# Sounding out other species

All animals, including humans, employ methods of communication to convey meaningful and adaptively-significant information. These range from movement, eye contact, and scent-release to light displays and, of course, vocalizations. The human use of complex language is not the only resource available for animals to let others know what they need, want or plan. Yet we have no legally recognized mechanism to make use of these communications in order to represent other species in conflicts with us or in situations we've created that are critical to their lives. It is time to consider new ways of politically listening to animals, not only as a means of ensuring some measure of procedural justice but to refute the convenient claim that non-human animals have no voice.

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Melanie works as a researcher on environmental philosophy, and the history of humanity and the natural world. She is the author of – amongst other works – *On Extinction: How we became estranged from nature* and *How to Be Animal: A history of what it means to be human.*

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What I hear first is heavy breathing like someone has just outrun a bear. I follow the sound down to my feet. There, in the grasses, is a large rabbit, struggling for air. It doesn't have to tell me what's wrong. I know by the way its eyes are crusted over like newly covered graves. It's got what we call 'myxy' – a nasty and fatal disease caused by the poxvirus, *Myxoma*. It produces swellings and lesions on the membranous parts of the animal, breathing difficulties and severe suppression of the immune system. Most rabbits die unpleasantly within two weeks of contracting the virus.

A few days later, after I'd been in the kitchen listening to the latest news on COVID-19, the disease caused by another pathogen, SARS-CoV-2 – but this one attacking the human world – I went outside to find that old rabbit, utterly blind now, grazing near its burrow. Our home is in the middle of a 10,000-acre managed forest in the north of England. We have no visible human neighbours, and the nearest public road is nearly three miles away. Who we see most often is this rabbit, or one of the many others that live around us. And they're not our only non-human neighbours. There are roe deer that graze our back field, who've left the temporary gift of one of their newborn for two years running now. There's a barn owl roosting nearby, who hunts on our land like daylight's ghost. There are the mice and voles that make holes in our front lawn, and peer up at us as like tiny earthmen of Narnia, dwellers of the Underland (Lewis, 1953).

I've said 'our' a lot in these sentences but this land is theirs too. What we own officially in the human world forms the mental and physical territory of thousands of other beings in our midst. We live in a multispecies community. Our small human family is heavily outnumbered. There are nightjars. Tawnies and woodcocks. Goshawks nest close by. And that is to say nothing of the inconspicuous, whose lives are made secret by habit or habitat. The beetles that leave their larva in the warm layers of earth. The efts that shelter in our kids' sandpit. The earwigs and millipedes that seem gifted with the ability to walk through walls, turning up in the dark, neglected corners of my study. The moths that hibernate in the warm shadowed vents of the barn, hanging together like old clothes.

So, we knew this old rabbit a little. Normally, he would flip into the air like a sprung trap when we came outside, then disappear into the hole beneath the damson tree. On the day I found him still alive and grazing, he made no effort to run away, just moved blindly forward, pulled by the need for food. I watched him and spoke

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a few futile words to him. Two days later, I found him dead under the salvia bush a few feet from his home. And what I felt was shame. While we shelter from a virus we've brought on ourselves through our intensive exploitation of other species, this rabbit died because we deliberately infected his kind with a devastating pathogen.

It was the French physician and bacteriologist, Paul-Felix Armand-Delille who brought myxomatosis to his country and, in doing so, collapsed the rabbit populations across much of Europe (Bartrip, 2009). A specialist in malaria, he'd been inspired by the successful control of rabbits in Australia through *Myxoma* and, in 1952, decided to experiment with releasing it on his own estate in France. The virus escaped within a matter of months and, by the year's end, nearly half of the wild rabbits of France were dead. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't just rabbit populations that were affected by his decision. Predators that mostly filled their bellies with rabbits also began to decline, and this included the iconic Iberian lynx (Platt, 2011). It had been a catastrophic and callous decision, yet it existed within an internally logical and permissive ethical landscape.

Most often, our relationship with other species turns on whether we consume them or meet them in an environment as rivals of some kind. We can think of it as the 'eat or compete' logic. Even today, many view rabbits simply as a pest or as a meal. It takes little effort to find someone who will help get rid of a rabbit 'infestation'. As a result of this framing, humans give themselves free rein to gas an entire burrow system. Or shoot rabbits for recreation. Or bait live traps. We can anticipate that once gene-edited methods of control become possible, these will be added to the toolkit. And so, it's almost impossible for our societies to make sense of what might be wrong in the release of myxy – or, indeed, what might sadden us in the associated disappearance of the Iberian lynxes – while we continue to act from this 'eat or compete' logic. Yet many of us find our moral sentiments pulled in favour of these other animals when we look from their point of view. For much of modern history, such an internal move has been belittled as 'emotionalism' or 'anthropomorphism'. But we urgently need a fresh means of squaring up to the kinds of moral puzzles we now face.

