

Beyond Humanism

Barbara Ehrenreich Beyond Humanism

Essay written for the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation on
the occasion of the award of the Erasmus Prize to Barbara Ehrenreich,
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Praemium Erasmianum Essay 2018

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The Erasmus Prize is awarded annually to a person or institution that has made an exceptional contribution to the humanities, the social sciences or the arts, in Europe and beyond. Emphasizing the importance of tolerance, cultural pluriformity and non-dogmatic thinking, the Foundation endeavors to express these values in the choice of its laureates.

In 2018 the board of the Erasmus Prize decided to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary with the theme of ‘The Power of Investigative Journalism’ and awarded the Erasmus Prize to the American journalist and writer Barbara Ehrenreich. She is commended for her courage in putting herself on the line in her journalistic work. While her approach is often very personal, it goes hand in hand with sound and thorough investigation. The people we meet in her work tell us stories that would otherwise remain unheard and give us insight into the darker sides of Western society. As a writer, Ehrenreich draws on various disciplines, uniting scientific analysis with literary elegance and a dry sense of humor.

In this twelfth volume in the series of Praemium Erasmianum Essays, Barbara Ehrenreich gives another example of her infinite curiosity. She focuses on another group in society that remains unheard: that of the animal world. And while on that matter, adds some critical notes on the idea of Humanism. Yet again, Ehrenreich proves to be an advocate of critical thinking and fact finding, at the same time motivated by empathy and social engagement. Thus, she embodies the Erasmian ideals championed by the Foundation.

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The most attractive feature of humanism as we understand it today is its professed universalism. Other ideologies are usually defined by exclusion: The Islamist identifies only with Muslims; the feminist identifies with women, not men; the nationalist expresses solidarity with his fellow citizens, but not with the people just across the border, etc. Only the humanist embraces all humans with enthusiasm and finds something to honor, or even celebrate, in the universal condition of humanness. No wonder humanism seemed so bold and hazardously unorthodox to Catholics in the 16th century. Not only did humanism seem to imply that we could make moral decisions ourselves, without the guidance of some hypothesized deity, but it seemed to announce a new era in which all the earth's people would be united in mutual respect and solidarity.

But from a 21st century perspective humanism falls far short of this promise. It is not its universalism that draws criticism today – as it did from some late 20th intellectuals like Edward Said – but its narrowness. Today, 500 years after the emergence of humanism, what is striking is not its inclusiveness, but its brazen exclusiveness. Why should our allegiance extend only to *Homo sapiens*, and not to the many non-human animals with whom we share the planet – chimpanzees, for example, whose DNA is approximately 99 percent identical to ours, or dogs and horses, who have been our loyal companions for thousands of years?

I do not advocate inclusion of the non-human animals out of some personal regard for them. I am not a vegan or even a pet-owner. But my formal education is in the sciences, and the scientific view of non-human animals has changed rapidly, just within my own lifetime, to the point where their exclusion from the human moral landscape has begun to seem entirely arbitrary. Everywhere, animals have been found to be displaying capabilities once thought to be uniquely human: they can use simple tools; they can be altruistic; they can create

what they seem to regard as works of art, like the bubble rings of bottle-nosed dolphins; they can reason and remember; they can fall into what looks very much like depression.

Language, which is often taken as a uniquely human accomplishment, is widespread in the nonhuman world, and not only among birds, dolphins, and whales. Very recent research reveals that American prairie dogs, who are closely related to squirrels, can issue calls informing each other about what kind of human, or other creature, might be approaching. ‘Here comes the tall human in the blue [shirt],’ they can say, or ‘here comes the short human in the yellow [shirt].’ Perhaps strangest of all, octopuses off the coast of Australia have been found building complex cities, complete with roads and private dwellings. When exposed to MDMA (known colloquially as Ecstasy), they appear to dance, undulating erotically and, what is rare for octopuses, touching each other. Somewhat belatedly, in 2012, an international conference of neuroscientists acknowledged that non-human animals are capable of emotion, reasoning and even consciousness.

