They Fell Silent When We Stopped Listening: Apophatic Theology and 'Asking the Beasts'

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Meyer, Eric D., "They Fell Silent When We Stopped Listening: Apophatic Theology and 'Asking the Beasts" (2016). Theology Faculty Works. 3.
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Introduction

Fredric Jameson poignantly notes that for those of us formed by the cultures of the West, it is easier to imagine the destruction of the biosphere and the extinction of the majority of earth’s species than the end of global capitalism. Our collective moral imagination has atrophied within the enclosure of a political-economic system whose momentum seems unstoppable, yet whose operation is geared toward the short-term monetary benefit of a tiny minority. We can readily imagine mass extinctions and ecological deterioration because this is the direction that we are already going; we have trouble imagining the end of late capitalism because so many avenues for


meaningful resistance have already been foreclosed or co-opted. Proponents of even the grittiest realism still negotiate daily complicity with the economic empires that pollute, despoil, and colonize the resilience of the land and its creatures. To use a threatened metaphor, this is a stream against which it is exceedingly difficult to swim. Going with the flow, though, charts a course toward “manmade omnicide.”

The urgency of this framing perhaps balances the eccentricity of my constructive proposal below. This essay highlights Elizabeth Johnson’s theological work as a passage toward terrain in which our collective moral imagination might outgrow the constraints of its current formation. Specifically, it explores the apophatic impulse in Johnson’s work as an avenue toward new forms of shared creaturely life through extended encounters with nonhuman animals. In other words, I chart a course from Johnson’s adaptation of apophatic theology toward attitudes and practices that would enable us to “ask the beasts” themselves (Job 12:7-9). Such asking, it turns out, will require more listening than we humans have yet had patience for. My wager here is that cultivating passionate communicative curiosity toward our nonhuman neighbors would transform human relations to the biosphere generally, insofar as nonhuman animals often function as representatives and condensations of the natural world.

The essay’s itinerary runs as follows: First, I offer a brief exposition of the apophatic impulse in Elizabeth Johnson’s theological work. Second, I take a more focused look at the way that this apophatic impulse is at work in *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, particularly in relation to what “the beasts” are thought to be saying and who is authorized to speak for them. Third, I take a constructive turn, setting a creaturely apophaticism in

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conversation with the science of ethology to seek after forms of theological knowledge that transgress species boundaries. Learning how to name God from our nonhuman neighbors would necessarily expand our moral imagination, enabling us to see modes of exchange that do not presume endless exploitation.

**Elizabeth Johnson's Apophatic Impulse: Fidelity to Mystery**

Apophaticism is a methodologically sophisticated approach to the unavoidable but impossible questions that drive the discipline of theology. Wendy Farley rightly notes that “awareness of the inadequacy of language exposes every attempt to draw the divine into the structure of thought as a failure.” Theologians are those fortunate few who find great value in failing endlessly and publicly. In its ancient roots, apophatic theology emerges from practices of mystical contemplation seeking communion with God beyond the interference of language, concepts, and images. As a theological *discourse*, however, apophaticism demands an intensified attention to language’s limits and slippage. Apophatic theology, then, is not an escape from discourse into pure knowledge, but a disciplined, self-reflexive awareness of language’s inadequacies and structural contradictions.

Elizabeth Johnson’s writing evinces a strong apophatic impulse. Drawing on Thomas Aquinas, she enumerates three principles for speaking about God: 1) God is a mystery beyond all imagination, beyond every “grasp” of thought or language; 2) therefore, no description or name

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5 Farley, “Merciful Heart,” 409.

for God can be taken literally; 3) the inadequacy of language and thought necessitates a proliferation of images for God. Human beings can name and describe God only through faltering metaphors that liken God to familiar aspects of created life (including highly abstract realities like being or time). Even the christological mediation of the communicatio idomatum—which warrants claims that creation bears the weight of God’s self-revelation (finitum capax infiniti)—does not collapse the infinite difference between God and creation. Every carefully crafted description of God communicates genuine knowledge about the divine, yet every description of God simultaneously requires erasure insofar as it misleads hearers into accepting a false equivalence, some presumptive point (however minute) at which language stitches God into creation. Apophatic theology, then, proceeds by multiplying names for God (via affirmativa) while also subjecting all names for God to negation (via negativa), in recognition that God escapes and exceeds every cognitive or linguistic grasp (via eminentiae). Johnson’s three principles invert this pattern, but the difference is minimal insofar as, forward or backward, the apophatic method is a cyclic discipline requiring endless repetition.

