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“Who are these people?”: Anthropomorphism, Dehumanization and the Question of the Other¹

Abstract: Discussions of the animal have repeatedly examined both our epistemological desire and our epistemological insufficiency towards the non-human animal. In different ways Spinoza, Derrida, Nagel and Berger have shown that once the anthropomorphic layer of assumption has been peeled back, there appears the abyss of incomprehension between humans and the non-human animals. Yet the ‘abyssal difference’ does not address the scale or the scope of existing knowledge; it only points to the elusive and ultimate epistemological certainty, obscuring important distinctions between degrees and kinds of inter-species communication. This paper will consider the ground that is too often overlooked in arguments that appeal to the anthropomorphic fallacy. While we cannot share another species’ experience, we can, to some extent understand it through processes of inductive inference – that is anthropomorphism – and through studying it, broaden and deepen the ontological significance of both humans and animals. By looking at the process of humanizing the non-human as a basic cognitive method, this paper will argue that anthropomorphic reasoning can not only bridge the ‘abyss’ in crucial ways but have a powerful impact on animal ethics. Then it will link anthropomorphic reasoning to the process of othering – dehumanizing the human – and make salient the processes that inform the discursive and political practices of speciesistic and cultural hierarchization. Finally, it will examine representations of anthropomorphism, dehumanization and the construction of otherness in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2005), a novel which is based on the Morichjhani massacre of 1978–79, when animal rights came into conflict with human rights.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, WIL Question, Animal, Theory of Mind, Limitrophey

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I

In *What I Don't Know About Animals*, published in 2010, novelist and *London Review of Books* columnist Jenni Diski sketches a scene from her domestic life which many pet-owners will find familiar. Meeting the steady gaze of her cat, she ponders precisely what the look might mean. She writes:

Sometimes Bunty is beside me on the sofa and when I glance at her she is sitting, or lying there, looking directly at me, staring hard and purposefully at me; it seems, at any rate, her eyes are fixed unblinkingly on my face. It happens in the bathroom, in the study, while I'm watching TV with her on my lap or on the arm of the sofa, on the stairs. She looks at me long, hard and quite often. And for extended periods. ... Sometimes, in exactly the same way, she sits with her back to the room and stares just as hard at the blank wall. Nothing is crawling on it, that I can see – it is a wall, uneventful and a shade of white. She sits alert and just looks at it. What could just looking possibly mean? *Meaning*, a word, a concept, that as far as I know only humans have. She looks at me, and I don't know what she means by it, and if she doesn't mean anything at all by it, she's just sitting there, what is she doing, why, what could that possibly mean? Are you looking at me? It drives me crazy. It has always driven me crazy. It's partly the reason for writing this book. (64–65)

Diski is not alone in being driven crazy by what we don't know, or can't know, about animals. From Descartes to Derrida, a long line of philosophers, theorists and writers have been spurred into inquiry by the potent mixture of our epistemological desire and our epistemological insufficiency towards the non-human animal. And in the main, modern philosophers have defined our relationship with animals around our insufficiency – what we don't know about animals. For how or what could we possibly know about the meaning of the gaze of an animal that is not translated into human terms?

But it depends on the look, of course. For a lot of the time, we can infer perfectly well what a look means: give me food; I am excited to see you, open the door, stroke me. Vast kinds of animal-human interaction would be inconceivable without at least some knowledge of the mental processes of animals. But this kind of knowledge – what Diski calls 'casual' knowledge – is, of course, not what besets her. What drives her crazy are the moments when, as we saw, she cannot make satisfactory inferences about the operations of Bunty's cognition from her behavior. No amount of inductive inference about Bunty's mind will address essentially human questions like "What are you thinking when you are looking at me like that?" To paraphrase Thomas Nagel's famous conclusion in his celebrated 1974 philosophical essay, "What is it like to be a bat?" (435–50), it may be possible for Diski to know what it is like for her to behave as Bunty behaves, which is not the same as what it is like for Bunty to behave as Bunty. Diski thus concludes that it is not just hard but strictly impossible to

reach the mental state of an animal; there is no way out of anthropomorphism. She writes:

