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# Feeling Like a Bat

## A Critique of Thomas Nagel

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ABSTRACT

*According to Thomas Nagel's thought, human beings are incapable of subjectively experiencing what a bat experiences. The only possibilities outlined by the philosopher are: (1) the objective analysis of ethological expressions, that is, the description of the phenomenon of the bat; (2) analogical projection, which we shall refer to as analogism to distinguish it from the concept of analogy used in evolutionary biology – effectively, anthropomorphism. If, by definition, objective analysis cannot be considered subjective, the second point entails an even more radical negation, as it relies on a human-centred projection. The human perspective undoubtedly possesses specific characteristics, yet the error lies in viewing these as exclusive. This mistake stems from the enduring influence of an essentialist conception of living beings that characterises the humanist approach. Such a view tends to treat the umwelt as a kind of self-contained monad, shared solely within the human species. From an evolutionary standpoint, however, different species share broad traits, meaning that various umwelten exhibit overlapping domains. Given that the strict distinction between objectivity and subjectivity is itself debatable – Nagel himself refers to the bat's echolocation – the true error lies in assuming that analogism is the only available approach.*

*Keywords:* analogism; animality; animal subjectivity; anthropocentrism; anthropomorphism; homology; moral status; semiosphere; Thomas Nagel; Umwelt.

## 1. FOREWORD

The first form of anthropocentrism undoubtedly stems from our gaze upon the world – an inherently human point of view, or one so excessively human as to preclude any genuine sharing with the biosphere. This perspective: (1) is, for some authors, a limitation – or perhaps a perimeter – from which one cannot escape except via analogical reasoning, thereby rendering us incapable of understanding what an animal otherness subjectively experiences; (2) for other authors, it appears so

evanescent and fluid that it becomes incommensurable with the more constrained and predetermined outlooks of other species. In both cases, an insurmountable distance is affirmed between human beings and other animals – a form of existential solipsism often evoked through questions such as "Are we alone in the universe?", which ultimately betray an ambivalent feeling. On the one hand, humans claim this supposed uniqueness – the notion of being the only entity truly endowed with rationality and free will, the conditions necessary to rise above the deterministic mechanics of natural phenomena, being capable of saying "no" and of doubting. On the other hand, this very solitude engenders a kind of anxiety or loss of meaning – especially when the comforting connection with the divinity fades, since, as Nietzsche declared, "Gott ist tot" in the catastrophic collapse of the metaphysical edifice (Nietzsche 1882).

In my view, this sense of solitude actually predates the fall of traditional values identified by the German philosopher and, if anything, justifies the primordial human need to appeal to – and anchor itself in – a transcendent entity within post-Neolithic societies. The existential solitude of the human being is a sort of spiritual affliction – a degenerative pathology progressing slowly but inexorably towards deterioration. This ailment began the moment humanity claimed for itself a separation – some might say emancipation – from the biosphere, positioning itself outside and above it. In an almost adolescent impulse, humanity asserted its own existential destiny, one marked by successive acts of separation – such as the trauma of relinquishing geocentrism – that gradually led to an awareness of its solipsistic drift.

I contend that the root of this problem – or rather, the primary aetiology of this pathology – lies in anthropocentrism. Though it might superficially appear to serve as a bastion of human identity, it is in fact a disjunctive factor, one that renders the human being increasingly isolated and incapable of breathing, in both a metaphorical and existential sense. Just as egocentrism isolates the individual and impedes social relationships – ultimately obstructing personal development – so too does the sealed-off conception of anthropocentrism not only generate existential solipsism but proves deadly for human beings, as it renders them impermeable to the kind of open exchange with the biosphere that has always been a source of ontological enrichment, even before it became a utilitarian resource.

Anthropocentrism has another problematic aspect: the complete devaluation of everything non-human. This devaluation – already implicit in conceiving of the biosphere purely in terms of exploitable

resources – is the first step towards its destruction. If only what is human holds value, then it becomes justifiable – indeed, one might say even prescribable – to convert the non-human into something aligned with human interests: such as destroying a forest to obtain materials or to generate energy for artificial intelligence. Anthropocentrism is, in essence, a form of species-level egocentrism. Just as egocentrism devalues interpersonal relationships, reducing others to instruments for one's own gain, so anthropocentrism is incapable of valuing relationships with other species. The first mechanism by which anthropocentrism avoids being questioned – just as in egocentrism – is to deny the possibility of establishing a relationship with animal otherness, either due to the presumed impossibility of transcending our inevitably human-centred condition or because of a presumed ontological difference.

