10 Just like humans

Similarity, difference and empathy towards nonhumans in the Amazonian rainforest

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After living for a few months in a village in the Ecuadorian Amazon, the region where I have done fieldwork since 2011, my 3-year-old son started hitting dogs. It was an awkward experience: when we returned from the village to the main city, he would threaten with a stick any dog we encountered in the street. I was very uncomfortable with his behaviour and often screamed at him, but he seemed unable to understand the reasons of my anger. After all, his behaviour was condoned, if not actively encouraged, by most adults and children in the Runa village where we had been living. I did not know what to do or how to behave. An afternoon, as we were walking home with a colleague, we encountered a stray dog asleep on the footpath: as soon as my son saw it, he quickly grabbed a stone and attempted to throw it at the dog, shouting "Don't be lazy! Go away!" My friend ironically said to me: "You should include *that* in your research on Runa empathy towards nonhumans!".

I was taken aback. My friend found it paradoxical that, while I set out to investigate Runa children's empathy towards nonhumans – the focus of my last fieldwork – my toddler son, imitating his friends and family in the village, had turned into a dog beater. With that ironic exclamation, he probably wanted to push me to reflect on what looked like an unsettling paradox: the fact that my son had so readily learned to beat up dogs after a few months in a Runa village seemed like an obvious sign that there was very little empathy towards nonhumans among locals. To me, however, his reaction offered a compelling invitation to clarify, on the one hand, what I meant by "empathy", while on the other hand, to think about how empathic-like processes are indissolubly intertwined with local ideas about humans and nonhumans. In other words, through this seemingly problematic episode, I started to think about the need to articulate how, in general, and more specifically for the Runa of the Ecuadorian Amazon, empathetic manifestations towards nonhumans are shaped by assumptions about similarity and difference between people and animals.

I shall start by trying to clarify my use of the term empathy in this chapter. By "empathy", I refer to "the experience of the embodied mind of the other, an experience which rather than eliminating the difference between

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self-experience and other-experience takes the asymmetry to be a necessary and persisting existential fact" (Zahavi 2014, p. 151). According to this definition, inspired by phenomenological works by Husserl, Scheler and Stein, empathy is understood to be the basic capacity to experience the mindedness of others. Conceived as the direct perception of the embodied minds of others, empathy does not entail any kind of emotional contagion or involve any projections of one's feelings onto others: it is a morally neutral capacity to recognise others in their full "otherness". Importantly, it does not presuppose any shared experience. Distinct from sympathy, empathy constitutes the very way in which we perceive others as "others", distinct from the self. To make the difference clearer: following this definition, my friend's comment on my son's behaviour towards dogs would have not referred to a lack of empathy, but rather to a lack of sympathy, since my son clearly perceived dogs as minded subjects: the lack regarded the fact that he seemed not to feel any compassion towards them.

In this chapter, I will draw on the phenomenological distinction between empathy and sympathy, since I find it useful to advance some claims about Runa ways of experiencing nonhuman others – yet, I do not believe that we can distinguish between "empathy" and "sympathy" at all times and in all contexts. As Douglas Hollan notices, the fact that cross-culturally, we often find manifestations of empathy associated with emotional states such as pity, compassion and sympathy, seems to raise "the more general issue of whether 'empathy' per se is ever to be found in a relatively pure, isolated state" (2017, p. 343). Rather than setting an a priori definition of empathy, Hollan urges anthropologists to look at how "empathic-like processes" – all those kinds of lower-level and higher-level aspects of social cognition which are related to empathy – are manifested during everyday sociality. In this chapter, I thus explore various facets of empathy but do not attempt to reach an overarching definition as to what "empathy" is or should be. My task is complicated by the fact that among the Runa, there are no clear terms for empathy. In Amazonian Kichwa, the language spoken by the Runa, the closest word to empathy is *llaki*, which could be translated as "to feel sadness, pity, happiness" and which bears some resemblance to the concept of sympathy. *Llaki* is an important emotion through which Runa people frame their relationships with certain categories of animals, and it constitutes a fundamental concept to think about issues of empathy and sympathy.

This chapter is inherently comparative. In shedding light on Runa "empathic-like" processes towards nonhumans and specific cultural understandings about humans' relationship with animals, I constantly contrast my ethnographic materials with research done in Western countries (mainly the United States and the UK) on human–animal relationships.[1] This comparative material "closer to home" comes from research in developmental psychology and the cognitive sciences, as well as from my observations of foreign visitors in Runa villages. My central claim in this chapter is that in

order to investigate empathy-like processes towards nonhumans, we first need to pay attention to local understandings of similarity and difference between animals and people. Another closely related claim is that, to do so, we need to explore the role played by direct experience and imagination in shaping people's perceptions of nonhuman others.

If empathy consists of the recognition of others as minded creatures like us, a question which needs to be addressed regards the nature of this perceived "alikeness". Developmental psychologists have shown that, soon after birth, infants are attracted to animate objects which display self-directed movement and intentionality (Spelke et al. 1995). This discovery has led them to argue that, as humans, we have an innate ability to recognise other minded creatures. The question of similarity or ontological closeness constantly resurfaces, more or less explicitly, in discussions on empathy.

