

The gift in the animal:

The ontology of hunting and human–animal sociality

ABSTRACT

Many hunting peoples conceive of hunting as a process of reciprocal exchange between hunters and other-than-human persons, and anthropologists have tended to view such accounts as purely symbolic or metaphorical. To the extent that our theories deny the validity of northern hunters' conceptions of animals and the ontological assumptions on which they are based, however, we legitimize agents of the state when they dismiss the possibility that aboriginal knowledge and practices might serve as the factual basis for making wildlife management policy. In this article, I argue that our refusal to consider aboriginal accounts of hunting as perhaps literally as well as metaphorically valid has both contributed to the marginalization of aboriginal peoples and foreclosed important avenues of inquiry into hunting societies and the nature of human–animal relations. I focus on human–animal relations as a form of reciprocal exchange and argue that the development of a theoretical framework that can accommodate northern hunters' ontological assumptions is warranted theoretically as well as politically. [*hunting, human–animal relations, reciprocity, traditional/indigenous knowledge, ontology, radical participation, Subarctic, Yukon*]

All the animals used to be people before.¹

—Joseph Johnson, Kluane First Nation

Anthropologists have long been aware that many northern hunting peoples conceive of animals as other-than-human persons who give themselves to hunters. By accepting such gifts from their animal benefactors, hunters incur a debt that must be repaid through the performance of certain ritual practices (e.g., Hallowell 1960; Speck 1935).² These practices vary across the North—as well as by animal—but they commonly include food taboos, ritual feasts, and prescribed methods for disposing of animal remains, as well as injunctions against overhunting and talking badly about, or playing with, animals (Nadasdy 2003:88–94). Hunting in such societies should not be viewed as a violent process whereby hunters take the lives of animals by force. Rather, hunting is more appropriately viewed as a long-term relationship of reciprocal exchange between animals and the humans who hunt them.

In wildlife management meetings and land claim negotiations throughout the Yukon, government officials listen to First Nation people's accounts of animal personhood and reciprocity with polite—and often quite genuine—interest. After all, these officials now publicly extol the value of “traditional ecological knowledge” possessed by First Nation elders and hunters, and they are working with them to cooperatively manage wildlife and other resources throughout the territory. Even so, conceptions of animals as persons who engage in reciprocal social relations with humans never seem to form the basis for wildlife management decisions, nor do they find their way into the provisions of First Nation land claim agreements.³ Elsewhere (Nadasdy 1999, 2003, 2005a) I have examined these political processes in some detail to understand why, despite over two decades of efforts to make use of traditional or indigenous knowledge, Northern hunters' conceptions about animals continue to be marginalized. In this article, I consider the role anthropological theory has played in this marginalization.

In her study of Aboriginal land claims in Australia, Elizabeth Povinelli (1993, 1995) points out that social theorists—regardless of how sympathetic we may be to the plight of aboriginal peoples—are implicated in their political marginalization because of the a priori assumptions we bring to our theorizing. Even as we argue for the importance and legitimacy of indigenous knowledge and practices, our own theories remain rooted in Euro-American ontological assumptions that are fundamentally incompatible with them. Critical social theory, then, finds itself in an oddly ambiguous position with respect to aboriginal peoples. As Povinelli puts it, “while political-economic theory has aided in unpacking the material and social relations of state domination and exploitation of Fourth World communities, . . . it has done little to overturn the basic tenets of Western notions about the qualitative divides among humans (subject-agents), non-intentional animals (predators-prey), and objects (insentient things)” (1995:515). Insofar as social theorists maintain such ontological distinctions, Povinelli argues, we provide government officials with the very models they use to justify the delegitimization of indigenous knowledge and the extension of the state’s authority over aboriginal peoples.

