

The Fox and the Wolf

Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother proved deadly for the wolf, the fairytale having totally destroyed the reputation of this intriguing animal. Yet the wolf gave us the dog. Wolves probably partly self-domesticated over time by joining itinerant groups of people, initially cautiously and from a great distance. Though these days far more people are killed by dogs than by wolves, the dog is nevertheless seen as man's friend and the wolf isn't.

Then there's the fox which has been shown little more clemency than the wolf. As Reynard he was portrayed as a trickster, a villainous, ruthless creature that manipulated and violated. Even in the Middle Ages he was generally seen as a creature that 'stole' chickens, because it did not and does not enter the heads of the non-ecologically-minded that a chicken is common-or-garden prey for a fox, just as a mouse or rabbit is.

Humans were ruthless to beasts of prey that invaded 'their' space. Our landscape has become more predator-friendly as man has increasingly encroached upon nature. In prehistory some wolves followed small groups of human beings so as to take advantage of offal and other waste that was left behind, but later on the wolf inevitably found itself in the vicinity of human settlements. It no longer had the choice. And that was its downfall.

Hence the irony of the fact that the fox is now encroaching upon our cities. In Brussels there is an old lady who boils eggs and bakes cakes every day for the foxes in her garden. The animals come right up to her sitting room. Go there in the evening and with a little luck you will see a fox running along under a streetlamp with a piece of cake in its mouth. The neighbours are less than enthusiastic about the old lady who regards the foxes as the children she never had, and as natural replacements for the dogs she used to have. She treats the foxes like children, she has given them names, she talks to them, and she talks non-stop about her darling pets, each of which has its own distinctive character.

Of course individual animals have their idiosyncrasies, their personality. There are brazen foxes, but there are also timid foxes. There are assertive wolves, but also introvert ones. There are instigators and hangers on, sprinters and strollers, ringleaders and wallflowers. But there are no foxes or wolves that target people because they get in their way or disturb their peace of mind. Foxes and wolves don't kill or violate, they don't scheme or manipulate, they don't steal or threaten – these are human characteristics. But neither are they friendly or considerate to other animals, even though sometimes they could do with this.

It is incredibly difficult to demonstrate the existence of a deeper sense in animal species other than man. When you see how hard chimpanzees are on each other, it is difficult to see it as even a mild form of what we call civilization. Bonobos are gentler, more tolerant, but in the bonobo world the females have the final say – and that makes quite a difference in terms of harshness. Occasionally we hear reports of animals like elephants and dolphins showing 'human' behaviours, such as deep

friendship or intense mourning, but how is it possible for a human being to comprehend this, how can we gauge how fundamental those feelings are if we cannot ask?

That does not stop scientists trying. They describe experiments which claim to demonstrate empathy and honesty and trust in chickens, rats, jays and apes. They have shown that a rat in captivity will ignore a piece of chocolate to free an imprisoned fellow rat, and that a bonobo in a zoo keeps a banana for a victimized fellow cage bird. In such cases empathy does sound highly convincing. But the majority of the scientists do not explore human values in animals in any depth. Usually it is possible to find more prosaic explanations for the findings, such as saving a family member or helping an animal the group needs, rather than evaluating and responding to emotions.

The scientific basis for the existence of human values in animals was dealt a severe blow when a world authority on research into animal ingenuity was fired by his American university (the illustrious Harvard) in 2011 because of fraud, namely for inventing and faking research findings, including an experiment which showed that tamarin monkeys recognize themselves in a mirror – self-awareness being seen as crucial to the development of higher values. It is interesting that human deceit played a part in the scientific search for superior values in animals!

There is no point in making animals half human – neither is it necessary, for they are fascinating enough as animals. Why is it so difficult to see animals as unfeeling, amoral or void of reason? Out of jealousy perhaps, because we have made it so difficult for ourselves by regularly having to ask if we are doing the right thing, if we are not violating the rules, where the limits lie when it comes to breaking legal and social customs, while animals just do their own thing, driven by instinct and unhindered by moral and other complicated concerns.

Humanizing animals to learn more about our own kind is of course a different story, a satire, a lesson for life in verse or other narrative form. There is not much human in an animal, but there is quite a lot of the animal in a human. Unfortunately, the facts show that our civilization is frequently no more than a thin layer of varnish that quickly cracks and peels if circumstances go against it. That is what you see happen when you get caught up in a civil war and certainly in genocide: human instincts come to the fore.

Man behaves like an animal, like a pig, we say, but that detracts from what makes a pig a pig, because a pig does not deliberately kill or violate or engage in battle, a pig does what a pig is supposed to do, without ethical and philosophical speculation being attached to it. A pig will never stoop so low as a torturous or murderous human being. Barbarians, that is the only allegory that can be used for evil people, subhumans who reject all the values man holds dear and go their own way unchecked.

Man has also behaved like a barbarian with respect to many species other than his own. Of the animals Reynard encountered in his time many have disappeared from

our region, such as the wolf, the bear and the wildcat. But as a moral species, we have insight and common sense, and fortunately that occasionally manifests itself in time. People are now making an effort, and even take risks to save vulnerable animals. Animals that were once reviled, are now cherished. People have started to love animals, and not only their pets.

More and more of us are happy to see magnificent foxes return to their original surroundings – a sign that nature is improving. The wildcat is making a comeback, and even the wolf, because protective measures result in growing populations elsewhere in Europe. In the few large areas of natural beauty left in Flanders there is certainly room for a small family of wolves. Then these elegant animals will be able to count on our understanding for the first time in living memory and on a warm welcome. It could be the beginning of a new fairytale.

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