

# Ecocentrism: Playing beyond boundaries

“What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you? And all the six of us to the amoeba in one direction and the backward schizophrenic in another?”

(Bateson, 2002: 7)

I vividly remember sitting in the back seat of my dad’s car watching the landscape fly past pretending to be a horse running alongside. I could feel the cold wind in my nostrils, my pounding hoofs, the strength of my muscles, the joy of the movement and the changing surface under my feet. Sometimes, the horse would dissolve and I merged with the land, green fields, rolling hills, soaring mountains, forests, alpine pastures and roaring waterfalls. This merging was my favourite play. Can you smell the high moor? See the delicate flowers and hear the insects humming in the high moor? Can you also feel what it is like to *be* a high moor? Dark, timeless, rhythmically pulsating, breathing, basking under the sun, absorbing the rain and melting snow, sharing with thousands of other creatures. This play was enchanted, connected, and made me feel at home in the endless universe. But such a connection to nature also allowed me to feel pain, irritation and sadness, as when my neighbours rescued a kitten and put it up with their cat to ‘calm down the kitten’, rather than taking it back to its mother. Or when I saw horses shut into little ‘loose’ boxes for hours, or cattle chained to their troughs for months on end, or logged forests and meadows being eaten up by construction sites.

The barrier to empathy and to responsibility toward animals and nature

lies in anthropocentrism. It is hidden in what we perceive as “normal, natural and necessary” (Joy, 2011). Anthropocentrism, “which sees individual humans and the human species as more valuable than all other organisms” (Washington *et al.*, 2017: 35), has many aspects which are deeply embedded in our language and social structures, as well as our cultural practices. There are, first, the dualisms between human and animal, culture and nature, and mind and body, which set the human distinctly apart from all other life forms. The human has defined himself throughout Western philosophy as against the animalistic, the natural and the embodied. Indeed, the notion of humanity and ethics remains largely based on an understanding of *independence* from animals and nature (Oliver, 2009). Second, our categories for animals are formed according to their use for us humans: livestock, laboratory animals, pets, wildlife and vermin. These boundaries define how we can exploit these individuals (*e.g.* horses as ‘sports utility vehicles’ or deer for hunting). Crossing the boundaries (*e.g.* when farm animals escape and are rescued in a sanctuary), however, makes the ethical dilemma visible – that we are dealing with *live beings*, not with categories.

The strict boundary between body and mind, spirituality and rationality, and empathy and objectivity made itself felt in my life as well. As I progressed through high school and university, my original play disappeared from my life. The ‘rational mind’ developed, almost to the exclusion of other approaches to the world, and I started to get engrossed in playing with patterns in sociological survey data. When, decades later, I

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rediscovered this play in the form of animal communication, it remained one-half of my life – incompatible with the other scientific part. The feeling of leading a life split in two halves was mirrored back to me when one day I told a research colleague about animal communication and he responded: “That discredits all your academic work.” It took me many years to find a way to integrate the two spheres in my professional work, in what I have come to call ‘mindfulness-based learning’. Still, the denialism that meets me in academia with respect to animals and nature is still breathtaking:

- “I don’t have anything to do with animals.”
- “Are you really suggesting that we can learn from animals?”

These quotes not only highlight the dualisms, but also the consequential lack of recognition that animals and nature have as co-constitutive partners in our communities. They also point to another boundary that seems to enclose us, as isolated individuals. Based on subjectivism, the ‘other’ can only be perceived as an object to be used for *one’s* own aims and desires. Hence, animals and landscapes are for *our* entertainment in ecotourism and nature parks, and companion animals are just for animal-assisted therapy and pedagogy. In education, this understanding implies that the human being is the *only* centre of pedagogic effort, that education can be planned and results reproduced, and that knowledge can be appropriated and owned (Spannring, 2015). The alternative approach, which highlights relationship, dialogue and responsibility, is hard to find in today’s education systems (e.g. Noddings, 2005).

Some postmodern and post-humanist discourses have set out to deconstruct the human subject, stressing ‘relationality’ and ‘mutually dependent emergence’. From such a perspective, Haraway (2007) describes the “mutual becoming” of humans and companion species, one example being the interdependence

of extensive sheep farming, the reintroduction of the wolf, and the Great Pyrenees guard dogs, in what she calls “naturecultures”. She argues (2017: 4; original emphasis):

To become one is always to *become with* many. [...] The partners do not precede the meeting; species of all kinds, living or not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters.