Povinelli’s argument certainly rings true for the North American Arctic and Subarctic. Although anthropologists and others have done important work there analyzing the political and economic inequalities of northern hunters’ forcible incorporation into modern nation-states (e.g., Coates 1985; Feit 1982; Langdon 1986), we have tended to treat northern hunters’ conceptions of animals and human-animal relations as “cultural constructions,” implying that they are purely symbolic or metaphorical, rather than real (see Ingold 2000:40–60). As Povinelli points out, the very act of representing such conceptions of the world as beliefs—rather than as “methods for ascertaining truth” (1995:506)—necessarily reinforces the state’s monopoly over the terms of debate and the criteria for assessing value and justice. Aboriginal peoples’ understandings of animals and human-animal relations may now have legal standing as “traditional culture” in liberal multicultural states like Canada and Australia (and, as endangered elements of cultural diversity, they are even eligible for protection), but they cannot serve as the factual basis on which to build wildlife management policy or land claim agreements (see Povinelli 1995). To argue (as I think at least some anthropologists would like to do) that they should be used in these ways necessarily entails a fundamental rethinking of our approach to hunters’ ontological assumptions about the world. In short, we must acknowledge that they are not just cultural constructions and accept instead the possibility that they may be actually (as well as metaphorically) valid. For the most part, however, we have refused to do this.

In this article, I take seriously the possibility that northern hunters’ conceptions of animals and human-animal re-

lations might embody literal as well as metaphorical truths. To this end, I focus in particular on the widespread idea that animals give themselves to hunters as part of an ongoing relationship of reciprocal exchange. Certainly there is room for a healthy skepticism about whether animals really do consciously give themselves to hunters, but I argue that blanket refusals to even consider human-animal reciprocity as a set of social practices (as opposed to being merely an idiom hunters use to talk about their relations with animals) have prevented us from asking important questions about hunting societies and the nature of human-animal relations.⁴

The approach I am suggesting also presents a radical challenge to social theory itself. As Povinelli (1993, 1995) and Tim Ingold (2000) have argued, taking aboriginal peoples’ ideas seriously (i.e., as understandings that might inform our own theories about the world rather than as merely symbolic constructs, however socially useful) necessarily entails rethinking many of the most basic concepts of social theory: personhood, agency, knowledge, power, labor, exchange. It is beyond the scope of this article to present a thorough analysis of hunting-as-reciprocity and explore all its theoretical implications. My goal, instead, is to make the case that such an analysis is warranted, theoretically as well as politically.

I begin by examining anthropologists’ reluctance to apply standard insights of exchange theory to their analyses of human-animal relations in hunting societies. I consider the theoretical justifications for (and implications of) doing so by looking at examples from both my own fieldwork with the people of Kluane First Nation in the Southwest Yukon and the broader literature on northern hunting peoples of North America. In the process, I engage closely with some of the recent interdisciplinary literature on animals and human-animal relations, particularly the work of Ingold. Although Ingold’s work provides much of the inspiration for my approach, I suggest that he ultimately shies away from some of the most radical implications of his own work and ends up (despite himself) treating certain important aspects of northern hunters’ conceptions about human-animal relations as just metaphor, including the notion that animals are thinking beings who might consciously give themselves to hunters. As a means for interrogating the a priori assumptions to which Ingold clings, I invoke Michael Jackson’s call for “radical participation” and introduce an episode from my own fieldwork that has caused me to question some of my own assumptions about the world. I maintain that by challenging such assumptions and remaining open to the possibility that there might be some literal truth to what hunters tell us, we can gain important insights into hunting societies and the nature of human-animal relations and at the same time avoid reinforcing state control over aboriginal peoples and their way of life.