Johnson’s theological work is so compelling because she employs apophasis in a new way. Guided by her watchword, “The symbol of God functions,” Johnson places calcified language under apophatic negation in order to call attention to the ways in which habituated patterns of speech about God cement power differentials into a supposedly natural order. Apophasis becomes a tool working toward the transformative justice of the Realm of God. A strong apophatic critique cultivates socio-political change where over-used names for God harden into

8 Farley, “Merciful Heart,” 412.
9 Johnson, She Who Is, 38; “Female Symbols,” 41.
conduits that validate hierarchy (as in Mary Daly’s words, “If God is male then the male is God.”). 10 Using feminine pronouns for God or insisting that God is Black shifts the socio-political function of theological discourse precisely by exposing the sexism and racism latent in the theological commonsense that finds such speech jarring. 11 Apophasis—an impulse rooted deeply within the Christian tradition—serves as a countervailing force that resists the tradition’s tendency to maintain naturalized political hierarchies.

**Who Answers for the Beasts?**

In *Ask the Beasts*, Johnson’s apophatic impulse breaks open stale images of divine transcendence—the God who is untouchably separate from creation—in order to find the Spirit pulling creation forward from within, fomenting the chance variations shaped into new species by creation’s regularity. She recovers symbols for God adequate to the Spirit’s work in the cosmic processes which have multiplied creaturely diversity and creaturely beauty. 12 Working from scripture and tradition, she unfolds images of God as wind, as water, as fire, as a bird, and (philosophically) as the source of all participatory existence. These images transpose Darwin’s curious wonder at the natural world into a theological key, perceiving a “profoundly religious” impulse in his attention to creatures while respectfully recognizing that Darwin himself did not understand the “grandeur in this view of life” from within a religious frame. 13 Simultaneously, Johnson works to unsay the image of God as an imperturbable grey-haired man, the eternal

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advocate for stability and keeping everything in its place. The apophatic maneuvers of *Ask the Beasts* establish common ground between Darwin’s testimony regarding the complex entanglement of evolving species and the testimony of Job’s beasts, for whom “the hand of the Lord has done this. In God’s hand is the life of every creature (Job 12:9).”

Johnson’s apophaticism allows her to move past the prevalent cultural assumption of an interminable conflict between science and theology toward dialogue and practical cooperation. Darwin’s discoveries and the scientific discoveries of those in his wake become an unintentional witness to the work of the “God of love”—and conversely, theology becomes concerned with patient observation of (and care for) fellow creatures. Johnson calls Christians to see as Darwin saw, and in such curious attention, to encounter God in new images and with new names. The apophatic turn toward evolutionary transformation, then, also effects an ecological transformation of theology itself, providing the basis for a pragmatic solidarity with those scientists who are concerned with conservation, restoration, and rehabilitation. Here too, Johnson’s apophatic impulse expands fidelity to divine mystery, while simultaneously seeking after a much needed cosmic justice.