For instance, Italian neurobiologist Vittorio Gallese (2001), one of the scientists behind the discovery of mirror neurones, argues that empathy is intimately linked to motor imitation. One feels empathy towards someone who is in pain because the act of visually witnessing the other's pain activates an imitative response in the perceiver, who then comes to feel in his own body what it is like to be that other. Gallese's definition of empathy is thus that of an embodied state which originates with the perceiver and which can only exist if the perceiver has either already gone through the same condition of the perceived subject or the same sensory apparatus enabling identification. From this account, it follows quite logically that the perceived has to be in some way ontologically similar to the perceiver, since this latter has to use his own experience to make sense of the other's. Were this other to be truly "other", there would be no way for me to know him. Like in many other approaches to empathy which are heavily based on imaginative projection, the "other" in its original otherness is ultimately an unfathomable entity. There cannot be any knowledge of the other, unless we recognise in the other something which we have experienced, too. Such approaches have their origins in the same dilemmas which afflicted generations of Western philosophers and which find their best examples in Descartes's work on the *cogito* or in John Locke's argument for analogy. Such accounts suggest that, since all we can know directly is the content of one's own mind, knowledge about others can only then be indirect and analogical, namely, based on one's subjective experience.

This is a thorny issue in discussions about human intersubjectivity, and it becomes even more so in the case of human-nonhuman interactions. While the principle for analogy can be applied, at least in principle, in cases of human intersubjective encounters, it becomes difficult to do so in the case of nonhuman others whose lives are deemed to be so radically "other" from ours to make any recognition or feeling of what it "means to be like them" almost inconceivable, or at least ridden with ethical challenges. In his essay "What is it like to be a bat?"(1974), philosopher Thomas Nagel famously argues that despite being possible to imagine "what is like" to be a bat,

this imaginative interpretation would nevertheless fail to capture the experience of the bat *from the bat's point of view*, since as humans, we do not have access to its sensorial equipment and thus to its specific form of consciousness. Nagel concludes that all we have access to is our own subjective experience and that any other type of glimpse onto another individual's life is third-person knowledge. More recently, on a similar vein, philosopher Michael Marder (2012) argued against the possibility of feeling empathy towards nonhumans, and more specifically, towards plants. According to him, empathy towards plants is impossible since plant life is so radically dissimilar from ours. Given that "the likelihood of empathy is grounded in the degrees of ontological proximity (and distance) between the human empathizer and the living object of empathy" (Marder 2012, p. 262), he argues that any attempt to empathise with plants cannot be other than a projection of human values and feelings onto them. In his view, empathic manifestations towards plants replicate a human-centred world and deny the radical alterity of vegetal life forms.

Marder's suggestion raises with clarity some of the issues I will be grappling with in this chapter. One of the central assumptions of these debates is that "others" – and in particular, nonhuman others – are fundamentally different and thus "unknowable" to us. However, as I will show in this chapter, this is an idea the Runa with whom I work would have trouble agreeing with (as, one might argue, anyone who works and lives close to animals; see Candea 2010; Smuts 2001, Webb et al. this volume). While the similarity described by developmental and social psychologists might be a sufficient condition for the emergence of basic forms of empathy, a more sophisticated account of similarity and difference is needed for those higher forms of empathy which involve imagination and other cognitive and affective processes. The main question which I will seek to address in this chapter is: how do cultural ideas about animality and humanity effectively shape empathic responses towards nonhumans?

I will first give a general introduction to Runa people's relationships with nonhumans, and in particular, to certain wild animals and pets. I will then explore the meaning of *llakina*, a local Kichwa term which refers to empathic-like processes, with a particular focus on the ways this term is deployed to describe sentiments towards animals. Finally, I shall compare such empathic-like manifestations with "Western" expressions of empathy towards humans. To do so, I will draw on a variety of ethnographic materials, as well as from work on empathy in psychology and the cognitive sciences. I will conclude by reiterating the importance of local notions of similarity and difference for understanding expressions of empathy.

The Runa and their animals

When Mondi, my 10-year-old "sister", wakes up in the morning, she might find a fresh bat's bite on her leg. We can still hear the bat tweeting, hidden

somewhere inside the leaves of the thatched roof. Getting rid of them is an impossible task: there are no physical barriers to stop the bats – and many other small animals – from entering the house. Even if she is spared by the bats, she will bear marks of other bites from the many insects which enter the sleeping net at night. As soon as she is up, she goes outside to feed the chickens who run free in the yard. She then helps her mother eviscerating the animals – fish or game – her dad caught during the night. School hours, from 8 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. are the only time spent in a relatively closed space with little animal presence. After school, Mondi goes fishing with her brothers, sisters and other children: they first look for worms, then they go down the river in their canoes. She sometimes spends the afternoon in the garden, where she encounters and interacts with a wide range of animals: spiders, bats, lizards, ants, butterflies, birds, fish, dogs, small mammals and, on an unlucky day, snakes. On certain occasions, her father asks her and her brothers to walk in the forest with him, to carry back home some large prey he has killed: during the walk, she will likely spot birds, hear the noises of a distant herd of peccaries and recognise the footprints of tapirs, deer and other terrestrial mammals. She will see more animals as dead prey; it is her duty, and that of other women in the family, to transform the prey into food. She will burn the fur on the fire, cut the large animal, remove the viscera, wash it, butcher it and cook the meat.

