Serpents, raptors and other liminal beings: The symbolic decentring of anthropocentrism

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Modern Western thought constructs non-human animals as Other – as lacking all the supposed marks of the human, such as subjectivity, reason, language and morality. Snakes, raptors and other liminal animal figures disrupt this dominant anthropocentric worldview, and a comparison with non-modern cosmologies shows how, in many cultures, non-human animals are recognized as legitimate interlocutors, endowed with their own subjectivities and agency. A reflection on a biocentric and intercultural ethics of interspecies communication, capable of overcoming extractive logics and mending the symbolic bonds severed with the non-human, shows how we can symbolically decentre anthropocentrism, and open spaces for these non-human agencies.

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We live in a time when ecological upheavals and cultural fractures converge to question the supremacy of the human. The erosion of biodiversity and the spread of zoonoses not only signal a biological crisis, they also expose the limits of an anthropocentric worldview that has long reduced non-human animals to objects of fear or utility.

In this context, exploring animal subjectivities becomes a radical act. It is not just about recognizing animal emotions or intelligence, but about asking how human cultures – ours and others – have constructed the category of *animal* as Other: deprived of reason, language and morality (Shepard, 1996; Lévi-Strauss, 1962). This dualistic opposition has had deep cultural and geopolitical consequences, shaping the destinies of non-modern cosmologies as well (Descola, 2013). To reopen the question of animal subjectivities is therefore to reopen the very meaning of what it means to be human (Latouche, 2009; Braidotti, 2013).

In this article I focus on species that occupy a particularly ambiguous place in the human imagination: snakes and raptors. These are animals culturally marginalized or openly feared, embodying ancestral fears and, at the same time, deep symbolic fascinations (Kohn, 2013). I will also explore the concept of liminal figures – beings who dwell on thresholds: between nature and culture, wilderness and domesticity, object and subject (Maran, 2015).

Feared others

If we look closely at the historical relationship between humans and many animal species, we notice that *fear* has often functioned as a powerful epistemic device: a lens that does not merely distort the image of the other, but actively constructs its meaning. We do not fear snakes and raptors *because* they are 'objectively' dangerous. Rather, narratives of danger, suspicion and control have shaped our understanding of their place in the world.

Snakes represent a paradigmatic case. Across cultures they have embodied both renewal and danger, but in modern Western contexts a single image prevails: the Edenic serpent, translated from religious symbol of temptation into secularized figure of risk. This legacy justifies their preventive elimination as an act of 'safety', a framing that still permeates popular science and wildlife management practices (Descola, 2013).

Raptors have likewise been cast as adversaries, from the eagle accused of stealing lambs to the owl associated with death omens (Shepard, 1996). Well into the twentieth century, their shooting or poisoning was considered a civic duty to protect livestock and 'useful' fauna. This rhetoric of defence consolidated a hierarchy of value among species, rendering some worthy of protection and others legitimately expendable (Kohn, 2013).

Beneath these schemes lies a deeper assumption: an anthropocentrism that establishes hierarchies of life based on perceived utility or danger to humans. A snake that does not bite, a raptor that does not prey on what is 'ours', may be tolerated or even celebrated as spectacle; otherwise, they become objects to be neutralized. Fear, far from being a mere instinct, thus acts as a normative device that shapes ecological relations (Latouche, 2009; Braidotti, 2013).

Furthermore, human emotional responses such as fear, fascination or affection do not erase animal subjectivity; they often presuppose it. As Winnicott (1971) suggested, encounters with non-human presences open transitional spaces where emotions become forms of symbolization. Marchesini (2017) similarly emphasizes that emotions toward animals are not projections but moments of relational recognition, in which the self negotiates its boundaries with another subject. Even fear, as Shepard (1996) reminds us, can be read as the trace of a long co-evolution, a response to beings perceived as active presences rather than inert objects. For this reason, animals that provoke fear are not less but more clearly revealed as subjects: they confront us with the limits of our control, obliging us to acknowledge them as agents in the relationship.

