

MULTISPECIES DEMOCRACY AND THE DIFFERENCE HUMAN DIFFERENCE MAKES

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Democracy is under siege. Here, there, anywhere we might look, whether in established or nascent democracies, industrial or industrializing nations, Global North or South—electoral processes are being undermined, civil rights are being eroded, and the compulsion toward authoritarianism is arguably stronger today than it has been since World War II. In this short essay, I consider a bright spot among democracy's tremulous prospects today: the emergent discourse around the potential for a *multispecies* democracy.

To this point, arguments for direct democratic representation for nonhumans (voting rights, say) have not been sustained. Advocates of multispecies democracy instead contend that humans should serve as something like *proxies* by giving voice to nonhumans' concerns in democratic processes.¹ Yet because

¹ Representative works on multispecies democracy that stop short of calling for direct democratic representation for nonhuman animals include David Abram, who, in *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Vintage, 2010), argues that, while nonhumans should be considered as active participants in ecosystems and the political arrangements that provide for their flourishing, only humans can act on other kinds' interests, and Vandana Shiva, in *Earth*

much of the discourse around multispecies democracy is galvanized by an impulse to contest *human exceptionalism* in modern politics, arguments for humans' proxy status tend to sit uncomfortably with multispecies democracy's more radical challenge to anthropocentric conceptions of the subject.

If we grant, as I do, that the strength of the discourse on multispecies democracy is its capacity to reveal the moral and political limitations of defining terms like subjectivity, agency, and freedom solely in relation to human life, then the question of what makes humans capable of acting on nonhumans' behalf only becomes more urgent. Humans' chief difference from nonhuman kind is our *discursive capacity* to establish normative accountability. This restricts participation in democratic governance to humans alone. Our giving proper attention to this difference, as I will show, can help to clarify what makes democracy worth pursuing, even protecting, in a time like ours when democracy is everywhere beset with opposition and hostility.

As a start, let me note the three interconnected factors that account for the recent rise in the interest in multispecies democracy (hereafter MD): (1) Insights into the complex interdependencies between species and their environments in interdisciplinary fields like animal studies, environmental humanities, and eco-criticism have fostered new ideas about inclusive governance models. (2) Scientific advances in our understanding of nonhuman cognition are challenging long-established assumptions about the difference between humans and other species. And (3) these insights and advances have emerged alongside a broader cultural shift inspired by the spread of global environmental awareness, evident in the growth of social movements like veganism, which emphasize empathy for other species.

Philosophically speaking, as I mentioned earlier, discourses related to what I am referring to as MD are motivated in large part by the desire to contest the assumption of human exceptionalism. The primary concern, specifically, is with whom and what counts as a subject. As the late French philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour best demonstrated, modern philosophy's assumptions—that subjects are only humans, say; or that subjects can only be individuals, or that subjects stand apart from their ecological relations—are

Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace (Berkeley, Cal.: North Atlantic Books, 2005), who advocates for a more inclusive form of democracy that respects the rights of nonhuman beings, though with those rights being articulated by humans. Others such as Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, and more, some of whom I note in the pages that follow, also have made important contributions to discourses aimed at fostering multispecies coexistence (even if they do not make explicit reference to "multispecies democracy") without seeking to establish formal mechanisms for granting direct democratic representation to nonhuman entities.

obstacles to remaking politics in light of humans' thoroughgoing relational entanglements with nonhuman life.²



Edward Hicks, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 1834, [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Following Latour, a cadre of powerful voices, including the political theorist Jane Bennett, feminist theorists Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, and the anthropologists Eduardo Kohn and Marisol de la Cadena, have challenged traditional political theory by broadening the scope of democratic representation.³ These thinkers aver that, if the subject can be shown to be

² See, e.g., Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Catherine Porter, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). Here, Latour built on his earlier analysis in *We Have Never Been Modern*, Catherine Porter, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), which sought to overcome the modernist separation of nature and society as an artificial construction that overlooks the complex system of interactions tying humans and nonhumans together. Latour later came to advocate for a broader understanding of actors involved in political processes when he introduced his renowned Actor-Network-Theory in *Reassembling the Social: Introducing Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³ See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and*

indiscernible from its relations, then traditional ideas about what “agency,” “responsibility,” and “freedom” mean will likewise require a similar revision. Whereas classical liberal tradition, by bestowing the rights, powers, and liabilities of legal subjects solely on human beings, has historically authorized colonial and extractive political practice, MD’s proponents call for something that better resembles Indigenous notions of kinship and collaborative survival. In places like Ecuador, Bolivia, and New Zealand, where human rights conventions have been extended into the more-than-human realm, this shift is already taking place.