When I catch her looking at me, I am sharply reminded of her innerness, though I know I can't really grasp it. What she is thinking I will never apprehend ... 'What, what, what?' I say to her pleading. But, like Alice's Cheshire cat, she just looks at me from inside her head, and, even as I look back at her, disappears from view. (75)

This idea that once the anthropomorphic layer of assumption has been peeled back, there appears an abyss of incomprehension between humans and animals, has dominated modern philosophy, albeit on various grounds. Perhaps the most famous elaboration of it was made by Derrida, to whom Diski pays tribute, whose own domestic scene with his cat was the starting point of his investigation, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.² At the start of every day Derrida's cat follows him when he wakes up, walks to the bathroom and goes about the business of getting ready for his day. Each day the cat looks at Derrida naked in the bathroom, seemingly with a purpose. But what purpose? Being subjected to the gaze of his cat while naked produces in Derrida a sense of shame, an inexplicable sensation since what is it that his cat is seeing when the concept of nakedness is restricted to humans? Derrida becomes ashamed of his shame which then becomes an impetus for an extended self-examination. He writes:

I often ask myself, just to see, *who I am* – and who I am (following) at the moment when caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat ... It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will have ever given me more food for thinking through this absolute alterity of the neighbor or of the next (-door) than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat. (11)

In seeing his cat as the other with whom he is in a relation of alterity, Derrida considers the gap of knowledge between humans and animals to be absolute. In the Derridean world view, there exists an “abyssal difference”, an “absolute rupture”, between humans and what “humans call animals”, as he puts it. Consequently, he divides discussions of the animal into two types of discourses – those that acknowledge the ‘abyss; and those that don't, and in doing so, he draws a line between empiricist thinking and his own. He writes:

² Derrida famously took issue with the tradition of metaphysical human exceptionalism that ascribes to man qualities that justify his privileged position among living creatures. For Derrida's other discussions on the question of the animal, see his *Aporias* (1993) *Of Spirit* (1989); and *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009–2010).

(T)here would be ... only two types of discourse, two positions of knowledge, two grand forms of theoretical or philosophical treatise regarding the animal. What distinguishes them is obviously the place, indeed, the body of their signatories ... In the first place there are texts signed by people who have no doubt seen, observed, analyzed, reflected on the animal. But who have never been *seen seen* by the animal. Their gaze has never intersected with that of an animal directed at them (forget about their being naked). If, indeed, they did happen to be *seen seen* furtively by the animal one day, they took no (thematic, theoretical, or philosophical) account of it. They neither wanted nor had the capacity to draw any systematic consequence from the fact that an animal could, facing them, look at them, clothed or naked, and, in a word, *address* them. They have taken no account of the fact that what they call “animal” could *look at* them, and *address* them from down there, from a wholly other origin.’ (29–31)

Both Diski and Derrida’s texts are addressed from a ‘wholly other origin’ – signed from a place where they have been ‘seen seen’ by the animal, and from this position anthropomorphist thinking – or ‘anthro-theomorphic’ in Derrida’s case – is wholly discreditable. For Derrida and Diski (and going all the way back to Descartes), an invocation of anthropomorphism is grounds for dismissal as far as serious knowledge is concerned. In rejecting anthropomorphism as an error in reasoning, a category mistake, pseudo-knowledge, Derrida is not in conflict with the continental philosophical tradition, from Descartes to Heidegger, which in other matters regarding the question of the animal he was so effective in disposing. For Derrida, anthropomorphism is actually a human appropriation of the animal’s existence, a surveillance of power locating the animal within a conceptual binary.

But is anthropomorphism a mere fallacy – a conceptual prison-house into which we are inescapably locked, separating us from the non-humans? This is the question this paper would like to interrogate. While the idea of the anthropomorphic fallacy is not flatly repudiated, it will challenge the grounds on which some of the objections are based. It will also examine the ethical and political implications of claiming absolute alterity and attempt to establish anthropomorphism as a legitimate topic of discussion.

