

Acknowledging our relatives

Mary Midgley

The Others: How Animals Made Us Human. By Paul Shepard. *Island/Shearwater*: 1996. Pp. 374. \$24.95.

PAUL Shepard's theme is a good one. It is that our distancing of our own species from all other animals deprives us of a vitally necessary range of symbols. Because we no longer take other animals seriously, we now have an impoverished and distorted notion of humanity. Our absurd claim to stand outside the biosphere, whether as detached spectators or as engineers controlling it, deprives us of our foothold on reality. As he says:

Neither the creationists nor the postmodern critics are right, one thinking that the world was made for us and the other that it is made by us. A better vision of the animals is that we are one among them. The only drama in town... is the evolutionary play on the ecological stage.

The sense of continuity with other creatures that most early humans undoubtedly felt played (says Shepard) an essential psychological role. It provided a language for expressing and illuminating the complications of human social life. He points out how deeply this repertoire still pervades our speech today:

We... carp, rat, crow or grouse vocally.
We cow, quail, toady, lionize and fawn....
We bull, ram or worm our way, monkey with things, weasel and chicken out. We know loan sharks, possum players and bullshitters.

Even today, our small children are passionately and spontaneously interested in animals, even when discouraged from this by their elders. As for early humans, their cosmologies and origin-myths draw no sharp line around the human species at all. Most of them claim animal ancestry without embarrassment.

Is all this — as Enlightenment wisdom tells us — just useless childish luggage that we ought to lose now that we have made our journey to civilization? No, says Shepard. Our alienation from continuity with the beasts flows partly from our deliberate insistence on control rather than on communication, and partly from our ignorance:

The true richness of these social/natural metaphors depends on knowledge of the natural behaviour of the animals themselves, on the diversity and complexity of those animals, a habit of watching we have lost by stages. We disavowed the animal mind and soul three centuries ago, reduced the beasts to representa-



PECKING order — A brown goshawk (*Accipiter fasciatus*) makes a meal of a large rabbit. Adult females have been known to take prey up to twice their own weight whereas males confine themselves to victims of a far more modest size. Just one of many striking images to be found in *Australian Birds of Prey* by Penny Olsen. Johns Hopkins University Press, \$49.95.

tions of the appetites twenty centuries ago, replaced the wild forms in our environment with simpler domestic animals of fewer species sixty centuries ago.

Like wild herbs in cooking and medicine, notions of tapir ancestors and parrot paradigms have the quaint air of rustic stories... Yet in a time of deeply felt loss of 'nature', which we mistakenly think of as a kind of pastoral anodyne, we may wonder about the necessity of 'thinking' animals. [Shepard then quotes Terence Turner] "The 'nature' incarnated in animal symbols is not simply... a convenient metaphor for human social patterns... It consists of aspects of human society that are rendered inaccessible to social consciousness as a result of their incompatibility with the dominant social framework. These alienated aspects of the human (social) being, which may include the most fundamental principles of social and personal existence, are therefore mediated by symbols of an ostensibly asocial or 'natural' character."

In short, if we think about people in animal terms we can grasp essential things about them that we do not know yet and could not envisage if we tried to reach them directly. These terms provide the language for new insights that cannot penetrate our existing models of human psychology. Those models are misleading partly because they are far too simple, but also because — still worse — they are biased by all sorts of past choices of which we are unaware, choices that do not really suit our present and future at all.

What does all this amount to? I think Shepard is right to say that irrational insistence on human uniqueness distorts our thought on many important subjects. We do deeply need a more serious attention to our continuity with other animals.

When he is in a psychologically perceptive mood, he has some really excellent, original things to say about this, things that make the book well worth reading. It is, however, fearfully uneven, diffuse, sometimes eccentric and shockingly unreliable about details. As a quite typical instance, I was surprised to see myself quoted in large print at the head of a chapter as having said about animals that "They too are persons". This was in fact a remark I had made about unrelated *human beings*, in a short section clearly and unmistakably headed "Why Do Other People Matter?".

This oddity forms part of a savage campaign that Shepard wages against proponents of animal rights. He is wedded to the idea that contemporary hunters understand animals far better than humanitarian people do — in fact, that the only true way to understand animals is actually to hunt and eat them. This has to be a muddle. No doubt primitive subsistence hunters do understand animals intimately, and also have interesting ambiguous attitudes to certain animals whom they both revere and eat. But how much have these hunters in common with urban people who drive out in cars to shoot creatures for sport? Shepard's indiscriminating polemic damages his book because it is so unconstructive. We cannot now become unspoiled hunters and gatherers. We have to develop attitudes towards animals that make sense from where we now stand. Humane feeling is certainly not the only kind of material we need for these attitudes. But it is surely an essential part of it. □

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