Animals are not different from humans in some easily generalizable way – less gracious and intelligent, perhaps, or more impulsive and unpredictable. In fact, it makes very little sense to say what animals are like or not like. There are so many species of animals that any analysis based on the human-animal division is as eccentric, in its own way, as a hypothetical biology based on the jellyfish-nonjellyfish distinction would be. And there are as many differences between individual animals as there are between individual humans, which is why, for example, it is so difficult to get reliable advice on how to avoid a bear attack while hiking in the American west. Do you run away, wave your arms and make noise, or curl up on the ground and play dead? It depends on the bear and what mood it is in at the moment.

There is a word, albeit an awkward one, for the kind of vanity that leads some creatures to imagine that their

own species is superior to all others – speciesism, coined by philosopher and animal rights activist Richard Ryder in 1970 and later popularized by the Australian animal rights crusader Peter Singer. The structure of the word invites comparisons to ‘racism,’ ‘sexism’ and ‘ableism’ (prejudice against disabled people) and animal rights activists urge us to direct the same kind of moral disapproval at speciesism that we are learning – all too slowly! – to apply to the ‘isms’ that denote prejudice against other sorts of humans. Already, within the American humanist community, there have been sharp criticisms of humanism as a form of speciesism and even suggestions that ‘humanism’ be updated to ‘animalism.’ The community of living creatures that we must try to salvage from the rising seas and suffocating summer heat includes not only our children and grandchildren but bears, whales, snakes and frogs.

But disconcertingly – or perhaps I should say heart-breakingly – just as we have begun to learn how much we have in common with non-human animals, they have begun to disappear. As the Center for Biological Diversity reports:

Our planet is now in the midst of its sixth mass extinction of plants and animals – the sixth wave of extinctions in the past half-billion years. We’re currently experiencing the worst spate of species die-offs since the loss of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. Although extinction is a natural phenomenon, it occurs at a natural ‘background’ rate of about one to five species per year. Scientists estimate we’re now losing species at 1,000 to 10,000 times the background rate, with literally dozens going extinct every day. It could be a scary future indeed, with as many as 30 to 50 percent of all species possibly heading toward extinction by mid-century.¹

Among the animals that have disappeared in the last 200 years are the black rhinoceros, the passenger pigeon, the Pyrenean ibex and the Tasmanian tiger. Several species of prairie

dogs, the creatures whose language we are just beginning to understand, are now listed as endangered.

Most of the extinctions of the past 200 years can be attributed to human activities. Industrialization and the accompanying pollution of air and water is one cause; destruction of wild animal habitats to make way for farming, grazing and human housing is another. But not all animal extinctions are the results of recent human expansionism. For thousands of years, animal species have been giving way to excessive human hunting, or what geoscientist Paul Martin termed ‘overkill.’ In North America, the extinction of mastodons and giant sloths followed the arrival of humans in the Western hemisphere. There is archaeological evidence that these early Americans often hunted by driving herds of their prey over cliffs, a method that produced far more dead animals than the hunters could possibly eat. In South America and the Pacific Islands, the disappearance of creatures like the dodo occurred shortly after settlement by humans. To Martin, whom I was able to interview before his death in 2010, humans had made the earth into a ‘planet of doom’ for our fellow animals. We were, and remain, monstrously insatiable predators.

This perception of the human role on the planet leads to what the conservative Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson has called ‘environmentalist self-loathing.’ I encountered it once after posting something in favor of space travel on social media – only to be told that we should stay here on earth lest we destroy another planet. Human self-loathing is of course the very opposite of humanism. It suggests that our species is a tragic mistake.