II

As we saw, Diski and Derrida (and others) are in agreement that there lies an ‘abyssal difference’ between us and animals. But the idea of absolute alterity does not address the scale or the scope of existing knowledge that is shared between species; it merely points to the elusiveness of ultimate knowledge, obscuring important distinctions between degrees and kinds of interspecies communica-

tion. While we cannot share another species’ experience, we can, to a significant extent share a part of it through processes of anthropomorphic inductive inference. Some inferences we draw – like ‘open the door’ – are ‘casual’ and everyday, while at the other end of the range are highly specialized information yielded by scientific research. For example, heterospecific research on the neural mechanisms underlying emotion is a growing area of study that has produced substantial evidence on common circuits that are shared across mammalian species. In particular, neurobiological research into evidence for survival function mechanisms in mammals (or ‘fear conditioning’), allows us not only to a common manifestation of fear in animals but actually to measure it (see, for example, LeDoux). Uniting the broad spectrum of anthropomorphist thinking is the process of induction, which begins with highly accessible knowledge as an inductive base that is subject to subsequent correction or adjustment. Like all inductive inferences we learn through making hypotheses then learning from our mistakes. And like all processes of human inquiry, anthropomorphic induction requires epistemic vigilance in all areas in order to filter out misinformation and false conclusions. Our anthropomorphic proclivities often lead to misinterpretations and distortions of the world around us and while we know complete knowledge of an animal’s mind is not obtainable, we can still believe in the process that leads to the knowledge of the animal mind because without it we fall into a position hugely susceptible to severe political and ethical implications (a point to which I’ll return later).

By way of illustrating this point on inductive inferences I would like to refer to another domestic cat encounter, here a fictional one. In the famous introduction to Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* ‘Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls’, James Joyce gives us a representation of Bloom’s mind while he moves about the kitchen going about the everyday business of breakfast, for himself, his wife, Molly, and their cat. Whereas Bloom is introduced to us by an external narrator, our introduction to his wife Molly, is filtered through Bloom’s consciousness through the technique of free indirect discourse.

Kidneys were in his mind as he moved about the kitchen softly, righting her breakfast things on the humpy tray. ... Another slice of bread and butter: three, four: right. She did not like her plate full. (53)

Molly’s first appearance in the novel is thus made through the thought in her husband’s mind as to how she likes her breakfast. Ordinary readers will have no difficulty inferring from this thought in Bloom’s mind that he arrived at this knowledge either by making outright mistakes (having overloaded the plate and been criticized) or by inductive inference through observation. It is not the kind of knowledge one acquires by direct proposition. How full do you like your plate to

be? Soon after we read that she did not like her plate full, another she enters the scene.

Just how she stalks over my writingtable. Prr. Scratch my head. Prr. ...
Milk for the pussens, he said.

Who is saying ‘Scratch my head’ in this section? It is not Bloom for the sentence is not said out loud. It is the external narrator who is representing the processes of Bloom’s mind as it is in the process of inferring the cat’s mind. ‘Scratch my head’, like ‘she did not like her plate full’ are both inferences Bloom draws. Within the representation of Bloom’s mind, there are inferences not only about someone else’s mind but also about his cat’s mind. Both Molly and the cat are referred to by the feminine personal pronoun without explanatory tags, as one would expect in one’s unsaid thought processes. This ordinary slice of Bloom’s domestic life and Joyce’s representation of Bloom’s mind inferring other minds including that of his cat, is a scene that most readers would be able to recognize in their own experience. The ordinary thought-processes of a human mind that Joyce captures are full of the kind of casual knowledge to which Diski refers and illustrate the fact that a very large part of our everyday inductive inference about people and anthropomorphic inference about animals share a fundamental cognitive pattern.