Following the scriptural suggestion from Job that lends *Ask the Beasts* its title, Johnson repeatedly gives voice to the animals in her text: “The hand of the Lord has done this.” “We are created.” “We are finite and will end.” The book concludes with the beasts asking “no less” of us than an effective response to ecological degradation in creative fidelity to God's Spirit. In turning toward the constructive work below, I want to note two aspects of Johnson’s beastly inquiry. First, as with Job’s own injunction, the book’s question and answer takes place with

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14 Ibid., 179.
15 Ibid., 12.
16 Ibid., 155, 214-15, 219, 286.
animals *en masse*. If panthers and pika have diverse or divergent responses, those perspectival differences regarding “what the Lord has done” disappear within a summing up of the beastly collective. Second, setting theology in conversation with Darwin’s evolutionary biology entails that the primary spokesperson for the beasts—Darwin himself—is a creature with questionable beastly credentials. That is not to question Darwin’s place in kingdom *Animalia*, but to note that the scriptural injunction to “ask the beasts” would seem to push the seeker beyond the boundaries of the human community. In Darwin’s wake, fields of scientific inquiry—ethology, for one—have developed that allow for greater attention to the communication of the beasts themselves. A theological dialogue with ethology could enable a more literal (perhaps perversely literal) approach to the task of asking the beasts, each according to their kind. The purpose of raising these points is not to suggest that *Ask the Beasts* should have been a different book so much as to gratefully acknowledge Johnson’s pathbreaking work toward further apophatic engagement with the life sciences.

Johnson allows Darwin to take the podium as spokesperson for the beasts, partly on the rationale that his inquiry (and human inquiry more generally) has produced the scientific tradition with the most advanced understanding of our shared creaturely origins.17 The preface to *Ask the Beasts* begins with Holmes Rolston's assertion that the development of human consciousness is a "third Big Bang." Just as space-time-matter qualitatively differs from the hyper-dense formation that produced our universe, and just as living creatures qualitatively differ from the organized collections of matter that preceded them, Rolston claims that human consciousness differs qualitatively from the consciousness of all other animals.18 Though

17 Ibid., 241.
Rolston's scheme provides license for a strong human exceptionalism, Johnson’s text sits uneasily with such a position. On one hand, Johnson acknowledges that recent scientific work has made clear that the difference between human beings and other creatures is "less absolute" than previously thought. 19 Likewise, human consciousness remains the product of a common evolutionary history as (in Karl Rahner's terms), the highest expression of matter’s tendency toward self-transcendence under the guidance of the Spirit. 20 On the other hand, *Ask the Beasts* holds shades of exceptionalism in the claim that human self-reflection and symbolic expression entail that the human is not “simply one more sibling” in the family of living creatures. 21 Such a claim qualifies the kinship metaphor from Johnson’s earlier book, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, in which Johnson argues that human intelligence and human freedom do not “break the kinship” of human beings with other creatures. 22

At issue here is how to understand Johnson’s designation of humanity as a “singularity.” 23 Do human beings differ from other creatures in a manner analogous to the ways that other species differ from one another, so that every species is a singularity? Or, are human beings categorically different from all other living creatures, such that “animal” is a coherent category that can be opposed to “human.” The overwhelming majority of the Christian theological tradition has subscribed to the latter position, while the force of Johnson’s text certainly pushes toward the former. Rooted in apophatic sensibilities, the remainder of this essay looks for theological insight where categorical human exceptionalism is abandoned altogether.

21 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 240-41
22 Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 37; for other metaphors expressing humanity’s inseparability from the natural world see *Ask the Beasts*, 195-96, 240-41.
They Fell Silent When We Stopped Listening

Apophatic theology has excelled at marking the limits of discursive thought in any approach to God. In its long history, however, apophaticism has generally been guided by some version of the great chain of being, recognizing discourse’s limits only in considering realities that are “above” human existence. If we can shake the great chain of being loose for a moment, however, we recognize other frontiers that persistently repel the intrusion of thought and language. Catherine Keller has recently argued that apophaticism provides an alternate approach to our knowledge of fellow creatures. “The ancient *via negativa* now offers its mystical unsaying, which is a nonknowing of God, to the uncertainty that infects our knowing of anything that is not God.”24 Turning apophaticism toward “lower” creaturely relations cultivates respectful awareness regarding just how little we know about the pluriform and variegated lives of earth’s many animals.

