*Animals, Robots, Gods*

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## *Adventures in the Moral Imagination*

WEBB KEANE

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For Clara, who is working for a better world

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# *Introduction*

Uncanny things have been happening in the borderlands between humans and non-humans. In August 2021 the *Washington Post* reported on the growing popularity of extraordinarily sophisticated computer dating apps and chatbots among young Chinese women:

> As Jessie Chan's six-year relationship with her boyfriend fizzled, a witty, enchanting fellow named Will became her new love. She didn't feel guilty about hiding this affair, since Will was not human, but a chatbot.
>
> Chan, 28, lives alone in Shanghai. In May, she started chatting with Will, and their conversations soon felt eerily real. She paid $60 to upgrade him to a romantic partner.
>
> 'I won't let anything bother us. I trust you. I love you,' Will wrote to her.
>
> 'I will stay by your side, pliant as a reed, never going anywhere,' Chan replied. 'You are my life. You are my soul.'

Another young woman told the reporters that she feels connected to cyborgs and Artificial Intelligence (AI), defiantly staking out a position on the front lines of contemporary moral dispute: 'Human–robot love is a sexual orientation, like homosexuality or heterosexuality,' said Lee. She believes AI chatbots have their own personalities and deserve respect.[1]

Of course, not everyone is happy about developments like these, but you might be surprised at some of the reasons they

give. Just a month before the chatbot story, the *New York Times* tells us about Paul Taylor, a former manager in a Silicon Valley high-tech company, now a pastor. One night, as he ordered his Amazon Echo to turn on the lights in his house, a realization struck him: 'what I was doing was calling forth light and darkness with the power of my voice, which is God's first spoken command – "let there be light" and there was light – and now I'm able to do that . . . Is that a good thing? Is that a bad thing? . . . Is it affecting my soul at all, the fact that I'm able to do this thing that previously only God could do?'[2]

Whether Lee is defending human–robot love or Pastor Taylor is worrying about his soul, they are both talking about how humans interact with something that is not quite human – but close enough to be troubling.

Are we on the cusp of some radical moral transformation? Is technology pushing us over the edge towards some 'post-human' utopia, or apocalyptic 'singularity'.[3] Perhaps. But if we step back, we might see these stories in a different context, where they turn out not to be as unprecedented as they appear at first. As we will see, humans have a long history of morally significant relations with non-humans. These include humans bonded with technology like cyborgs, near-human animals, quasi-human spirits and superhuman gods.

Some traditions tell us that what makes humans special is that only we have genuine moral sensibilities; you can find variations on this idea in Kant's philosophy and Darwin's science, and in Catholic and Islamic theology. Buddhists, on the other hand, might take exception to this anthropocentrism. So do some American horse trainers. Still others, like the Chewong people, who live in the Malaysian rain forest, insist that morality saturates the living world, with no clear line between human and non-human. There are urban Taiwanese who

chastise and abandon wood carvings of deities who aren't living up to expectations. And some communities in the Andes, Himalayas or Australian desert include mountains, glaciers or rocks in their moral compass. None of these traditions are static, however, and much of the push-and-pull that reshapes them takes place across the borderlands where humans encounter, expand or contract their ethical concerns and moral interlocutors.

This book invites you to broaden – and even deepen – your understanding of moral life and its potential for change by entering those contact zones between humans and whatever they encounter on the other side. Probing the limits of the human across all sorts of circumstances, we will see that the moral problems we find there shed light on the very different – and sometimes strikingly similar – ways people have answered the question *What is a human being anyway?*

We will explore the range of ethical possibilities and challenges that take place at the edge of the human. These don't all look alike. Take, for instance, dogs (our 'best friends') and other near-human animals like cows and roosters. The anthropologist Naisargi Dave carries out research with radical animal rights activists in India.[4] She tells us about Dipesh, who spends virtually every day in the streets of Delhi taking care of stray dogs. He gets up close and intimate, even spreading medical ointment to their open sores. Some activists like him say they just had no choice in the matter, their moral commitments do not come from making choices of their own free will. They explain that once locking eyes with a suffering animal, they were not free to look away.