It is unlikely that those who subscribe to the anthropomorphic fallacy will be completely won over by this argument which is, after all, based on fiction. Fictional case studies do not constitute ‘data’ though they reflect and create human experience. Furthermore attribution of human characteristics to non-human beings or objects is a *particular* kind of inductive inference even though the basic process that underlies induction may be the same. Like the critics in J M Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*, who meet with derision Elizabeth’s belief that she can ‘think her way into the existence of any being’, the hard sceptics will not be persuaded that a common cognitive operation – gradual acquisition of knowledge through experience and subsequent correction – is able to bridge the ‘absolute rupture’(80). There is a considerable amount of argument to be developed on this point. In this paper I will only take it as far as establishing that inference, prediction and making errors are crucial for establishing a relationship with the world around us, including our relations with animals; and that what we get wrong when we think about animals through anthropomorphist thinking is crucial for eventually establishing models that works.

III

My second point draws on two areas not directly related to the question of animals but which have considerable implications for the question of what we don't know about animals: philosophy of mind and neuroscientific theory of mind. And I'll begin by observing that anti-anthropomorphist arguments are based exclusively on what might be called first-person knowledge, which has been the dominant European philosophical tradition since the Enlightenment. However, in the last twenty years, challenges to first-person knowledge have been produced by a growing convergence between metacognition ('we-mode' theory) in neuroscience, and relationalism in philosophy of mind (see Timothy Chappell on relationalist philosophy and Chris Frith on the theory of 'we-mode' cognition). The seminal moment can be traced back to 1991 when Donald Davidson disputed first-person epistemology as staking an exclusive claim on knowledge and truth and proposed what he termed interpersonal knowledge. In his ground-breaking article, 'Epistemology Externalised', Davidson argued:

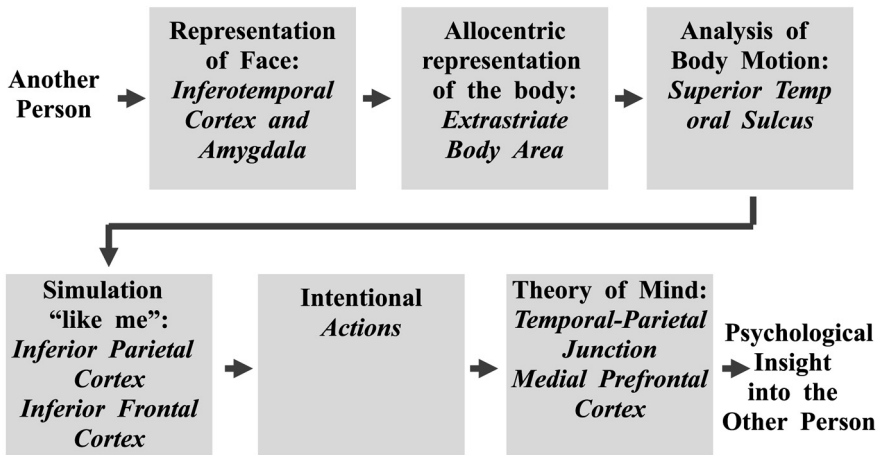
Starting with Descartes, epistemology has been almost entirely based on first person knowledge. We must begin, according to the usual story, with what is most certain: knowledge of our own sensations and thoughts. In one way or another we then progress, if we can, to knowledge of an objective external world. There is then the final, tenuous, step to knowledge of other minds. In this paper I argue for a total revision of this picture. All propositional thought, whether positive or skeptical, whether of the inner or outer, requires possession of the concept of objective truth and this concept is accessible only to those creatures in communication with others. Third person knowledge – knowledge of other minds – is thus conceptually basic. But such knowledge is impossible without knowledge of shared world of objects in a shared time and space. Thus the acquisition of knowledge is not based on a progression from the subjective to the objective; it emerges holistically, and is interpersonal from the start. (191–202)

The idea that third-person knowledge – knowledge of other minds – is conceptually basic and that it derives from a shared world of objects in a shared time and space goes some way to countering the idea of an abyssal rupture.