Life in the Ecuadorian Amazon, a daily life like that of Mondi, which I just described, is replete with encounters with animals. The Runa of the Ecuadorian Amazon are a Kichwa-speaking people living in the region of Pastaza, in the Ecuadorian Amazon. People in rural villages live mostly on subsistence agriculture, fishing, hunting and some informal labour. From early in life, Runa people are in contact with a variety of animals and plants: in every Runa house, you can find dogs, chickens, monkeys and parrots. Insects – from small mosquitoes to louse – are ubiquitous, and people simply learn to live with their presence. Interactions with animals are vigorous: animals are held, taken care of, killed, dismembered and cooked. From a very early age, children learn to recognise the flight of a toucan, to kill a chicken and to catch small prey and butcher larger animals. The butchering of a large animal is an event of great excitement for young children, who gather around the dead animal in a disordered crowd not to lose sight of its internal anatomy.

In Kichwa, there is no term which easily corresponds to the English category of "nonhuman animals". People distinguish between animals who live in the forest (*sacha aychaguna*) and those who live in rivers or lagoons (*yacu aychaguna*), but it is only animals which are considered as "prey" that fall into these two groups (where *aycha* means "meat"). For instance, other creatures – such as snakes, insects, dogs and worms who are not edible – do not fall into any of these categories and are simply called by their names. Apart from daily interactions with creatures who live in or near the houses, it is in the context of hunting and fishing that the most valuable encounters

with animals take place. Runa people in the area where I work still live mostly of hunting and fishing: from a very young age, boys and girls spend weeks in hunting sites with their kin, and from the age of 8, boys go with their fathers on hunting trips to the forest while girls are responsible for carrying and butchering prey.

These early and continuous interactions with animals effectively make Runa people into astute and careful connoisseurs of animal behaviour. Like for many other Amazonian people, intentionality and reflexive consciousness for the Runa are not exclusive attributes of humanity (Descola 2013; Fausto 2007; Kohn 2013; Peluso this volume; Viveiros de Castro 2012[1998]). This is evident from Runa myths and story-telling whereby animals are presented as fully humans who later transformed into the animals who inhabit the forest today (Whitten and Whitten 2008); in Runa myths of origins, modern-day animals are ex-humans who retain subjectivity and consciousness. But more than mythology, it is the actual interaction with animals in their everyday life which enables Runa people to recognise animals as subjects with their own intentions and emotional life. Eduardo Kohn has beautifully described how this process of acknowledging other minds is the fruit of living in a place where life depends on the recognition of the intentions of others. As he puts it:

> it would be impossible for the Runa to hunt successfully or to engage in any other kind of interaction within this ecology of selves without establishing some sort of set of assumptions about the agencies of the myriad beings that inhabit the forest.
>
> (2007, p. 9)

As noted in the Introduction (this volume), a central assumption in debates on empathy and intersubjectivity is that knowing the other is a difficult endeavour since his true "essence" is concealed and hidden from view. However, as noticed by philosopher Dan Zahavi, this view is based upon a limited view of the self. The mistake here, suggests Zahavi, is to think that selfhood "necessarily refers to purely interior and private states, i.e., states that are not visible in meaningful actions and expressive behavior" (2017, p. 41). He suggests to go beyond the dichotomy of behaviour-reading and mind-reading by taking a phenomenological approach which sees selfhood as manifesting itself through embodied forms and actions in the world. Zahavi quotes phenomenologist Max Scheler, one of the first theorists of empathy, who postulated "the existence of . . . a universal grammar of expression, one that enables us to understand, to some extent at least, the expressions of other species, be it the gasping fish or the bird with the broken wing" (Zahavi 2014, p. 123).

The phenomenological view of selfhood expressed by Scheler resonates with Runa approaches to understanding nonhuman others. To them, knowledge of nonhumans is not thought to be problematic, at least not usually, as

I will explain in what follows. People are not shy about interpreting animal behaviour, based on their experience and their particular knowledge of the animal. When I asked people what kinds of emotions, for instance, dogs might feel, the Runa did not hesitate to attribute animals with interior states by referring to the kind of barking sound, the way the dog moved its tail and jumped, and other visible signs of behaviour – an attitude that most dog lovers would also unproblematically adopt (see Haraway 2008). In a favourite – if not the most favourite – topic of discussion, Runa people spend hours talking about the peculiar characteristics, qualities and attitudes of individual animals and species.

