

Anarchist library
Anti-Copyright



Animal Dreams

John Zerzan

May 1st, 2014

John Zerzan
Animal Dreams
May 1st, 2014

Black Seed Issue #1

en.anarchistlibraries.net

This is the age of disembodiment, when our sense of separate-ness from the earth grows and we are meant to forget our animality. But we are animals and we co-evolved, like all animals, in rapport with other bodily forms and aspects of the world. Minds as well as senses arise from embodiment, just as other animals conveyed meaning—until modernity, that is. We are the top of the food chain, which makes us the only animal nobody needs. Hamlet was very much off the mark in calling humans “the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals.” Mark Twain was much closer: “the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.”¹ The life form that is arguably least well adapted to reality, that has weaker chances for survival among the at least 10 million animal (mostly insect) species. Humans are among the very few mammals who will kill their own kind without the provocation of extreme hunger.²

The human species is unique but so is every other species. We differ from the rest no more, it seems, than do other species from

¹ Quoted in Marc D. Hauser, *Wild Minds* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), p. 70.

² Konrad Lorenz, *The Waning of Humaneness* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), p. 70.

each other. Non-human animals have routinely amazing facilities for accomplishing things by acting on information they receive from their environments. They are creatures of instinct, but so are we. As Joseph Wood Krutch asked, “who is the more thoroughly acquainted with the world in which he lives?”³ Adaptation to one’s world is a cognitive process. If we wonder which species is the smartest, the best answer is, most likely: they all are.

I think that Henry Beston is beautifully helpful: “We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear.”⁴

In the 1980s I knew someone who signed his excellent anti-authoritarian writings and flyers “70 animals.” That kind of identification has charmed me ever since. In rather a contrary spirit is the long-prevailing ban on that act of appropriation and greatest sin, anthropomorphism. Correcting this desperate error means that “A monkey cannot be angry: it exhibits aggression. A crane does not feel affection; it displays courtship or parental behavior. A cheetah is not frightened by a lion; it shows flight behavior.”⁵

Why not take this kind of reductive approach even further and simply remove animals from our vocabulary? This is already underway, if the Oxford Junior Dictionary is any indication. The 2009 edition added several techno words like Twitter and mp3, while the

³ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), p. 83.

⁴ Henry Beston, *The Outermost House* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2003), p. 25.

⁵ Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson and Susan McCarthy, *When Elephants Weep* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1995), p. 34. Among other works that indicate a shift away from anti- “anthropomorphism” are Ruth Rudner, *ask now the beasts* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 2006) and *How Forests Think* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

The counsel of immediacy, of direct connection, has not been extinguished. “But ask now the beasts/ And they shall teach thee;/ And the fowls of the air/ And they shall teach thee;/ Or speak to the Earth/ And it shall teach thee.” (Job 12: 7–8) In the Arctic Jonathan Waterman moved away from separation, from domestication: “I first removed my watch. My ability to isolate different and unidentifiable smells became incredibly distracting. My hearing seemed to improve.”⁵⁰ Far from the Arctic, traces of this dimension have always been felt. Melville sensed in the sight of a sperm whale a colossal existence without which we are incomplete. One thinks of Virginia Woolf’s use of animal vocabularies and inter-species relations. Something whole, something unbroken, there millions of years before Homo showed up. Bequeathing to us what Henry Beston Sheahan called our “animal faith,” which he saw being destroyed by the Machine Age.⁵¹ We are lost, but other animals point to the right road. They are the right road.

We lack that state of grace, but we do know how much is in danger. Laurie Allman, taking in a Michigan songbird: “I can tell in a glance that he does not know he is endangered. He knows only that his job is to sing, this day, from the top of that young jack pine. His beak is open, full of the sky behind him.”⁵²

Here are Richard Grossman’s lines in favor of a return to the old joy: We shall forge a change of mind and come to understand the spirit as animal.⁵³ We are still animals on the planet, with all its original messages waiting in our being.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵¹ John Nelson, “Henry Beston Sheahan,” *Harvard Magazine*, September/October 2013, p. 40.