Animated ontologies

In contrast to Western framings, many other cultures have inscribed snakes and

raptors into radically different ontologies, which do not sharply separate nature and culture, human and non-human (Viveiros de Castro, 1998; Descola, 2013).

In Amazonian indigenous cosmologies, for example, snakes are not merely predators to be feared, but entities endowed with subjective perspectives, capable of seeing and acting upon the world intentionally (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). In these cosmologies the boundaries between species are not fixed lines, but constellations of relations continually redefined. A snake, in certain ritual contexts, can see 'like a human' or become a conduit for visions, revealing that subjectivity is not the exclusive monopoly of *Homo sapiens*, but distributed among many living beings inhabiting different natures.

Similarly, in many African and Asian cultures, raptors are regarded as messengers or spirit guides. The eagle and falcon in particular embody the ability to overfly borders, connect worlds and carry news from ancestors or gods. Even barn owls, which in medieval European iconography were linked to misfortune, appear in other traditions as threshold protectors and guardians between life and death (Shepard, 1996).

This transformation is also visible within Euro-Mediterranean traditions if we look further back in time. The figure of the serpent provides a striking example. Jörmungandr, the great serpent encircling the world in Norse mythology, is a necessary cosmic presence, a symbol of balance and renewal. Its death at Ragnarök does not mark the end of everything, but the beginning of a new cycle. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, by contrast, the serpent becomes the embodiment of sin and temptation, bearer of a guilt that founds the punitive order of the West and justifies its moral supremacy over the rest of creation. These contrasts remind us that there is not a single, monolithic 'Western thought', but a plurality of traditions, often internally contradictory, that have framed animal figures in divergent ways.

These cosmologies are not simply 'folk beliefs' to be contrasted with a supposedly neutral and objective scientific knowledge. On the contrary, they reveal how every culture – including modern Western technoscience – constructs animated ontologies, ways of conceiving who or what possesses interiority, intentionality and speech (Descola, 2013; Kohn, 2013). The difference is that modernity has fenced off such qualities almost exclusively within the human, leaving other beings only a remainder of merely mechanical or biological functions.

To compare these visions is thus to problematize our very way of delimiting subjectivities. It is to ask: what do we lose – ethically, ecologically, epistemologically – when we refuse to entertain the possibility that a snake or a raptor might be something other than a mere automaton guided by instinct? And above all, what responsibility do we bear when transmitting to non-modern peoples a paradigm that risks dissolving their more sober, cohabitant cosmological relations with the living world (Latouche, 2009; Descola, 2013)?

It should be emphasized that focusing on the role cosmologies play in constructing our ontology, does not mean denying that animals possess autonomous subjectivities which precede and exceed human symbolic constructions. As Marchesini (2017) has argued, animal subjectivity is not a

derivative of human recognition but an agentive and relational dimension in its own right. Ingold (2000) has similarly shown that to perceive the environment is to enter into a meshwork of relations that cannot be reduced to cultural constructs, because beings are already enmeshed in processes of life and meaning. In this horizon, Kohn's (2013) insight that even forests 'think' through the semiotic activity of their non-human inhabitants further extends the point: what human cultures construct are not subjectivities themselves, but the frames through which these are acknowledged, valued or suppressed (Descola, 2013).

Liminal beings

In many mythological and narrative traditions, certain animals occupy an ambiguous position, oscillating between categories we usually consider distinct: life and death, earth and sky, inside and outside, individual and collective (Kohn, 2013; Lévi-Strauss, 1962).

Snakes are an emblematic case of such liminality: they crawl on the boundary between surface and underground, shed their skins, regenerate. Thus they are often associated with cycles of rebirth, but also with deep fears linked to the unknown and the uncontrollable (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). Likewise, raptors traverse a frontier space: they fly high yet hunt low, acting as mediators between sky and earth, divine and terrestrial. Their gaze from above questions the horizontal perspective typical of humans, destabilizing hierarchies of observation and control (Maran, 2015; Martinelli, 2010).

