

# Presidential Speech

## Human-Animal Relationship in an Anthropocene Era<sup>1</sup>

How we treat our fellow creatures is only one more way in which each one of us, every day, writes our own epitaph-bearing into the world a message of light and life or just more darkness and death, adding to the world's joy or to its despair ... Perhaps that is part of the animal's role among us, to awaken humility, to turn our minds back to mystery of things, and open our hearts to that most impractical of hopes in which all creation speaks as one.

**Matthew Scully, Dominion**

Relations between human and animals have been drastically reconfigured by the emergence of industrial capitalism. A profound separation between humanity and natural world has been almost instituted, resulting into the alienation of modern citizens from a working engagement with nature and other creatures around them. We have developed isolation of urban awareness as reflected in our artificial, often depraved relations with animals. Further industrial technologies have intensified the degradation of non-human world. Modern cultural and material economy has changed the concept of human animal relations that existed before the heyday of either capitalism or industrialization. Studies have shown how the representation, consumption and management of animals in the nineteenth century did not always facilitate, but sometimes resisted European imperialism, scientific empiricism and capitalism, along with their more oppressive counterparts: colonial racism, slavery, indigenous dispossession and environmental depredation. So, reassessments and reinterpretations of the animals' place in contemporary contexts is the necessity of the present time.

The aim of my speech is to unfold the cultural history of the human-animal relation in the contest of globalizing modernity. My focus will be on the relationship between human animal narratives, and the social practices and conditions from which they emerge on the one hand, and on the other the evidence of exchange between human and non-human forms of agency. It is my belief that we need to go beyond reading animals as screens for the projection

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Dr. Gatam, President of LAN, Delivered the speech on March 1, 2019, in the LAN Conference held in Sauraha, Chitwan, Nepal

of human interest and meaning, which has been the predominant way of treating cultural representation of animals. C.L. Strauss has said that animals are "good to think", with implying that animality mediates the construction of humanity so that animals means whatever cultures mean by them. Scholars in the field of 'Animals Studies' or human animal studies reject anthropocentric assumption of such an approach. They are interested in attending to what animals mean to humans, and what they mean themselves beyond the designs of human beings. Contrary to such scholars, Donna Haraway has espoused the recognition of the non-human world as "witty agent, or actor and active collaborator in the construction of meaning". Such type of analysis explores what is at stake ultimately and that is our own ability to think beyond ourselves. Humans can represent animals experience through the mediation of cultural encoding, which involves a reshaping according to our own intentions, attitudes and perceptions. In seeking to go beyond the use of animals as mere mirrors for human meaning, our best hope is to locate the 'tracks' left by animals in texts, and the ways cultural formations are affected by the materiality of animals and their relations with humans.

Many people in the West and outside the West have started to deconstruct the obvious claim about the privileged status of the human, in contra distinctions to the animal, as the source of agency in the world. Such a reconceptualization of agency might facilitate a mode of analysis that does not reduce the animal to a blank screens for the projection of human meaning and might offer productive new ways of accounting for the material influence of the non human animal upon human and vice versa.

The ways in which animals are understood and treated by human must also be considered in relation to ways we feel towards them. In this regard Raymond William says that literature provides "often the only fully available articulation of structure of feelings which as living processes are much more widely experienced". Literary texts testify to the shared emotions, moods and thoughts of people in specific topical movements and places, as they are influenced by and as they influence the surrounding socio-cultural forces and systems. It is our concern to identify the various structures of feelings that characterize human animal relations. The inclusion of human animal relations is a significant factor in the present context of the outwardly expanding globalizing dimension of modernity.

By turning their gaze beyond Europe, towards unfamiliar lives and locations, Enlightenment thinkers developed their notions about the world and the place of humans in it. The epistemological movements of the period were inextricably entwined with material expansion: trade, navigation, cartography, colonialism, and slavery. And the fictional voyages created by Defoe and Swift drew extensively upon the experiences of real life travelers—for example those of explorer, adventurer, trader, slaver and pirate.

The second feature of Enlightenment modernity demonstrated by all these adventures is the formative role played by human–animal relations. Whether as a concept (animality) or as a brute reality (actual animals), nonhumans play a constitutive role in the preoccupations of the modern enterprise: its relentless mobility (spatial, social, economic and epistemological), its development of commodity culture, its promotion of new scientific paradigms and its

determination to reconceptualize the human.

In medieval Europe the security of the division between human and animal rested upon theological and moral qualities. Christian dogma, exemplified by Augustine and Aquinas, saw human nature as a conflict between the animal passions of the mortal body and the divine aspirations of the immortal soul to transcend the former in favour of the latter. This version of humanity was guaranteed by a divinely created chain of being that ordered the world, material and immaterial, into a hierarchy which placed animals below humans, and angels above.

Humanism, however – first emerging within Christian philosophy, but eventually arrogating the cultural dominance of its theological parent – required a reconfiguration of this bifold nature of ‘man’. Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the growing authority of science and philosophy gradually but inexorably shifted the distinction between the human animal and all others away from the former’s unique access to divine grace and possession of an immortal soul, towards a more anthropocentric concept of mind, as characterized by the capacity for rational thought. Again, animals were integral to this movement – literally, as tools for scientific experimentation, and conceptually, as a control group against which to prove the uniqueness of human intellect and agency.

