

According to Sam Hurn (2012), anthropologist and author of the book *Humans and Other Animals*, anthropologists have not been that interested in looking at animals, despite the fact that humans and animals have deep, important bonds with each other. She thinks anthropologists have preferred to focus on economic, politics, war, belief and the family over human animal relationships because the subject of anthropology requires one's primary focus must be on what people are up to, not on what animals and humans have been an error and her book goes some way to show how important animals are to human lives.

Anthropos is the Greek for human
Ology refers to the study of a
subject - a branch of knowledge.

As Hurn (2012) notes if texts have presented animals at all, they have presented them from a utilitarian perspective: as livestock or as prey which creates a picture of animals as little more than resources useful to ensure human survival and consequently means that scant attention has been paid to the other ways that animals contribute, impact on, provoke, restrict and inform the way people can live. Most people would assume that animals are primarily useful and that their value is connected to how their lives benefit people – rather than how being together forms significant relationships, even shapes families. To think about how animals have been represented by people, we first need to think about how to define what an ‘animal’ is. This is important, because as you will see, it is not that easy to settle on a satisfactory definition.

What is an Animal?

In 1988 Tim Ingold published a book called *What is an Animal?* in which he got authors from different disciplines to try and answer the question. Obviously, they all came up with very different answers because a biological perspective of animals

differs dramatically from an ecological perspective or a cultural or religious one. However, despite all the many differences, something very interesting emerged. Namely, that to be able to think about what an animal is you need to understand what makes a human what it is. The following activities will reveal why that is.

ACTIVITY

- Let's think about what 'animal' means. How would you define the term? What do you think you are referring to when you use the word 'animal'?
- [Click on this link to see how Merriam-Webster \(2021\) dictionary defines 'animal'.](#)
- Now [click here to see how Collins \(2021\) defines the same word.](#)
- Think about the variations between the definitions alongside what you originally thought the word means, how would you understand the term now? Have your ideas changed?



Can we safely say that an animal is a living organism that is not a human OR should we include humans? It seems there is some uncertainty. Humans are animals and they are not animals, depending...



As we are not having a lot of luck getting a suitable definition of 'animal', let's approach this from an alternative direction - by thinking about the definition of 'human'? How is the term defined in dictionaries? Have a look.

According to [Collins online dictionary](#) (2021) the word human means 'relating to or concerning people'. The entry goes on to say, 'You can refer to people as humans especially when you are comparing them with animals or machines.' This definition clearly sets up a distinction between what is human and what is animal...which suggests that they must be different. Consequently, by using Collins dictionary (2021), we can say that people are humans, and that you can use the term human to describe people when you want to show they are different to animals or machines.

Drawing the 3 definitions together, it becomes apparent that there is some slippage between terms: Humans can be animals sometimes, but equally the word is used to show how that they are also not animals. So, what is it that allows people to straddle both categories? And if people are animals, can animals be people? And why do definitions of animals tend to single out humans as not quite animal enough, even if we are primates? It appears that humans have created an 'us and them' situation with regards to people and all other species of animal.

This is evident in a number of ways.

For example, people are regularly stated to be elevated above other animals because of their ability to use language, their self-awareness, their cognitive abilities and techniques or crafts that have developed technologies that other animals have not. People, therefore, can be thought of as special, clever animals. One might say they are animals+.

But most people would not want to be thought of as an animal because animals are considered less intelligent with fewer capabilities than humans – after all, as people often state: what other creature has invented anything as complicated as a smart phone?



Following this same train of thought, accusations of being like an animal signal that one is behaving in ways one ought to avoid. Imagine someone hurls the accusation, ‘You are behaving like an animal’ at you. What does this judgement mean? Whatever it is that you are doing, the sentence is warning you that ‘behaving like an animal’ is undesirable and testifies that people find behaving like animals is unbecoming of humans. Indeed, many disagreeable social behaviours are labelled in terms of animality. Being unwashed, smelly, eating too greedily are all behaviours attributed to animality. People that are considered to be acting like animals might be impulsive, wild, physically brutish, even ferocious, possibly murderous, unconcerned with hygiene, only concerned with meeting one’s desires, stupid and even lazy – all characteristics and behaviours society expects people to avoid. Therefore, to be properly human one must put distance between one’s human identity and the animal part of oneself.

‘Humanity exists in ‘a state of transcendence over animality’
(Ingold 1994: xxi cited in Hurn 2013: 14)

What could the phrase, ‘being like an animal’ really mean?

To be able to understand the phrase in the question above, we need to deconstruct or ‘unpack’ the concepts in the phrase.

People perceive and think about the world in accordance with their personal circumstances. Whatever conclusions they arrive at are determined by the context of their upbringing. This means that how one understands animals depends very much on how and where one was brought up. For example, a person raised in a farming family will approach animals very differently from a



person who lived in a tower block and only came in contact with animals through the television screen or via the school hamster. Culture also plays an enormous role in creating attitudes and shaping our conclusions about the world – including how we think about and engage with animals.