⁵² Laurie Allman, *Far From Tame* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 73.

⁵³ Grossman, *op. cit.*, “The New Art,” p. 2.

names of various animals, trees, etc. had been deleted.⁶ Children (and others) have less and less contact with nature, after all.

But there is no substitute for direct contact with the living world, if we are to know what it is to be living. Our own world shrinks and shrivels, cut off from animal culture, from the zones of that shared, learned behavior. What Jacob Uexhull called the *Umwelt*, the universe known to each species. We need to be open to the community of our beginnings and to the present non-human life-world.

Amphibians have been here for 300 million years; birds for 150 million years. Dragonflies ask no more of the biosphere than they did 100 million years ago, while Homo species, around for not much more than three million years, are the only animals that are—since domestication and civilization—never satisfied, always pursuing new wants.⁷

Might it not be that nature is for the happiness of all species, not just one? We sense something like this as we search for oases of wildness in the vacuum of civilization. “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers,” wrote Emily Dickinson.⁸

We have mainly lost the sense of the presence or aura of animals, of those who inhabit their bodies so wholly, fully. People in traditional indigenous cultures have not lost that awareness. They feel their kinship with all who live. Some of the bond remains even with us, however, and may be seen in small ways—our instinctive love of songbirds, for example.

⁶ Eoin O’Carroll, “Oxford Junior Dictionary Dropping ‘Nature’ Words,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 9, 2009.

⁷ An ugly leftist counter-notion is communist Oxana Timofeeva, *History of Animals: An Essay on Negativity, Immanence and Freedom* (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2012), with Foreword by Slavoj Žižek. Timofeeva condemns nature’s resistance to technology while bizarrely claiming that animals are natural communists! E.g. pp. 146–147.

⁸ Quoted in Susan Hanson, *Icons of Loss and Grace* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), p. 182.

All is not sweetness and light in the non-human realm either, especially in this shaken and disturbed world. Rape has been observed among orangutans, dolphins, seals, bighorn sheep, wild horses, and some birds, although it is not the norm in any of these species.⁹ But even in animal societies marked by male power, females generally remain self-sufficient and responsible for their own sustenance, unlike in most human (domesticated) societies. In some groupings, in fact, females provide for all. Lionesses do the hunting in their prides, for example.¹⁰ Each elk herd is led by a cow, wise in the ways of coyote, wolf, lynx, cougar, and human. And it is also the case, according to many, that non-humans can be as individually distinct as we are. Delia Akeley concluded that “apes and monkeys vary in their dispositions as much as do human beings,”¹¹ and Barry Lopez commented on the “markedly different individual personalities” of wolves.¹² But one does see an absence of many old, infirm, and diseased animals among non-domesticates. How the “food chain” operates here brings up questions such as, do wolves only kill animals that are near their end anyway—the old, sick, injured? This seems to be roughly the case, according to Lopez.¹³

Hierarchy and dominance among other species is a long-running assumption, often a baseless one. The idea that there is usually, if not always, a “pecking order” derives from a Norwegian graduate student in 1922. His concept came from observing domestic chickens in his back yard and spread virulently in the animal studies field. It is a classic example of projecting from human domestication where, of course, hierarchy and dominance are indeed the rule.

⁹ Masson and McCarthy, *op.cit.*, p. 140.

¹⁰ Barbara Noske, *Humans and Other Animals* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), p. 115.

¹¹ Vera Norwood, *Made from this Earth* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 235.

¹² Barry Lopez, *Of Wolves and Men* (New York: Scribner Classics, 2004), p. 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

animals? Maybe what we need most to know is that we could possibly join them in their non-domestication.

