Toward a Negative Zoology: Not-Knowing for a Post-Anthropocene Future

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In *The Message of the Qur'an*, an influential English translation of and commentary on the Quran, Muhammad Asad discusses the *jinn*. Citing classical Arab philologists, he explains that the term *jinn* signifies beings that are "'concealed from [man's] senses," i.e., things, beings, or forces which cannot normally be perceived by man but have, nevertheless, an objective reality … of their own.'[1] He writes:

> We know, of course, very little as to what can and what cannot play the role of a living organism; moreover, our inability to discern and observe such phenomena is by no means a sufficient justification for a denial of their existence. The Qur'an often refers to 'the realm which is beyond the reach of human perception' (al-ghayb), while God is frequently spoken of as 'the Sustainer of all the worlds' (rab al-alamin): and the use of the plural clearly indicates that side by side with the 'world' open to our observation there are other 'worlds' as well – and, therefore, other forms of life, different from ours and presumably from one another, and yet subtly interacting and perhaps even permeating one another in a manner beyond our ken. And if we assume, as we must, that there are living organisms whose biological premises are entirely different from our own, it is only logical to assume that our physical senses can establish contact with them only under very exceptional circumstances: hence the description of them as invisible beings.[2]

Asad's exposition is remarkable in multiple ways. First, he notes that one of the terms for God – *rab al-alamin*, with *alamin* in the plural rather than the singular *alm* – signals the existence of many worlds, not just the one we humans know. Second, by marking this plurality of worlds, he underscores the possibility of 'forms of life' in these worlds of which we likewise have no perceptual knowledge. 'We know, of course, very little' about what even constitutes life, he writes, but this does not mean those life-forms do not exist. He also raises the possibility that these life-forms may be interacting with one another in ways beyond our awareness. Finally,

1 Asad 2022, 1321.

2 Asad 2022, 1324.

by emphasizing humans' perceptual incapacities and our limited knowledge *as* humans in accessing the cosmos and its many worlds, he defines the human as an onto-epistemological limit: our inability to know (our epistemological threshold) is the effect of our bodies, our bio-physical makeup (or ontology) as homo sapiens.

Asad's comments are focused on humans' relationship to jinn, but they beg the question as to the perceptual capacities of nonhuman animals (like dogs and cats) and their possible interactions with nonhuman nonanimal forms of life (like jinn). Put simply, might animals' very different bodies enable them to sense, to perceive, to know, to be in relation, and therefore to take care of and be taken care of by forms of life in ways imperceptible to humans? Given my perceptual limitations as a human, I cannot know for sure, as Asad contends. I take that impossibility of *ever knowing for sure* as the starting point for what I call a negative zoology, an approach that radically unsettles a (secular) fantasy of human mastery by embracing the human as an onto-epistemological limit. In so doing, I am thinking with others in this volume about how we can live fully in common, how we can world worlds of multispecies care and kinship, without necessarily taking as a given the secularity of those worlds.

The Golden Snail Opera is a multispecies ethnography-as-choreography. Through text and film, it depicts enactments of 'living in common' by various creatures, human and nonhuman, in the changing ecology of a rice field in Yilan, in northeast Taiwan.[3] The film documents the perspectives of underwater snails chewing on rice stalks, of a dog running through the rice fields, and of various humans planting and harvesting rice, burning paper money as offerings to ancestor-spirits, and discussing the science of rice cultivation. The text, which is meant to be read or performed alongside the film, features three speaking characters: the Farmer, who has taken up farming practices that are friendly to other species; the Pedant, who explains the story in social-scientific terms; and the Wanderer, 'a roaming ghost' whose living life was ended by American bombs during World War II. 'No one noticed me', the ghost says, until 'I tossed the civet cat in front of a car; I swerved that truck into your motorcycle.'[4] When the piece is performed on stage, the Wanderer intrudes upon the humans, standing in front of them or nudging them, but the Pedant sees and hears nothing, and the Farmer only feels the roaming ghost's presence as cold air on the back of her neck. The film does not offer the ghost's perspective, nor take up the ghost's story in its multispecies narrative.[5]

3 Tsai et al., 2016, 521.

4 Tsai et al., 2016, 524.

5 Permalink <https://vimeo.com/188367219>.

Fig. 1: Still photo from The Golden Snail Opera by Yen-Ling Tsai, Isabelle Carbonell, Joelle Chevrier, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing.