Such a *becoming with*, or ‘becoming animal’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013), can serve as an entry point to environmental consciousness (e.g. Fawcett, 2009; Stewart, 2011). This was certainly the case in my life.

However, many post-humanist attempts fail to question anthropocentrism, as illustrated by Haraway (2007) in her celebration of ‘agility’, a dog sport she participates in with her border collie. It overlooks the fact that breeding, training and competing with animals are fundamentally anthropocentric endeavours, with high risks for the animals’ physical and emotional well-being. Indeed, it is very hard to discern the anthropocentrism deeply embedded in our cultural practices, and the egocentrism hidden in what is commonly called ‘love’. We ‘love’ horses because we can ride them and some people ‘love’ wilderness because it touches a romantic spot in them. For love to be truly ecocentric, it needs to be coupled with empathy, listening, respect and a willingness to discard anthropocentric and egocentric blinkers. Finally, it requires finding an appropriate expression in one’s behaviour. Society does not provide us with many exemplars, and so we are called upon to develop countercultural practices in many spheres of life. In my own case, I repeatedly found myself caught up in anthropocentric practices because I did not see alternatives. Eventually, however, my compassion for animals led me to an engagement with critical animal studies and cognitive horse ethology (de Giorgio and de Giorgio-School, 2016), and their respective communities of practice.



The author's friend Freja.

They proved an essential frame and resource to develop my empathy into a critical understanding of anthropocentric practices, and to change my behaviour in a way that would benefit the animals, and be consistent with my compassion. As I started playing with these challenges, I moved from vegetarianism to veganism, and I stopped training my horse in favour of cultivating affiliative–cognitive moments – in which we can both learn.

One last boundary I would like to mention is the one that is sometimes constructed between different groups and perspectives. On the one hand, Paul Waldau (among others) observes resistance to the consideration of *individual animals* within the conservation movement. He believes environmental education is full of “human-centeredness anchored in a formidable coalition of business, political and religious rationalizations” (Waldau, 2013: 30). He attributes this resistance to the fear of loss of human privilege, and

the denial of those who consume animal products. Animal advocates, on the other hand, focus on individual animals’ sentience, the continuity between the human and animal condition, and their ethical implications. They thereby often overlook the environmental context of animal existence, and their integration in other-than-human-made habitat (Noske, 2004). I personally experience a ‘policing of the borders’ now that I have started to integrate environmental aspects in my research. Some animal advocacy colleagues repeatedly try to bring me back to what supposedly ‘matters most’. Here I see the path as one that others also speak of (Waldau, 2013; Kopnina and Cherniak, 2015) – an invitation to play with and *beyond* boundaries, to expand our hearts and our minds in an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach that fosters ecocentrism.

As I end this essay, my thoughts wander to my last experience with my horse, Freja,

“The invitation to play, transgressing boundaries and opening up new opportunities, is out there.”

and her equine friends. Rather than walking straight towards Freja, putting a halter on, grooming and saddling her to ride off in one linear movement, I simply spend time with them. I stand at the gate for a while. The horses briefly look up from their hay. Freja nickers as she recognizes me and then continues to delicately pick up single straws of hay with her sensitive lips. I walk into the paddock, but do not approach the horses. I leave the decision as to whether or not to make contact to them. Freja turns toward me without leaving her position. Another horse turns and walks past Freja to the other side of the paddock. Then Freja makes a couple of steps toward me, stops and stretches her neck so that she can touch my arm and hand. She steps up to stand with me, relaxed, her hind leg cocked. After a while, another horse joins us. He explores my anorak, and Freja watches him playing with the zip. A third, very young horse approaches and starts nibbling at Freja. I step back and Freja uses this space to walk forward and away from the young horse. Our little group breaks up. As I stand alone, Freja comes back to rest with me again. I feel incredibly enriched by being involved in this group dynamic, in this play.

Later, I let the horses into a vast Alpine pasture. They immediately start grazing the short grass and the herbs of the meadow. My own focus on the horses shifts to a broader view of the pasture, with its rocks, spruce trees, dwarf alpenroses and a brook. Jackdaws are playing and screeching. A buzzard flies high above my head, and I feel the cold air descending from the still snow-covered mountain peak. The categories of domesticated and wild blur, the land is alive and interwoven with all living and non-living beings. I start wondering about how we might step back – as I did in the horse group – and allow for new dynamics on an ecocentric level. The invitation to play, transgressing boundaries and opening up new opportunities, is out there. ■

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