Kant was grievously wrong about human superiority. “As the single being on earth that possesses understanding, he is certainly titular lord of nature.”⁴⁵ Walt Whitman provides a simple response: “Do not call the tortoise unworthy because she is not something else.”⁴⁶ It is noteworthy that women dominate what is called animal ethology, and are far less prone to follow Kant’s wrongheadedness.

The illusion of human domination of the natural world comes in many forms. One is the assumption that our prowess gives us long-range safety; we forget that this orientation can lead us into danger in the long run. Our lost connection, our lost awareness have led us into an age of horrors of every kind. And as Olaus Murie once said, “In the evolution of the human spirit, something much worse than hunger can happen to a people.”⁴⁷

Jacques Derrida came to see the prime importance of the question of animality for humans, as pivotal to “the essence and future of humanity.”⁴⁸ The image of a free animal initiates a daydream, the starting point from which the dreamer departs. Meanwhile the living reality, the communion among species, yet manage to survive. The Inupiat Eskimo and Gwich’in people, who still travel without maps and discern direction without compasses, know that the caribou carry a piece of them in their hearts, while they carry the caribou in their hearts.⁴⁹

versity Press, 2013), p. 178.

⁴⁵ Immanuel Kant, trans. J.C. Meredith, *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), Part 2, Section 431.

⁴⁶ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Library of America, 2011), section 13.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Jonathan Waterman, *Where Mountains are Nameless* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), p. 237.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Leonard Lawlor, *This is Not Sufficient* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 7.

⁴⁹ Waterman, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

further slavery, a fitting complement to the captivity at large. As the unbuilt, unmassified world recedes, the line between undomesticated and domesticated has blurred. Pretty much everything requires managing, up to and including the oxymoron “wildlife management.” We are now in fact in a new age of domestication, including an unprecedented escalation of controlled animal breeding in recent decades.⁴¹

The completely non-biocentric, humanist myth of immortality is part of the ethos of domestication, its rituals focused on sacrifice rather than on the freedom of pre-domesticated life. Freud’s Oedipal family model is a product of jointly domesticated animals and the father. Lacan’s formulations often stem from findings about caged animals, and Kristeva’s notion of abjection or disturbing threat, at base, refers to the act of domesticating. But the non-domesticated do not participate in assimilation into the conquered whole, in Freudian terms or otherwise.

Once there was a communal life of organisms in an ecosystem. Life fed on life, but not in a destructive trajectory. Even now we should not forget that the victory of domestication is far from total. Many species, for various reasons, are outside its orbit. “The lion tamer doesn’t actually tame anything,” John Harrington reminds us. He must stay within the boundaries the cats have established.⁴²

“Almost everything about whales is a tantalizing mystery,” concluded Diane Ackerman.⁴³ Wendell Berry quotes his daughter in his poem, “To the Unseeable Animal”: “I hope there’s an animal somewhere that nobody has ever seen. And I hope nobody ever sees it.”⁴⁴ Do we need to know, can we know, so much about other

eds., *Animal Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 158.

⁴¹ Clive Roots, *Domestication* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), p. xii.

⁴² Quoted in Lane, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

⁴³ Diane Ackerman, *The Moon by Whale Light* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 112.

⁴⁴ Wendell Berry, “To the Unseeable Animal,” in Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street, eds., *The Ecopoetry Anthology* (San Antonio TX: Trinity Uni-

Its universality unravels with the fact that poultry yard pecking orders are not observed in wild flocks.

Similar is the fallacy that the Freudian paradigm of murderous rivalry between fathers and sons represents the state of nature. Questionable in the first application; even more so, evidently, regarding non-humans. Masson and McCarthy refer to zebra, kiwi, beaver, wolf, and mongoose fathers exhibiting acceptance and affection toward their offspring.¹⁴ South American murequi monkeys, female and male, are non-aggressive, tolerant and co-operative. Steve Kemper’s “No Alpha Males Allowed” focuses on Karen Strier’s work with the murequi, which subverts the dominant view of male primates.¹⁵ Among Asian gibbons, primates that live in pairs, the male may stay with his mate a very long time after sexual activity has ceased.¹⁶

John Muir described a goose attacking a hunter in support of a wounded companion: “Never before had I regarded wild geese as dangerous, or capable of such noble self-sacrificing devotion.”¹⁷ Geese mate monogamously and for life.