There is a moment in the film, however, when the dog, with a camera mounted on his back to give us the view from his perspective, suddenly pauses mid-gambol and looks intently toward something or someone in the rice field. There is nothing significant to be seen, as far as human eyes can tell. But, given the presence of the Wanderer in this multispecies ecology, one has to wonder whether the dog is looking at the roaming ghost, whether, unlike the humans, the dog notices her as more than her effect in a series of unfortunate accidents, whether he senses her as more than cold air on the back of his neck, whether together they form a multispecies relation, even a multispecies community, hidden – because imperceptible – to humans.

Dogs, after all, have sensory capacities that far outpace our human ones.[6] They hear at frequencies much higher than humans. They have a set of specialized hairs called *vibrissae* – whiskers – which help dogs feel their way through the world without having to make physical contact with an object or surface to know it is there.[7] Dogs' visual physiology means that they see better than humans in low-light situations, though they are less able to focus on details directly in front of them. Dogs have a higher flicker-fusion rate, the rate at which cells process intermittent frames of light to produce a continuous picture, which means they visually notice a bit more of the world every second than we do; one could say that space-time moves more slowly for them. Dogs' capacity to smell vastly exceeds that of humans, since they have more genes committed to coding olfactory cells, more olfactory cells, and more

6 See Coren 2005 and Horowitz 2010.

7 Coren 2005, 95.

kinds of olfactory cells than humans do. Mammalian internal nose tissue has receptor sites through which we all smell. Human noses have about six million of these receptor sites; a beagle's nose has more than 300 million, a sheepdog's more than 200 million. Moreover, because their olfactory window is larger than our visual one, dogs parcel up time differently: they smell the traces of what has disappeared for us but still lingers for the dog, and the traces too, of what is, for us, yet to materialize. Dogs seem able to predict earthquakes and avalanches and, more mundanely, oncoming storms, though scientists know little about how they do this. As it turns out, dogs are also magneto-sensitive; again, scientists don't know which sensory mechanism is responsible for magnetoreception, though they do know it's not one of the five '"traditional" senses'.[8]

That humans, animals, plants, gods, jinn, spirits, and other nonhuman creatures live together in multispecies ecologies is, of course, common knowledge in many non-Western traditions. In Yilan, Taiwan, the setting for The *Golden Snail Opera*, farmers, fauna, flora, and nonliving beings collaborate in a wet-rice ecology. The nonliving beings are those who have no descendants to care for them after death and, unmoored from kinship ties, they take up residence in a paddy field.[9] Tending a plot of land means tending to the ghosts there, who in return help the farmers to tend the land. Yen-Ling Tsai writes that 'a famer is expected to take care of … the paddy field in its entirety', that is, the ghosts, the snails, the rice stalks, the dogs, and so on, 'all paddy beings, both material and formless'.[10]

In the Indian Himalayas, humans, animals, and powerful local deities (*devis* and *devatas*) are similarly bound together in webs of reciprocal relations. In these multispecies landscapes, both humans and animals are devotees (*bhakts*) of the gods. Radhika Govindrajan writes of *pahari* goats in the Kumaon region of the central Himalayas – *pahari* literally means 'of the mountain' – who are 'related to *pahari* people by virtue of their shared subjection and relatedness' to the particular local mountain deities governing the landscape and its various inhabitants.[11] Leopards, too, are *bhakts* of a local deity, Golu *devta*, and Govindrajan tells the story of man-eating leopards that have attacked and killed several villagers. In a spirit ceremony at a temple dedicated to the *devta*, the god speaks through a medium to tell the villagers that the leopards are the result of the humans 'having forsaken their deities in pursuit of greed' by selling and clearing the fields near the forest, once home to his temple. According to Mohan Joshi, an interlocutor of Govindrajan's, 'Humans, animals, and deities have responsibilities toward one another. We have forgotten our responsibilities toward our gods. That's why killing one leopard after another will not do any