However, solitude will remain our fate as long as we persist in thinking that: (i) "the others do not exist", in the sense that non-human living beings cannot be regarded as true alterities, but only as natural phenomena; or (ii) others are so wholly alien that they are unreachable in terms of intersubjectivity, and can only be described as phenomena. I believe both of these positions are mistaken, or rather, they are expressions of an anthropocentrism in which we entrench ourselves in order to preserve a cultural assumption despite its obvious shortcomings. In reality, there are three interpretative frameworks that do not involve anthropomorphism: (1) Homology, or a shared affective response based on kinship similarity; (2) Analogy (distinct from projection or analogism), based on having been shaped by similar external forces; (3) Metapredicates of animality, that is, shared existential needs, though expressed differently across species.

Let us begin with the first claim – that there is no alterity within our earthly dimension. This view, clearly articulated by philosopher Martin Heidegger, draws an ontological distinction between the human and the non-human (Heidegger 1927). It is grounded in the classical framework of Western tradition, which sees the human being as devoid of a natural rank and therefore as a wholly fluid, self-determining entity. In this schema, the difference between humans and other species does not lie in perspectival specificity, but rather in an ontological chasm that renders the human a non-animal – an insurmountable barrier that precludes any form of sharing or exchange. The second claim, here aptly represented by Thomas Nagel, turns the species-specific perspective into a monad from which it is impossible to escape. While it may be possible to describe the objectivity of animal phenomena – even their ethological expressions are

treated merely as phenomenal descriptions, limited to external manifestations – they are in no way accessible from an intersubjective standpoint. For Nagel, the only way to conceive what a bat subjectively experiences is through analogism, that is, via anthropomorphic projection – therefore, we are dealing with a fallacy from the outset.

In this essay, I will attempt to show why both these positions are flawed, beginning with a perspective that acknowledges a human nature – that is, a species-specific viewpoint – but which regards it as: (i) not a monad, and not disconnected from other perspectives, such that I do not believe analogical reasoning is the only viable option; and (ii) an elastic canopy that, while defining field functions in terms of possible outcomes, nonetheless allows us to experience other dimensions.

When actor Rutger Hauer, playing Roy Batty in Blade Runner (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982), improvised that extraordinary monologue to highlight the existential difference between the world of replicants and that of humans, his iconic line – "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe" – quite possibly, beyond his original intentions, inaugurated what may be considered the most vivid image of a critique of the anthropocentric universal, showing us – and more importantly, communicating – a different perspective. He does not do this by drawing upon sensory differences, but by articulating an existential distance that pertains to inhabiting different worlds and accessing spectacles beyond human reach.

Different species dwell in environments that are often highly specialised and barely comparable to our own: think, for instance, of an insect navigating a microcosm, swifts gliding at high speed around a bell tower, moles moving through the underground, or abyssal fish dwelling in the deep sea. These are mere glimpses that reveal how perspective is not solely a matter of internal sensory or cognitive variables, but also of the worlds inhabited – just as Roy Batty suggested – worlds in which spectacles occur such as "I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate".

## 2. On the concept of "Umwelt"

Let us begin by analysing the principle of species-specific perspective – that is, how different species are immersed within their environmental context – and attempt to understand how somatic interface systems shape our subjective point of view. The central questions concern the relationship between the body and subjective condition: what it feels like to be a certain body. This inquiry proceeds from the assumption – one

not even challenged by the two positions I intend to critique – that there exists an indissoluble link between being a certain kind of sensitivity and the subjectively perspectival condition it entails. It is no coincidence that Nagel chooses the bat as a point of comparison, focusing on the peculiarity of its sensory interface – namely echolocation – but I would also include the dimension of flight and the state of resting upside down.