Widespread among non-humans are the social traits of parental care, co-operative foraging, and reciprocal kindness or mutual aid. Mary Midgley, in sum, referred to “their natural disposition to love and trust one another.”¹⁸ Also, to love and trust others, such as humans, to the point of raising them. Jacques Graven, in a striking finding, refers to children having been adopted by wolves, bears, gazelles, pigs, and sheep.¹⁹

¹⁴ Masson and McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

¹⁵ Steve Kemp, “No Alpha Males Allowed,” *Smithsonian*, September 2013, pp. 39–41.

¹⁶ Noske, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹⁷ John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912), p. 151.

¹⁸ Mary Midgley, *The Ethical Primate* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 131.

¹⁹ Jacques Graven, *Non-Human Thought* (New York: Stein and Day, 1967), p. 68.

In his irresistible *Desert Solitaire*, the cantankerous Edward Abbey imagines that the frogs he hears singing do so for various practical purposes, “but also out of spontaneous love and joy.”²⁰ N.J. Berrill declared: “To be a bird is to be alive more intensely than any other living creature, man included...they live in a world that is always the present, and mostly full of joy.”²¹ To Joseph Wood Krutch it seemed that we have seen our capacity for joy atrophy. For animals, he decided, “joy seems to be more important and more accessible than it is to us.”²²

Various non-human intelligences seem lately to be much more highly regarded than in the past. John Hoptas and Kristine Samuelson’s *Tokyo Waka*, a 2013 documentary film, looks at resourceful urban crows. How they use their beaks to shape twigs into hooks to snag grubs from trees, for example. In 2002, a New Caledonia crow named Betty was declared by an Oxford University researcher to have been the first animal to create a tool for a specific task without trial and error, something primates have evidently yet to achieve. Elephants’ actions, according to J.H. Williams, are “always revealing an intelligence which finds impromptu solutions for difficulties.”²³

More surprising is what is coming to light about animals we usually consider to be further down the “food chain.” Katherine Harmon Courage has uncovered heretofore unseen capacities of the octopus. “It can solve mazes, open jars, use tools. It even has what seems to be a sophisticated inner life.” Courage goes on to state that the octopus “has a brain unlike that of almost any creature we might think of as intelligent.”²⁴ Along these lines is a growing inter-

²⁰ Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), p. 157.

²¹ Quoted in Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Great Chain of Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956), p. 224.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

²³ J.H. Williams, *Elephant Bill* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1950), p. 58.

²⁴ Katherine Harmon Courage, “Alien Intelligence,” *Wired*, October 2013, p.

tains much about death. Today we are ever more distanced from encountering the reality of death—and animals. As our lives shrink, Thoreau’s words from 1859 are all the more true: “It seems as if no man had ever died in America; for in order to die you must first have lived.”³⁷ One need only add, it isn’t humans who know how to die, but the animals.

As if in acknowledgment, humans have exacted a revenge on selected species. Domestication is a kind of death, forcing animal vitality into a subjugated state. When animals are colonized and appropriated, both domesticated and domesticators are qualitatively reduced. It is the proverbial “greatest mistake in human history” for all concerned. The direct victims, once quite able to take care of themselves, lose autonomy, freedom of movement, brain size, and what Krutch called the “heroic virtues.”³⁸

A farm pig is almost as much a human artifact as the farmer’s tractor. Compare to a wild boar. Wild means free. To John Muir, wild sheep represented conditions before the Fall; conversely, he decided, “If a domestic sheep was any indication, Man’s work had been degrading for himself and his charges.”³⁹ The level of an animal’s perfection, as Nietzsche saw it, was their “degree of wildness and their power to evade domestication.”⁴⁰ In light of the vast picture of oppression, David Nibert calls the institution “domestication,” and it is not surprising that objections have been raised against even using the same name for wild and domestic members of a species.

