life.

Ostrich females pretend to share a communal nest, but the dominant female will lay her eggs first then later discard those of the weaker females.

Ants, though, are the only species beside humans that carry out wars and engage with activate slavery.

Bottlenose Dolphins sometimes gang together to torment and kill younger and smaller dolphins. Apart from just humans, another example of inter-species interaction - where one species raises another species, specifically for companionship - is also common with baboons that kidnap feral puppies to raise as pets. Unfortunately, like humans, these pets are often abused and tortured.

What else we have in common with animals ...

- Emotions and grief
- Language and communication
- Humour and laughter
- Use of tools and farming - ants and termites
- Intelligence and memory – crows, squirrels and elephants
- Self Awareness - gorillas and magpies
- Building – beavers and wasps

Where animals win:

- Speed
- Strength
- Sight – ultra-violet radiation (bees)
- Smell
- Sense of magnetic fields (sharks), and electricity (turtles)
- Longevity – tortoises

If animals, especially dogs and cats, can recognise individual humans, their owner's behaviour patterns, moods and health and the time of day, why cannot we believe that we can read the facial expressions in our pet dogs and cats?

Humans have empathy with their pets and can, rightly, recognise happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise and guilt.

We are not isolated or disconnected from nature - nor nature from us.