There is another figure we can evoke as an example of radical liminality, one that prompts us to question the very temporality of life: the Aldabra giant tortoise (*Aldabrachelys gigantea*). With its slow pace, shell reminiscent of living rock and longevity spanning centuries, this creature embodies a deep time that far exceeds our individual human horizon. Encountering these tortoises can thus produce a disorienting sense of suspension. Liminality, in this sense, does not indicate a fixed border but a condition of oscillation and passage, where categories blur without disappearing: the perception that our rhythms, our urgencies, even our inner conflicts are tiny events on a temporal scale to which we do not quite belong (Shepard, 1996).

Liminal figures thus have the power to unsettle the dichotomies upon which we construct our identity – subject/object, culture/nature, rationality/instinct, and, of course, human/animal – and help us to see the contingency of the ontological boundaries we have constructed.

Interspecies communication and biocentric ethics

In light of all this, we might ask: what does it mean, in practical and normative terms, to recognize animal subjectivities and their agencies? How can we translate this perceptual shift into a biocentric ethics capable of decentring the human without denying it?

This shift entails acknowledging the cultural pluralities in how human relationships with other animals are conceived. An intercultural ethics cannot simply impose Western categories – whether zoological or moral – on the

relationships that different peoples maintain with the living world. It must instead open to a dialogue with cosmologies that see animals not as mere organisms, but as non-human persons, allies or guardians – interlocutors in a profoundly relational sense (Viveiros de Castro, 1998; Kohn, 2013).

Interspecies communication becomes the privileged laboratory for such an ethics. It is not just about developing techniques to 'better understand' animals or interpret their behaviours in utilitarian ways (for example in conservation or training), but about cultivating forms of listening, attention and respect that recognize in other living beings the capacity to signify, to choose and sometimes to withdraw (Martinelli, 2010; Hoffmeyer, 2008).

In this context, a crucial contribution comes from zoosemiotics, the study of sign processes involving animals not merely as receivers but as producers of meaning (Hoffmeyer, 2008). As Martinelli (2010) and Maran (2015) demonstrate, animal communication is a complex semiotic field where animals interpret signals, construct meanings and modulate social and ecological interactions. As Wheeler (2016) argues, this semiotic approach can help us conceptualize human cultures themselves as ecologies of signs, interwoven with the communicative practices of non-human beings. This perspective reinforces the idea that animals are not biological machines but active interpreters of signs and subjects endowed with their own interiority.

This approach is not limited to an interpretive level: it becomes a true epistemic rewilding, a *renaturalization* of our own knowledge, dismantling the cognitive barriers we have erected between ourselves and other living beings (Hoffmeyer, 2008). It means reopening to the possibility that the signs emitted by a snake vibrating its tail, a raptor in flight or a turtle moving stubbornly forward are not merely physiological reactions, but components of a broader ecological language of which we too are a part (Abram, 1996).

In this sense, zoosemiotics emerges as a critical device for deconstructing anthropocentric categories and for relearning how to read the traces of agency scattered throughout the living world, without immediately domesticating and reducing them into 'the useful' or 'the dangerous'. It is an invitation to reshape our sensory and ethical literacy, reactivating a form of listening that precedes and exceeds our own grammar, opening us to the multiplicity of worlds and languages coexisting on the planet.

Decentring anthropocentrism

Ultimately, this perspective has an eminently political value: in an era marked by ecological crisis, zoonoses and climate change, rethinking interspecies relationships through a biocentric lens is not only an ethical exercise but a strategic urgency. This implies what I call a symbolic decentring of anthropocentrism, opening space for other agencies and ways of inhabiting the Earth. In this sense, liminal figures such as snakes, raptors and tortoises provide a privileged laboratory: they show us how to go about dwelling in thresholds, in the interstices that unsettle our ontological boundaries – between human and non-human, culture and nature, mortality and deep time (Descola, 2013; Braidotti, 2013). Authors such as Braidotti (2013) and Maran (2015) have argued

that learning to live with and in these thresholds is essential for a post-anthropocentric ethics. This entails no longer placing the human at the centre of our imaginaries, but instead opening space for narratives, practices and representations that restore agency and complexity to animal subjectivities.