The idea that we communicate with other creatures on the basis of shared objects, time and space is vehemently disputed by philosophers albeit along different philosophical paths. Heidegger, for example, made the distinction between *mitgehen* and *mitexistieren* and argued that animals can live with us in the house, walk with us in the house, be with us in the house but they cannot *exist* with us in the house. For him, 'the animal *behaves within an environment but never within a world*' for only '*man is world forming*'. (239, 274) Shared knowledge is impossible because we simply do not share a world of objects in a shared time and space in the same way in our minds. Humans in this model are thought to be

so exceptional a species that they are positioned outside of the natural order entirely, to be analyzed and understood independently from the rest of the living world.

But biology suggests otherwise. Neuroscientific discoveries in the last twenty years, building on evolutionary theory, have produced evidence which goes some way to supporting the idea that contrary to the idea of a radical abyss between species, there exists a continuum. I don't propose to lay out a detailed summary on the neuroscience of theory of mind here but only to reflect on the implications of these findings for the question at hand. One is that theory of mind is dependent on a specific network of structures in the human brain that are dedicated to social cognition. Research into how the human brain regulates theory of mind – that is to say, how it attributes mental states to other minds – has isolated a specific network of structures in the human brain that are specific to interpersonal knowledge. The mechanisms that enable us to attribute mental states to other beings have been summarized by Eric Kandel in his 2012 study, *The Age of Insight* (411):



These findings propose that theory of mind is dependent on a hierarchical network of about five systems specific to the processing of social information in the brain: face recognition, representations of someone else's body, analysis of body motion, simulation, and finally the inference of intentional actions. A significant discovery on the neural mechanisms of empathy was made by Chris and Uta Frith and their colleagues at UCL who studied autistic children who are unable to attribute mental states or feelings to other people and therefore cannot predict the behavior of others. Uta Frith suggests that the healthy human brain is equipped

with mechanisms that enable us to attribute mental states to another being to be able to make predictions and that this expectation about people and other beings is part of normal mental life. Though not articulated in biological terms, this is very close to the point Donaldson made in his discussion of externalized epistemology from a philosophical perspective – that third person knowledge or social cognition is a basic cognitive process. The second significant implication is that social recognition depends on processes that are automatically put into place without our conscious awareness and that it is switched on all the time whether we are aware of it or not. So referring back to the animal theme, it is now possible to make the case that a large part of what we know about animals is dependent on processes in our brain that are unconscious and automatic.³ Eric Kandel states that we are engaged in forms of ‘unconscious mind-reading’ all the time. We, according to Kandel, are endowed with a ‘social brain’ that has innate mechanisms for accumulating social knowledge, which our evolutionary history of communicating with other creatures on the basis of shared objects, time and space made possible.

This argument that anthropomorphism is ‘integral to the relation between man and animal’ and is ‘an expression of their proximity’ was made in a different form by the romantic Marxist art historian, novelist, and farmer in the south of France, John Berger in his collection of essays, entitled ‘Why Look at Animals’ (11). In it Berger analyzed the marginalization of animals in capitalism, the disappearance of animals and their replacement by signs and examined the ways in which both humans and animals are alienated from each other. He proposed that anthropomorphism makes us uneasy because animals have gradually disappeared and it is from this new solitude that the unease appears.

This unease was similarly expressed by another Anglophone émigré to France, Edith Wharton, who wrote of the new solitude of humans. Writing in her diary of the seven ruling passions of her life, she lists, number one: Justice and Order; number two: Dogs, Books come in only at number three. She writes:

I am secretly afraid of animals – of all animals except dogs, and even of some dogs. I think it is because of the us-ness in their eyes, with the underlying not us-ness which belies it, and is so tragic a reminder of the lost age when we human beings branched off and left them; left them to eternal inarticulatedness and slavery. Why? Their eyes seem to ask us.’ (160)

³ Research on heterospecific face recognition is not as extensive as human face recognition. However, data in Anais Racca’s study “Reading faces” indicates that children look at dog faces and human faces in a similar way, showing a bias to gaze to the left for negative faces, faces showing threat and less of a bias to the left in the case of neutral faces. See De Haan, Pascalis, and Johnson on neural mechanism underlying face recognition.