Industrialism of course brought far worse lives on a mass scale, mass misery to feed mass society. Zoos and marine parks showcase

1997), p. 173.

³⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal, 1837–1861*, ed. Damion Searls (New York: New York Review of Books, 2009), p. 585 (entry for October 22, 1859).

³⁸ Krutch, *op.cit.*, p. 102.

³⁹ Michael P. Cohen, *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), pp. 173, 176.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Ham, “Taming the Beast,” in Jennifer Ham and Matthew Senior,

as a lack; the animal is without the lack that constitutes the human subject. At the heart of nature, wrote Joseph Wood Krutch, are the values “as yet uncaptured by language;” he added that the quality of cranes lies “beyond the need of words.”³²

I’ve long wondered how it is that so many animals look you in the eye. What do they mean by it? Gavin Maxwell enjoyed the “wondering inquisitiveness” of the eyes of Canadian porpoises,³³ while Diane Fossey’s *Gorillas in the Mist* is filled with examples of gorillas and humans gazing on one another in trust. John Muir wrote of Stickeen, an Alaskan dog with whom Muir survived a life-threatening situation, “His strength of character lay in his eyes. They looked as old as the hills, and as young, and as wild.”³⁴ John Lane was drawn by the eyes of alligators, an experience “not to be forgotten. Their black eyes hold steady as if staring through millions of miles or years.”³⁵

Maybe there’s more to be learned there, in those direct windows, in that openness and immediacy, than by means of quite possibly unanswerable questions about consciousness and language. And if we could somehow see with those eyes, would it possibly allow us to really see ourselves?

There is an unmediated openness about the eyes. Death may be mentioned here, as perhaps the least mediated experience, or certainly among them. Loren Eiseley, near his own end, felt that wild things die “without question, without knowledge of mercy in the universe, knowing only themselves and their own pathway to the end.”³⁶ Ernest Seton-Thompson’s *Biography of a Grizzly* (1901) con-

1983), p. 421.

³² Leopold, *op.cit.*, p. 102.

³³ Gavin Maxwell, *Ring of Bright Water* (Boston: Nonpareil Books, 2011), p. 45

³⁴ Edwin Way Teale, *The Wilderness World of John Muir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954), p. 281.

³⁵ John Lane, *Waist Deep in Black Water* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), p. 49.

³⁶ Loren Eiseley, *The Night Country* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press,

est in “cold-blooded cognition,” with recent studies revealing that reptile brains are not as undeveloped as we imagined. Lizards and tortoises, for instance, have exhibited impressive problem-solving capabilities.²⁵

Jacques Graven was amazed to learn that the method of solving a maze is “scarcely different for a roach than for a rat,” and that striking achievements by mammals “reappear in almost identical form in insects.”²⁶ Speaking of mazes and the like, it may be added that very little of important truth is to be found in controlled laboratory experiments, whichever species may be subjected to them.

Memory is important to many creatures as an aid to survival. The work of animal scientist Tetsuro Matsuzawa demonstrates that chimpanzees have far stronger memories than humans.²⁷ Katydid flies have a hearing range many times that of ours. Honeybees can see ultraviolet light, invisible to us. The ichneumon fly can smell through solid wood. A monarch butterfly’s sense of taste is two hundred times as sensitive as the human tongue. The dung beetle finds its way with reference to the Milky Way. Animals with four legs, and who don’t wear shoes, probably pick up on a variety of emanations or vibrations lost on us. How about pet dogs or cats who are separated by hundreds of miles from their host families, and somehow find them? Only a kind of telepathy could account for the very many such cases.

