

Animals in Mythologies and Religions, Humans, Gods and human-centeredness ... and three questions we asked Kim Socha about secularity and Animal Rights.

We ourselves are an AR-project that has a strong interest in the subject of ‘animals in mythology’ (from a relatively non-anthropocentric angle) as an *expression* of how humans have related to nonhuman animals socially and emotionally in the past.

Inasmuch as we find interest in that subject, we are confronted with the aspects of the human-centeredness of mythological traditions and how they blended over, in traces, into religious scriptures (i.e. the ‘Whore of Babylon riding the seven-headed Beast’ (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whore_of_Babylon); God’s preference of a dead animal, an animal sacrifice, to the offering of a plant-based sacrifice in the bible’s story of Cain and Abel; the Devil, being depicted as half ‘man’ half ‘beast’) and maintained and morphed in popular folklore (fables, fairy tales, dragons and unicorns).

Now since, following this interest in mythology, we are trying to discern between a positive relation and reflection on nonhumans animals (as how they *can* be depicted in mythology), on one hand, and on the other hand separating between dangerously possessive outlooks on “the animal” by cultures and civilizations, we are well aware of the importance of taking a secular perspective on “animals in mythology”, since one problem prevails in all religious scriptures that we know about: they all put ‘the human’ above nonhuman animals. And we do find that this attitude of a generalized identity of ‘human superiority’ in religions, poses a deep rooted problem in the ethical discourse when secularist and religious outlooks meet.

We thus were extremely glad to find an author who addresses the question of secularity and Animal Liberation:

Kim Socha, a professor for English and an Animal Liberation activist, publishes her new book entitled: ‘Animal Liberation and Atheism: Dismantling the Procrustean Bed’ this October (<http://freethoughthouse.com/animal-liberation-and-atheism.html>). So we asked Kim three questions pertaining to the subject of ‘secularity as part of an Animal Rights approach’ that seemed most pressing for us, and we are looking forward to reading her book this Fall!!!

Q: Religions typically base that what you could call their “positive” relationship to nonhuman animals, on mercy (and taking care for the nonhuman animal’s “welfare”), and not on rights. We find attitudes similar enough in some secular philosophies, namely that a human only has indirect duties towards nonhuman animals, so that the animal basically depends on the “mercy” of a human/humans. How can an atheist Animal Liberation approach make sure that nonhuman animals are acknowledged in their own rights, and that their rights are proper, and not based on our mercy?

Kim Socha: “There is a common presumption that once one adopts a secular view of life (atheist, agnostic, humanist), he or she has also given up systems of thinking imbued in religious discourse. I don’t believe this is necessarily true. In my upcoming book *Animal Liberation and Atheism: Dismantling the Procrustean Bed* (Freethought House, October 7, 2014), I use a passage from philosopher Michel Onfray’s *Atheist Manifesto* to explain what I mean: “Secular thought is not de-Christianized thought, but immanent Christian thought. Couched in rational language, it nevertheless preserves the quintessence of the Judeo-Christian ethic.” In other words, just because one has given up the concept of Christ does not

mean that person cannot and does not still think like a Christian in hierarchical, anthropocentric, and speciesist ways. (I do address other religious traditions in the book, but for the sake of brevity, I will focus on Western Christianity in this interview.) Thus, I don't find it surprising that secular philosophers have also adopted oppressive views of other species, for those writing from that perspective have been raised in cultures saturated with religious thought, even if brought up in atheist environments. Atheist animal liberationists, therefore, must challenge others in their freethought communities to see the ways they have adopted religious views of lived reality, especially in terms of nonhuman animals. For example, while one cannot depict all atheists in broad strokes, the atheists I know support gay marriage because sanctions against it are based in religious ideologies; however, I find a lack of awareness amongst freethinkers about the ways religion has determined their views of other species. But as atheism takes away the idea that humans are special in some sort of divine way (i.e. they have souls), I think it opens a door for leveling hierarchy and destroying the myth of human supremacy. Humans are not, it turns out, as special as we've been led to believe—special meaning we have been chosen by a divine creator to escape mortality and live in paradise, assuming we take part in the correct rituals and worship the proper creators. We are animals, and my hope is that by acknowledging ourselves as such, we will consider the lives of other animals with more compassion and sensitivity. They too want to enjoy life, avoid death, and flourish until the inevitable end all beings must face.”