IV

This takes me to my final point. What are the ethical and political consequences of setting humans and animals on either sides of an unbridgeable abyss? Derrida's argument was conducted in ethical terms powered by an unmistakable moral indignation. He argued that 'generating, raising and complicating' the limit between Man and Animal is an act of transgression, an act which he gives the name, 'limitrophy', which goes to the heart of his life's work, deconstruction (29). He writes:

I shan't for a single moment venture to contest that thesis, nor the rupture, or the abyss between this 'I-we' and what we *call* animals. To suppose that I, or anyone else for that matter, could ignore that rupture, indeed that abyss, would mean first of all blinding oneself to so much contrary evidence; and, as far as my own modest case is concerned, it would mean forgetting all the signs that I have managed to give, tirelessly, of my own attention to difference, to differences, to heterogeneities and abyssal ruptures as against the homogeneous and the continuous. ... I have never believed in some homogeneous continuity between what calls itself man and what he calls the animal. (30)

He repudiates a homogenous continuity on the ground that seeing animals' existence on human terms is appropriation and domination. There is much to be said for this line of argument. However, is there a necessary and inherent link between 'limitrophy' and emancipatory ethics? Or are there other political implications for disavowing the possibility of knowing? Heterogeneity as an orthodoxy should be distinguished from being open to the heterogeneous.

If we take a broader view of the question of difference, beyond the realm of philosophical discourses specific to the interaction between humans and animals, it is not difficult to see that articulations of difference have been instrumental to a variety of political positions, including out-and-out appropriation and the justification and naturalization of that exploitation. What I refer to here is the ideological construction of Otherness which is a dehumanization of the human, the inverse process of anthropomorphism, and more broadly, a refusal to accept that there are common grounds between the self and the other.

Like Derrida's 'limitrophy', the discursive strategy of Othering also begins from a position of disavowing knowledge of the other. But Othering takes difference as a starting point from which functionalist stereotyping takes over leading to the process by which societies and groups systematically exclude, subordinate and appropriate. In the history of the world, dominated, demonized and exploited groups of people were Othered into primitives, barbarians, brutes, savages and at times glorified and sentimentalized into other Othered categories in which women, children and animals were placed. Othering used the currency of unknow-

ability as a psychic strategy of power to dominate and bind together a range of differences between groups. Indeed, Ecofeminists argue that fundamental to the formation of western male subjectivity was the discursive and political practices of special, racial and cultural hierarchization.

So the question I would like to raise is what justification does the anthropomorphic fallacy provide for the process of Othering, if any? Unknowability in certain contexts can rapidly become an instrument of exploitation, drawing as it does on human attitudes and practices that operate so as to benefit one group – often the one to which we belong – at the expense of another. Disavowing knowledge of the other can reify unknowability into a solipsistic ideology that masquerades as enlightened thinking, but which actually serves appropriation and dehumanization. ‘Exterminate all the brutes’ so wrote Kurtz in his pamphlet on the civilization of Europe’s Other, Africa, where human bodies are seen by Marlow and other colonizing Europeans as indistinguishable from one another or from animals (44). In the words of Marlow, to look at one of the workers on the ship was as edifying as seeing ‘a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat walking on his hind legs’ (82). The stereotyping and Othering and the refusal to accept our common heritage makes Marlow construct people in Africa as a mass of naked, breathing quivering bronze bodies which are not quite human. ‘No, they were not human’ Marlow asserts (43). One could also look to slave narratives in which the experience of the enslaved is recounted with reference to animals. For example, in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), abolitionist and writer, begins the first of his three autobiographies with the account of his master Colonel Lloyd. We are told Lloyd owned a thousand slaves of whom Douglass was one and that ‘By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant’ (1).