At the same time, Nagel's example makes his argument more vulnerable to criticism, as bats, despite these peculiarities, are mammals and share numerous characteristics with human beings. It is evident that being a body entails establishing relations with the external world, for the animal condition – heterotrophic and peripatetic – would not allow for a life devoid of relational engagement. To interface with the world means to define a perceptual landscape within which one orientates oneself and moves, establishing a field of action in which to seize opportunities and avoid threats. The external world, therefore, is translated into a perspectival panorama – a particular configuration – thanks primarily to the specificity of our perceptual apparatus. For example:

1. the type of sensory organs available to us, which restrict access to certain stimuli perceived by other species, such as magnetic fields or polarised light;
2. the frequency range of perception, which, despite sharing auditory organs with dogs or cats, precludes us from hearing ultrasounds or perceiving ultraviolet light as parrots do;
3. additional variables of sensory definition such as visual horizon, sound amplification, signal intensity (e.g. the tapetum lucidum or fovea), and distant tactile sensitivity (e.g. vibrissae);
4. the temporal resolution of perception, determined by the sensitivity and refractory periods of sensory organs, which defines whether stimuli are perceived as continuous or discontinuous.

In short, our sensory organs, through their selective capacity, provide a phenomenologically delineated rendering of the world – an experiential manifestation of reality that, in many respects, differs even from species relatively similar to us, such as other mammals or cohabiting species.

In the 1920s, the German biologist Jakob von Uexküll introduced the term *Umwelt* to describe the immersive perceptual and operational world of a given organism, illustrating how this environment or context is species-specific (Uexküll 1921). This concept challenged the universalist assumption that all species share a singular, lived world. Uexküll's principle was later enriched by additional meanings, highlighting the importance of subjective perspective. Among those who extended this

notion beyond perception to include signification were Thomas Sebeok (1990), father of zoosemiotics, and the philosophical anthropologist Max Scheler. For them, Umwelt also refers to a semiotic world, endowed with meaning specific to each organism (Scheler 1928; Sebeok 1990).

Scheler applied the concept of Umwelt to the human condition, attributing to it a dynamic- evolutionary character shaped by affective impulse, instinct, and experiential memory, with specific reference to one's assumed position (*Stellung*) within spatial dimensions. For Scheler, the relationship between perception and movement is fundamental in defining the concept of environment.

A clarification is now in order: when we speak of different *Umwelten*, we are not referring to wholly distinct worlds, as if each species were enclosed in a bubble entirely disconnected from others. This monadic interpretation stems from an essentialist, i.e. non-evolutionary, legacy of species-specific perspective – one that fails to account for the fact that to be a certain kind of body is also to carry traits inherited from one's ancestors, particularly close ones, but also from more distant lineage. These traits, therefore, are not exclusively one's own but are shared with other species descending from the same progenitors.

Even if we consider only sensory organs, it becomes clear that, despite the differences between humans and dogs, we are capable of sharing many common experiences and reciprocally interpreting perceptual stimuli. We are both mammals, and despite our respective differences, we can encounter one another in shared subjective sensations – not necessarily the product of anthropomorphism.

In the 1980s, Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman introduced the concept of the semiosphere, designating the space in which different semiotic systems coexist and interact to generate new information (Lotman 1990). In this light, an evolutionary conception of *Umwelten* – characterised by shared traits and species-specific differences – reveals a condition of partial overlap among *Umwelten*, with a degree of overlapping proportional to phylogenetic proximity. One could thus speak of an interspecific semiosphere that allows different species to share zones of exchange. As Scheler argued, perspective on the external world is not determined solely by sensory organs but also by affective and cognitive aspects – for example, emotions and motivations experienced at a given time, or the type of mental processing at play. The world appears to us filled with dangers if we are in a state of emotional alertness; it may seem devoid of hope, cloaked in darkness, when we are gripped by sadness; or full of opportunities if joy fills our hearts. Similarly:

(i) if motivated by social drives such as affiliation or competition, our attention is focused on our peers;
(ii) if, conversely, we are engaged in exploration or gathering, we focus on the objects of the world;
(iii) if we are in an epimeletic disposition – where caregiving is the prevailing drive – we are filled with tenderness towards a young creature.