The gift in the animal

From early studies of the potlatch to reconstructions of the “original affluent society” (Sahlins 1972), hunting peoples have long held a prominent place in the development of exchange theory in anthropology. Most hunting societies are characterized by extensive sharing of food and other resources, and their small size has made it relatively easy to trace and analyze the social relations created through and maintained by these kinds of exchange. For this reason, an understanding of the gift and the social relations associated with it have long been essential to the study of hunting societies, and anthropologists studying such societies have generally been quick to apply insights from other parts of the world to their understanding of interpersonal relations among hunters. Yet we have been reluctant to countenance the belief that hunting is literally an instance of reciprocity between humans and animals by applying these same tools to the analysis of human–animal relations. This reluctance is evident in the assumption—widespread in the anthropological literature on hunting in the North—that the idea of hunting-as-reciprocity is but one of two contradictory principles that govern human–animal relations.⁵ Numerous scholars have maintained that although hunters do indeed sometimes see themselves as engaged in a relationship of reciprocal exchange with their quarry, at other times these same hunters express beliefs and engage in practices that seem to deny such a relationship. To illustrate this, I will refer to two of the finest and most sophisticated analyses of human–animal relations among northern hunting peoples. In *Bringing Home Animals*, Adrian Tanner’s study of human–animal relations among the Mistassini Cree, he describes a number of phenomena that he argues are “at odds with the model of positive exchange relations” between humans and animals (1979:176). These include activities—mostly magical—carried out by hunters with the expressed intention of coercing or tricking animals so that the hunters can kill them. The phenomena also include the belief that animals (or their keepers) will visit sickness, starvation, or other misfortune on hunters who fail to meet their ritual obligations. Similarly, in *Grateful Prey*, Robert Brightman (1993:ch. 7) argues that a tension exists between two distinct and mutually contradictory principles governing human–animal relations among the Rock Cree in northern Manitoba. These are the principles of “reciprocity,” on the one hand, and “domination,” on the other hand. He argues that although Cree hunters do at times seem to subscribe to the notion that animals give themselves to hunters, at other times these same hunters think of themselves as locked in an adversarial relationship with animals, who are conceived as powerful beings that must be overcome and dominated if the hunters are to survive. He describes an elaborate system of hunting magic, whose explicit aim is to overpower and/or deceive animals so that hunters can kill them. Like

Tanner, Brightman sees this principle of domination—with its elements of coercion and deceit—as antithetical to the principle of reciprocity (1993:200).⁶ After all, if animals really give themselves to hunters, what need would the hunters have for hunting magic to overpower and deceive them?

Both of Brightman’s principles—negative and positive, dominance and reciprocity—have been observed among hunting peoples the world over. Like hunters elsewhere, Kluane people of the Southwest Yukon often talk quite explicitly about animals “giving themselves” to hunters. In 1996, not long after my arrival in Burwash Landing, I learned how to snare rabbits. The first time I found a live rabbit in a snare was something of a crisis. I was alone, and I knew I had to break its neck. Never having killed anything with my bare hands before, I was not really sure what I was doing. The animal suffered as a result, and I felt terrible.⁷ The next day, somewhat recovered from the trauma of this event, I told Joe Johnson, my neighbor and then chief of Kluane First Nation, what had happened and how badly I felt about the rabbit’s suffering. He told me that I must never think that way. The proper reaction, he said, is simply to say a prayer of thanks to the animal; it is disrespectful to think about an animal’s suffering when you kill it. I did not understand that at first. A couple of months later, however, Agnes Johnson, who had since taught me the proper way to kill rabbits, explained it to me. She told me that it was “like at a potlatch.” If someone gives you a gift at a potlatch, it is disrespectful to say or even think anything bad about the gift or to imply that there is some reason why they should not have given it to you (e.g., that they cannot afford such an expensive gift). It is the same with animals, she said. If they give themselves to you, you say a prayer of thanks and accept the gift of meat you have been given. To think about the animals’ suffering, she said, is to find fault with the gift, to cast doubt on whether the animal should have given itself to you in the first place. To do this is to run the risk of giving offense and never receiving such a gift again.

It is significant that Agnes chose to explain the human–animal relationship by drawing an analogy to the potlatch, which Kluane people see as epitomizing relations of reciprocity among humans. She and other Kluane people clearly see themselves as embedded in a web of reciprocal relations with the animals on whom they depend. By accepting the gifts animals make of their own bodies, hunters incur a spiritual debt that they must repay through the observance of a whole series of different ritual attitudes and practices. These ideas continue to structure Kluane people’s lives in important ways (Nadasdy 2003:ch. 2).