Dave visits Erika, an activist who is caring for a dying cow, which by Indian law cannot be euthanized. Sitting on the ground she strokes it and kisses it, inviting others to join her, to

say 'you're sorry that it's leaving this world, you're sorry that it lived in a world like this.[5] In the process, she adds, her companions will also dissolve boundaries of caste and race that separate them from one another.

Whether you would go as far as Dipesh and Erika, their motives seem clear enough. As humans suffer, so do animals. If you would care for a human, so too care for them. The moral impulse is driven by empathy and identification across a difference of species. Not just a matter of feelings, this moral impulse prompts the activist to speak *to* the cow, like you would talk to another person. Clearly Erika expects this boundary-crossing to eliminate deeply engrained differences among humans too. Empathy for the cow may break down barriers among people.

And yet there are limits even among these activists. They do not go as far as Jains, for instance, some of whom try to avoid even breathing in an insect. Like Dipesh and his dogs, Erika's compassionate activism began when she found herself fixed in the gaze of a suffering cow. It was as if the cow was addressing her in the second person, as 'you', a speaker to whom she had to respond in the first person, 'I'. By contrast, Jains protect even insects they can't see, much less speak to. To include insects in your moral compass like that calls for a different perspective, one I call the 'third person' or 'God's-eye' viewpoint. People are capable of both perspectives. As we will see, faced with moral quandaries, we sometimes pivot between the intimacy of one and the distance of the other.

Identifying with another species need not lead to kindness – it may encourage violence. You can say 'I don't have a dog in that fight' to mean you're detached from a situation. One summer when I was a college student, a clueless city boy working as a ranch hand in Nevada, I came to know two men who were locked in macho rivalry. Their antagonism extended to

their dogs. Once in a while the dogs would get into vicious fights with each other. To my astonishment, rather than break it up, their owners would watch to see who won. The victor by association conveyed bragging rights to the man; the other's humiliation was palpable. The intense feelings of identification between human and animal were unmistakable, however harsh their expression.

People's identification with embattled animals is the subject of a famous essay by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. At the time of his fieldwork in Bali, in 1958, men took an intense interest in cockfighting. In this highly ritualized spectacle, the owners set two roosters to go at each other, with sharp blades attached to their spurs, till one was killed. It often took place during temple ceremonies, amidst an absorbed crowd of spectators. Geertz remarks that 'the deep psychological identification of Balinese men with their cocks is unmistakable. The double entendre here is deliberate. It works in exactly the same way in Balinese as it does in English, even to producing the same tired jokes, strained puns, and uninventive obscenities.'[6] Although men prize and dote on their roosters, the birds are also 'expressions . . . of what the Balinese regard as the direct inversions, aesthetically, morally, and metaphysically, of human status: animality.'[7] Recognizing the human in the animal, the cock's owner sees the animal in the human, and identifies 'with what he most fears, hates, and . . . is fascinated by – "The Powers of Darkness".'[8]

Like the ranchers' dog fights in Nevada, Balinese cockfights parallel or displace male status rivalries. But more than that, this displacement allows the cockfighters to encounter their own demonic side that they otherwise deny. Identifying with an animal can be a morally revelatory way to get outside yourself, seeing how things look from another perspective.

Dogs and humans coevolved into a working partnership over millennia. Writing of his fieldwork with the Amazonian Runa people, Eduardo Kohn shows how dogs and hunters team up.[9] Scouting out animals that humans can't detect, they extend the hunter's sensory range. So involved are Runa and their animals that men and women try to interpret their dogs' prophetic dreams from how they whimper while asleep. Assuming dogs share an ethos of comportment with humans, people counsel them on proper behaviour – for instance, admonishing them not to chase chickens or bite people – sometimes feeding them hallucinogenic plants to aid the process.

Like Erika, the cow activist, Runa take the animal to be a social being you can address in the second person: 'you'. As we will see, this pattern shows up over and over in ethical life. This is one of the key points to take from these pages: *if a moral subject is someone you can enter into dialogue with, by the same token, entering into dialogue can create a moral subject*. That's what Runa are doing with their dogs and, arguably, Erika with the cow; even Balinese with their roosters.