Cognitive aspects also significantly shape our perception of the world: prior knowledge gained through research images or predictive mechanisms provides vastly different panoramas from those seen by individuals lacking such representations. Innately, we also possess specific acquisitive predispositions: affordances, *Gestalt* patterns, prototypical stimuli, perceptual heuristics, a priori expectations, and correlation timing.

Moreover, there is not only a temporal scan linked to the sensitivity-refractoriness of sensory organs but also cognitive time – a subjective or lived temporality – that varies according to multiple factors such as cortisol biorhythm, adrenaline levels, dopaminergic fluctuations, metabolic activity, thyroid function, and immuno-cytokine responses. In essence, when discussing perception of the world, we must not refer solely to sensory organ diversity – important though it may be – but rather to an immersion in the world originating from multiple, converging factors.

Perspective becomes perspectival – i.e. a conception of the Self-in-the-world – when it reveals an existential dimension. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests in *L'Œil et l'Esprit* (1964), not only does the eye capture the image of the world, but the world also reflects its characteristics through it. We may affirm that an analogical relationship exists between different perceptual systems, insofar as they reflect certain shared aspects of reality. The analogical conception differs from analogism, as it does not rely on projection, but rather on the existence of evolutionary convergences rooted in common features of the real world. Returning to Scheler, we now examine the relationship between perception and movement, which can be considered the starting point for the formation of an archetypal Self (Scheler 1928). Animals are entities that arrange their movement, displacing a multi-part body through an environmental medium, aided in this peripatetic condition by sensory compasses.

It is clear that somatic movement requires adaptive sensory systems, since action necessarily alters the perceptual panorama. One must learn to distinguish changes in the environment resulting from the animal's own movement – i.e. from its actions upon the world – from those due

to external events, for we know that the environment is not a static backdrop, but a place in which things happen and conditions change. In practical terms, it involves differentiating between what occurs in the world and what the individual enacts in the world.

Accordingly, neural networks evolve to process incoming information, distinguishing:

1. sensitivity – what is happening "out there" in the world;
2. agentivity – what derives from the animal's own actions.

This explains why, when we move our eyes across various targets on the horizon, we do not perceive the world itself as moving. This is an elementary mechanism known as neurobiological reafference, a theory developed by Erich von Holst (1954), demonstrating that even in very simple animals – such as the nematode – a sense of Self emerges, owing to the fact that movement produces a clear distinction between the individual's protagonism and the world as background.

Perspective, then, is a form of being-in-the-world, or, to use Heidegger's term, a *Dasein*, for which every animal is prepared by its a priori conditions (Heidegger 1927). These operate transcendentally, not only providing pre-empirical capacities, but also enabling the elective development of experience itself. These a priori, as Konrad Lorenz suggests in *Behind the Mirror* (1978), are nothing other than inherited a posteriori from our phylogenetic lineage. It is the Austrian ethologist who further argues that experience is never merely exposure to the world, even through selective perception, but a construction – a process the animal actively undertakes, guided by the innate as its experiential mentor.

Thus, the sense of being "thrown" into the world, or of primordial alienation as articulated in Heideggerian philosophy, loses its grip – for every living being, upon birth, rediscovers the world rather than experiencing it for the first time. Within its mind reside, as dormant presences awakened anew, the memories of its ancestors, which confer upon it the perception of having already-been-there in the world.

But what world are we speaking of? In the concept of *Umwelt*, what stands out is its immersive nature – the importance of having a perspective on a world conceived as a given a priori, though declinable in perspectival terms by different species. Heidegger intuited this limitation when he noted that human beings are world-constructors, not merely inhabitants of a world in perspectival terms, but active agents in its transformation. His error lay in relegating non-human animals to their narrow immersive perspective, thus branding them as "poor in world", in contrast to humans.

Today we know that other species too construct their own worlds; they do not simply inhabit niches, but literally build them. This awareness has greatly enriched evolutionary theory. Once again, the inability to perceive clearly the existential dimension of animality stems from an anthropocentric bias – a genuine epistemological obstacle of which the human species must soon become aware. Let us then turn our attention to the anthropocentric constraint, beginning with the human point of view, as an entity necessarily endowed with a specific gaze upon the world.