I can offer one narrative with which to counter this dispiriting conclusion. It may seem obvious now but for decades evolutionary biologists have resisted the fact that, before our ancestors became formidable predators, they must have been the prey of more formidable predators than themselves. The African savanna that our hominid ancestors

strode (or, more likely, crept warily) into from the forest was populated not only by edible ungulates like antelopes, but by a host of deadly predators, including a variety of big sabertooth cats as well as the ancestors of lions, leopards, and cheetahs. Evolutionary biologists have tended to poo-h-poo the threat of predation to early humans. ‘Man’, the archeologist and popular writer Louis Leakey proclaimed, ‘is not cat-food’.² So, until recently, big-cat predation on primates of any kind was thought to be the work of rare pathological individuals who were too disabled or demented to catch their normal prey. Besides, whether or not primate meat is distasteful to carnivores, as evolutionary biologists have tended to assume, the thought of being eaten is definitely distasteful to *us*.

But the evidence of predation both on hominids and on modern primates has become overwhelming. The turning point came in the early eighties, with the reexamination of certain hominid bone deposits found in southern Africa. For years, these assemblages of hominid – *Australopithecus* in this case – and animal bones had been interpreted as evidence of hominid predation on other animals: The reason why the hominid bones were commonly found intermixed with those of other animals, according to Raymond Dart, was that *Australopithecus* was a murderer as well as a hunter. The wounds found in one of the hominid skulls were evidence, he argued, of ‘purposeful,’ armed assault.³ And so it went until the South African paleontologist C.K. Brain did a little further detective work. He measured the puncture marks in the skull of the supposedly murdered *Australopithecus* and found that the distance between them precisely fit the gap between the lower canines, or stabbing teeth, of the leopard. The reason, he argued, that hominid and animal remains so often ended up together was that *both* had been eaten by leopards.⁴

Hominids and prehistoric humans were almost certainly never numerous enough to constitute the sole foodstuff of any predator species. But even if no other species specialized in predation on early humans, our biology alone is enough to

suggest an alarming level of vulnerability to the exceptionally hungry or casual prowler. Humans and primates generally (with the exception of the muscular gorillas and certain baboons) are individually, and in the natural, unarmed state, rather dainty creatures. Compared to the big cats, our teeth are blunt, our muscles weak, our nails good for little more than scratching away at lice. Nor do we have the natural defenses possessed by other large land animals: the elephant's thick skin, the buffalo's horns, the antelope's speed. Until recently though, predation on primates was downplayed because primatologists seldom witnessed it. There was, as it turns out, a good reason for this: Primatologists do their work in the daytime, while predators tend to do theirs at night. More careful observations – including the analysis of carnivore feces for primate remains – have established that predation is indeed a serious threat to modern primates and was most likely to ancient ones as well.

A 1991 study found that leopard predation was the number-one cause of death among a forest chimpanzee population, accounting for 39 percent of deaths over a five-year period.⁵ Two years later, evidence was reported for significant *lion* predation on chimpanzees.⁶ Field observations suggest that troops of savannah-based baboons, which are sharp-toothed, formidable fighters, lose 25 percent of their members to predation annually.⁷ If primatologists have not always appreciated the threat of predation, primates certainly have. Savanna-dwelling chimpanzees, who share their habitat with lions, cluster in large groups, presumably for defense, and use alarm calls to warn of approaching predators.⁸ Similarly baboons enter the savanna warily, falling into a defensive marching order, with the young males on the periphery. A sick baboon will try so hard to keep up with the group that it will neglect to find food, and thus weaken all the more quickly. For an individual to fall behind the troop is to be eaten 'within hours after the troop has gone and probably before its heart stops beating.'⁹ Reviewing the evidence for carnivore

predation on nonhuman primates, the Dutch biologist Adriaan Kortlandt concludes that 'for the early hominids, breaking a leg while walking alone would often have been fatal, due to carnivore predation.'¹⁰