Not surprisingly, the principal complaint the advocates of MD have—again, philosophically speaking—is with Kant and the conventional means of conceiving the modern subject. While nonhuman entities are normally recognized as working with and against human purposes, philosophical convention holds that it is *only* humans that retain the capacity for genuine intentionality, i.e., Kant’s famed contribution to the modern understanding of subjecthood. In response to this convention, the advocates of MD reconfigure ideas about what qualifies someone (or something) as a subject by highlighting the active role nonhuman entities play in shaping the world. Think of an event like a power blackout, Jane Bennett says, where electrons, transmission wires, neoliberal regulatory policies, human consumers, and more can all be acknowledged as acting, and thus possess agency, along multiple and concurring points in the complex assemblage they constitute.⁴

Recent works on animal and plant life better indicate the specific interests of MD’s most prominent advocates, however. The philosopher Thom van Dooren explores the ethical implications of the complex social lives of birds and highlights species like crows’ distinctive political capacities.⁵ Vinciane Despret, a philosopher of science, argues that traditional scientific approaches to

Significant Otherness (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2003) and *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); and Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁴ See chapter two of Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*. Singular objects can also be thought to possess agency, Bennett says, for example how trash can be shown to influence human behavior and environmental conditions (ibid., 107). Latour’s influence on Bennett along these lines is important to note, though certain differences in Latour’s and Bennett’s accounts are themselves notable. For example, while Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory focuses on the ways agency is distributed among actors (human and nonhuman) across interactions that occur within relational networks, Bennett’s focus is on the ethical and political implications that arise when nonhuman entities’ own agency is recognized.

⁵ Thom van Dooren, *The Wake of Crows: Living and Dying in Shared Worlds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

understanding nonhuman life can be altered to appreciate animals' unique agentic competencies.⁶ Regarding nonanimal life, the anthropologist Anna Tsing has examined the important role fungi play in shaping human economic and social systems. And Merlin Sheldrake, a biologist, portrays plants and fungi not as passive entities but as dynamic participants in biological and social processes.⁷

For these thinkers, agency is not reducible to the autonomy of the will. Gone are concerns over heteronomy and the pursuit of transcendental freedom so crucial to conventional (*viz.*, Kantian) philosophical concerns. In their place, van Dooren, Despret, Tsing, Sheldrake, and others propose that agency emerges from the complex interactions between networks of actors—both human *and* nonhuman; animals, technologies, institutions, and more—whose influence, however small, shapes collective outcomes. There is no nature-culture binary. This democratization of agency, which borrows much from Latour, also informs the democratization of political representation. If nonhuman entities determine societal and ecological statuses, all beings should be given the status necessary for participating in political decision-making.⁸

While the advocates of MD have been successful in unsettling long-held assumptions about human exceptionalism, I doubt they significantly challenge liberal democracy and the philosophical tradition that underwrites it. A re-examination of Immanuel Kant will indeed confirm that tradition's affirmation of human difference, as I demonstrate in what follows. Yet this affirmation does not necessarily entail the assumption of human exceptionalism that MD's proponents rightly oppose.

According to Kant, what distinguishes agents from non-agentic entities is not some special mind stuff, as René Descartes held. Rather, we are agents because we make judgments *intentionally*. Through our judgments, that is, we are reckoned *responsible*. Note that this account of autonomy is not the one commonly attributed to Kant, which, as we just saw, obtains merely in the power

⁶ Vinciane Despret, *What Would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions?* Brett Buchanan, trans. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

⁷ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2021); Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures* (New York: Random House, 2021).

⁸ Interest around MD has emerged alongside, and perhaps because of, the popularity of the philosophical movement in speculative realism, otherwise known as "flat ontology," which focuses on the autonomy of objects by emphasizing their existing independently of human perception and use. Foundational works in this movement include Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, Ray Brassier, trans. (London: Continuum, 2008); Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, 2011), and Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (New York: Pelican, 2018).

to formulate and enact intentional aims. Kant, in fact, fixates on something far more rudimentary: that intentional states (our beliefs, say) have distinctly *normative* significance. Our judgments are *commitments*, in other words; they are exercises of authority. We live, move, and have our being in a normative space—a space of rules.⁹

It was Ludwig Wittgenstein in the 1940s, and later Wilfrid Sellars in the 1950s, who retrieved from Kant this argument for the normative significance of intentional states. Entailed in that argument, crucially, is the basis for what sets humans apart from the rest of creation: our linguistic capacity. We are free to constrain ourselves through our submission to conceptual norms, namely linguistically denominated rules. Sellars summarizes this point when he says that “man is a creature not of *habits*, but of *rules*,” before memorably spotlighting humans’ difference from non-humans, concluding, “When you cease to recognize rules, you will walk on four feet.”¹⁰

This is not to say nonhuman animals are not expressive, that nonhuman species do not *also* communicate with intention. Elephants, we now know, call out to each other by name. African grey parrots regularly use words to identify colors, shapes, quantities, and even to express desires and feelings. Plants, too, are expressive. Trees communicate both with one another and with other plant species through complex root networks, while fungi form vast mycorrhizal communication channels to facilitate the exchange of information to adapt to changes in the environment. Some animal species even engage in the sort of norm-governed practices, which Kant and others believed were the sole province of human beings. For instance, primate species like chimpanzees adopt normative attitudes toward one another in the maintenance of social order, thereby signaling an implicit understanding that norms are not objects in the causal order but instead are *instituted* by beings who shape their worlds.