## 3. Anthropocentric perspective

The first form of anthropocentrism is what we may call the anthropocentric perspective – a notion that refers to the human condition as the outcome of a specific phylogenetic trajectory, and in many respects, overlaps with the concept of *Umwelt*. It is a standpoint that derives from our belonging to the species Homo sapiens, a gaze shaped by our biological heritage that affords us a particular image of our being-in-the-world. As previously stated, every animal is immersed within a specific experiential panorama and interacts with external reality in ways determined by its own perceptual constitution. Our systems of immersion – bodily configuration, affective inclinations, and cognitive dispositions – project us into particular existential landscapes.

Our being-a-body modulates our existence according to a somatic register that defines us not only in sensory terms but as affective and temporal beings. Our animal condition connects us to our surroundings not in a neutral fashion, but according to a predetermined frame. We live within an existential perimeter that is not only species-specific but also rhythmically structured across the life course: childhood, adolescence, youth, adulthood, and old age, culminating in the end of our days.

To offer but one example: the hormonal evolution of the body reshapes our affective dispositions, the tonal quality of emotions, and the appetitive urgency of motivations. These inflections of the flesh configure our experience of the here and now in markedly different ways – evident when comparing the emotional life of childhood with that of adulthood, or the motivational impulse of adolescence with the resigned serenity of old age.

This ensemble of bodily traits and species membership – or more broadly, of a certain type of animality, as seen in contrasts between mam-

mals and birds – constitutes a standpoint upon the world, a *Dasein*, which is never fixed nor centred upon a secure fulcrum, but entrusts us to a metastable condition, akin to the sensation of navigating the open sea.

Naturally, this standpoint is not to be taken in a literal sense: it is not merely about how reality is seen or perceived, but about how the world is experienced. The experiential score arises from multiple factors – not exclusively those pertaining to the particularities of sensory organs, nor solely to the structure of body and mind or to the temporal segmentation through which a species organises diachronic flow. It also extends to lifestyle, environment, and the entities with which one engages. In a word, existence pertains to the individual's ecological dimension, their being embedded within a web of relationships – suggesting an extended existence, not solely confined within the perimeter, however metastable, of the organism and its identity.

It is natural to appropriate this existential space, just as we speak of having a body or possessing a biography. If extensivity is part of our being-in-the-world, the appropriative result reflects our specific difficulty in stepping beyond a conception of individuation in order to access an alternative intellectual dimension. What I mean is this: even within the framework of extended mind theories, the human being is unable to avoid an intensive conception of *Dasein*. The human is undoubtedly a plastic entity, but not fluid in the way trans-/post-humanist narratives propose – and this awareness must lie at the heart of any discussion that seeks to transcend or deny human nature.

Belonging to a particular existential dimension is not only a matter of self-awareness – recognising one's predispositions, idiosyncrasies, vulnerabilities, strengths, and weaknesses – but is also fundamental to understanding how humans relate to the external world and to alterity. It must be acknowledged at the outset that, even with all due care, and employing various tools such as digital technologies or artificial intelligence, we cannot entirely divest ourselves of our own perspective, just as we can never fully purge ourselves of egocentrism.

This does not mean, however, that the anthropocentric tendency cannot be mitigated – though it is naïve to imagine that it might be wholly abandoned in pursuit of a universal mode of immersion. Remaining entirely imprisoned within this perspective risks leading to two epistemological pitfalls:

- epistemic error: the mistaken use of our perceptual and cognitive systems as though they were universal instruments, rather than acknowledging their partiality;

- anthropomorphism: the attribution of human traits to non-human others, even if only in diluted or lesser form.

Both of these constitute anthropocentric biases that function as epistemological obstacles and generate interpretative distortions.

Let us begin with epistemic anthropocentrism, often referred to as naïve physics. It is not uncommon to hear it claimed that, as human beings, we are necessarily anthropocentric – that is, destined to position ourselves as the evaluative and perceptual centre of the world. Yet this is a mistake, and not a trivial one. Let us examine why.

