

DK: This is ARREST from the Punk Ethnography website, my name is Douglas Kidd.

ARREST is a series of short pieces that use anecdote, theory and reflection to share an idea that we hope you find arresting- an idea that stops you and helps you think a little differently.

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The Medieval Bestiary

Bestiaries emerged as a literary form in the UK around 1200CE and were popular for the next 300 years or so. They were lavishly illuminated manuscripts that contained illustrations and information about animals and birds, insects, trees and even rocks, some real and some mythical. The illustrations would be accompanied by a story to inform the reader about the natural history of the beast concerned and a moral lesson that the reader could apply to their life. Various scribes and artists would have worked on each manuscript and their patrons were usually high ranking members of society or the church.

I want to share here a little of the history of bestiaries and offer a critical analysis of their influence with a view ultimately to considering their potential relevance in the 21st century, and the possibilities for reimagining them for our current times.

Visiting with the beasts

Christianity animated the worldview of the bestiary and every entry reflected the rule and rules of God. In Christian tradition God discloses himself in two 'books'- the bible which is the source of his revelation and law, and the natural world in which everything is a source for understanding God's will and majesty. So the bestiary sought to reveal how the very nature and ordering of existence disclosed God's will.

The theology informing the bestiary sees humans as the pinnacle of God's creation, given dominion over all life, yet simultaneously fallen and corrupted by sin, and thus in need of instruction. The bestiary reveals how the natural world can guide Christians in living a life in line with God's design.

Let's look at some examples.

Let's begin with the **Peredixion tree**, which grows in India. Doves like its sweet fruit and gather in the tree to eat, but only on the shaded side. This is because dragons will gather to eat the doves but are afraid of the shadow of the tree. Doves that stay on the shaded side of the tree are safe, but those that venture to the other side will be eaten. The meaning of the story is that the doves are like good Christians and the tree is like the church. As long as Christians stay in the church they are safe, but if they stray, the dragon, representing the devil, will devour them.

Another example: **Fire stones** are stones that can be female or male. Kept apart they are normal stones, but if brought together they ignite and burn everything around them. The

moral is that men and women- especially in monastic orders- should be kept separate to prevent lustful thoughts and actions destroying everything.

Beavers appear in bestiaries as animals hunted for their testicles which were a source of castoreum used to make medicine and perfume. When a beaver sees a hunter it will bite off its own testicles to leave them to the hunter. If the beaver is then unfortunate enough to encounter another hunter it will roll over to show that it has already lost its testicles so the hunter will not bother to capture it. The moral of the beaver's testicular sacrifice is that Christians should cast off all vice and temptation to escape the devil's traps.

Finally: **the lion** appears in bestiaries with several stories attached to it, one being that lion cubs are born dead and remain so for three days until the father lion breathes life into them. This linked the lion to the Resurrection of Jesus with the message that all of creation- in this case, the very King of the animals- reflects the truth of the Christian gospel, and the human viewer ought to recognize Christ's power and obey His laws.

Through the lens of Christianity, the natural world was a book of symbols read to discern God's laws and purposes which must then be reflected in human society and behaviour.

The popularity of Bestiaries waned in the 1500s with a growing interest in scientific observation, empirical evidence and the study of the natural world for its own sake. New encyclopedias of animals were published based on scientific observations and experiments. Scientific dissections of beavers in the 1600s, for example, demonstrated that the source of castoreum was in fact pouches near the beaver's tail and not its testicles.

The effects of these shifts in thinking were felt throughout Western culture. There was no need for appeals to mysticism or religion, instead the scientific method, and human rationality were sufficient to determine truth, morality and the way to order civilisation, a philosophical approach referred to as secular humanism. Philosophers since the Enlightenment have pointed out the resonances, links and continuities between the Christian worldview and secular humanism, and I want to make the connections between mediaeval bestiaries and the way we view the natural world today. I want to suggest that two interlinked assumptions which underpinned the bestiary were carried through the scientific revolution into the secular humanist worldview and can still be discerned in Western scientific thinking and everyday discourse.

The hierarchy of nature and natural law

Hierarchy is the key to the two assumptions I want to discuss.

The first assumption is that there is a separation between humans and the rest of the natural world. In the view of Christianity, God gave humans dominion over all the earth. The distinctiveness of humans in medieval thinking is revealed in the Great Chain of Being. This model of the universe had God at the top and the inanimate matter of Earth at the bottom. Humans are lower than the angels but higher, and so closer to God, than all other living things.