Modern *Homo sapiens*, too, can be tasty prey. Despite the conventional wisdom that wild predators do not like the flesh of primates, or will not attack unless 'bothered,' wild carnivores have been a threat to human communities right into historical times. One of the few systematic studies of carnivore predation on humans – conducted near the Gir Forest of western India between 1978 and 1991 – found up to forty lion attacks on humans per year, forcing the unhappy villagers to remain indoors after sunset or go out only in groups of four or five.¹¹ Lions significantly impeded the construction of the Ugandan Railway in 1895-1901, killing twenty-eight Indian laborers and about a hundred African villagers living near the construction sites. Surviving laborers were forced to set up camp on top of water towers, dig pits beneath their tents, or sleep in beds lashed to trees.¹²

In our own time, most of the large predators have become endangered species, and this has led to an understandable tendency to see them as victims rather than as victimizers, and of no great danger to respectful humans. Hikers are routinely reassured that the ambient wildlife will not bother them if they refrain from bothering it. But there have been a number of cases, in recent years alone, of attacks on humans by apparently undisturbed predators – mountain lions attacking joggers, for example, or bears attacking sleeping campers. Some of these attacks can perhaps be rationalized as unnatural behavior resulting from too much contact with humans or with the waste left at human campsites. But clearly *some* predators, in *some* settings, do in fact stalk humans as food. The tigers of the Sundarbans are an undeniable example, and have even been known to modify their behavior in response to the evasive tactics of humans. In 1986, realizing that tigers almost never attack a human from the front, someone designed plastic face

masks to be worn on the back of the head. The masks fooled the tigers for five of six months, after which the tigers figured out that the masks were not faces at all, and resumed their attacks.¹³

Tigers, far more than lions, have restricted human opportunities in the Indian subcontinent. According to Franklin Russel's *The Hunting Animal*, when the British East India Company received its charter from Elizabeth I in 1600,

many thousands of square miles – some said half a million – of India were depopulated by tigers. Farmers, after establishing crops, grazing animals, residences, and roads, were driven from their land by tigers, the stock destroyed, their workers taken in the fields, and their families plucked from out of their residences. Travel on roads ... was impossible without either firearms or great numbers of travelers banded together.¹⁴

The British started recording the numbers of humans lost to tigers in 1800, and found that by the end of the century, approximately three hundred thousand people had been killed, along with 6 to 10 million farm animals.¹⁵ In the Sundarbans region of India, where the tigers routinely stalk humans as food, even today:

So many are killed by tigers here that some villagers are known as *vidhaba pallis* – tiger widow villages. Arampus, near Gosaba, is one such village; in each of its 125 families is a woman whose husband or brother or son was killed by a tiger.¹⁶

Today most large land carnivores are either extinct or too wary of firearms to attack a group of humans – or so, at least, the conventional wisdom goes – but individuals still fall prey to alligators, bears, mountain lions, and packs of hyenas or wild dogs. Among the more lurid twentieth-century cases of

predation on humans catalogued by C.K. Brain is a leopard in Rudraprayag, India, that killed 125 people between 1918 and 1926, even in one instance forcing open a door to get to a boy sleeping inside. A Zambian leopard killed sixty-seven people in 1936,¹⁷ and according to Brain, some African villages practiced a grisly form of euthanasia by leaving old, sick, or feeble individuals outside the village at night so that animals would dispose of them.¹⁸ 'People living in the perfect safety of their homes in a Western country have no conception of the insecurity felt by blacks in their kraals in the interior of Africa,' a white hunter, James Sutherland, wrote in 1912:

The cause of this feeling of insecurity is chiefly the man-eating lion, and no other animal of the forest inspires such terror ... In villages far in the heart of the pori, where the white man is never seen, not hundreds but thousands of Africans are killed annually by these monsters.¹⁹

Wolves, it is often claimed, never attack humans.²⁰ But in the summer of 1996, the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh experienced thirty-three fatal wolf attacks on children and twenty maulings. As the *New York Times* reported:

When the man-eating wolf came into this tranquil village (Banbirpur) toward dusk on an evening in mid-August, it was every child's worst nightmare come true. The wolf pounced while Urmila Devi and three of her eight children were in a grassy clearing at the edge of the village. The animal, about 100 pounds of coiled sinew and muscle, seized the smallest child, a 4-year-old boy named Anand Kumar, and carried him by the neck into the luxuriant stands of corn and elephant grass that stretch to a nearby riverbank. When the police search party found the boy three days later, half a mile away, all that remained was his head.²¹

In the Paleolithic setting, humans (or hominids) would not have had to be any animal's favorite meal in order to be thrust into constant conflict with predators. For one thing, the population of predators – and indeed, of all large land animals – was much larger in the Paleolithic period than it has been ever since. Furthermore, if early humans obtained their meat by scavenging from the kills of big cats, as some paleo-anthropologists now propose, they would have been drawn, again and again, to the kill sites left by more successful hunting animals, where there is always the possibility of the predator's return. Leopards and lions will fight any poachers they discover at their kill sites – wild dogs or hyenas, for example – and unarmed hominids would have been easily driven off or even added to the predator's meal. Though scavenging may be a sinecure compared to hunting for oneself, it is hardly a low-risk occupation.

Yet somehow it offends human vanity to think of ourselves or our predecessors as vulnerable prey, potential meat for other species. Darwin himself glided right over the problem of human vulnerability. On one page in *The Descent of Man* he calls 'man' 'the most dominant animal that has ever appeared on earth.' Twenty pages later he acknowledges that if hominids had been any stronger, they

would probably ... have failed to become social; and this would most effectually have checked the acquirement by man of his higher mental qualities ... Hence it might have been an immense advantage to man to have sprung from some comparatively weak creature.²²

But a 'comparatively weak creature' could not have become 'the most dominant animal' overnight. Here is what we might call the missing link within the theory of human evolution itself: how a poor, shivering creature grew to unquestioned dominance. Before and well into the age of hunting, there must have been a long, dark era of fear when the careless and

the stragglers were routinely picked off, when disease or any temporary weakness could turn a man into meat.

Many things propelled the human ascension to the top of the food chain. Fire was no doubt one of them. Even the fire at a campsite might have given predators pause, and torches waved at animal marauders would have been even more effective. Over time, humans and their predecessors learned to sharpen sticks and even stones into weapons. Possibly the most important human and hominid innovation was the development of collective defense mechanisms, whereby the humans banded together, made loud noises and perhaps jumped together in unison as if to fool the predator into thinking they were one large animal rather than a collection of puny ones. Some have gone so far as to speculate that it is in such choreographed encounters that we may find the origins of both music and dance.

So we could say, without disrespect to the known facts, that there were at least two broad and overlapping epochs in prehistory: one in which our ancestors were relatively weak compared to marauding predators and stampeding ungulates – an epoch of cowering and perpetual vigilance – and, two, an epoch in which other species learned to cower and flee from *us*. The transition from one status to the other would have been halting and gradual, as the means of defense – both weapons and forms of social organization – evolved into the means of attack and offense. And well into the epoch of man-the-hunter, humans still had good reason to fear the tall grass, the forest and the night.

But there *was* a transition, and even if Darwin could not bring himself to think of it, it had to be the single greatest advance in human evolution, this progress our distant ancestors made from the status of anxious prey to that of unrivaled predator. We were not given dominion over the earth; our forebears earned it in their long, nightmarish struggle against creatures far stronger, swifter, and better armed than themselves, when the terror of being ripped

apart and devoured was never farther away than the darkness beyond the campfire's warmth. If we seek an 'original trauma' – meaning, of course, not a single event but a long-standing condition – it was the trauma of being hunted by animals, and eaten.