It is self-evident that we cannot pose as neutral observers, as we are enmeshed in a specific species- bound dimension. However, rather than speaking generically of anthropocentrism – a term that encompasses a broader set of ideas – we ought more precisely to refer to our phylogenetic condition, which unavoidably places us within a particular perspective. Our perception and interpretation of the world follow predetermined a priori coordinates inherited from our forebears.

Nonetheless, while we cannot ignore this starting point, it is equally mistaken to treat it as an uncorrectable limitation. Just as a child evolves from an egocentric cognitive state into an empathic understanding of others, so too can the human expand its epistemic horizon. The anthropocentric perspective is a starting point – and in some sense, it defines our range of possibilities – but it is not an immutable condition. As interpersonal relationships help dissolve egocentric viewpoints, so too can the human mitigate its projective tendencies.

In this regard, technoscience has played an essential corrective role by revealing the fallacies of intuitive interpretation. Consider the Copernican model, which unsettled geocentric intuitionism (Kuhn 1957), or Darwinian evolutionary theory (Darwin 1859), which dismantled the essentialist and fixist conception of living beings. Einsteinian relativity and quantum mechanics likewise reveal an image of the cosmos that contradicts our everyday experience (Einstein 1920). Science, by its very nature, is counterintuitive: if phenomena were easily accessible to intuition, scientists would be superfluous. The a priori through which we view the world – being phylogenetically inherited a posteriori – do not confer universal validity, but only domain-specific applicability.

Ethology too has widened our horizons by unveiling other existential perspectives that involve alternative modes of perception and cognition – transforming encounters with heterospecifics into revelations of other immersive worlds. Nor should we forget how the digital revolution has enabled the development of computational systems capable of highlight-

ing numerous interpretative biases rooted in human intuition – exposing the contingent and adaptive condition of our epistemic faculties.

In my view, the inevitability of anthropocentric perspective can be sustained only by ignoring the fact that we already occupy a somewhat eccentric position relative to our phylogenetic coordinates. Contemporary human thought, in certain respects, still bears the imprint of our species' lineage – but in others, it has already developed a broader epistemological perspective. The key lies in identifying the boundaries imposed by our natural heritage, for it is reasonable to assume that our cognitive apparatus still entails constraints. When we speak of decentring, we do not mean a limitless potentiality, but rather a flexibility within bounds.

It is evident that human history has cultivated a perspective no longer confined to its origins – demonstrating an ability to treat the anthropocentric viewpoint as an elastic membrane, capable of extension toward new epistemological dimensions. Thus, while it is logical to admit that decentring has its limits, it is equally undeniable that we can go beyond our phylogenetic perspective – because we already have. This anthrodecentring – the true trajectory of cultural evolution – has, in fact, been underway for millennia, accelerating in tandem with scientific and technological development.

Therefore, even if we cannot entirely renounce our species-bound perspective, we can undertake redirections of openness, acknowledging its specific validity and expanding our epistemic horizon – as illustrated by scientific counter-intuitionism and the cognitive sciences' exposure of the partiality of human thought and reasoning. If we conceive of the human being as the result of adaptive specialization – manifested in our anatomy and physiology – then we must likewise speak of cognitive specialisation. Just as there are multiple perceptual worlds in the animal kingdom, so too must we regard the human intellect not as universal, but as one particular modality of interpreting the world. Hence, this perspective is a kind of species-based egocentrism which, while perhaps never fully surmountable, can be mitigated through empathic exercises that involve both cognitive and affective dimensions.

Let us now turn to the tendency towards anthropomorphisation, and more generally, to the projective stance – both of which are consequences of an auto-referential perspective.

Anthropomorphism is often seen as the opposite of anthropocentrism, since the human attitude toward animal otherness appears to be one of affinity rather than separation. Yet this is merely apparent: uncritical anthropomorphism is itself a form of anthropocentrism – specifically,

projective anthropocentrism, in which the human standpoint is extended to other species by analogy.

There are several forms of anthropomorphism:

- animistic anthropomorphism, which attributes human-like intentionality to natural phenomena;
- a-specific anthropomorphism, which ignores species-specific differences and projects a human perspective onto all others;
- epistemic anthropomorphism, which assumes that analogism is the only way to interpret otherness;
- affiliative anthropomorphism, commonly employed in relationships with companion animals;
- critical anthropomorphism, which, though grounded in a continuist view and thus using projection, submits such projection to scrutiny – functioning as a kind of precautionary principle in ethology.