At the same time, however, other aspects of Kluane human–animal relations might be characterized by what Brightman has called the negative principle of domination. Kluane people regularly talk about animals as creatures who have to be overcome and/or outsmarted, and they revel in stories that recount a battle of wits between hunter and

animal (see below). Although Kluane people no longer make extensive use of hunting magic like that described by Tanner and Brightman, Catharine McClellan (1975), who did research in the southern Yukon in the late 1940s, notes that such magical practices were common in the not-too-distant past. Not only must animals be cajoled, outsmarted, and/or tricked into giving themselves to the hunter, but they can also present a real threat to the hunter's life and the lives of his or her family. Hunters who fail to meet their ritual obligations toward an animal (obligations incurred through the very act of hunting) run the risk of punishment; the offended animal may exact spiritual retribution by causing the hunter to lose his or her luck in hunting, or they may cause misfortune, sickness, or even death to the hunter or members of his or her family (Nadasdy 2003:ch. 2). And certain animals can present an even more direct—if mundane—threat to life and limb. One hunter, for example, warned me never to fire my last bullet if I am alone in the bush: "Always save at least one so you can get home." He insisted that even if I had wounded an animal but had only a single shell left with which to dispatch it, I should refrain from doing so. Instead, I should go home, get more shells, and then return to track the animal. He seemed to be suggesting that one was better off risking potential spiritual retribution from the wounded animal than walking unarmed into a chance encounter with a bear or wolf (Nadasdy 2005b).

So, I, too, could construct a model of Kluane human-animal relations composed of two contradictory principles: a positive principle of reciprocity and a negative principle of domination. I want to argue here, however, that there is no theoretical need to make such a distinction and, further, that to do so artificially separates aspects of what Kluane people themselves see as a coherent whole. Although the negative principle of domination, with its elements of coercion, deceit, and danger, is certainly incompatible with popular notions about altruistic gift giving, it is not at all incompatible with the anthropological concept of reciprocity. Anthropologists have long been aware that altruistic giving is in fact extremely rare; for the most part, gifts are neither spontaneous nor freely given. Indeed, this was one of Marcel Mauss's (1967) main points, and the anthropological literature is replete with examples of reciprocal exchange systems that embroil their participants in unequal, competitive, and even adversarial relations.

That anthropologists studying the North should have missed this is somewhat surprising considering that even in purportedly egalitarian hunting societies, gift giving and sharing are not as spontaneous and disinterested as are often supposed. Scholars studying social relations among human persons in hunting societies now recognize that people in these societies are seldom as eager to share as they are often portrayed to be (e.g., Kelly 1995:164–165; Myers 1989; Peterson 1993; Woodburn 1998). People will sometimes hide meat to avoid having to share it, and others will demand

shares not freely given. The important social fact is the expectation that people will share. This means that claims on others for meat, as long as they are not excessive, are generally viewed as legitimate by others in the community. This aptly describes the situation in the Southwest Yukon, where Kluane people will often force a gift of meat from a successful hunter through a direct request, opportunistic visiting, indirect accusations of "stinginess," or some other strategy (Nadasdy 2003:72–75).