So far, my description of Runa understanding of animals as minded subjects does not sound very different from what is commonly thought by middle-class urban dwellers in countries such as the UK or the United States. One only needs to think of pets and the way they are readily attributed by human owners with a wide variety of emotions, unique traits and qualities. Are then Runa understandings of animals' intentions and emotions – in other words, of animal mindedness – any different from those of middle-class Americans living in an urban context? I believe they are. To support my argument, I draw on a body of research undertaken by psychologists bethany ojalehto, Doug Medin and García Salino (ojalehto et al. 2017) on cross-cultural conceptualisations of life and agency. Their team asked a group of U.S. college students and Ngöbe people – an indigenous people living in Panama – to attribute to a given entity (e.g. animal, plant, inanimate object, etc.), a particular quality or disposition (e.g. capacity to reason, the capacity to feel, to remember, etc.). The objective of the study was to measure how the two cultural groups differently conceptualise agency. One of the results of the study was that the Ngöbe attributed far more agency to animals (and, for that matter, to any other nonhuman subjects) than did the U.S. college students. During my last fieldwork, I reframed and asked some of the questions formulated by ojalehto and colleagues to my Runa friends (adults only). My aim was to gain a sense of how people attributed agency and intentions to nonhuman others and what qualities in particular were constantly attributed (or not) to certain categories of beings. If one compares my results with those of ojalehto and colleagues, one can immediately observe that the Runa, very much like the Ngöbe, readily attributed agency to a variety of nonhuman entities. For instance, all animals in my sample were understood as possessing the capacity to feel, think and remember, capacities which, in contrast, U.S. college students only attributed to larger mammals.

In the questionnaire, I purposefully introduced an animal which the Runa do not directly know – a lion – but of which they have some knowledge through movies, documentaries and children's textbooks. I was interested in seeing how the Runa would conceptualise an animal of which they have little experiential knowledge. Questions about the lion were met by my Runa research participants with puzzlement. Although none had trouble

identifying the lion as a minded other with desires and intentions, people were not comfortable speculating on the details of such "interior" states. My questions were met with vague answers or with explicit statements of ignorance and doubt. To me, such a widespread manifestation of uncertainty seemed surprising, considering that the lion is, after all, a large carnivorous mammal, closely related to the jaguar (an animal the Runa know very well). This was not the only case in which my Runa friends expressed a kind of cautious uncertainty towards animals which they do not personally know. For instance, they would listen with extreme delight to my stories about exotic animals such as sheep and goats. I would draw upon my (scarce) animal knowledge and childhood memories of holidays in Sardinia to satisfy their curiosity regarding the behaviour of goats and sheep. I was usually asked questions about their alimentary habits, but one day, as we were having lunch, my compadre asked me: "Tell me, then: do goats ever get angry?". The question seemed to me so awkward that I hesitated a little before answering. I replied that I did not know if they got angry. My compadre looked at me and didn't say anything, so I added: "It is hard to tell. How would I know if goats get angry?". "You should be able to tell", my compadre said self-assuredly: "I don't know if goats get angry, but you've seen one; you should be able to tell." He then kept speculating on whether goats might ever get angry and if so, for what kind of reasons. How would they manifest their anger? From this and the lion example, it seems that Runa empathic understanding of animals – or at least, what they feel they can safely guess about animals' intentions and feelings – depends on the level of direct engagement people have with them. When this first-hand experience lacks, Runa people seem hesitant to speculate about the inner lives of unknown creatures. Even when they do, they express uncertainty as to whether their suppositions hold any truth – an attitude which starkly differs from the readiness with which people usually interpret the behaviour of familiar animals.

In my earlier discussions of the phenomenological definition of empathy, I mentioned that one of its central claims is that it is a phenomenon limited to one to one direct encounters. Under this perspective, Runa people's promptness to recognise familiar animals as possessing thoughts and minds seems to represent a kind of "ecological empathy": an awareness of the ecology of "selves" inhabiting this world. Nevertheless, such empathic understanding of nonhuman others should not be read as something akin to a Western ecological knowledge striving for "objectivity". The ability to accurately understand and respond to animal behaviour is necessary for survival in the forest: without it, life would simply be impossible. And yet, empathetic knowledge is always shaped by local cultural concerns and preoccupations. For instance, think of my compadre's question about goats' anger: he could have asked a question about any other emotional state – sadness, joy, fear – but he picked the one which for the Runa is the most culturally salient marker of agency: anger (*piñana*). That is to emphasise

that, as Zahavi (2014) notices, empathy – understood as a direct access to others' subjectivity – does not necessarily provide any deep or accurate knowledge about the other. Furthermore, "direct" access does not mean that it is unmediated by previous knowledge, culture and experience.

The phenomenological definition of empathy I deployed so far has helped me to highlight how the Runa perceive animals as beings capable of thought, feelings and intentions, an ethnographic fact which might not be readily visible if one merges empathy with sympathy, as in the episode of my son and my friend I described at the beginning of this chapter. The distinction also allows us to state quite confidently that the recognition of others' mindedness does not necessarily translate in a greater emotional engagement with others, nor does it need to be followed by any sympathetic behaviour. From my examples on Runa understandings of animal inner states, it also becomes obvious that, in the messiness of social life, it is impossible to distinguish between "first-level" empathy – as the direct perception of other selves – and more complex empathic-like responses which involve imagination and affective states and which may fall under the conceptual umbrella of sympathy or compassion. In the next section, I will explore the more explicit ways and contexts in which the Runa express compassion towards nonhumans and will suggest that local conceptions of animality and humanity are central to understanding its emergence or absence.