A great deal more could be said about the gifts of animals. Or about their play. It is not “anthropomorphic” to recognize that animals play. Consider the mating dances of birds. I have seen the wonderful dawn dances of the sandhill crane. They dance, and have inspired an endless list of human societies. What of wild geese,

84.

²⁵ Emily Anthes, “Coldblooded Does Not Mean Stupid,” *New York Times*, November 19, 2013, pp D1, D5.

²⁶ Graven, *op.cit.*, p. 127. 7

²⁷ Justin McCurry, “Chimps Are Making Monkeys Out of Us,” *The Observer*, September 28, 2013.

whose matchless grace, elegance and devotion put us humans to shame?

Individuals of many species operate on an awareness that there is a distinction between “self” and “non-self.” A member of one species can always recognize another of the same species. These kinds of self-recognition are obvious. Another instance is that of grizzly bears hiding out of sight of humans and others. There is a consciousness that the whole body—the “self” if you will—must be concealed.

But do non-humans realize that they are “selves”? Do they have self-awareness such that they realize their mortality? Many posit an absence of self-reflection and make this supposed absence the primary dividing line between humans and all other animals. Bees use signs, but are not conscious of their signing. On what basis, however, can we make assumptions about what bees or other animals know or do not know? Chimpanzees and orangutans recognize themselves in a mirror; gorillas cannot. What exactly does this reveal? There is quite a set of unresolved questions, in fact, as to how conscious or unconscious human behavior is, especially in light of the fact that consciousness in ourselves is such a completely elusive thing. The complex, versatile, and adaptive responses we see as a rule among the living on this planet may or may not be guided by self-awareness. But self-awareness is not likely an all-or-nothing phenomenon. The differences between humans and others have not been established as radical; they are probably more a matter of degree. More fundamentally, we do not know how to even comprehend consciousnesses different from our own.

Our concept of self-awareness, vague though it is, seems to be the gold standard for evaluating non-humans. The other watershed condition is that of language: are we the only species that possess it? And these two benchmarks are commonly run together, in the assumption that consciousness can only be expressed by means of language. It is tempting to see in language the explanation for consciousness, to wonder whether the latter is only applicable to

language-using beings. Indeed it can seem very difficult to think about the state of our minds without recourse to language. But if language were the only basis of a thinking order, all non-human animals would live in a completely disordered world, after all.

Wolves, dogs, dolphins, elephants, whales, to name a few, can vocalize at about the range of human registry. Humpback whale “songs” are complex intra-species forms of cultural expression across vast distances. It may be that animals’ calls are, overall, more a matter of doing than of meaning.

If we look for our kind of symbolic meaning, it does not seem to be sustained among our fellow animals. In their natural state, parrots never imitate the human voice; species that may be seen to draw in captivity do not do so in the wild. Primates trained to master language do not use it like humans. Herbert Terrace, once a convinced ape-language researcher, became one of its harshest critics. Trying to wrest “a few tidbits of language from a chimpanzee [who is] trying to get rewards,” says Terrace, produces nothing much of importance.²⁸

Animals don’t do what humans do via speech, namely, make a symbol stand in for the thing.²⁹ As Tim Ingold puts it, “they do not impose a conceptual grid on the flow of experience and hence do not encode that experience in symbolic forms.”³⁰ An amazing richness of signaling, of the most varied kinds, does not equate to symbolizing. When a creature presents its intentional acts, it does so without the need to describe them, to re-present them.

The poet Richard Grossman found that truth is “the way it tells itself.”³¹ Jacques Lacan saw the orientation toward representation

²⁸ Quoted in Stephen Budiansky, *If a Lion Could Talk* (New York: Free Press, 1998), p. 45.

²⁹ Kelly Oliver, *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to be Human* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 186.

³⁰ Tim Ingold, *Evolution and Social Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 311.

³¹ Richard Grossman, “The Truth,” in *Animals* (Minneapolis: Zygote Press,