Do we need justification for transforming apophaticism from a mystical strategy for knowing God to a relational strategy for interacting with others? One approach particularly amenable to Johnson’s work could combine a Thomistic account of creaturely participation with Gregory of Nyssa’s insight that creaturely being participates not only in God’s virtue, but also in God’s incomprehensibility.25 Just as theological apophaticism does not deny the knowledge of God altogether, but shapes a strategic fidelity to God’s mystery as it exceeds every discursive


approach, so also creaturely apophaticism is an unknowing meant to expand the terrain in which mutual knowledge dwells.\textsuperscript{26}

A few starting points: Within their social networks (which, in many cases bridge multiple species) animals communicate regularly and effectively. It remains controversial to refer to these longstanding, culturally inflected, socially transmitted patterns of communication as languages, but the connection is both justifiable and illuminating.\textsuperscript{27} Of course, these patterns of communication do not have the same complexity, structure, or function within the social networks that employ them. The wiggle-dance of a bee follows a different logic, has a different range of communicative possibility, and serves a different purpose than the trunk-to-mouth greeting of an elephant. Accordingly, no creaturely language can be translated into another without loss or remainder—a difficulty that explicitly includes expressing any animal communication within the logic, structure, purpose, and emotional range of human language. I begin from the supposition, then, that human communication does not categorically differ from all other creaturely communication any more or less than dolphin communication does, but represents a highly specialized and intricate form.\textsuperscript{28} Human languages are highly variable sets of audible, written, and/or corporeal practices constrained by particular social-cultural contexts that

\textsuperscript{26} Keller, \textit{Cloud of the Impossible}, 23.


(falteringly) communicate meaning inflected by a wide range of actual or assumed postures, gesticulations, phonic/tonic variations, and interpersonal histories. On such a definition, patterns of nonhuman animal communication are analogous.

Following this understanding of language, an apophatic approach to “asking the beasts” begins with two convictions: First, we human beings are largely ignorant of vast tracts of animal interiority, worlds (or experiences of the world) that find some form of expression through animal communication. Second, access to any one of these worlds requires immense patience, careful study, a highly refined creative empathy, and something akin to social generosity on the part of fellow creatures. Even so, such access will be partial, obscure, and immensely prone to misunderstanding.

The first conviction acknowledges animal interiority—what Jakob von Euxkill called Umwelt. Nonhuman animals have rich conscious experience of the world(s) that they inhabit corresponding to their own drives, physiology, sociality, and interests. Again, extending interiority and mindfulness beyond the human species does not posit consciousness as a homogenous quality that creatures participate in to varying degrees (slugs hardly at all, chimpanzees quite a lot). Pace Heidegger, every perceptive creature is Weltbildend (world-building) because “the world” is not a single, objective experience to which creatures have varying amounts of access, but a reflection of the structured, contextual interests of each species. Likewise, every conscious creature is Weltarm—poor in the “worlds” of other species.29 For example, decades of study convinced Joyce Poole that elephants have rich emotional lives that partially overlap with the emotions familiar to us, but also filled with emotions that we humans

cannot experience, since our social formation and interests differ drastically. A good acknowledgment with which to begin a creaturely apophaticism would be that we humans are poor in elephant-world (among so many others).

The second conviction recognizes that because of our intractable differences, the minds of nonhuman creatures will necessarily remain partially opaque to us. We may devote our attention to the details of interactive behavior and hone our capacity for empathy, but the differences in our drives, senses, and socialization will necessarily always set an abyss between us and fellow creatures, which description and understanding can never fully cross. As Anthony Paul Smith perceptively argues, nature is always perverse with respect to human thought; no campaign of thought can escape nature in order to grasp it in determinate form.