It is generally accepted by people around the world that our actions are driving large-scale impacts on the rest of life on Earth. Climate change, biodiversity losses, coral bleaching – these kinds of events are in the daily news cycle. They are a part of our global psyche. And so, as cultural geographer Franklin Ginn has written of the current extinction crisis, "learning to live less destructively and more ethically with nonhumans is clearly a pressing task" (Ginn, 2014: 532). There's a growing movement of people of all nations who recognize that we can't continue with what GENIE co-founder, Joe Gray, and colleagues call a "single-species democracy" (Gray *et al.*, 2020). But there remains a stubborn refusal to think about animals on their own terms. We continue to talk collectively about 'animals' as if a species of orb spider is of a piece with a gorilla. We talk about 'nature' as if our duties to this seemingly homogenous *other* can be dealt with in concert. In this way, we continue to act as if other animals are somehow without being. And, as they have no being, they have no ethical weight in the societies of our planet. Their lives are light with meaninglessness, while our human lives are freighted with meaning. *Their* being is morally diaphanous, morally silent, whereas *our* being is thick with value. Yet history reminds us we can be woefully misled by false frameworks.

There was once a time when other animals were a part of our systems of justice. In Europe, throughout the middle ages and until only a few centuries ago, other beings could be tried and convicted as the perpetrators of crimes. Their cries or growls were offered as admissions of guilt or pleas of innocence. Most commonly it was domesticated animals that were imprisoned or executed: horses, cows, sheep, dogs. But pigs were the repeat offenders. EP Evans' large study on the trials found that one pig was hanged in the fourteenth century for eating a church

wafer (Evans, 1906). There's more than a little irony in the fact that while other animals were thought to be in service to us because they lacked souls, they could only be punished because, like us, they possessed bodies that could be tortured. In other words, a Judeo-Christian framing meant that, for a long while, animals could be moral *agents* but never moral *subjects*. Only an entrenched belief in a biological hierarchy set by a Christian God prevented us from listening to other species properly or seeing that our own harmful actions against other species might also be viewed as criminal.

As Europe shifted towards secularism, at least in matters of jurisprudence, a strange reversal took place that holds to this day. Animals lost their moral agency but, in turn, they began to emerge as moral subjects. However, the emphasis on minimum thresholds of welfare have only been as significant as the animals' experiences appeared to be. Or, more truthfully, as we have been willing to allow them to appear to be, given the overwhelming cultural and economic impulse to continue utilizing them. There is only so much recognition of the feelings, intentions or agency of other species that can be tolerated. And almost no recognition of the staggering and relevant differences between what different kinds of animals might need or want. The reason we're stuck with this minimum of moral subjecthood is because we've not been looking from the perspective of other animals' centres of experience.

It is nearly a decade now since the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness (Low, 2012). The headline that went around the world stated that "animals are conscious and should be treated as such". Scripted and signed by leading neuroscientists Philip Low, Christoph Koch and the late Jaan Panksepp, and witnessed by Stephen Hawking, the declaration was unequivocal in its findings: "non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviours" (Low, 2012). This was a landmark statement. Other animals, these scientists confirmed, experience and express, in measurable ways, worlds of awareness and intention that should matter to us (if, by logic, our own worlds of awareness and intention matter). But what has followed from it? Well, surprisingly little. But there are signs of changes afoot.

In recent years, philosophers and social scientists concerned with democratic process have focused on forms of 'political listening' that encourage us to pay attention to the voices of those that will be affected by our political, economic and legal decisions. Might something similar be possible with other animals? In recent years, Alasdair Cochrane (2018) and Alfonso Donoso (2017) have argued independently for new methods of representing the interests of non-human animals. Something like the concept of political listening was put forward by John Dryzek (2000) as a potential way of acknowledging and addressing the needs of non-human animals. Of course, listening literally and 'aurally' is not the only means of openness to other species. Other kinds of behaviours and expressions can be 'listened to' in the figurative sense, through learning to recognize and interpret signals from other animals. This was suggested by geographer Catherine Johnston (2008), where she argued for a "responsible anthropomorphism" through proximity, observation, and, where relevant, working with other species.