Of these, only the critical form can be retained – at least partially – provided it is used with care, especially in relation to phylogenetic proximity, and serves to enhance our understanding of the psychological conditions and behavioural expressions of other species.

However, I believe that understanding the condition of other species is better served through three more rigorous investigative tools:

- analysis of homologous traits, which reveals the level of comparability between species based on shared ancestry;
- analogical evaluation (not to be confused with projective analogism), which identifies common traits that arise from similar selective pressures;
- animal metapredicates, which examines how foundational characters of animality – such as sensitivity, emotion, and desire – are manifested in species-specific ways.

I remain sceptical of anthropomorphism because:

- it maintains the human as the model to which other species are compared, rendering them *minus habentes* – perpetually inferior and orbiting a human norm;
- it treats differences as quantitative rather than recognising the qualitative specialisation of adaptive evolution;
- it fails to acknowledge traits in which other species might surpass or differ radically from humans, instead flattening such traits to human likeness.

## 4. What is it like to be a bat?

To understand the principle of estrangement commonly attributed to animal otherness, let us consider the well-known essay *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*, originally published by Thomas Nagel in 1974. In this work, Nagel does not question whether a bat can have thoughts, a mind, or experiences – in other words, a perspective on the world – but rather whether we, as human beings, can comprehend that perspective. From the outset, Nagel describes the bat as a fundamentally alien form of life, and not by chance does he later equate it with a Martian or a robot – overlooking the fact that, as a mammal, the bat shares with humans a considerable range of psychological traits, particularly of an emotional kind.

Nagel's most significant error lies in his proposing a relation of identity between perception and experience, suggesting that the presence of echolocation necessarily leads to a radically different world-experience. Yet world-experience is not reducible tout court to sensory modalities. Such a reduction would imply that a blind or deaf individual has a perspective wholly incommensurable with my own – an implication refuted by numerous findings in neurophysiology.

In *Picturing the Mind* (2022) Simona Ginsburg and Eva Jablonka report on the case of Daniel Kish, a man who lost his sight due to retinoblastoma and who nonetheless now rides a mountain bike, plays basketball, and readily locates golf balls on the field. How is this possible? He emits clicking sounds and extracts environmental information from the returning echoes –much like bats do.

According to Ginsburg and Jablonka, researchers working with Kish and another echolocator have demonstrated that, upon receiving the returning signal and reporting what they perceive, the visual cortex is activated, just as in a person navigating the world via sight.

However, the most problematic aspect of Nagel's argument lies in his claim that subjective experience cannot be rendered interpretable in any objective form. Unsurprisingly, he concludes that the only way to imagine the subjective condition of being a bat is through analogism, i.e., via projective thought. This leads Nagel to the further conclusion that such attributions of experience are possible only between human beings.

I have already criticised the unreliability of analogism, and it is precisely here that Nagel's position is weakest: the claim that animal otherness is either a matter for objective description, or – if we wish to shed light on what-it-is-like – can only be approached through analogism. The subjective character of experience is not in question, nor is the undeni-

able partiality of understanding another's point of view – an issue that concerns not only bats, but also fellow human beings, particularly where profound differences of life history are present. This is the perennial problem of empathy, which – although it has natural precursors in neurophysiological mechanisms – nonetheless demands a decentring effort.

Nagel's concern, then, does not lie in our ability to know the ethological traits of bats, but in the impossibility of translating a subjective perspective into an objective report – and on this point I agree. Where I disagree is in the claim that analogism is the only viable means of access – a methodological postulate that inevitably places the bat on equal footing with the Martian. Yet, while the Martian is truly alien, the bat is only partially different from us. The appropriate approach, therefore, is not analogical but homological, rooted in the premises of evolutionary theory and comparative anatomy, which show substantial zones of continuity between the two species.

The existence of shared traits does not render the bat's perspective wholly objective; rather, it makes it participatory – I can partake in the bat's fear, not because it behaves in a certain way, but because we share a similar emotional response to environmental stimuli.