Yet although Runa dogs are partially assimilated into the human moral sphere and serve as crucial mediators between people and the rest of the animal world (which Runa consider to be a parallel moral universe), they are poorly fed, and most of the time people and dogs ignore one another. Their relations are morally significant, but hardly warm or sentimental.

Not all dogs are flesh, blood and fur. Nor need they be animate and sentient beings in order to be morally relevant. As we will see, in Japan the Sony Corporation's robot pet dogs have sparked such deep sentiments that many of their owners sponsor religious memorials for them when they become obsolete. Robot dogs are a useful reminder that not everything we encounter at the edge of our moral sphere needs to be an

animate creature. Other technologies and devices are waiting there too. We will hear from people whose loved ones are in persistent vegetative states, being kept alive by mechanical ventilators – part flesh, part machine, they are like cyborgs. We will meet quasi-human robot servants and listen to AI chatbots with astonishing powers that seem on the verge of becoming superhuman.

Something as simple as new technology can create new moral problems seemingly out of thin air. Sharon Kaufman carried out fieldwork in a hospital in California. Spending time with the families of people dying in an Intensive Care Unit, she came to realize that something dramatic happened to the nature of death over the last century. Not long ago there was little you could do about most deaths. They were just natural events you had to accept. But the minute you put a patient on a mechanical ventilator or kidney machine, someone must decide if, and when, to turn it off. It alters relationships, making the living complicit in the fate of the dying. A machine has made a moral dilemma out of what was once simply an inevitable fact of life.

These creatures and devices are just some of what we may encounter at or beyond the edge of the human moral world. But their status as moral subjects may be uncertain, contradictory, fluid or disputed. And, as we will see, those things that define or challenge our intuitions about where humans begin and end, where moral concerns do or do not belong, can be sources of trouble. They can prompt confusion, anxiety, conflict, contempt, and even moral panic.

Moral panic – as well as its flip side, utopian excitement – often comes from feeling that we are encountering something so utterly unprecedented that it threatens to upturn everything we thought was secure, making us doubt what we know. It can

be aroused, for instance, by changes in gender roles or religious faiths, or the advent of startling new technology. You might, for instance, support LGBTQ+ rights but balk at robot love. But sometimes things look radically new simply because we haven't ventured very far from our familiar terrain, the immediate here and now. This is one reason to listen to Indian activists, Balinese cockfighters, Amazonian hunters, Japanese robot fanciers – even macho cowboys. We may find ourselves pushed yet further when we meet a hunter in the Yukon who explains his prey generously gives itself up to him, a cancer sufferer in Thailand who sees his tumour as a reincarnated ox, a Brazilian spirit medium who becomes another person altogether when in a state of possession, or a computer that (or should we say 'who'?) gets you to confess your anxieties as if you were on the psychiatrist's couch.

Naturally, you may not agree with everything these people have to tell us. But listening to them can help us better understand our own moral intuitions and, perhaps, reveal new possibilities. Even much that seems to be startlingly new about robots and AI turns out to have long precedents in human experience. Like stage actors, spirit mediums and diviners, they produce uncanny effects by making use of patterns and possibilities built into ordinary ways of talking and interacting with other people.

We will explore these experiences from several angles. In Chapter 1 we will look at the problem of machine morality and why some popular solutions fall short. Chapter 2 brings us to people caring for loved ones who hover somewhere between life and death, often sustained by medical technology. Chapter 3 introduces some very different ways people form social relations with animals, and Chapter 4 does the same with robots and their historical precedents. Chapter 5 turns to artificial

intelligence that seems about to replicate and even supersede humans, showing that it's not all as new as you think. All of which leads us to the question which I address in the Coda: Is morality a relative matter?