Prior to the nineteenth century, no animal was more central to the commerce of everyday European life than the horse, as a mode of transport, agricultural machine, agent of communication, weapon of war and tool of colonization. European states rode to national prosperity and global power on the back of the horse. The publication of Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species in 1859 is usually considered to mark the beginning of a new era in the study of life’. Harriet Ritvo writes, "for those who were persuaded by it, Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection . . . eliminated the unbridgeable gulf that divided reasoning human being from irrational brute", and thereby ‘dethroned . . . humankind almost implicitly.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the movement known as modernism brought about a parallel discrediting of sympathetic and sentimental engagement with animals in the aesthetic sphere. Rejecting the complacencies of Victorian modernity, the modernists aimed also to dispense with – or in some ways, reform – the legacy of the last great literary revolution, Romanticism. In much contemporary fiction, then, so-called wild nature is irremediably lost, or else subsumed into the manipulated and artificial spaces of the Frankensteinian workshop. The wild beasts feared by Crusoe and revalued by the modernists are captured, domesticated, neutered; their fangs are drawn and their claws clipped. The fictions of Coetzee and Findley, and many others demonstrate an emerging determination to re-engage literary fiction with the most vital and intimate of contemporary structures of feeling. They also suggest that today, living inexpertly with animals and our own animality amidst the ruins of modernity, we are especially in need of narratives that attempt translation between the animals we are and the animals we aren’t.

Now I would like to emphasize the common emotion at the core of human and animals. In his book *Mama’s Last Hugs: Animal Emotions and what they feel*, F.D. Wall narrates the following incident to show how emotions are at our core.

The two old friends hadn't seen each other lately. Now one of them was on her deathbed, crippled with arthritis, refusing food and drink, dying of old age. Her friend had come to say good bye. At first, she didn't seem to notice him. But when she realized he was there, her reaction was unmistakable: her face broke into an ecstatic grin. She cried out in delight. She reached for her visitor's head and stroked his hair. As he caressed her face, she draped her arm around his neck and pulled him closer.

The mutual emotion so evident in this deathbed reunion was especially moving and remarkable because the visitor, Dr. Jan Van Hooff, was a Dutch biologist, and his friend, Mama, was a chimpanzee. The event—recorded on a cellophane, shown on TV and widely shared on the internet—provides the opening story and title for the ethnologist Frans de Waal's game-changing new book, "Mama's Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us About Ourselves."

Other authors have explored animal emotion, including Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson and Susan McCarthy in "When Elephant Weep". (1995) and Marc Bekoff in "The Emotional Lives of Animals" (2007). Still others have concentrated on a specific emotion, such as Jonthan Balcombe in "Pleasurable Kingdom" (2006) and Barbara J. King in "How Animals Grieve" (2003).

For too long, emotion has been cognitive research's important aspect. In research, human's emotions were deemed irrelevant, impossible to study or beneath scientific notice. Animals behave. By examining emotions in both, F.W. Waal puts these most vivid of mental experiences in evolutionary context, revealing how their richness, power and utility stretch across species and back into deep time.

Emotions, De Waal writes, "are our body's way of ensuring we do what is best for us," unlike instinct—which leads to preprogrammed, rigid responses—emotions. Emotions "may be slippery," he writes, "but they are also by far the most salient aspect of our lives. They give meaning to everything". In this book, Waal sets the record straight. Emotions are neither invisible nor impossible to study; they can be measured. Levels of chemical associated with emotional experiences, can easily be determined. The hormones are virtually identical, from humans to birds. Emotions are not an affliction we must strive to keep in check. They are adaptive" Love, anger, joy, sorrow, fear all help us to find food and safety, protect our families, escape danger. Emotions enable us to survive.

So, it's no wonder that animals experiences and exhibit an array of them. Zebrafish can get depressed and respond to the some antidepressant drugs that human do. A dog who mistakenly bites his owner may be so upset over having broken this taboo that he suffers a nervous breakdown.

And like humans, animal can control their emotions when necessary. A frightened chimp will contort its face into an anxious "fear grin" Waal recalls watching fearful males abruptly turn away so rivals don't see their expression. "I have also seen males hide their grin being a hand, or even actively wipe it off their face," he writes. "One male used his fingers to

push his own lips back into place, over his teeth, before turning to confront his challenger." Similarly, I have seen nervous speakers in greenrooms hold their faces in their hands and push their cheeks upward to sculpt a frown into a smile before taking the podium, writes Waal.

Emotions are our constant, intimate companions, Birds and cats can tell human males from females merely by observing their movements. Like us, our fellow primates value justice and fairness. Waal recounts what happened during experiments with capuchin monkeys at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center, near Atlanta. Two monkeys worked side by side in a test chamber with mess between them. For successfully completing a task, they were rewarded with cucumbers or, even better, grapes. If both monkeys got the same reward for the same tasks, everything was fine. But if one monkey received grapes while the other was rewarded with a more cuke, conflict arose. Sometimes one would hurl the vegetable back at the researcher in disgust.

We recognize ourselves in such stories. This is why they are powerful: They evoke our empathy, perhaps our most cherished emotional ability. But, to our detriment, researchers who study animal's behavior have been methodically warned against exploring empathy as a means of understanding. Too many illuminating observations have gone unpublished suggesting that humans share traits with other animals invites accusations of anthropomorphism.

We need to reorient our efforts to expand human and animal relations for our own delight and better life. Researchers should fight against all charges and obstacles that create a division between human and animals. New research and observation should be conducted to awaken the people and the governments of the time that human animal relations are vital for the betterment and even for the survival of humanity. In her new book, "Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals," Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor of Philosophy Christine Korsgaard makes the case that humans are not inherently more important than animals and therefore should treat them much better than we do.

I would like to end this speech by quoting from the great Irish poet W.B Yeats on how the animals are like us and how "Civilization" has taken away the sense of wonder and awe that was our common inheritance: "One often hears of a horse that shivers with terror, or of a dog that howls at something a man's eyes cannot see, and men who live primitive lives where instinct does the work of reason are fully conscious, of many things we cannot perceive at all. As life becomes more orderly, more deliberate, the supernatural world sinks farther away."

Let us not allow the animal in us to die and lose the magic of life and the world.

Thank you.