Let us return, then, to our example, which can be generalised to the broader issue of imagining the existential condition of another species. Of course, one cannot fully grasp what it is like to be a bat, but one can form a reasonably accurate approximation. Other species are not alien to us, but rather carriers of degrees of difference. Any given species exhibits a blend of similarities and differences relative to the human, proportional to phylogenetic proximity and the degree of overlap in lifestyle and environment. In other words, species-specific *Umwelten* are not disjointed monads but present substantial overlaps – namely, hereditary commonalities (homologies) and adaptive convergences (analogies) – which aid us in comprehending much of another species' dispositions.

We possess, in effect, shared foundations – an ontological Rosetta Stone – that allow for an empathetic approach toward other species, particularly since animal existence is marked by universal metapredicates – sensitivity, pleasure, food-seeking, impulses, and motivations – from which the specific variations of species can be meaningfully explored. Moreover, in the case of the bat, we are dealing with a mammal whose neurobiological system is nearly identical to our own, despite the uniqueness of its perceptual mechanisms.

After all, the task of an ethologist consists precisely in this effort: to grasp what it is like to be a bat – in other words, to map the perceptual,

emotional, motivational, and cognitive conditions of a subject belonging to another species. This does not imply epistemic certainty, but there now exists a substantial array of methods that enable us to investigate an animal's psychological states, including:

- specific behavioural tests (e.g. false belief, preference, differential reactivity, violation of expectation);
- analysis of the effects of neuromodulation (e.g. changes following oxytocin administration);
- neural imaging techniques (e.g. fMRI to track brain region activation during specific behaviours);
- ethogram-based observational schemes, detailing how a species undertakes functional cycles such as foraging and reproduction;
- problem-solving tasks, which reveal how an animal addresses novel challenges.

Even if, at first glance, a bat may appear to be an utterly alien entity, this does not mean that it is so. Rather, it means that understanding a bat requires an approach rooted in homology, not analogism.

Nagel's assertion of estrangement risks a further problem: the implication that, since we cannot know what it is like to be a bat, any discourse about its potential moral status becomes void, that is, ethically irrelevant. While Nagel himself did not make such a claim, many have leveraged this argument to question whether moral consideration ought to extend to non-human species. Moreover, this stance forecloses any possibility of shared ground between humans and other species. It is, in fact, a far more regressive attitude than it first appears. It suggests that any affirmation regarding animal otherness is merely a projection – an anthropomorphism resting on the tenuous foundation of analogy – and, second, it posits an unbridgeable rupture between the human and all other life forms, effectively condemning the human to ontological solipsism.

This sense of human solitude – already latent in the roots of Western culture – does not help us to grasp the intimate co-substantiality of the human within the biosphere, nor the shared sentience and, most importantly, the common fate we hold with other species. Humanity often presumes the existence of a metaphorical lifeboat, believing that whatever world it comes to inhabit, it will remain fundamentally the same. It is from this conceit that some of humanity's most destructive inclinations emerge – those that lead to indifference toward the biosphere, and even to devaluation or hostility toward the non-human.

In avoiding the old dualism between a mechanistic and an anthropomorphic view of animals, I have sought instead to foreground the

principle of difference. But this emphasis on diversity does not entail that other species ought to be regarded as alien, toward whom all existential hypotheses must be suspended. The reason is straightforward: the evolution of life is based on common descent, and thus species exhibit wide overlaps of predicates – that is, numerous shared traits. Understanding another species' perspective does not require an anthropomorphic approach; instead, we can rely on the significant continuities between species: shared traits by common descent (homologies) and by adaptive convergence (analogies).

Alongside these, of course, lie important differences, which must not be neglected nor effaced through excessive identification. Yet these differences can be understood through common existential necessities – such as the need for nourishment – variously expressed according to the species' lifestyle.

When we assume, as Nagel does, that the non-human other is fundamentally unknowable, we are not merely affirming its difference but denying that it can ever truly intersect with us – that it can be, for us, an alterity. But to claim that recognition must be grounded in identical perceptual experience is to appeal to an objective criterion in order to establish a subjective difference – thus allowing back in through the window what one tried to expel through the door.

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