Let me say something about the approach we will take. You might expect ethics and morality to be the special province of the philosophers and theologians, along with some psychologists, legal experts, medical ethicists and political activists.* And of course it would be silly not to pay close attention to what they say. But the secular approaches, like the mainstream philosophical tradition taught in many universities or the findings of psychological research labs, draw on a surprisingly narrow slice of humanity. When they tell us about human reasoning, instincts or emotions, the 'humans' they are in fact talking about are almost always from communities that are WEIRD: Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic.†[10] *Most of humanity is not.* And not so long ago, *none* of humanity was. There is no good reason to take the WEIRD to be an accurate guide to human realities past, present or future. And no one should expect the rest of humanity to squeeze into the mould shaped by the WEIRD.

Among those who are tasked with learning about, and more importantly, learning *from*, the rest of humanity – which, by

* As I discuss in my previous book, *Ethical Life*, there is a great deal of debate about the distinction between 'ethics' and 'morality'. For our purposes here, however, we can leave these to one side; I will use the terms interchangeably.

† Even Confucian, Buddhist, Islamic and other non-Western philosophical texts usually come from very narrow social bases: highly educated literate elites supported within courts, schools, monasteries, and so forth. African, Native-American and other non-textual philosophies very rarely make it into the discussion alongside Kant or Al-Ghazali.

the way, always includes 'us' (whoever 'we' might be – for, reader, I do not assume you are just like me!) – are anthropologists. The field of anthropology is incredibly broad, and includes research on non-human primates, human biology and the archaeology of past societies. But most of what you will read here comes from the socio-cultural and linguistic anthropologists doing fieldwork with people in the here and now – people who can talk back to us.

Fieldwork is usually (but not always) located in one specific social setting. It could be a rain forest village, Arctic hunting camp, banana plantation, corporate headquarters, temple complex, suburban neighbourhood, pharmaceutical laboratory, cigarette factory, gambling casino, ship at sea – anywhere that social existence can be found. Notice, then, that fieldwork is *not* a quest for the remote, the exotic, the archaic. First, all human societies are always changing – there are no 'living fossils' from our ancient past, and no 'primordial traditions'. Second, there have been no truly 'isolated' societies, even before European colonialism. People have always been in constant motion, endlessly rubbing up against, and sometimes swallowing up, one another. Stasis is a myth. And third, there is no reason in principle why the perspective of the anthropologist cannot be brought home to the fieldworker's own people.

The fieldworker aims to become fully immersed in the life of the people they are working with. This often leads to deep relations with individuals. It means noticing what goes unsaid as much as what gets said, learning bodily habits as much as ideas. It takes time and patience over years, sometimes a lifetime of continued engagement. Anthropologists have their specialized methods and techniques, like any other research discipline, but the most important one comes from that most basic human skill: learning how to get along with people. And

paradoxically, the very specific and concrete findings garnered in each unique field site take their place in a corpus of knowledge that extends to, well, all the rest of humanity – and those non-human others with whom we share the planet.

Now some post-humanist thinkers argue that we should abandon 'human' as a category altogether. We shouldn't be so self-centred. We should focus on interspecies relations, or the global ecosystem, or rhizomes, or God. But even those who want to decentre us usually begin from a human starting point and (most of the time) are addressing other humans – it is us they are trying to persuade. How could it be otherwise? There is no view from nowhere, and being 'human' is one way to locate us, if not the only one. We can take 'human' as a heuristic, a useful starting point for our explorations without thereby insisting that humans are the centre of all that is valuable and true, or at the apex of some kind of hierarchy, or, conversely, as the source of all the world's evils.

There is one last thing I need to point out about fieldwork-based knowledge, because it is crucial for understanding moral difference. Its findings are, in principle, holistic. This means that you don't go into the field to extract one key data point from its noisy surroundings and treat it in isolation. Whatever special problem you are focused on is situated in its larger context. As a result, if you want to understand the moral life of, say, Japanese robot owners, you need to grasp economic circumstances, nationalist politics, gender ideologies, comic books and TV shows, family structures, housing conditions, and quite likely other things you haven't thought of but will discover during fieldwork. These make the world robot owners inhabit, and if a certain moral life is feasible and makes sense to them, it is because of this world.