Other species employ forms of imitation, light displays, movements, sounds, gesture, chemicals and scents to convey information to others. Each day, we are learning more about the significance and complexity of these expressions. In her recent book on animal languages, philosopher Eva Meijer (2019) demonstrates the "wealth of animal languages all around us" that can transform how we think about non-human animals. Meijer argues that the fear of anthropomorphism has led us to under-report what we can know from other animals. This has been compounded by a narrow understanding of what we mean by "language." Wittgenstein, she argues, gifted us the "concept of 'language games' – which refers to the entirety of language,

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individual language practices and very primitive artificial languages." This concept, she writes, is more "appropriate to thinking about communication with animals as it does not give a fixed definition and is therefore suitable for studying a variety of linguistic actions" (Meijer, 2019: 44–5).

After reading Meijer's book, I began to pay closer attention to rabbits. What struck me was the absence of the abstract, rational part of my human morality. What emerged through observing these animals running about after each other, avoiding dangers, seeking food, or just resting and looking into the distance, was the transparency of the uncountable motivations of their lives. What my mind responded to was not a rational calculation of feeling or interests but the observable movements of need. It reminded me of what parental attentiveness is like: the same rapid observation–interpretation of the unspoken needs and experiences of an infant. Of course, reasoning matters, but watching other animals properly is a reminder that moral interactions are a form of attention that is largely physical and instinctual. Reading these cues is the beginning of igniting our agency. It is through our natural gifts for interpreting the expressions of others that we enter their worlds and gather the information that gives us the opportunity to meet their needs. We trust this faculty as parents; why do we discount it as formal moral agents?

"It is through our natural gifts for interpreting the expressions of others that we enter their worlds and gather the information that gives us the opportunity to meet their needs. We trust this faculty as parents; why do we discount it as formal moral agents?"

Anthrozoologist Margo DeMello (2010: 237) reminds us that:

> The rabbit-human relationship is one of the most schizophrenic of all human-animal relationships. Rabbits have been sacrificed, hunted, bred, skinned, slaughtered, experimented on, and consumed; they have also been worshipped, cherished, and represented in countless myths, folk tales, children's books, and pieces of art. But they have rarely been considered as intelligent beings worthy of psychological inquiry.

DeMello argues that rabbits vocalize on only very rare occasions, but that we can see and learn to 'read' how rabbits communicate through their ears, their noses, their tails, their bodies. DeMello notes that rabbits "spend endless hours communing with each other – grooming, nuzzling, playing, 'gossiping,' or just hanging out." She is talking about house rabbits here. But wild rabbits spend huge amounts of time in play too. And, by god, can they scream when they need to. The sound of a young rabbit in the jaws of a stoat is unmistakable. It's like the whistle of a kettle that hasn't been removed from the heat. Should we respond to its cry for help? Not necessarily. One of the burdens of attentiveness is also to understand who the message is for.

So, can we do some kind of 'listening' on a larger, and more formal scale? I am part of an international group of scholars who have come together during this pandemic to work on a kind of 'animals' jury', which, it is hoped, will be a political form of attention and an instrument of deep listening to colour in the 'who' we are talking about when we talk about 'animals' or 'nature' or the 'more-than-human'. It will be an effort to pay attention to signals of need and flourishing. It is early days for our group, but the hope is that a replicable method can be created for listening to other species and articulating, as best as possible, these lives that we are affecting. It's only mechanisms like this that will enable us to see and hear other species properly in the public or political sphere, and thereby guide us in our relationships with them. It is only this kind of mechanism that might enable us to understand and formalize ahead of the act, whether releasing a deadly virus like *Myxoma* is the right thing to do.

There's no question that it might be a threatening prospect to listen too closely to the lives of those we harm. But as we move forward with development projects, with large-scale conservation initiatives, and with frontier technologies like genome-editing and gene drives, it's vitally important for our own moral integrity that we find a way to pay attention, both politically and compassionately, to the gestures, cues and articulations of the

other species around us. We may not like what they tell us. But that's the price of reason. ■

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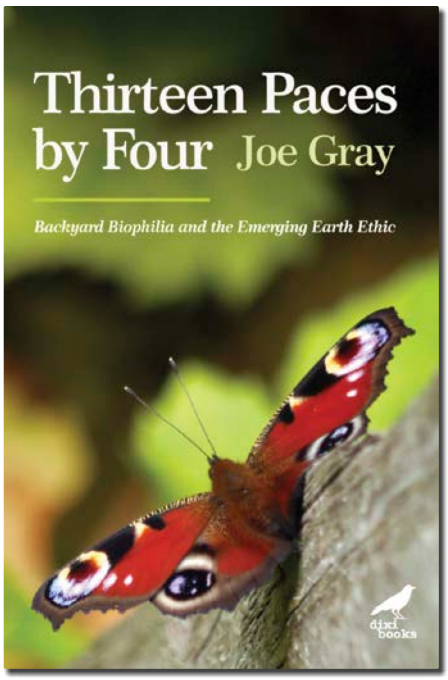


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