We do not have to look far back in time to find traces of the marauding beast, faint paw prints left deep in the human psyche. Children's first nightmares are often of devouring beasts; their most thrilling games are of capture and pursuit; their bedtime stories feature cannibal witches and wolves intent on human flesh. A 1933 study of urban children's fears found high frequencies of fear of animals and hybrid animal-human monsters, and this before television had brought monsters into every living room. A later study of American schoolchildren, in 1965, found them not much concerned about practical threats like nuclear war, traffic, and germs. 'The strange truth,' concluded the author of the study, 'is that they fear an unrealistic source of danger in our urban civilization: wild animals.' In response to the question 'What are the things to be afraid of?' 80 percent of children ages five and six mentioned wild animals, predominantly snakes, lions, tigers, and bears.²³ Similarly, studies of dreams reported by urban adults show a surprising prevalence of menacing animals, given their virtual absence in real life. Japanese and American college students, for example, reported high frequencies of dreams involving 'creatures, part human, part animal,' 'wild, violent beasts, snakes', and 'being frozen with fright' – subconscious preoccupations which, biologist Balaji Mundkur speculates, may reflect 'basic sensitivities imprinted during the psychological evolution of primates.'²⁴

My conjecture is that our own prehistory as prey may help explain some of humankind's more horrifying crimes against other animals – from the overkill of large mammals by North Americans approximately 11,000 years ago to the murder of 300,000 'game animals' by the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in the years before his assassination in Sarajevo. I can think

of no way to prove or disprove my conjecture, although it is suggestive that people who are abused in childhood are somewhat more likely to abuse their own children than are other people.²⁵ Possibly, by killing animals for 'fun,' or for purposes other than providing food, humans have attempted to reassure themselves that they are, in fact, finally predators rather than meat.

So what are we – cowering prey, who cling to each other for support, or cruel predators who sometimes kill far more than we can eat? Or, to give the question a veneer of profundity – what does it mean to be human? Are we uniquely endowed with a mission to infuse morality into a morally indifferent natural world, as the notion of 'humanism' might suggest? Or are we a curse upon the planet, the scourge of all its other creatures?

Perhaps the best answer is that we are each a mosaic of both predator and prey. We swagger to assert our dominance while inwardly cringing from threats both real and imagined. We huddle together against the night and at the same time plot to turn our little group into a fighting force that can defeat other humans in war and other animals in the hunt.

But even in our internal disunity, it could be argued that we are not totally unique. All animals are born young and vulnerable – tender prey for any creature with claws and teeth. Hyenas, who start killing and eating their siblings in utero, are a possible exception, but even lions start out as cubs who risk being eaten by the adult males of their species. Ontogeny repeats phylogeny. The individual transition from prey to predator echoes that of the species. And of course in old age we lapse back into the status of prey, as underscored by the practice of leaving the old and feeble outside of the village, to be disposed of by leopards or wolves.

There is however one unique thing about the individual human prey-to-predator transition: All humans are born 'prematurely,' in that it takes – not weeks or months but years – for a child to achieve physical maturity. This prolonged

infancy has only faint parallels among other animals, and it imposes on humans a heavy responsibility. If we want descendants, we must be prepared to feed, clothe, and otherwise cherish our young for a prolonged period, if not for most of our adult lives. Those children will grow up recalling their extended period of relative helplessness. They may become warriors or masters of the hunt, but the memory of being at the mercy of terrifying animals (or perhaps cruel human adults) is always there.

To say that we are hybrids or mosaics is to suggest a new answer to the question of what it means to be human. That answer is that it means we are a kind of *question*: good or evil, kindness or slaughter? If we are conscientious, we are asking that question every moment of our lives, with every action we take, and this may be the true and original meaning of 'humanism.' The challenge now is to apply it to our actions as they affect the non-human animals with whom we share the planet. Let me end by quoting the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum: '...Let's put aside the narcissism involved in asking only about ourselves. Let's strive for an era in which being human means being concerned with the other species that try to inhabit this world.'

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Colophon

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