On the basis of the examples just given, one could develop the argument that if othering dehumanizes the human by transforming differences into ideological hierarchies and diminish other species with whom we share life, anthropomorphism humanizes the non-human with no less transformative implications. Even while we acknowledge ultimate unknowability, the process of reasoning and inferring has deep political and ethical implications. For treating agents as human or nonhuman has a powerful impact on whether those agents are going to be treated as moral agents. As Peter Singer has argued in his essay ‘All animals are equal’ (1989), an extension or reinterpretation of the basic principle of equality should be extended to all animals if the basic idea of equality is a moral ideal and not a statement of fact. In this era of biology it is increasingly difficult to make a satisfactory defense of the claim that all humans and only humans have an intrinsic quality that distinguishes us from all animals.

The questions that I have so far examined about how we encounter the minds of other beings are presented in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2005). Set in the Sundarbans islands off the Bay of Bengal on the eastern coast of India, Ghosh's novel illustrates the fact that we can never establish with certainty what part of our knowledge about others is the result of our conscious communication and what part is determined by the shared forms of life. Not everyone will be familiar with this novel so a few words of summary are needed: Piya Roy, an American marine biologist arrives in the islands to research the behavior of dolphins and begins her work from across a mental gulf of cultural and linguistic differences. There ensues a series of stereotypical projections about the locals, against whom she defines herself until she happens upon an illiterate fisherman, Fokir, whose life is beyond Piya's comprehension, for they do not even share a language through which they can communicate. Nevertheless they experience profound mutual recognition through their shared understanding of marine life while all around them walls of miscommunication, misunderstanding and misattribution rise higher and higher, between husbands and wives, teachers and students, the city and the country, bureaucrats and citizens, Hindus and Muslims, reaching a catastrophic climax in the form of the Marichjhapi massacre.⁴

The narrative builds on the idea that knowledge is founded on an ethical commitment that few choose to adopt. In the following extract, Nilima, a former headmaster, who is deeply imprisoned into solitude by his inability to bridge the gulf between himself and others, attempts to rescue Kusum, a refugee activist and former protégé from the impending eviction.

she began to cry. The sight of her tears came as a shock to both Horen and me. Kusum had never till now shown any flagging in courage and confidence; to see her break down was unbearably painful. ...

'What is it Kusum?' I (Nilima) said, 'What are you thinking of?'

'Saar,' she said, wiping her face, 'the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit there, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcement, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, were less than dirt or dust. "This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is part of a reserve forest, it belongs to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world." Every day sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people? Do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these things, it seemed to me that this whole world had become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the

⁴ In 1978–79 the government of West Bengal evicted thousands of Bengali refugees who had settled on the island. See Ross Mallick.

soil. No one would think this is a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, clearing land and by planting the soil.’(261–62)

‘Who are these people?’ is an enunciation uttered by people who have been placed across the gulf of incomprehension. Whether it be animals or humans, refusing to acknowledge what it is like to be that being is, as Derrida has argued, a way of refusing to be seen by them. But having been *seen seen* by the Other, we could then focus on the ‘us-ness’ in their eyes – anthropomorphise the gaze. In doing so, we remember how humans have always lived – not just by fishing, clearing land and by planting the soil, as Kusum says, but by using our imaginative sympathy – or the social brain with which we are endowed – towards those with whom we share life. That we can never think our way into the existence of other beings, that we can never have complete knowledge about the minds of animals does not diminish the significance of what we do and can know about them. Value should not be confined to ultimate knowledge. The process in itself is important not only because it helps us distinguish between illusory beliefs and secure knowledge but because it prevents us the kind of alienation that Berger discussed and Ghosh fictionalised. What we don’t know about animals and what we get wrong about animals have great significance in their own right as something separate from securing ultimate certainty, for the process of extended scrutiny and investigation is in itself a political and ethical bridge.

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