“Implicit” is the operative word here. For it is humans’ distinct ability to make the norms we rely upon *explicit* that sets our norm-using practices apart from—makes them truly different from—nonhuman kind. As Robert Brandom has shown vis-à-vis Kant’s turn from epistemology to semantics, merely being able to distinguish between the appropriate and inappropriate application of norms is

⁹ My analysis here is indebted to Robert Brandom’s account of Kant’s post-metaphysical epistemology, and particularly Brandom’s claim that the normativity of intentionality is Kant’s most “axial insight.” See Robert Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Wilfrid Sellars, *Pure Pragmatics and Possible Worlds: The Early Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. Jeffrey Sicha (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1980), 138. Original emphasis.

not sufficient for creatures to be said to be able to participate in genuine discursive practice.¹¹

What is required, rather, is the ability to make explicit the inferential commitments implicit in the reasoning being used to structure the shared world. This means being able to account for whether a given agent is entitled to a certain commitment, which is to say, *justified* in their beliefs. That justification is derived from a complex process wherein agents distinguish between what would and would not entitle one to maintain a particular commitment. Not only must the entitlements, commitments, and their inferential articulations implicit in practical reasoning need to be made explicit in order to count as being governed by genuinely intentional acts; but entitlements, commitments, and their constitutive inferential relations also must be inheritable through *discursive testimony*, the aforesaid process of giving, taking, and exchanging reasons that both justify the commitments one is entitled to as well as make explicit the commitments one is said to be justified to have undertaken.

It is precisely *this* sort of capacity—genuine discursivity—that differentiates human beings from proto-linguistic animals (or plants and fungi). It is also what makes possible a genuine participation in democratic governance, in which the exercise of power is always subject to being challenged, to being held *accountable*. This is especially evident when individuals in power (elected officials, say) can be shown to lack sufficient reasons to justify certain actions that have ill effects on the individuals who confer power upon them (their electors).

What the proponents of MD help to illumine, recall, is the limitation of philosophical tradition to define agency purely in light of a being's capacity for *intentional action*. Agents' norm-institution is irreducible to the capacity for self-legislation, in other words. In an ecologically entangled world such as ours, political arrangements cannot (and should not) be modeled merely on agreements undertaken between independent rational agents as Kant mistakenly believed. The pernicious assumption of human exceptionalism and, implicitly, superiority, specified in the supposition that humans can be thought to stand apart from their ecological relations, should be contested at every turn.

Yet human difference makes a genuine difference, so to speak, when we discern how humans *alone* possess the capacity to make explicit the norms that govern intentional acts. To do this, to make explicit the norms that guide our acts through discursive practice (*viz.*, the exchange of reasons), is simultaneously to subject norms to critical scrutiny and rational revision in view of the purposes they serve. To possess this capacity is to possess the capacity for taking part in

¹¹ The full account of Brandom's semantic inferentialism is contained in *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

democratic governance—both as a being accountable to others and as a being who holds others to account. This, however, is a capacity decidedly lacking in nonhuman kind.

The success of MD's exponents to elucidate nonhumans' commitment to norms, whether among crows, chimpanzees, trees and fungi, or myriad other forms of nonhuman life, has advanced a compelling case for acknowledging nonhumans' moral significance. Nonhumans indeed have their own lives and experiences, as well as make vital contributions to the shared world. Yet as I have been demonstrating, what is essential to democracy's success is that *everyone* in democratic society recognize each other as capable participants in discursive practice. The reasons for this are as much for establishing who has authority in democratic society as it is for holding that authority to account.

When citizens engage in discursive practices, that is, engage in making claims, providing reasons, and evaluating one another's justifications, they actively engage in the process to attribute authority to one another. This sort of authority is not conferred from above as a king might claim his position of sovereignty by divine right (or, more apropos of our own cultural moment, when would-be dictators claim authority by virtue of their inherent superiority or genius). No, someone's having authority in a democracy, namely the authority to participate in the structuring of governance to which the conditions of their lives are subjected, instead develops from their being recognized as responsive, so responsible, to the same norms to which *all democratic participants* are answerable.

G.W.F. Hegel, by building on Kant's semantic conception of the normative, showed how norms emerge from the mutual recognition agents give to each other when they share a culture, which in turn shapes the subjectivity and rationality constitutive of that culture and the values it enshrines. Under the broadly Hegelian rubric I have been explicating, nonhumans do indeed lack the authority to take part in democratic governance because they lack the capacity to participate fully in recognitive activities. This does not mean that nonhumans should lack a *voice*, however, as MD's advocates have successfully shown. As we see in a country like Ecuador's constitution, which declares that ecosystems retain inalienable rights, humans are responsible for petitioning on ecosystems' behalf to ensure those rights are acknowledged and protected. This is in line with the discourse on MD that I have been explicating here, where I have sought to clarify the political relevance of humans' difference. For while nonhuman entities should be recognized as participants in the body politic, it is both an indication and imperative of our identity as human that we, as members of that same body, speak in support of nonhumans.