The confidence, unflagging across millennia, that human intelligence really is the high water mark for cognitive capacity on earth has been asserted more often than tested when it comes to nonhuman communication. Are human beings intelligent enough to learn—even rudimentarily—the languages of chimpanzees, corvids, cetaceans, or prairie dogs? We have tested a long entourage of creatures for the capacity to learn human language, but hardly allowed the obverse question to gain traction on our imagination. We have presumed to be teachers without challenging our minds as students, only occasionally acknowledging the bias inherent in using ourselves as the measure of intelligence. Since many animals communicate regularly, we must acknowledge that they have something to say—even when it is not to us. Even so, our barely-conscious habits of projection, interruption, and interpretation functionally deny language

to animals by another route. We too often assume that we already know what an animal *would be saying*, and we speak it for them, foreclosing their expression by containing it within a familiar language that already reflects human interests and concerns.\(^3\) Apophasis negates the projections that rush to extend human thought and language beyond their limits; an unsaying that knows there is more to be said than we yet perceive. As such, disciplined apophasis remains particularly appropriate for any effort to ask the beasts.

Stephen Clark offers a reminder that many of our religious practices are meant to shut up our “relentless ego,” our “self-critical monologue,” our rationalizations, and linguistic fixations. In this light, irony pervades the Christian theological tradition’s insistence that human language and human consciousness are a privileged conduit for relation with God, a conduit that remains closed to other creatures.\(^4\) Perhaps our prejudices regarding human exceptionalism have obscured many of the more significant differences among creatures, and as Clark suggests, perhaps one difference is that many animals are *more* religious than we humans are—or, to eschew linear comparison, *differently* religious.\(^5\)

The worlds of many nonhuman creatures may not include a God or gods. Those that do may not associate divinity with transcendence, norms, origins, and ends. Yet, there may be as many names for God as there are animal languages. We cannot know without asking. Learning about such names would require something like a quotidian spiritual ethology. I will sketch the possibilities for such inquiry by turning to ethologist Marc Bekoff, philosopher Valerie Plumwood, and stories of feral children.

\(^3\) Derrida, *Animal*, 18, 48.


Through his work on canids (i.e. wolves, coyotes, foxes, dogs), Marc Bekoff has earned recognition as a leading figure in ethology, a field that includes well-known scientists such as Konrad Lorenz, Niko Tinbergen, Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Frans de Waal. Ethology is the study of animal behavior patterns within their own social-ecological context, with attention to adaptive-evolutionary function. Building on his scientific work, Bekoff makes philosophical arguments repudiating the idea that morality and emotion belong to human life alone. Bekoff has discerned norms that govern fairness, empathy, cooperation, and generosity along with manifestations of richly textured emotional experiences particular to the social formations and interests of each species. The wholesale denial of morality and emotion to nonhuman species is, in Bekoff’s words, “bad biology.” Bekoff is careful not to claim that the emotions and morality of caribou or coyotes map seamlessly onto human morality and emotions—or even that they occupy the same spectrum. Rather, he argues for a species-relative view of morality because the social structures of different species (and occasionally interspecies communities) reward and censure behaviors according to a variety of norms and through a variety of mechanisms. Bekoff’s work reveals how much we have to learn about the interiority and sociality of fellow creatures and begins to demonstrate how we might go about learning it.

Val Plumwood encourages us to attend to our “familiars.” Familiars include companion animals, but especially the individual creatures that we encounter (and who encounter us) on a