8 Martini et al., 2018.

9 Tsai 2019, S349.

10 Tsai 2019, S352.

11 Govindrajan 2018, 10.

good … Leopards are also devotees [*bhakts*]. They are fulfilling their obligations to the gods.'[12]

Despite the anthropocentrism that has come to dominate major traditions of Islamic thinking and practice, the Quran, too, references a multispecies cosmos of humans and various nonhuman beings – jinn, angels, animals, plants, rocks, planets, etc. – and it attributes to nonhumans, including animals, an innate capacity to be in relation with God. Interestingly, the nature of that relation hinges on animals' biophysical structure, what the Ikhwan al-Safa (or Brethren of Purity), a group of tenth-century Muslim philosophers, called the animal 'form' and 'frame'.[13] The Ikhwan authored a 52-volume encyclopedia on the mathematical, natural, and psychological sciences that included an epistle (the longest) called *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn*, in which animals contest the human claim to mastery over them in the court of the jinn. The Ikhwan, ventriloquizing the animals, spend a great deal of time on animals' distinct physical form and sensory capacities. The epistle's fourth chapter ('On the Acute Sense of the Animals') holds that there are many animals with 'finer senses and sharper discrimination' than humans, such as the camel, 'who finds his footing on the most punishing and treacherous pathways in the dark of night', or ewes, who can birth multiple lambs in one night, or those lambs, who each finds its way to its dam 'without any doubt by the mother or confusion by the young', in contrast to humans for whom 'a month or two or more must pass before they can distinguish their own mother from their sister'.[14] Other chapters go into great detail about the physical form of various creatures, like the long tusks and great bulk of the elephant, or the delicate wings and tiny proboscis of the gnat. Ya'sub, leader of the bees, carefully outlines the 'intricate and ingenious body' and 'wondrous form' of his species,[15] which enable them to 'build dwellings more aptly and skillfully than your [i.e. humans'] artisans, better and more ingeniously than your builders and architects'.[16] And different animals rely on different senses for their well-being: 'Some, like hawks and eagles, rely on their keen vision and powerful flight. Others, like ants, dung-beetles, and scarabs, have a powerful sense of smell. Others are led to their needs by their sense of hearing, as are the vultures. And some are guided by their sense of taste, as are fish and other aquatic animals.'[17] In arguing their case, the animals also insist that, although their 'every movement is worship and praise' of God, humans do not understand much of what animals do or say. At one point, the nightingale exclaims: 'We praise, sanctify, celebrate, and exalt [God],

12 Govindrajan 2015, 33–34.
13 Goodman and McGregor 2009.
14 Goodman and McGregor 2009, 113–114.
15 Goodman and McGregor 2009, 234.
16 Goodman and McGregor 2009, 275.
17 Goodman and McGregor 2009, 193.

morning and evening – although these humans do not comprehend our songs of praise.'[18] Earlier in the trial, the parrot had made a similar point:

> '*if you could follow the discourse of the birds*, the anthems of the swarming creatures, the hymns of the crawling creatures, the hosannas of the beasts, the meditative murmur of the cricket, entreaty of the frog, admonitions of the bulbul, homilies of the larks, the sandgrouse's lauds and the cranes' celebration, the cock's call to worship, the poetry doves utter in their cooing and the soothsaying ravens in their croaking … you would realize that among these throngs are orators and eloquent speakers, theologians, preachers, admonishers, and diviners, just as there are among the sons of Adam.'[19]