The anthropological literature on reciprocity, then, makes it clear that gifts are not always freely given; those who wish to receive a gift must often resort to some strategy—whether it be physical, social, or magical—to force the giver to part with the desired gift. As it turns out, all of the attitudes and practices that Brightman, Tanner, and others see as constituting the principle of domination in animal-human interactions have clear analogues in the literature on exchange among humans. This is certainly the case for "hunting magic," which is often viewed as epitomizing the negative principle of domination. In his analysis of the Kula, for instance, Bronislaw Malinowski describes an elaborate system of Kula magic, the whole point of which was to "act directly on the mind . . . of one's partner, and make him soft, unsteady in mind, and eager to give Kula gifts" (Malinowski 1922:102, see also pp. 334–349, 360–365). Mauss, in turn, drew on Malinowski's description of Kula magic to illustrate a general characteristic of reciprocal exchange everywhere: the potentially adversarial relationship between partners in gift exchange (Mauss 1967:23). Much of the hunting magic described by Brightman and others clearly resembles Malinowski's "magic of persuasion" and, so, is actually quite compatible with the notion that animals give themselves as gifts to the hunter. In this light, even the spiritual sanctions that animals impose on hunters (bad luck, sickness, death) can be seen as consistent with a system of reciprocal relations; indeed, these sanctions can be viewed as the flip side of hunting magic, used by animals to coerce hunters into providing them with the required "counter gifts." None of this is to deny that there is a tension between positive and negative aspects of the relationship between hunters and their prey. There is a tension, but it is a tension inherent in the gift relationship itself, rather than arising from a contradiction between two distinct principles of "reciprocity" and "domination." Much like the Trobrianders' Dobuan Kula partners, then, animals must be viewed as powerful and dangerous trading partners.

Animal gifts: Real or metaphor?

The notion that the principle of domination is somehow opposed to the principle of reciprocity is inconsistent with anthropological understandings of exchange. Why, then, have northern anthropologists—who have otherwise demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of exchange theory

in their analyses of human–human relations in the north—seemingly bent over backward to avoid analyzing hunting as a form of reciprocity? Implicit in our refusal to do so is the assumption that, despite what northern hunters themselves may think and say, humans and animals do not actually engage in ongoing reciprocal relations.

One of the basic premises of exchange theory is that reciprocity is a social act. It binds persons to one another through the creation and maintenance of social relations. Because it is a social act, it can occur only among persons, that is, social beings who are active and conscious participants in the exchange process. Very few Euro-American scholars are willing to accept the proposition that animals might qualify as conscious actors capable of engaging in social relations with humans. As a result, Euro-American anthropologists—even those familiar with aboriginal theories of human–animal relations—have been reluctant to expand their own analytic concept of society to include animals, much less sentient spiritually powerful ones.⁸ Yet this is precisely what the study of human–animal relations among northern hunting peoples calls for.

In 1960, Irving Hallowell observed that the Ojibwe with whom he worked thought of animals (not to mention other inanimate objects and natural forces, such as trees, stones, thunder, and even pipes and kettles) as sentient and intelligent persons. Indeed, he noted that among the Ojibwe, “the concept of ‘person’ is not, in fact, synonymous with human being but transcends it” (1960:21). According to Hallowell,

all animate beings of the person class are unified conceptually in Ojibwa thinking because they have a similar structure—an inner vital part that is enduring and an outward form [e.g., human, animal, stone, etc.] which can change. Vital personal attributes such as sentience, volition, memory, speech are not dependent on outward appearance, but upon the inner vital essence of being. [1960:21]

Human and other-than-human people are both in a sense immortal; although their bodies may die, their inner vitality either continues its existence in another place or is reborn into another body. At root, however, the Ojibwe concept of “person” seems to be inextricably bound up with the notion of agency. Indeed, Hallowell notes that for the Ojibwe, events only occur as the result of actions taken by one or more actors who are, by definition, *persons*:

“Persons,” in fact, are so inextricably associated with notions of causality that, in order to understand [Ojibwe peoples’] appraisal of events and the kind of behavior demanded in situations as they define them, we are confronted over and over again with the roles of “persons” as *loci* of causality in the dynamics of their universe. For the Ojibwa make no cardinal use of any concept

of impersonal forces as major determinants of events. [1960:43–44]

As a result, Hallowell argues, relations between Ojibwe people and animals must be understood primarily as social relations. As he puts it: “The more deeply we penetrate the world view of the Ojibwa the more apparent it is that ‘social relations’ between human beings . . . and other-than-human ‘persons’ are of cardinal significance” (Hallowell 1960:22–23). This, he maintains, necessitates a rethinking of traditional anthropological notions of what constitute social relations: “Recognition must be given to the culturally constituted meaning of ‘social’ and ‘social relations’ if we are to understand the nature of the Ojibwa world and the living entities in it” (Hallowell 1960:23). Because the Ojibwe see themselves as enmeshed in a web of social relations not only with other human beings but also with animals (not to mention other “inanimate” objects), the only way to understand Ojibwe society is to take that into account. This means that hunting must be understood—and analyzed—as a set of social relations not only among humans but between human and animal persons as well. Needless to say, this does not accord well with standard anthropological approaches toward animals.