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daily basis, be it while walking through a park, on a subway platform, or across campus.\textsuperscript{38} We have the chance with our familiars to listen, observe, and develop an empathetic curiosity about the worlds they inhabit. Doing so, Plumwood argues, requires abandoning the homogenous Cartesian conception of mind, which functions according to an on/off binary incapable of recognizing structural difference: Are you a thinking thing or a not-thinking thing?\textsuperscript{39} Conceiving creaturely mindfulness as pluriform—not subject to measurement upon a single (human) scale—inculcates curiosity about these “other nations” living according to their own moral, emotional, linguistic, social and mental attunements.\textsuperscript{40} It would also place human beings in relationships where we have as much to learn from fellow creatures as we have to teach.\textsuperscript{41} Our narrowest definitions of rationality are too cramped to take in the longstanding ecological intelligence of so many of our creaturely neighbors. Further, it is the “rational decisions” of \textit{homo economicus} that drive ecocidal human behavior, legally binding corporate boards (for one example) to prioritize shareholder profit over workers’ well-being, the survival of threatened species, and long term ecological resilience.\textsuperscript{42} An everyday spiritual ethology would place human beings in \textit{social} and \textit{political} relationships with fellow creatures where we currently see (at best!) managerial responsibility or (more often) colonial control and exploitation.\textsuperscript{43}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Plumwood} Plumwood, \textit{Feminism}, 137-38; Ingold, “Hunting and Gathering,” 32.
\bibitem{Plumwood1} Plumwood, \textit{Environmental Culture}, 176-79.
\bibitem{Keller} Keller, \textit{Apocalypse Now}, 175.
\end{thebibliography}
Another entryway into a quotidian spiritual ethology might be found in the documented stories of feral children—human children living with bears, leopards, wolves, monkeys, gazelles, and even birds. These stories limn the possibilities for communicative encounters with nonhuman animals and perhaps indicate a trajectory of escape from exploitative human relations with fellow creatures. For these exceedingly rare children, human kinship with nonhuman creatures is not simply a metaphor for deep ecological interdependence but a life-sustaining material and social bond. What might these kinship relationships teach us about what it might mean to “ask the beasts”?

Most stories of feral children are framed in tragedy. Whatever cruel events bring human children to their animal kin, as H. Peter Steeves notes, when children are discovered living with animals, the animals who cared for the human children are often killed. Violence also pervades attempts to socialize and civilize the children according to human norms. One boy, discovered living with gazelles, was subjected to surgery cutting the tendons in his legs after his caretakers/captors found his persistent leaping and bounding unnerving. In another case, Amala and Kamala, siblings eighteen months and eight years old, were discovered living with wolves in India, were “rescued” by a minister, Reverend Singh, and taken to an orphanage where Amala died within a year. This tragic plot line repeats itself in stories of feral children because their

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44 See Johnson, Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit, 29-34 for a development of kinship metaphors for ecotheology.


47 Because the account of Amala and Kamala comes primarily from a diary kept by Reverend Singh, (later published in collaboration with an American academic R.M. Zinng), there have been suspicions that the story was fabricated. Other people did, however, provide accounts of visiting the orphanage and meet Kamala, including a local bishop. Though other stories could serve in its place, I use their story here (without making claims on its veracity) because it is relatively famous and well-documented. See Candland, Feral Children, 54-55, 375 n.40.
familiar human corporeal form is perceived as a promise that is betrayed by nonhuman
movement and socialization. Feral children, by their very existence, pull back the curtain on the
operative normativity of “humanity” as a cultural production.48

The unnecessary cruelty and tragedy of their stories aside, these children demonstrate that
in the absence of “proper” human socialization, humans are plastic enough to be socialized as
gazelles, as wolves, as bears. Even after years of reeducation, Kamala was still, in many senses, a
wolf: “She learned few words, raced around on all fours, preferred the company of dogs to
humans, and frightened the other orphans by prowling at night, sniffing and growling near their
beds in the moonlight.”49 When her young sister died, she mourned by remaining in one corner
of the orphanage, “moving only to smell all of the places that Amala had frequented.”50
Kamala’s world took shape according to a wolfish use of the senses. She did not simply act like
a wolf, she perceived the world as a wolf; she inhabited a wolf’s world.51 Through wolf-
approximations and wolf-adaptations in their human bodies, Amala and Kamala communicated
well enough to become kin with wolves. As far as one can tell, these children saw their real kin
as wolves and their real sense of themselves was that of a wolf—their animal formation was no
veneer.52 What can be said theologically about Amala, Kamala, and their wolf-kin?

Even in outline, the feral children’s stories can teach us quite a lot. On the one hand, it
seems, human beings are intelligent enough to learn languages in use among fellow creatures.