Llaki: feeling compassion, love, sorrow

There are not specific words for empathy in Amazonian Kichwa. The closest term to empathy is *llakina*, which could be translated as "to feel pity, to love, to feel sorrow", thus approximating the English meaning of compassion/sympathy. Like among the Toraja of Eastern Indonesia described by Hollan (2017), a state of *llakina* usually entails a sentiment of identification with the other and a strong desire to help. *Llakina* is understood as the main reason why people do things for others. For instance, a husband who goes hunting for his hungry wife explains his choice by referring to *llakina*, a feeling of love and pity for his companion. The verb *llaki* does not necessarily denote a negative feeling: indeed, the sense of sorrow and pity comes as a direct consequence of feeling love.

Llakina is a word used to describe Runa relationships with the animals they raise. Peter Gow (1989) has beautifully illustrated how for the Piro of the Peruvian Amazon, it is a state of helplessness that usually generates profound feelings of compassion. This state of helplessness is common to people who are alone, who have no kin. For instance, Gow describes how Piro infants who are not yet conceived as social beings are the subject of extreme compassion by others because they are deemed lonely and dependent. Among the Runa, too, helplessness is a state which provokes compassion and concern. More specifically, for the Runa, to be helpless is synonymous with being incapable of taking care of oneself. Infants and wild

animals raised by people are characterised by this quality, and they are both referred to as *huibashca* ("domesticated" or "taken care of"). Animals who are rescued from a hunt and kept as house pets (as, for instance, baby monkeys whose mother is killed by hunters), are thought to remain in this state of helplessness throughout their lives. In contrast with animals of the same species who are from the "forest" (*sachamanda*) and are considered as game (*aycha*), these pets, raised by human owners, are deemed unable to fetch for themselves and to live alone in the forest. Pets include capuchin monkeys, parrots and other varieties of birds, but also peccaries and larger mammals. Orphaned animals are lovingly taken care of by children and women in the house, and their deaths produce great sorrow. The love Runa people can feel towards animals can be very deep and long-lasting; women can breastfeed monkeys or other small mammals, they feed them special foods and carry them everywhere, and consuming their meat is considered a taboo.

Despite these obvious and intense manifestations of compassion towards animals, Runa people do not commonly display *llaki* beyond the category of helpless pets. Foreign visitors who arrive at Runa villages – tourists, government officials, non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers – are often struck by locals' apparent lack of empathic-like feelings towards animals. I was often a spectator of visitors' surprise and disappointment at the way Runa people treat their home companions. An exemplary case is that of dogs. As I anticipated in my opening paragraphs, dogs in Runa villages do not have an easy life. Often in poor health, badly fed and mistreated, it is hard for a foreigner not to feel sorry for dogs who live in Runa villages. Dogs are named individually, in contrast with other domestic animals such as ducks and chickens. Most dogs are a mixed breed, one which people refer to as "Runa" (literally "people"). In the past, when dogs were scarce, they constituted a highly sought after resource and could be exchanged for other precious objects such as salt, clothes or meat. Shamans usually had many dogs, given as gifts by patients in return for healing. According to Runa elders, famous shamans in the Bobonaza region could own up to fifty dogs – tangible proof of their shamanic prowess and mastery. Dogs' main role is that of helping men in the hunt of terrestrial mammals, such as capybaras, armadillos, peccaries and tapirs. Hunting is a rough and deadly business: dogs often lose their lives or get seriously injured. Hunting with many dogs constitutes for a hunter an important protection since they usually walk in the front of their owner and, in cases of any attack by predators, their presence enables the hunter to escape or defend himself. Some dogs are better hunters than others: these are the most cherished by their owners. If they get injured, they will be promptly cared for and given plenty of food. On the contrary, dogs who cannot chase prey, who steal food or engage in any other inappropriate behaviour are often left with very little food, sent away from the house and generally ignored unless they are badly sick. Such behaviour, which so often strikes non-Runa visitors, is ubiquitous and morally unambiguous. As Roy Ellen describes in the context of dog mistreatment among

the indigenous Nuaulu in Indonesia, "what outsiders might regard as unacceptable cruelty is not simply pardonable, but somehow morally neutral" (1999, p. 66).

When I first started my fieldwork in a Runa village in 2011, I took pity upon a small, emaciated dog called Pishnia. Pishnia was never a very good hunting dog, and when she became malnourished, nobody thought of trying to rescue her. I used to give her some of my food, and every time I came back from the city, I brought along some remedies. Whenever my host father saw me giving food to her, he would run to chase her away. After a few months, Pishnia had become fat and happy, almost unrecognisable from the skeletal animal I had first met. My host father cheerfully laughed at my accomplishment. He seemed simultaneously bewildered and amused at my feat. Why weren't my hosts moved by Pishnia's obvious suffering? Why wasn't hunger – a condition which the Runa consider to be the epitome of helplessness – enough to make my hosts feel *llaki* towards that tiny, skeletal creature?

