Books Forum

Cross-species craziness: Animals, anthropomorphism and mental illness

Laurel Braitman

Animal Madness: How Anxious Dogs, Compulsive Parrots, and Elephants in Recovery Help Us Understand Ourselves, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2014, 1–373 pp., US$19.31, ISBN: 978-1451627008.

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The boundary between human and veterinary medicine is becoming porous in many domains, from infectious diseases to psychiatric disorders. Laurel Braitman's *Animal Madness: How Anxious Dogs, Compulsive Parrots and Elephants in Recovery Help Us Understand Ourselves*, focuses on how mental illnesses have come to be recognized as not exclusively a human problem. But let me begin by framing this trend more broadly.

With the recent 2014 outbreak of Ebola in West Africa, the connections between human and animal health have been front-page news. The outbreak of infections such as SARS and H1N1 first drew public attention to these links; as we now know, these are all *zoonoses* – infectious diseases that are transmitted between species, but which are used for the most part to refer to the transmission from non-human animals or birds to humans. Although zoonoses are clearly not new, the changes in the scope and speed of human mobility and the changes associated with climate change have led these infections to spread more quickly and widely, leading to a fear of pandemics. The global initiative 'One Health' is one response to this threat: it incorporates the health of humans, animals and plants (or eco-health) and treats them in relationship to one another. Still relatively amorphous, 'One Health' is a concept that began with the WildLife Conservation Fund, and is now being developed at the level of international multilateral organizations, governments, NGOs, private organizations and individuals, as well as educational institutions.[1]

While 'One Health' is a collaboration largely grounded on the *threat* of non-humans to human health, a number of other books and initiatives have since followed, concentrating less on danger and more on what we can gain from the shared treatment of human and non-human animals. The co-author of the book *Zoobiquity* (2013), for instance, Barbara Natterson-Horowitz, is both a cardiologist and psychiatrist; based on her work with zoo veterinarians, she makes the argument that doctors can learn from veterinary medicine, and human health could benefit from learning about similar cases in animals. She points to diseases we think are uniquely human, showing that they are actually found in many non-human animals: heart attacks, stress, gout, eating disorders and self-injury. *Zoobiquity* suggests that looking to animals is one way to learn about human problems and vulnerabilities, based on the idea of a 'deep homology' – the genetic kernels or molecular lineage that we share with nearly all creatures.

In looking at human and non-human health in the same frame, these initiatives challenge the common belief that humans are somehow qualitatively different from non-human animals – that we are exceptional. Of course, this challenge is also shaped by a

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1 Among many others, the following promote the 'One Health' concept: the World Bank, The World Organization for Animal Health, WHO (the World Health Organization), FAO (Food and Agricultural organization), the US Center for Disease Control, the European Commission, the American Veterinary Association and the One Health Center at University of California's Global Health Institute. Most recently, the Gates Foundation has gotten involved, as has the Clinton Global Initiative. See: www.onehealthinitiative.com/about.php.

larger political climate where non-humans increasingly occupy central stage: attention to climate change, fights for the rights of 'Mother Nature', and movements against factory farming and to protect endangered species are all part of our contemporary context and insist that we take non-humans seriously. Yet on what grounds do we take them seriously – on what basis do we bring them into the same frame? Do we look to shared biology, immunology, biochemistry, psychology, morality, politics, culture or history? Do we see these similarities as a threat (as does 'One Health'), or do we embrace the blurring of species boundaries, and if so, to what end?

Laurel Braitman's *Animal Madness* is part of this trend of books and projects that examine the connections between human and animal health, emphasizing their similarities. It is based on her dissertation research, which she completed in the History and Anthropology of Science Program at MIT, and then transformed into a trade book. In discussing the mental health of non-human animals, Braitman takes on one of the main conceptual frameworks through which humans and animals have been thought about together, and yet which has been largely dismissed as bad science: anthropomorphism. This is the belief that animals are essentially like humans. Those found guilty of it are accused of employing human concepts and abilities to classify behaviors across the ontological divide between us and them.

Animal Madness is organized as a series of stories about the emotional lives of individual animals, starting with Braitman's own Bernice Mountain Dog, who suffered from such extreme anxiety that he jumped out a fourth floor window when she and her boyfriend were gone for the day. Yet the book's underlying mission is to reclaim anthropomorphism, arguing that we should not avoid it, but rather, we should "anthropomorphize well" (p. 36).

As Braitman explains in a history fragmented by stories of emotionally disturbed animals such as elephants, bears, parrots, whales, rats, bonobos and lions, anthropomorphism has been seen as 'lazy' science at least since the time of radical behaviorists such as B.F. Skinner in the mid-twentieth century. Although Darwin pointed to our shared evolutionary history, forcing us to understand human life on a continuum with other life forms, and while he made an argument for our shared emotional experiences, the rise of modern science nevertheless challenged this with the principle of objectivity: the argument was that we cannot actually know animals' mental states – we cannot verify them through laboratory methods – and therefore anthropomorphism can only be a self-centered projection, or a childish illusion.[2] Braitman suggests that the rise of cognitive ethology – a branch of ethology interested in the influence of conscious awareness and intention on the behavior of an animal – helped to challenge this view, as did the rise of the environmental movement in the 1960s. She cites the signing of the 2012 *Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness* to show that we are in a different moment: signed by neuroanatomists, cognitive neuroscientists, neurophysiologists and ethologists, the declaration sought to establish that mammals, birds and even some cephalopods like octopi are conscious creatures with the capacity to experience emotions. This is based on a theory about convergent evolution, which gave many creatures the capacity for emotional experiences, even if they do not have a cortex. Taking this as her starting point, Braitman suggests that anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism are different, and that we only need to avoid the latter.

