

How to Be Animal: The Case Against Human Exceptionalism

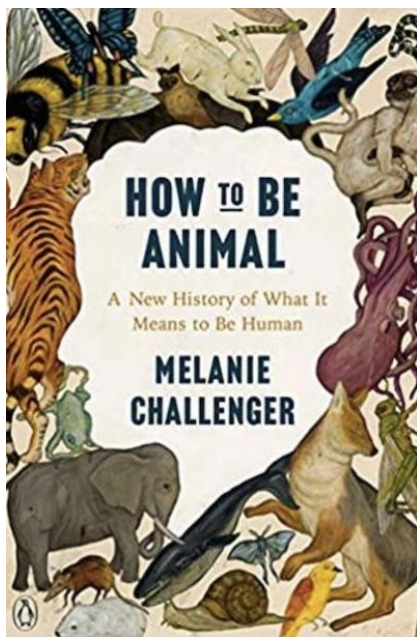
Interview by [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today / Animal Emotions](#)

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A new book explains why we should embrace the fact that we are animals.

I'm always amazed and somewhat disappointed when I read or hear phrases such as "humans and animals," as if humans aren't animals. Of course, we are. That's why, when I refer to other animals, I first write or say "nonhuman animals (animals)" to [stress](#) that we are, in fact, members of the animal kingdom and [should be proud of it](#).

It's precisely for this and other reasons that I am thrilled to offer an interview with [Melanie Challenger](#) about her riveting new book called [How to Be Animal: A New History of What It Means to Be Human](#).^{1,2} Here's what she had to say about her landmark work.



Why did you write *How to Be Animal*?

Many years ago, I wrote a book about extinctions—both biological and cultural—and what historical stages led to our estranged relationship with nature—estranged, in as much as we've become a species that is disruptive and, for some, disconnected from the earth systems and species with which we live and survive. At the end of that inquiry, I had noted what a strange psychological relationship many of us have with being organisms, with being animal, mortal, and so forth. That is going back more than 10 years ago now, but that was the starting point of what eventually became this book. It seemed to me then that we can't understand how we've arrived at the biodiversity crisis or climate change unless we understand the ways we've thought about what it means to be human and how our natural origins on the Earth matter to us.

How does your book relate to your background and general areas of interest?

After studying biocultural extinctions for my first book on [the environment](#) and nature, I shifted more into environmental [philosophy](#) and bioethics. I'm a member of the UK's de facto national bioethics body and

collaborate with a number of environmental philosophers around the world on various projects. *How to Be Animal* draws on this diverse background. It asks the questions: What are humans, how do we fit within the natural order of life on Earth, and what flows morally and psychologically from our reality as an animal?

Who is your intended audience?

I do much of the heavy lifting in this book. So there's a lot of philosophy—philosophy of mind, for instance—behind the scenes in the book but I was determined that this should be for general readers who are intrigued by our place in nature and big questions of what it means to be alive but don't necessarily want to wade through lengthy tomes on philosophy. I hope that this can be read by anyone with an enquiring mind. In particular, I think this book is for those who wonder about the future and how we can forge a better relationship with nature.

What are some of the topics you weave into the text and what are some of your major messages?

Being animal is so fundamental to our existence that I pull from a very wide range of topics. The sciences probably dominate, from biology to [neuroscience](#), but there's a lot of psychology, philosophy, and also anthropology in the book.

My primary message is that we've been mistaken in thinking we can somehow escape being animals. In many ways, the book is a deep critique of [human exceptionalism](#), but I don't straightforwardly claim that there's a better culture out there to which we could revert or that there's an easy answer to the many dilemmas that arise from accepting our mortal, animal reality. Rather, I ask us to try and recognise the difficult, critical thinking that is required of us. I also ask that we attempt, as best we can, to play to the strengths of human nature. I bring in questions of human origins and of the future—from [AI](#) to bioengineering. I look at our troubled relationship with other species and the complexity and richness to be found in the natural world. And I look at the many ways we've responded to being animal, psychologically and ideologically, and how being animal affects everything from our [politics](#) to the ways we interact with our kids. So there's a lot of ground covered!

How does your book differ from others that are concerned with some of the same general topics?

Within philosophy, our animal nature has been curiously ignored. Aristotle, Schopenhauer, and, more recently, Derrida have all done battle with being animal, but generally, philosophers, especially of Western traditions, have preferred to sideline discussions of the animal. There are many books that consider other animals, ethically and morally, but few that have directly tackled what it means for us to be an animal ourselves. This is a curiosity and one of the reasons I really wanted to take this on. I hope, in this way, it offers a big picture look at what it means for us to be an animal, embracing science as much as philosophy.

Are you hopeful that things will change for the better as people (re)connect with other animals based on some of what you've written?

I hope first that we arrive at a more nourishing acceptance of our own reality—that we cease to be so alarmed by what it means to be animals ourselves. I think we could all use a greater sense of peace, even of joy, in the condition of life, even though it involves things that are frightening to us, like death. And from this acceptance, I hope that we can recognise our interconnectedness in a multispecies community. I think if we could play to the strengths of our social psychology—of what it is to build coalitions, to collaborate, to learn from one another, to nurture—and see our role within nature as a more affiliative one—that would be an extraordinary step in the history of life on Earth.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell readers?

Many people have asked me how this book relates to the current pandemic. I think there are so many ways in which the fact that we are animals intersects with the pandemic. Not only is this crisis a reminder of why we have sought to control or escape nature as much as possible, but it is also, ironically, only possible because we're animals.

It is only because we're so highly related to other species that we can catch a virus from a bat and also give that virus to, let's say, tigers or chimpanzees. So, too, it is only an exceptionalist mindset—that only humans matter and other species have little or no moral standing—that has justified the kinds of intrusions into nature, deforestation, wildlife markets, animal experiments, etc that can lead to spillover events. So I think the book is a useful starting point for thinking about the broad context in which this pandemic sits.

Notes

1) The book's description reads: Human are the most inquisitive, emotional, imaginative, aggressive, and baffling animals on the planet. But we are also an animal that does not think it is an animal. How well do we really know ourselves? *How to Be Animal* tells a remarkable story of what it means to be human and argues that at the heart of our existence is a profound struggle with being animal. We possess a psychology that seeks separation between humanity and the rest of nature, and we have invented grand ideologies to magnify this. As well as piecing together the mystery of how this mindset evolved, Challenger's book examines the wide-reaching ways in which it affects our lives, from our politics to the way we distance ourselves from other species. We travel from the origin of homo sapiens through the agrarian and industrial revolutions, the age of the internet, and on to the futures of AI and human-machine interface. Challenger examines how technology influences our sense of our own animal nature and our relationship with other species with whom we share this fragile planet. That we are separated from our own animality is a delusion, according to Challenger. Blending nature writing, history, and moral philosophy, *How to Be Animal* is both a fascinating reappraisal of what it means to be human, and a robust defense of what it means to be an animal.

2) Melanie Challenger works as a researcher on the history of humanity and the natural world, and on environmental philosophy. She is the author of *On Extinction: How We Became Estranged from Nature*. She received a Darwin Now Award for her research among Canadian Inuit and the Arts Council International Fellowship with the British Antarctic Survey for her work on the history of whaling. She lives with her family in England. Challenger is the host of the “Enter the Psychosphere” podcast, where she dives into the world of the diverse intelligences that exist on the planet in conversations with guests like Peter Godfrey Smith and Daniel Dennett.

References

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