This theme of human non-mastery – of humanness as an onto-epistemological limit – runs through the Quran itself, cutting against the anthropocentric grain of dominant readings that were consolidated in the modern period. Sarra Tlili argues that while the Quran is undoubtedly a theocentric text, it is not necessarily an anthropocentric one.[20] It focuses on humans, yes, but this is simply because humans (rather than animals or jinn) are its addressee. Tlili identifies anthropocentrism with what she calls a *figurative* reading of the Quran's treatment of nonhuman animals, a reading that turns enigmatic phenomena in the Quran – like the ant who speaks to Solomon – into understandable ones. A figurative reading, she argues, gives more authority to the human mind to interpret the text and to understand the incomprehensible by translating animal behaviour – including their relationship with the divine – to conform with humans' perceptual experience with animals (and with the divine). Tlili holds that this approach goes against the Quran's insistence that humans know very little. As the Quran tell us: 'And of knowledge, you have been given but a little' (17: 85). By contrast, she argues, a *literal* reading leaves enigma as enigma, accepting the fact that humans do not always have the means to perceive other beings' deeper realities, without denying that such realities exist. This is humanness as an onto-epistemological limit. As Muhammad Asad put it, there may be 'forms of life, different from ours and presumably from one another, and yet subtly interacting … *in a manner beyond our ken*'.[21] Govindrajan also gestures to human not-knowing with her notion of the *otherwild*, a 'space of unmasterable difference' that entails 'the humbling recognition that animal lives, even as they are coconstituted alongside human lives, exceed their imbrication in the latter'.[22] She tells the story of a domestic pig who disappears every now and then for a few days at a time, and

18 Goodman and McGregor 2009, 302–303.

19 Goodman and McGregor 2009, 279, my emphasis.

20 Tlili 2012.

21 Asad 2022, 1324, my emphasis.

22 Govindrajan 2018, 123.

whose owner, Prema, has no idea where the pig goes or what he does. Since the multispecies geography in which Prema and the pig live also includes local gods and goddesses, we might speculate that the pig maintains interspecies relationships not only with humans like Prema but also with the *devis* and *devtas* who govern the landscape, that his repeated peregrinations are pilgrimages, or another form of communion with the gods, taking him to a space of unmasterable difference that Prema, a human, not only does not know but cannot know, given her corporeal and sensory limitations. We might speculate that next to Prema who does-not-know stands a pig who does know, or at least knows differently, who knows not only humans but also gods. After all, animals know in ways we do not, like dogs, who can sense magnetic fields, or cats, who can see in ultra-violet, a light spectrum invisible to humans. So, as a recent magazine article put it, 'a house cat's bizarre antics' of staring intently at a bare wall or chasing invisible prey 'may be more than just feline folly. The kitty may be seeing things that the human eyes can't.'[23]

What might the kitty be seeing?

I say that playfully, though also as a provocation – call it a theological-zoological provocation – to both the anthropocentrism of most secular and religious traditions *and* the secularity of much multispecies scholarship. If secularity is premised on human mastery of a knowable universe, and if the Anthropocene is the direct result of that kind of thinking, would not a rethinking of human mastery that many believe necessary to a post-Anthropocene world entail thinking beyond secular convention as well? This seems especially important for an ethical post-Anthropocene politics, since climate crisis affects communities that do not live only in secular worlds, nor abide only by secular categories. I do not know where thinking beyond secular convention would lead. But perhaps not-knowing is where we must begin. Not-knowing, as I am imagining it, as many religious traditions have imagined it, is not a condition to be overcome, but rather a fact of being human, an onto-epistemological limit.

I am therefore wary of the move to emphasize similitude between humans and animals, to declare that we are, ultimately, *animals all*, as the only way forward. After all, there is something absurd about claiming equivalence, given the vastly different capacities animals have. Even the term animals, as I have been using it, makes no sense, as Jacques Derrida insisted, given the 'heterogenous multiplicity' it names.[24] The language of equivalence – in fact, language itself – continually fails. I wrote about dogs' vastly more capable sense of smell compared to humans, but am I writing about the same thing – smell – when humans know nothing of what this canine sense of 'smell' is capable?

23 Lewis 2014.

24 Derrida 2008, 31.

I want to gesture, then, toward a kind of *negative zoology*, akin to negative theology,[25] where the other – divine, animal – can never be fully known, where that unbridgeable gap is a basic onto-epistemological fact of being human. I want to hold open the possibility that a heterogenous multiplicity of nonhumans may be worlding worlds together, sometimes with us, sometimes without us. And I want to propose that accepting this onto-epistemological limit may be key to unsettling the fantasy of human mastery, may be an ethical and political opportunity to cultivate a different kind of multispecies liveability than the one we currently practice.

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25 On negative theology, see Sells 1994.