Press, 2004), 15-16, 21; Kelly Oliver, Oliver, Kelly. Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human (New York:
Verso, 2010), 76-77, 94-95.

49 Candland, Feral Children, 59-62; Steeves, Things Themselves, 19.

50 Candland, Feral Children, 66.

51 Candland, Feral Children, 27.

52 Steeves, Things Themselves, 33; see also Oliver, Animal Pedagogy, 226-27.
On the other hand, what is required for such communication is considerably more immersive than developing a lexicon or a science-fiction translation device. One must become-wolf to learn to communicate with wolves, and this becoming is a (re)construction of the world as much as it is a (re)construction of the self. Beckoff, Plumwood, and feral children help us to see a transformation that Aldo Leopold described as the difference between “man [sic] the conqueror” and “man the biotic citizen.” Leopold likely conceived the “social approbation and social approval” that govern his famous land ethic as functions of human society but, as Cynthia Willett argues (and feral children demonstrate), there is no reason why humans could not expand our socio-moral sensitivity beyond our species boundary. To become sensitive to our socio-political-ecological interdependence upon our creaturely neighbors, we would need, as Jane Bennett puts it, to “devise new procedures, technologies, and regimes of perception that enable us to consult nonhumans more closely, or to listen and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies, and propositions.” Apophatic theology, with its attention to the limits of human thought and language and its exploration of alternate modes of knowing, can undoubtedly offer some of the “procedures, technologies, and regimes of perception” that would be necessary to learn to listen differently. Hard as it may be for our untrained noses to follow, the promise of apophatic theology in relation to other creatures tracks along the scent of this pathway. To ask the beasts is to give up on the notion of an easy translation, a simple extraction of wolf-knowledge that can be theologically thematized. Yet, it is arbitrary to insist that only the structure of human consciousness, perception, intelligence, and emotion allow for experience of

God as creator. In scripture, Job calls our bluff, “Ask the beasts and they will tell you, the hand of the Lord has done this.” We have yet to learn to frame the question.

**Conclusion**

Apophatic theology multiplies descriptions for God, trusting that each name communicates something truthful, while simultaneously placing every name under negation because creaturely thought and language (in all its forms) remains inadequate to the task. If the chimpanzees’ famous waterfall dance orients them in wonder and reverence—by no means a settled question—then apophatic theology offers no reason to discount the accuracy and perspicacity of such a symbolic experience simply because its experiential subject is a chimpanzee.\(^{56}\) Whatever chimpanzee experience of God might be (and we would have to ask to know), it is surely structured differently than the wide range of human religious experiences. Traditionally, that structural difference has been a reason to dismiss animal experience as theologically irrelevant; it could also, however, represent an enticement. What could we learn from such an experience of God? And here, we circle back toward Johnson’s theological project: Expositing scripture and tradition in connection with the widest range of creaturely experience would surely raise up forgotten symbols for God, and new ones too—symbols that function differently within their eco-socio-political context, opening a more expansive vision of justice and creaturely flourishing. I will conclude with theological rationale—both warrants and potential results—for a creaturely apophasis laboring to ask the beasts.

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We can begin by returning to the book of Job. Job’s text gives the final dramatic speech to God, who answers Job’s lamenting inquisitions by pushing Job back toward his fellow creatures—Leviathan, lions, mountain goats, and all the rest. The significance of this divine speech has been variously understood by its many interpreters, but its content is surely an elaborate repetition of Job’s words from chapter 12. God does not presume to speak for the creatures, but calls Job to attend to the creaturely experience of all his nonhuman neighbors, effectively saying, “ask the beasts and they will tell you, the hand of the Lord has done this.”