In her review of the anthropological literature dealing with animals, Eugenia Shanklin (1985) notes that anthropologists tended to take either a functionalist ecological or a symbolic approach to the study of human–animal relations. Those taking the former approach tended to view animals as purely biological organisms whose relationship to humans was composed entirely of their ability to help humans meet their subsistence needs, whereas those subscribing to the latter approach viewed animals primarily as symbols whose value lies in their usefulness to people as metaphors for thinking about human society. She puts it in Lévi-Straussian terms: “one group of anthropologists explore[s] the ways in which animals are good to eat and another group explore[s] the ways in which they are good to think or imagine” (1985:379). Shanklin concludes her study by calling for anthropologists to bridge the gap between functional and symbolic treatments and develop an integrated approach that considers the importance of animals as both food and food for thought. Notably, however, she never considers the possibility of a social analysis that takes into account the sentience and sociality of animals themselves.

Revisiting the topic nearly 15 years later, Molly H. Mullin (1999:208) states that in the interim, numerous studies had appeared that explicitly sought to close the gap identified by Shanklin between ecological and symbolic approaches to human–animal relations. Following Barbara Noske (1989, 1993), however, Mullin points out that such studies remain problematic because of their anthropocentrism. The vast majority of anthropologists who study human–animal relations, she notes, do so only because they see them as a

“convenient window from which to examine a great many other aspects of human societies, rather than as being of particular interest in themselves” (Mullin 1999:219). As a result, they focus solely on the human side of the relationship (i.e., on animals’ caloric and/or symbolic value to humans) and ignore completely the animal side of the relationship, thereby rendering invisible any *social* dimensions of human–animal interactions. As Noske puts it, “in addition to a *human–animal* relationship there also exists something like an *animal–human* relationship, and . . . totally ignoring the latter will lead to a one-sided subject-object approach” (1993:186). Indeed, what is notably absent from both ecological and symbolic analyses of human–animal relations (as well as those studies that integrate the two) is any consideration of animals as intelligent beings with agency of their own who might be active participants in their relationships with humans. Animals, it would seem, can serve as food or as food for thought, but they can never interact with humans as intelligent actors in their own right.⁹ As long as we insist on viewing animals as either elaborate biological machines or potent symbols, any account by hunting peoples of social relations among humans and animals can be construed only as a “cultural construction.”

For the most part, the study of human–animal relations in the North has followed the trend described by Mullin and Noske. Most anthropologists studying human–animal relations in the North have treated animals simply as “raw material” for the biological and/or mental lives of humans. By now, anthropologists studying northern hunters have largely accepted Hallowell’s argument that hunting peoples’ notions of society are “culturally constructed”; but as Ingold (2000) points out, this has not caused us to seriously question our own preconceived ideas about society, which, by comparison, we continue to treat as natural. So, we may theorize about Ojibwe conceptions of human–animal society, but few—with the exception of Ingold himself—have attempted to construct a theory of society–environment based on those conceptions.¹⁰

Even the most sophisticated symbolic analyses of human–animal relations in the North tend to deny indigenous hunters’ own understandings of the world by assuming that the social relationships with animals they describe are cultural constructions, that is, that they are metaphorical rather than real. Thus, they effectively brand northern hunters’ ideas about human–animal sociality as false while simultaneously valorizing their own analytical concept of society as real. Tanner, for example, states that among the Cree “animals are thought of *as if* they had personal relations with the hunters” (1979:136, emphasis added).¹¹ Although Brightman is a bit harder to pin down, he, too, ultimately seems to believe that Cree notions about human–animal reciprocity are not real but, rather, part of an ideology invented by the Cree to help them deal psychologically and spiritually with the violence inherent in hunting.¹²