This is not only of ecological or ethical significance; it also represents a profoundly anti-colonial act. It allows us to strip away the attractive power of a model of modernity which, when exported, pushes traditional cultures to abandon their cosmological fabrics in pursuit of consumerist paradigms (Descola, 2013; Latouche, 2009). In doing so, we risk destroying relationships that for centuries ensured cohabitation and respect, replacing them with a blind, purely economic relationship with the environment.

A symbolic decentring of anthropocentrism thus becomes a geopolitical responsibility: allowing the plurality of ways of inhabiting the world to flourish, without dragging them into a crisis that is, first and foremost, a crisis of our own imaginary. If we in the West – heirs to a modernity that severed symbolic ties with the rest of the living world – manage to regain a cultural and mental connection with non-modern visions, we might finally mend our ontological fracture without exerting that cultural soft power which pushes other societies toward our same fate (Braidotti, 2013; Latouche, 2009). A symbolic decentring of anthropocentrism thus means stripping power away from a devastating imaginary, resisting the homogenizing pressure of our cultural frames, and letting flourish the plurality of ways of dwelling on Earth – including those that still today recognize in snakes, raptors and tortoises not mere organisms, but interlocutors, allies and guardians of thresholds (Kohn, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 1998).

To make this symbolic shift effective requires us to translate it into concrete action. It means, for example, rethinking school and university curricula to incorporate intercultural and semiotic perspectives that restore complexity to non-human worlds. Concrete initiatives might include educational programmes where raptors are engaged as liminal figures to foster attentiveness and humility, or therapeutic projects involving giant tortoises, whose deep temporality unsettles our human rhythms and offers a unique pedagogical experience. It means fostering artistic and media forms that deconstruct human centrality, staging animal agencies, relational ecologies and deep temporalities (Martinelli, 2010; Maran, 2015; Wheeler, 2016). It also means supporting community and institutional decisions that integrate traditional knowledges, safeguarding historical relationships between peoples and territories without reducing them to mere marketing assets or hollow patrimonial rhetorics (Descola, 2013). Only in this way can this symbolic decentring become a daily and shared experience, truly transforming our way of inhabiting the Earth, rather than remaining a purely theoretical exercise.

Concluding remarks

Throughout this journey, we have shown how cultural representations of snakes, raptors and other liminal figures are not mere symbolic ornaments, but devices that concretely shape our relationships with the living. Modern

Western frameworks have often reduced these animals to objects to be managed or neutralized, erecting the human as the measure of all things. In contrast, non-modern cosmologies and the perspectives opened by zoosemiotics invite us to recognize a plurality of worlds and temporalities, where the human is neither centre nor apex, but one interlocutor among many.

Embracing this relational multiplicity means abandoning the claim to epistemic or moral transparency, opening ourselves to situated forms of knowledge, where listening to a snake vibrating its tail or watching a tortoise advance becomes an act of mutual learning. Moving from a paradigm of control to one of cohabitation entails rethinking educational institutions, environmental practices and our own inner maps. It means welcoming alterity not as a deficit, but as an opportunity to renegotiate our ontological, ethical and political boundaries.

Perhaps only by lingering alongside those who live in different times and worlds – from the raptor surveying from above to the tortoise crossing decades – can we begin to cultivate a perceptual openness and an ecological responsibility that is not paternalism, but a transformative alliance. To embrace such a perspective is to resist the homogenizing force of modernity and to let flourish a plurality of ways of dwelling on Earth that are truly ecocentric.

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