I think that the answer is partially answered by anthropologist Valerio Valeri in an ethnographic piece on domestic animals among the Indonesian Huaulu. Observing the mistreatment of hunting dogs at the hands of their human owners, Valeri writes:

> The Huaulu attitude vis-à-vis his dogs is . . . moulded on their attitude to fellow humans. Humans are liked and admired to the extent that they are good companions and good partners, that they give and not only take. Dogs who cease to hunt, who are afraid of wild animals, are despised for their cowardice (the ultimate vice for a Huaulu), and for their parasitic behaviour, just like certain humans are.
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> (2000, p. 158)

Valeri's description certainly resonates with Runa attitudes to their dogs. Runa society is based upon a strong sense of conviviality whereby one person's worth is recognised only insofar as she or he can effectively demonstrate to be able to do things for others. People who are lazy or stingy are effectively ostracised from the group and deemed not to be "real" people. Runa attitudes toward dogs thus seems to closely resemble Runa social interactions. It is in this sense that, as noticed by ethnographer Eduardo Kohn, "there is no place in Runa society for dogs as animals" (2007, p. 10): Runa people consider dogs to be social actors with human-like qualities.[2] Just like a hunter would not feel pity/love towards a hunter who cannot hunt, so does a human owner not feel compassion towards a dog who repeatedly fails to hunt. Dogs are not conceived to be "helpless" as are those pets – captured wild animals – who are usually the recipient of *llaki*. From a Runa perspective, dogs (like humans) are natural predators whose survival should not depend upon the goodwill of others: in contrast, captive animals such as monkeys, tapirs and others who naturally belong to the "forest" (*sacha*) are in an ambiguous status: they have become members of the household and

yet they retain some degree of otherness which is best exemplified by the fact that if left on their own, they cannot survive.

Hunters can, however, feel deep love and compassion towards their dogs. A neighbour from the village of Sarayaku had a very good hunting dog to whom he was very attached. During a hunting trip, he lost his dog to a herd of white-lipped peccaries who devoured it. He told us that when he saw there was nothing left of his dog, he became overwhelmed with fury. Instead of returning home, he decided to follow the peccaries who had killed his dog. When he found the herd, he shot five or six of them in an attack of mindless rage. He then returned home, abandoning their bodies to rot in the forest. In this story, the depth of the hunter's rage is startling: not only that he purposefully went back to shoot the herd of peccaries, but in addition that he left the dead bodies to rot instead of carrying them home to consume – a behaviour which is exceptional by Runa standards. Not only did he consider his dog as a social being whom he sought to avenge, but he also treated the murderous peccaries as persons – as enemies to exterminate, and not as food to be carried back home and eaten. It is not, then, that Runa people never feel compassion towards dogs – but rather they do not love a dog who does not reciprocate his owner. *Llaki* cannot be unconditional. In the aforementioned essay on dogs, Valeri provocatively compares Huaulu attitudes to dogs to Western approaches to pets:

> Our niceness towards our pets is due to the fact that they are a mere appendage of ourselves, useless animals whom we like precisely to the extent that they have not a will of their own, that we recognize an abyss between them and us. Our benevolence is that of the despot vis-à-vis his domestic slave.
> (2000, p. 209)

Valeri's observation that the affectionate relationship between pets and their owners in Western industrialised societies is based upon the recognition of an "abyss" is relevant to my discussion on the ways in which different understandings of animality and humanity might shape empathic approaches to nonhumans. I shall return to Valeri's point at the end of the next section. So far, we have seen that *llaki* depends upon intimate, reciprocal engagements with animals that are modelled after human relationships or based upon the recognition of a condition of helplessness. In both cases, a state of *llaki* emerges throughout long-term, sustained contact with animals who either fulfil certain expectations or fit into a specific category. I wish now to offer a telling contrast to this by focusing on two episodes that centred *gringo* (white) peoples' compassionate relationships with animals which provoked great surprise and puzzlement among my Runa hosts.

The case of the white boy and the turtle

Thomas is an 8-year old. His mother Lisa, is of Finnish-English background and has always, in her words, felt a deep attachment to "nature". When

they came on vacation to Ecuador, the Amazon region ranked first in their list of things to see because of its rich biodiversity and the lively cultural traditions of local indigenous people. Lisa contacted a local indigenous guide, Cesar, to arrange a trip to a Runa village. They arrived at Pacayaku, a small Runa village situated on the banks of the Bobonaza. During this stay, Cesar and Antonio, his cousin, brought them to camp in a hunting site located a few hours distance from the village. As they were walking to reach this place, they encountered a large land turtle that Cesar immediately captured. Turtle meat is a delicacy and Cesar and Antonio rejoiced at the thought of bringing it back to the village where they could kill it and eat it with their families. Upon arrival at the campsite, they performed a hole into the bottom extremity of the turtle's shell and tied it to a tree with a rope. Then, they began building a hut for the night. It took them quite a while before realising that Tomas, sat on a fallen tree, was quietly crying. Embarrassed, they asked his mother what had happened to him. The boy's sobbing quickly turned louder and he eventually walked away, soon followed by his mother. They talked for a bit in their language and then Lisa approached Cesar and his cousin. She explained to them that Thomas was upset because he could not bear the sight of the trapped turtle. She offered to pay them to release it. When Cesar told us the story, he laughed and exclaimed:

> I said "No! No! We will release it!" We didn't want any money! The boy was crying for the turtle! I thought: these little *gringos* (whites) do love animals a lot! What else could we do? We untied the turtle and gave it to him because he wanted to set it free himself. He let the turtle free in the forest and watched it walk away.