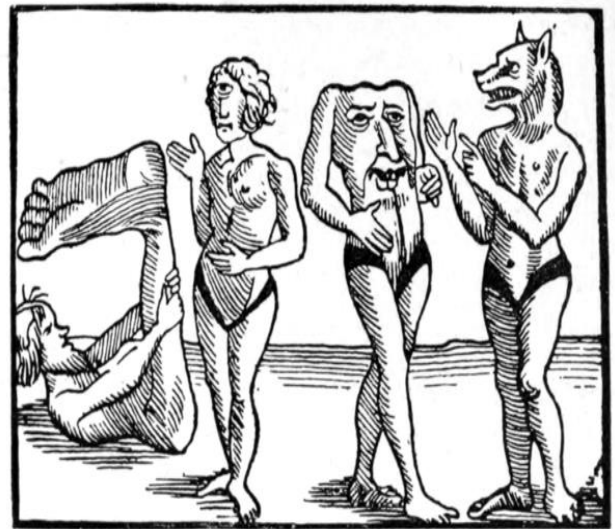
It has already been established that being accused of being like an animal has negative connotations. This is because the characteristics of animality or animalness are assumed to be utterly distinct from what is thought to be a civilised human being. Animalness, therefore, is represented as almost the untamed version of human or, as the Oxford English Dictionary (2021) says, 'a pre-human condition' of being - regardless of the fact that many of the redeeming qualities that humans have are also evident in other animals – such as curiosity, loyalty, protectiveness, caring and so on.



One could speculate that erecting a clear boundary between what is properly human and what is animal may have been encouraged to develop by the people who heard terrifying and sensational accounts of dangerous human-animal hybrids like, for example, werewolves in Europe. These local dangers, along with the tales of weird and wonderful creatures that explorers and missionaries claimed they had encountered on their travels might have been responsible for people feeling they needed to ensure their neighbours and family members were not going to suddenly transform.

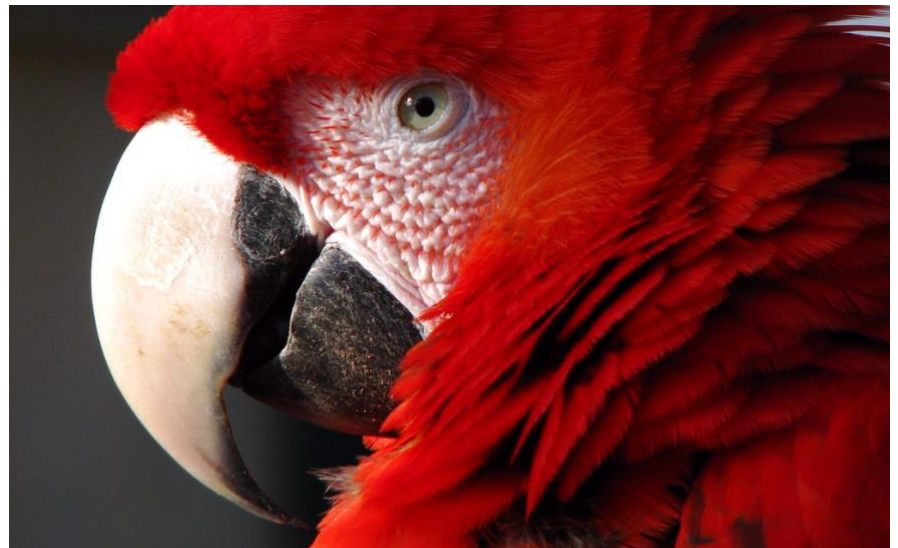


Herodotus, a Turkish/Greek traveller and ethnographer writing in the 4th century, provides us with a good example of some of the potent stories constructed about people in other lands. Herodotus' writings offer important insight into the details of other people's lives, but he also returned with fantastic tales of 'dog-headed men, headless men with eyes in their chests' and other 'monsters'. In recounting his stories, he established clear differences between people from distant locations and those hearing the anecdotes. These kinds of stories may have launched and promoted thinking about 'others' as unlike (and potentially dangerous) to those of mapped and so-called civilised areas. Of course, the stories were false and sensationalised, but nevertheless they excited the minds of those people listening – not unlike the 'fake news' that papers like *The Sun* run every day.



According to Haslam (2017), calling someone a rat or a shark is designed to transfer 'the disgust felt towards the animal to the person'. He also maintains that animal slurs function to reduce a person's humanity, which is intended to be experienced as threatening. This means there are 2 ways to use animality as insults, either to indicate one's disgust or one's disdain for the person. More interesting is that Haslam (2017) maintains that using animality to offend illustrates a moral and civil hierarchy where humans are believed to sit at the top.

Humanity's unique powers to reason have also provided them with the ability to imagine they are better than the rest. Consequently, despite being animals themselves, many people like to imagine they are not like other animals and have found ways to establish without doubt that they are very different from the rest of the animals in the world. But this is not the case for all people in all cultures. There are still



many people who see a connection between themselves and animals. A clear example of a group of people who feel intimately connected to certain birds, is that of the Bororo, who maintain that they are red macaws. So, what on earth can they mean? We'll take a look in the next section.

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