Practicing his own apophasis, Job realizes that he has been speaking too much, and places his words under erasure to listen more carefully (Job 42:1-6). Catherine Keller is surely correct that Genesis’ notion of human dominion stands in stark tension with Job’s humbler positioning of humanity among God’s creatures. Moreover, Christian theology has surely taken guidance from Genesis’ arrangement rather than Job’s. Given the deleterious ecological effects of even our most benevolent stewardship, it is high time for a corrective emphasis on Job’s creaturely entanglement. Animal apophaticism could provide an introduction to long-overdue apprenticeships in creaturehood, an escape hatch from the constrained rationality of capitalism toward cultural/political transformations that reconfigure human goods and goals into resonance with the resilient thriving of fellow creatures.

Second, Christian theology ought to note that the New Testament’s loftiest christological statements—John’s prologue and the first chapter of Colossians, for example—connect Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection with the entire cosmos. Stephen Moore notes that the christology in

57 Johnson, Ask the Beasts, 271.
Revelation—arguably the New Testament’s strongest links between Jesus and divinity—reaches its highest pitch precisely where it is an *animal* christology.60 Jesus is worshipped as a lamb by a host of other strange creatures (Revelation 4-5). It required real work, then, for the Christian theological tradition to constrict its purview to human concerns alone while also reading the New Testament. Johnson proposes an emphasis on “deep resurrection” to match recent interest in “deep incarnation,” a notion that takes stock of the cosmic implications of God’s life in flesh.

Creaturely apophaticism represents one concrete way to examine “the risen Christ’s affiliation [with] the whole natural world.”61 The Spirit draws creatures into the life of the resurrection wherever she blows and the whole creation groans with the Spirit (Romans 8). What might we learn by attending to these groans with an empathetic, rather than a managerial ear?

Third, the eccentricity of a creaturely apophaticism pairs well with the eccentricities of Christian hagiography. In over a millennium of hagiographic tradition, the ability to communicate with wild animals has signified sanctity and spiritual clarity. The examples are plentiful: lions help Anthony to bury the body of Paul in the Egyptian desert, a stag preaches to Eustathios/Eustace, birds and wolves attend to the words of Francis of Assisi, and a bear brings honey to Seraphim of Sarov. It is true that the communication largely takes place in human languages and that hagiography is dubious (at best) as a record of historical events, but these stories testify to a longstanding theological conviction largely abandoned in the present: that individual animals bear a substantial connection to God internal to the structure of their own perception, intellection, and experience. In hagiography, cross-species communication functions to forge bonds of cooperation, but contemporary theological discourse has lost the capacity for


61 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 208-209.
such imaginative possibilities. Nevertheless, asking the beasts through a quotidian spiritual
ethology would hardly be novel within the Christian tradition.

Fourth, a creaturely apophaticism represents the first step of an ecotheology that addresses
the pitfalls of mainstream environmentalism. In practice, environmentalism tends to enshrine the
same managerial approach to the natural world (albeit in a chastened and respectful mode) that
produced the ecological overreach it redresses. That is to say, the operative notion of human
identity and agency within mainstream environmentalism still celebrates the hallmarks of
enlightenment humanism. Very little in our social formation allows us to think of our
relationships to fellow creatures as constitutive of our personalities, our subjectivity, and our
agency. In part, it is this ecologically detached self-concept that constrains our collective moral
imagination to responding to ecological degradation through conscientious consumerism,
wildlife preserves, and superficial changes to economic policy.62 An apophatic reconception of
human agency and human entanglement with fellow creatures offers a significant alternative and
a rich starting point for ecotheology.63

Indebted to Elizabeth Johnson’s model of putting apophasis to work in service of those
whose experience and speech have been invalidated, I have sketched a creaturely apophasis
adequate to the vocation of asking the beasts. The first step toward such a vocation is to cultivate
passionate curiosity about the many minds and tongues shaped differently than our own, yet no
less enmeshed in God’s creation. What shape those minds and tongues (or tails, postures, colors,
and scents) give to the knowledge of God is a question that has almost never been asked.

62 These changes are commendable, to be sure, but woefully incommensurate to the scale of anthropogenic
ecological degradation.

Ask the beasts? Admittedly, we still lack the words.

**Further Reading:**