Cesar told this story repeatedly to family members, neighbours and friends; he and his cousin were quite bewildered by the little boy's distress and any drinking party or other social event was a good occasion to recount the story over and over. Listeners were similarly surprised and amused, and the episode never failed to elicit a great deal of discussion and laughter. During my fieldwork, I often listened to stories by Runa people in which foreigners were described as extremely loving towards animals. It is a shared belief that *caromanda runaguna* ("people from faraway places") express love towards all kinds of animals and cannot bear seeing any harm done to living creatures. Another episode that became a favourite story to be told at social gatherings concerned a French volunteer who had come to spend a few months in Cesar's village. After he had begged his hosts to take him on a hunting expedition, they eventually agreed and he was able to go with them on a three-day trip to a remote hunting site. During the expedition, they encountered a group of howler monkeys and the hunters urged the Frenchman to shoot them. Three monkeys were shot and fell to the ground: two were dead but one had only an injured shoulder. "That is yours", the hunters told the Frenchman, handing him a stick: "Kill it", they said. Upon arrival to the village, the hunters described how the Frenchman, holding the

stick in his hand, had suddenly become pale "like a ghost" (*ayashina*) and had begun to tremble. "His body was shaking; we laughed and said 'Kill it', but he kept shaking and did not move, so we waited a bit and then I kill the monkey", recounted one of the men. The interpretation of the episode – which the Runa found both perplexing and amusing – was once again that "white people" feel a strong compassion towards animals.

Yet, despite their disconcert, the sentiment of compassion which Runa people attribute to white people is not, as I have shown in this chapter, an emotion unknown to them. If it is not the existence of compassion the issue at stake here, what then is the contrast to be drawn between the attitude of the little boy and the Frenchman and those of my Runa friends? I want to suggest that the amazement of my Runa friends was due to the fact that the little boy and the Frenchman manifested compassion for a living being that was completely foreign to them. As I have argued earlier, for the Runa, *llaki* is a state caused by witnessing a condition of helplessness (as in the case of captured animals) or by reciprocal long-term engagements (as in the case of dogs). From a Runa perspective, the question would then be: how could a young boy feel such a pity for an animal he had never seen before?

Reframed as such, the problem poses some interesting interrogatives. One of them is the question of how one develops compassion towards entities that are not "known" directly but rather "imagined" through other means. The little Finnish boy did not know "personally" the turtle: he did not have any long-term relationship or commitment to the animal: he certainly perceived it as an "other" subjectivity but, as I have argued earlier, acknowledging that the other has a mind does not necessarily lead to feeling compassion for him. My Runa friends, very much like the young boy, could witness the turtle's distress (and perhaps could do so even better since they are very familiar with turtles), and yet they found the boy's reaction surprising. As they so eloquently put it, how could he feel such intense compassion towards a "random" (*yanga*) turtle, an animal he had never even seen before? I believe that this question is deeply related to the ways in which animals are imagined among Euro-American middle classes.

Ecologist Stephen Kellert (2005) has named "vicarious" or symbolic experiences of nature those encounters with natural kinds which do not come from direct experience but are rather the result of learning through representations, either realistic or unrealistic, of animals and plants. Such vicarious experiences – which usually take place through reading, story-telling or watching TV – comprise a great deal of what children (and adults) living in urban environments in industrialised countries know about animals. The omnipresence of animals in children's books and toys is a very recent phenomenon: John Berger (1980) argued that the kinds of animal representations which so ubiquitously characterise our daily life – such as toys, drawings, and comics – came about exactly at a time in nineteenth-century Western history in which urban centres were expanding, wild animals were disappearing and domestic pets and zoos were becoming increasingly popular.

One only needs to go to any bookshop and pick a random book to get a sense of the pervasiveness of animals in the media. For instance, Kellert (2005) found that a strikingly high proportion of toddlers' books in English include images of animals and plants which are portrayed in highly anthropomorphic terms. In her ethnography of a preschool in an upper-class New York neighbourhood, anthropologist Adrie Kusserow (2004) writes how empathy – or more aptly, "sympathy" – towards all kinds of living beings is actively taught to children through the use of picture books or toys. For instance, she notices how in preschool books "trees, animals, ducks, rocks and flowers all have feelings, and nothing is too strange to identify with" (Kusserow (2004, p. 187). Whereas not all the stories intentionally aim to convey information about the animals per se – but rather deploy animals to talk about purely human dilemmas – many of them inadvertently suggest a similarity between the inner lives of humans and nonhumans. She also gives other examples of how animals are used to encourage perspective-taking: for instance, during a class, "children sitting in a circle are asked to imagine how they think a bunny rabbit would feel when he loses his best friend or is lost in the field" (Kusserow (2004, p. 185). While the game's purpose might not be that of teaching something about rabbits, the fact that it is used to encourage reflection about human interior states implicitly encourages children to draw a connection between the emotional lives of humans and rabbits.