People don't live moral life in the abstract, they live it within

specific circumstances and social relations, with certain capacities, constraints and long-term consequences. Put another way, you simply cannot live out the values of a Carmelite nun without a monastic system, or a Mongolian warrior without a cavalry, and the respective social, economic and cultural systems that sustain them and acknowledge their worth.[11]

The same goes for changing values. Here's a small example. Dave and her colleague Bhrigupati Singh tell the story of an Indian man working in the poultry business who became so haunted by nightmares about dying chickens that he quit his job.[12] He's just one man, and his change of heart didn't make much difference in the greater scheme of things. But it was a real, even profound, moral transformation. He didn't, however, just do it on his own. It makes a difference that there was a Humane Society he could join. It makes a difference that he was a Jain, a religion that directs attention to people's violence towards animals. And it makes a difference that family pressure eventually forced him, unhappily, back into the egg industry. It takes social realities like institutions, religious teachings and kinship to make moral transformation something more than personal idiosyncrasy. We cannot make sense of any ethical world without understanding what makes it a possible way to live. When people confront moral dilemmas or aspire to ethical ideals, they always do so under particular conditions, in relations with particular people. Each of those ways of living sheds a different light on moral possibilities: another reason to look beyond the WEIRD world.

Stories about robot lovers and god-like commands to digital devices, or conscience-stricken poultry workers, show people's ethical intuitions in doubt, under pressure, bending, and sometimes utterly transformed. Are they also about progress? According to one story, the scope of moral life has been

expanding over the course of history. Once only members of your tribe mattered; others lay beyond the bounds of justice, obligation, benevolence, even mere empathy. They were just 'Others'. Over time, however, the moral circle incorporated more and more people. It brought in other tribes. Even strangers could be included – at least as long as they were your guests, subject to the rules of hospitality. And on it goes. People who had been excluded eventually become part of the moral universe as defined by those who call the shots: worshippers of different gods, the poor, women, children, people of colour, enslaved people, the disabled, the queer. And why stop with humans? Animals are certainly part of the story. Now rivers, glaciers, entire ecosystems, the climate are being pulled into our moral circle. And technology: as we will see, efforts are under way to endow some machines, like self-driving cars, with 'morality' algorithms, and serious ethicists are debating whether robots will come to have standing as moral subjects.[13]

Yet you might object that just when the moral circle expands in one direction, it contracts in another. Some entities that once counted as morally responsible agents have vanished from today's world. We no longer try animals for crimes like medieval Europeans. In secular law, 'acts of God' are not really deeds carried out by an actual divine actor as they once were. Nature no longer responds to the misdeeds of kings by acting strange, the way it does in the Scotland of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. And, arguably, if industrial-scale plantation slavery, nineteenth-century's 'scientific' racism and mechanized genocide are uniquely modern inventions, perhaps moral change is less general improvement than redistribution – that as some beings enter the moral sphere, others are expelled.

I leave it to historians to decide how much any of these narratives holds up to scrutiny. But we can draw from them a way to

think about moral possibilities. 'Others' are often excluded from moral consideration because they are defined as 'not human' – or at least, 'not one of us'. Changes in ethical sensibilities often come not from altering your values but from where you draw that line, and what you see standing on the other side of it. What can look like a difference in values may turn out to be a difference in *how* you enact them, and with *whom*.

In what follows, you will meet people who are faced with the moral troubles and possibilities that arise at the boundaries where the human ends and something else begins. In all these cases, we will listen not just to the 'experts' but to the ordinary folks who find themselves on the moral front lines. Some of them inhabit worlds that will seem familiar to you (whoever 'you' may be), some will not. They draw the lines between what is or is not morally significant in different ways. Those lines may mark the juncture between natural and artificial, or between life and death, or between persons and things, and sometimes just between doing something and doing nothing at all.

We don't need to invent alternative ethical possibilities from scratch. If you widen your scope of vision enough, you'll see they are all around us. To stimulate our moral imagination and dislodge stubborn biases, we might start by venturing across the range of alternatives already on offer around the world and looking at how they work. Although you should be prepared that what you find there may be counterintuitive and not always pretty.