We can draw parallels between the Great Chain of Being and the modern theory of evolution. In scientific and everyday discourse, we continue to talk about higher and lower forms of life and see evolution as progressive and in some way destined to lead to modern self-conscious humans. We can see this in the classic Time-Life Books illustration of the March of Progress which shows the evolution of modern humans 'from' Pliopithecus some 25 million years ago. Whilst many scientists and philosophers warn against this misunderstanding of the theory of evolution, it remains hard to avoid in popular discourse and in the language of much scientific literature, and far more consequentially it is embedded in the organisation of our modern world. The separation between humans and nature is also evident in everyday discourse, where we speak of nature as something to visit, or exploit or preserve, and the environment as a source of concern or political contention- in both cases as something separate to us where humans can take a 'view from nowhere', an objective view where we are not part of the rest of the world. Justifications base the distinct nature of humans on the complexity of human language and cognition, or the enhanced ability of humans to learn or develop complex societies or even by humans' capacity for destruction. Practically, the dominance of the natural world by humans is evident. Of the biomass of mammals on earth, humans and their livestock now form 96%, with just 4% of mammals being wildlife of the kind that formed many of the beasts in a bestiary.

So in this first assumption, there is a hierarchy and humans are above the rest of the natural world.

The second assumption relates this hierarchical view of nature to human society. Humans appear together on the Great Chain of Being, above animals and below angels. But not all humans are equal, they have their own place on the Chain based on gender, race, birth, wealth and piety. Saints sit above sinners, men above women, priests and princes above peasants and paupers.

The book of nature provides guidance to humanity about how to live a good life. The world is a mirror of the divine order: as above, so below. If we follow the guidance provided by the natural world we will live in line with God's rules which will involve taking our place willingly in the natural order. The human experience involves temptations to break God's rules, so the bestiary shows how the book of nature is replete with examples of how to resist temptation, learn your place and follow the rules.

For secular humanism, evolution and progress replace God and the Great Chain of Being. The term Social Darwinism was coined to describe the link between modern scientific thinking in evolution and human social organisation. It involved applying evolutionary principles derived from Darwinian theory to society. For example, applying the simplification of evolution captured by the phrase "survival of the fittest", socioeconomic status can be attributed to the fitness of those in each class. The poor must deserve their poverty due to their inferiority compared to the rich. The phrase "the White Man's burden" refers to the idea that white Europeans had a duty to "civilise" less developed countries which must be populated by inferior races and which they could therefore justifiably colonise.

Oppressive structures based on race, gender, ability and colonialism have been morally justified by imagining modern society as the arena of evolutionary competition in which the fittest survive and the strongest thrive. As the 19th century gave way to the 20th

century, the now-discredited science of eugenics promoted a more active and interventionist application of evolutionary theory, advocating forced sterilisation, immigration controls and incarceration to ensure the poor, feeble-minded, and racial minorities did not reproduce. As the 20th century progressed, Evolutionary Psychology and Sociobiology made the links between the natural world and human society and they have been criticised on the same basis, for creating a sense that discriminatory social structures and discourses are natural and inevitable. These criticisms have come from within the scientific establishment and from philosophers, thinkers and activists increasingly concerned with our place in and relationship to the planet we all share.

I will refer to just one such criticism. Ruha Benjamin comments on how still today what she calls a 'eugenics imaginary' disadvantages people of colour. Eugenics imagined a hierarchy of races in which the white races were more intelligent, moral and valuable than black races. Focusing on the USA, she describes how that hierarchy is operationalised through differential spending on education and social programmes, and through policy in housing, policing and incarceration, all of which disadvantage ethnic minorities. She sees Artificial Intelligence as an arena where this eugenical thinking is reinforced as the data through which AI is trained reflects racist assumptions and both intensifies and automates the implementation of racist policies and practices whilst giving them a veneer of authority as rationally and impartially applied. So the medieval bestiary and the hierarchies it imagined have very real consequences.

The assumption that humans have dominion over nature flows through the bestiary and is reflected in the catastrophes we face in our current relationship with the natural world. The assumption of human hierarchies modelled and reinforced with reference to the natural world form the lessons of bestiaries and flow into secular humanism and inform social injustices that we face today.

I want to explore the tensions and currents of thought that challenge this hierarchical thinking and to ask in the next episode whether there are new ways to imagine the bestiary that promote non-hierarchical futures in which the whole planet can thrive.

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