With 'good anthropomorphism' as its goal, the book tracks animal mental health through its intersections with human mental health, but this is not done in any simple way; Braitman shows how the two are intimately intertwined on many levels, not simply the biological or phylogenetic. For instance, while one might have thought that a diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) for military dogs was a very recent phenomenon tied to the Iraq War, and a blatant instance of anthropocentrism, in fact, Braitman reveals that Ivan Pavlov conducted the initial research on human war neurosis – which later morphed into PTSD – using dogs. Thus, Pavlov's canine-based research came to form the foundation of our understanding of nervous disorders in humans and the therapies used to treat them. In the chapter on animal pharmaceuticals, again, we learn that psychopharmaceuticals such as valium were tested on animals before animals were diagnosed with psychoses, anxiety or depression. That is, Braitman is clear to show that animals have often been used as experimental objects before becoming patient-subjects, yet in each case, there is an underlying assumption of – and often evidence for – shared emotional and other psychophysiological characteristics.

Braitman demonstrates that just as categories for human mental disorders have changed over time, so have those for animals, and often these have been linked. For instance, 'homesickness' or 'nostalgia' was a diagnosis given to both animals and humans in an era of increasing urbanization, when people were

2 On this history, see also Daston and Mitman (2006).

leaving their families to go work far away, or to go to war. Certain groups of people were seen as more subject to this illness, such as African-Americans, Native Americans and all women; they were seen as particularly weak or susceptible. Similarly, a gorilla named John Daniel forced into captivity was said to die from homesickness; mules, monkeys and elephants suffered the same fate when taken on ships. These diagnoses both created, and were created by, a sense of a racial and gendered continuum between certain kinds of people and certain animals. We see that the frame of anthropomorphism is appropriate here precisely because that is how animals were perceived in these historical contexts: the boundary between human and animal was and is ever slippery.

Even if we agree to anthropomorphize well, we are left with the question of which analogies between human and animal health to pay most attention to, and why: morphological, psychological or physiological? The fact that psychopharmaceuticals seem to be effective on both humans and non-humans has made some think that claims to biological similarities are more valid. Braitman's argument is that the diagnosis of mental disorders or illnesses must take into account several factors: not simply similar behavior, nor similar biochemistry, but the animal's individual history, its environment and what is considered 'normal' for that animal. Anthropomorphizing here includes paying equal attention to 'nature' and 'nurture', and indeed, not separating the two. For instance, she shows that even in 'good' zoos, the prevalence of odd behaviors across species reveals that the environment – life in captivity – is a primary cause of mental illness.

This leads us to the fact that anthropomorphism has both its intellectual and moral dimensions. That is, there are clear moral implications to making such an argument: if animals do feel and suffer as humans do, should they not be treated as moral persons, with the same rights and freedoms accorded to humans? The majority of Braitman's examples come from animals in environments of captivity: zoos, circuses, factory farms, aquariums, aquatic shows and laboratories. Indeed, Braitman says that the majority of zoo animals are on antipsychotic medications precisely because their environment literally makes them crazy. Her chapter on animal suicide and self-destructive behaviors mostly covers animals in zoos, marine parks or circuses. Ultimately, it seems that Braitman's main goal in 'anthropomorphizing well' is a moral one. While saying that animal madness is not our fault – "not always, anyway" (p. 282) – she nonetheless condemns the various ways we make animals suffer – teaching elephants to paint and dance, putting chimps in commercials, or confining all kinds of animals in cages and tanks. She proposes transforming zoos ; into wildlife rehabilitation centers, changing the kinds of lives we live that put our pets on pharmaceuticals, and eating fewer mentally ill pigs, chickens and cows in order to do away with corporate farming practices.

When read carefully, *Animal Madness* does convey a powerful message about the usefulness of anthropomorphizing, and of understanding human and non-human health in the same frame; we can treat mental illness in both humans and non-humans better if we understand how it manifests and is categorized in ways that cross species boundaries. For instance, sometimes animal mental illness can function as a sentinel for toxic environments that affect both non-human and human health, and recognizing this allows us to address the health of non-humans, humans as well as 'eco-health'. Anthropomorphizing here gives us a moral map of how to create a better, more just world. However, this larger point risks getting lost in the stories about individual animals that cannot help but be sentimental. While this might be due to the exigencies of trade presses, if such sentimentalizing is what initially gave anthropomorphism a bad name, unfortunately, Braitman risks undermining her own argument by playing into this same genre.

References

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