

## Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphosis may sound like it has nothing to do with you, but if you are clever it is probably pretty important.

The word means “changing to human,” and it describes the tendency people have always had, to decode the world around us in human terms, to project our humanness onto things around us that are not necessarily human.

We do it when we say a beaver likes to keep busy, or an ostrich in the zoo seems perplexed, or we look at the sky and decide it wants to rain. We do this with no real knowledge what a beaver or ostrich or weather system is thinking. It just comes naturally to us to think this way.

With regard to God, it means creating God in man’s image, the reverse of what the Bible says happened. It means, when we picture God, we picture someone who is sort of human. Either he looks human, or has human emotions, or he thinks more or less the way humans do.

We believe, as a point of theology, that humans matter a great deal to God – that he and we are made of the same kind of consciousness. We say he is our father and we are his children – even though we know that isn’t really true.

Anthropomorphosis is widely regarded by the clever as an intellectual crime, something only dumb or parochial or willfully chauvinist people do. Accusing people of it is seen as a can’t miss rhetorical tactic. It’s obviously wrong to do this, and it makes the other guy look like a cretin (another word with interesting and relevant etymology, which I will pass on for now).

Anthropomorphism can be innocent, as when we decide a ladybug is “cute.” People just want to see these little bugs that way. We overlook the evidence of our eyes (that ladybugs are as cruel as any other bug) and project instead our sense of the way humans feel things ought to be – and a bug shaped like a Volkswagen strikes us universally as cute.

It gets less innocent when it dominates our theology. Examples of theological anthropomorphism: calling God “Father,” attributing gender to “him,” thinking of him as a giant grandfather with flowing beard and sandals, attributing human emotions, imagining God has a special place, in this immense empty universe, for one stupid species.

Why do we so despise anthropomorphism? Because science has tried to teach us objectivity, and because history typically shows that whenever people see themselves as the center of the universe – see Ptolemy, for starters – they are wrong. It is one expression form of anthropocentrism – the sense that everything revolves (literally) around us. Thus we see history splitting between the reign of furious yahoos, with their too-human notions of manifest destiny, and real thinkers, who describe the universe based not on jingoism but on hard evidence.

That’s not much of a debate. Pro-anthropomorphism, you have the Bible, which is all about a covenant between the creator of everything and a bunch of anthropoid apes on planet earth. Anti-anthropomorphism, you have all the smart intellectuals who ever suffered at the hands of power-mongering anthropomorphists: Galileo, Darwin, Freud – anyone who ever observed that there is no physical corroboration of the God-man covenant.

So clever people are up against it, challenged by their intellectual superstars to laugh at the tribal arrogance of the anthropomorphists. It’s hard to say no to the likes of Galileo, Darwin, and Freud.

But there is daylight here, and it arises in part out of the very logic that makes anthropomorphism contemptible in the first place – the logic of science. The field of linguistics offers numerous theories about language, and what it comes from. But one of the most compelling is that language springs from our magical sense of metaphor – the idea that there is power in the names we give things, and that most words, if you track them down through their history, mean something.

This is so apparent in contemporary words. In the word *current* we clearly see the Latin root meaning “running.” *Horror* goes back to the Latin word for trembling. *Glyph* comes from the Greek word for “carve.” Even a word as disincorporated and abstractified

as *corporate* derives from the root for the “body.” The roots of metaphor go very deep, back to the first word forms in the Indo-European and other prototypical tongues.

What I am saying is that it is in the nature of language, and therefore in the nature of thinking, to project anthropomorphic meaning onto all things. This creates a built-in anthrocentric bias into everything we know. Even the scientist, eschewing loaded terms for seemingly value-neutral ones, is working with these ancient, magical roots. Think of these metaphors: catalyst (from the Greek for “loosen”), digital (Greek, “finger”), destabilization (Middle English, “where horses stand”).

You see, there is no pure language, apart from mathematics, which is also problematic (Greek, “to throw”). There is no non-anthropomorphic language with which we can neutrally name things. There is only the naturally anthropomorphic one that everyone – scientists included – must use. Because we’re people.

Knowing this, it is easier to go to the followers of Galileo, Darwin, and Freud and say, hey guys, forgive us for our parochialism, but this is the way we were made. Our way of naming things and explaining them to ourselves is inherently and inescapably “human.”

Then I would go a step further. This way of thinking is not only inevitable, in the sense that metaphor is sunk into us at the cellular levels, and is not likely to be extracted by a weekend of Wittgenstein or Bergson. It is not just inevitable, but it is the source of our most enormous power as humans. The power to name things (however taintedly) and to make them our own is the key to human hegemony on our planet. This “power of metaphor” is the reason we’re in charge, and not llamas.

It is the driving force behind commerce, persuasion, poetry, art – behind all human communication.

So I think what we are facing is a prejudice against anthropomorphism that is not really well thought out.

When someone frowns and accuses you of anthropomorphism, and are therefore unable to think clearly, the wrong answer is “I’m so sorry, my intellectual superior.” The right answer is, “It’s the only way, baby, and ain’t it a gas!”

Now, what does all this linguistic folderol (no origin, it is a made-up word) mean vis a vis God?

I want to tell clever people that anthropomorphism is another trap we set to make ourselves feel better about not getting God. Poke fun at folks who say “Our father” as savages dressed up in polyester suits misses a huge point, and one that most clever people do not wish to make – that prayer connects us to these wonderful, primitive shamanic thoughts.

I mean, we like those, right? It’s just the “grandfather in the rocking chair” idea that we disdain.

Then there is the almost unthinkable, unscientific possibility – that we see God in human terms because we really are living in a kind of fairy tale, in which good and evil are duking it out for the hand of fair Eternity. And in the starry vastness of the cosmos, a bet has been placed on us funny bipeds.

In other words, what if – unforgivable thought – he really is, in some mind-boggling way -- “our father”?