Q: In the history of the natural sciences, nature (i.e. the world) and its nonhuman animal inhabitants have been classified as lower than ‘the human’, and thus as being existent for human use. We see such attitudes expressed in the work of scientists starting from a Galen (<http://www.dyingtolearn.org/animalUseHistory.html> in antiquity) to a Descartes, and even later in the Linnaean (taxonomical) classification model which put the human as the “sapiens”, the “knowing”, on top of all animals. How much have these outlooks on nonhuman animals been driven or influenced by religious dogma and mythological traditions?

Kim Socha: “I believe there is a false dichotomy at play in Western culture, or at least in the United States, which poses science and religion at opposite ends of the knowledge spectrum. In contrast, science and religion often work harmoniously, even when they appear at odds, for they privilege human conceptions of “knowing.” To wit, only humans can “know” god, and humans are obliged to use their “superior” intellect to advance the cause of humanity even if that means using other species in research. (And, of course, we cannot forget that humans deemed less intelligent have historically been used in research and experimentation as well.) As such, the natural sciences have seen human intelligence as either the only type of intelligence of any worth or as the highest level of intelligence—at least high enough to justify the use of other species in the sciences. However, if one were to take the time to understand how other species understand the world (i.e. honey bees), they would be hard-pressed to deny nonhuman intelligence. And to be honest, I could care less if pigs are intelligent, even though they are. What matters to me is that they are suffering physically and psychologically by the billions simply because humans like the taste of their flesh. The worst example of devaluing nonhuman intelligence is Rene Descartes’ depicting nonhumans as “mere automata.”

No matter the religious perspective of history’s natural scientists, I would argue that “religious dogma and mythological traditions” have absolutely influenced the scientific community. Indeed, that is one area where science and religion meld: on the idea that Homo sapiens are superior to other species. This is true in almost all dominant religions, from the Abrahamic traditions to Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Jainism. Perhaps one could

argue it is the nature of animals, including humans, to value their species over others, thus making it “natural” to use nonhumans to advance human development. Yes, some species prey upon others for survival, but that is not the whole story with *Homo sapiens*. We have distorted the “circle of life” philosophy beyond recognition by basing our economies and nearly every cultural institution on the exploitation of other animal species. In that process, we have destroyed natural habitats, caused changes in climate cycles, and ensured the extinction of other species. In a sense, I see humans as a “natural disaster,” but I don’t mean to be completely pessimistic here, for there are many who fight against the dominant discourse and challenge others to interrogate their cultural dispensations so we can acknowledge, and perhaps undo, the damage we have caused as a species.”

Q: Can atheism become the inevitable driving force in the Animal Liberation movement (and have an educating and empowering effect!) in a world that is nevertheless battling with its religious inheritances?

Kim Socha: “I have faith, in the most secular sense of the word, that there is promise in an atheist animal liberation movement. Indeed, there is much evidence to support the idea that most animal advocates are freethinkers (something I address in my book as well), even though many do not inherently connect their atheism/agnosticism/humanism to their perspectives on nonhumans. I think that connection needs to be made more frequently and deliberately. Indeed, that is the premise of my book, as is the need for secularists to recognize the truth in Onfray’s observation that “[s]ecular thought is not de-Christianized thought.” I am not completely insensitive to those whose religious traditions are important to them, both culturally and spiritually, nor am I ignorant of the roles religions have played in various social justice movements. However, to get to my book’s subtitle—“Dismantling the Procrustean Bed”—I find that using religion to justify one’s opposition to oppression is not necessary. Our guttural reactions to a human suffering from starvation or a fox urgently attempting escape from a leghold trap is enough to let us know we should act for that being in need. Why do we need an almighty overseer to underpin our responses to cruelty and distress? Why do we need the promise of eternal salvation as reason to take action against subjugating cultural practices? These questions are especially apt when considering that so often the “almighty overseers” with which we are familiar value human life over that of other species. Life can still have meaning, and possibly more meaning if you give up the idea of immortality, without belief in the supernatural. There is still a distrust (and again, this may be more prevalent in the United States) of the godless amongst the general population, even though study after study has proven that areligious individuals are not any more immoral, unethical, or hedonistic than the religious; in fact, sociological studies have proven more radical activism and sensitivity toward the oppressed amongst freethinkers. I think this is because we believe in only one life, and we don’t feel the need to do good deeds to assure our spot in a celestial realm. We don’t want to suffer, and our acceptance of ourselves as animals attempting to survive in this world we are born into opens the door to seeing other species in the same way. As such, we can see our connections to other animals and make our brief time on Earth meaningful by making the world better for others, as opposed to climbing our way to heaven for personal gain.”

Q: Thank you for this interview Kim!