The question of what effects vicarious representations of animals have on children's conceptualisation of human–nonhuman relationships has been recently the subject of research of a team of psychologists which included Sandra Waxman et al. (2014). They conducted a series of experiments with U.S. 5-year-old children who had been pre-exposed to reading two different books about bears, one in which bears were portrayed in anthropomorphic terms (e.g. wearing hats) and other where bears were presented as animals with specific habits and behaviours. The results were striking: those children who read the book in which bears acted like humans showed a consistent anthropocentric pattern in the following experiments. In other words, after being primed to see bears as possessing human-like qualities, children adopted a human-centred reasoning pattern in the remaining part of the test, whereby humans served as the prototype for thinking about other living creatures. These results seem to suggest that even indirect means of experiencing nonhumans – such as storybooks – can have a measurable effect on the way children come to think about animals. It might then be reasonable to assume that the plethora of vicarious experiences of animals in industrialised Western countries – where nonhumans are understood as sharing similar interior states to us – has consequences in the way we come to empathise with them.

Conclusion

In an essay comparing "Western" and Amazonian ideas about human–nonhuman relationships, anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

(2012[1998]) argued that whereas for the former, difference is postulated around the belief of a physical continuity and a metaphysical discontinuity (e.g. common DNA but different minds), for the latter, what is common to both humans and animals is not shared biology but rather a condition of "subjectivity" (see also Kohn 2013). Among indigenous Amazonian people, animals – like humans – are persons with desires, intentions and intelligence. This, however, does not mean that animals and humans share the same intentions, desires and wills. As we have seen in this chapter, Runa people are extremely aware of each species' distinctive needs and desires, and frame such intentions within the specificity of the animal in question. The similarity to which the Runa refer when they speak about animals and humans, then, rests upon the acknowledgment that each species – humans included – possesses certain capacities that allow them to successfully interact with others in their – so to speak – "ecological niche" (Fuentes 2017). It is this kind of "ecological" difference that shapes each species' capacity to act, feel and think. Through this ecological sensibility, Runa people perceive animals as simultaneously similar to and different from humans: they might then emphasise certain aspects of animal subjectivity which are culturally salient for them – as, for instance, the case of angry goats – and yet they would explain such anger *from a goat's perspective*, so to speak, rather than merely imputing a human anger (motivated by human interests) onto animals.[3]

In the same essay mentioned earlier, Viveiros de Castro argues that Westerners think to share a physical substratum with animals (as, for instance, in DNA and biology) and to be different from them by virtue of the uniqueness of the human mind (the "abyss" to which Valeri referred). While this is true, biological closeness is not the only way Westerners recognise a similarity with nonhumans. Importantly, as I have argued earlier, for many middle-class urban people in Western countries, animals are often represented as beings which are emotionally similar to us. Animals of which we know relatively little – and which we might only ever see in zoos or on TV – are routinely imputed through film, cartoons, books and picture books with a set of emotions modelled after human ones. This *imagined* emotional closeness – often pejoratively labelled as "anthropomorphic" – seems to me to be at the core of the behaviour of the little boy and the Frenchman who so closely identified with the turtle and the wounded monkey, respectively, as to become paralysed when facing their pain. For the Runa, witnessing an animal in pain is not enough to justify such compassionate reaction: to them animals, let us not forget, are first and foremost conceived as "meat", *aycha*. The process of imagining an animal as emotionally similar to us, together with the fact that animals in industrial societies are hardly ever presented as food, encourages the kind of empathic manifestations we have witnessed in the case of the boy and the Frenchman. For the Runa, while animal interior states might be similar to humans, these are nevertheless shaped by their distinctive ecology; humans and animals are thus alike and yet profoundly

different. It is only by virtue of this difference that they can be killed or eaten – were they just to be the same as humans, each act of killing would cause profound moral challenges (see Fausto 2007). This is true of many Westerners, too; however, as I argued here, difference and similarity between humans and nonhumans are diversely distributed in the Amazonian and the Euro-American cultural contexts. Animals' inner states seem to be readily comprehensible to the Runa, but are not necessarily shared; animals can be empathised with, but they are not the indiscriminate recipients of human love.

Notes

1 I am well aware there is a growing body of anthropological research which questions the idea of a monolithic Western modernist attitude to nature and nonhumans (Candea and Alcayna-Stevens 2012; Candea 2012; Milton 2005), and that, as such, my category of the "West" is here to be understood as a generalisation based mainly on (psychological) research done with highly educated urban white people.
2 Other practices undertaken by the Runa testify to this understanding: Kohn (2007) reports that among the Avila Runa in the nearby region of Napo, dogs are given concoctions of medicinal plants and are verbally counselled to make them hard-working and well-behaved. In the region where I work, for instance, dogs are given red hot chili pepper to eat in order to cultivate their anger (*piña*) and make them become better hunters.
3 My Runa friend's question about the possibility for goats to get angry also elicits another reflection: why could we not take that possibility into serious consideration? Why should be anger a uniquely human emotional characteristic? These questions really tap into another unspoken assumption that underpins discussions about anthropomorphism. As Webb and colleagues put it, fears about projecting human states onto nonhuman others rely on the basic assumption that "we know both what it means to be characteristically *human* and that the subject lacks that prototypical characteristic" (Webb et al., this volume, emphasis in original). However, such assumption is deeply questionable.

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