In light of the explicit analogy Agnes Johnson drew between hunting and the potlatch in the story I recounted above, it might be tempting to reproduce the standard argument and claim that Kluane people conceptualize their relationship with animals metaphorically, that is, that they see animals as “like people” and interpret their relationships with animals based on their understanding of human society. There are a number of reasons I believe this would be an inaccurate characterization of the situation. First, as Nurit Bird-David (1999) has pointed out, arguments of this sort are based on the Tylorian supposition that hunting peoples’ understandings of social relations among humans somehow existed prior to their understandings of human–animal relations. Then, like Tylor’s primitive animists, these hunters projected their understandings of social relations among humans out onto animals and the rest of the world (Tylor 1871). In fact, there is no justification for assuming that human–human relations somehow predate human relations with other animals (with whom they have interacted as both predators and prey since before the evolution of modern humans). As Colin Scott (1989:198) has pointed out, one might just as easily argue that the metaphor works the other way around, that human–animal relations function as a model for relations among humans.

There is a second reason—at least in the Kluane case—not to assume that people simply project their ideas about human society onto animals. Social relations among Kluane people are governed by what Marshall Sahlins (1972) calls “generalized reciprocity” (others, e.g., Bird-David 1990 and Price 1975, prefer the term *sharing*). Whoever kills an animal distributes the meat to others in the village; there are few formal rules about who gets what, and there is no direct obligation to repay one gift of meat with another (Nadasdy 2003:66–75). Nor does the potlatch provide an exception. The potlatch of the Alaska and Yukon interior differs in important ways from the coastal variant. Although there are some formal rules for the distribution of goods at these potlatches, once the feast is over and the appropriate people have been ritually paid, everything else—including large amounts of meat and fish—is given away in a fairly random fashion (Nadasdy 2003:73, see also Guédon 1974:219; Simeone 1995:153–159). If Kluane people had merely projected their understandings of human social relations onto the animal world, one would expect the same rules to apply between humans and animals. Instead, human–animal relations are governed by a fundamentally different principle. In Kluane peoples’ view, humans and their animal benefactors incur specific and direct obligations to one another as a result of prior exchanges. Indeed, individual hunters can develop strong personal relationships with particular animals over the course of their lifetimes. The resulting reciprocal relationships between hunters and their animal “trading partners” resembles more the balanced reciprocity of, say, the Kula, than it does the sharing of meat in Kluane country.¹³

In fact, the model of balanced reciprocity that structures human–animal relations in the Kluane region has few analogues in the realm of human social relations.¹⁴

In drawing an analogy between hunting and the potlatch, then, Agnes was not making any claims about the structural similarity of the two forms of gift exchange. Rather, she was attempting to give me an education in emotion.¹⁵ As Jean Briggs (1970), Catherine Lutz (1988), and others point out, ethnographers, like children, need to be educated not only in the beliefs, values, and social norms of their host community but also in proper emotional responses as well. Agnes's point was to teach me the proper way to feel when receiving a gift—whether it is a rabbit caught in a snare or an armload of blankets received at a potlatch. In so doing, she was not making the claim that animals are like people, as most anthropological treatments would suppose. As anthropologist Michael Jackson (1983) points out, such an interpretation assumes a duality. It presupposes that the two domains of the metaphor—in this case, animals and people—are separate and distinct, only connected rhetorically and arbitrarily by the metaphor itself. In Jackson's view, “metaphor reveals unities; it is not a figurative way of denying dualities. Metaphor reveals, not the ‘thisness of a that’ but rather that ‘this *is* that’ ” (1983:132). Following Jackson, Ingold argues that, for northern hunters, animals “are not *like* people, they *are* people” (2000:51). Similarly, although Kluane people do recognize a metaphorical relationship between hunting and reciprocity among humans, this does not mean that they see animals as being “like people.” For them, animals are people. This does not mean that they cannot distinguish between human people and animal people. After all, one does not set snares to capture human people. There are many different kinds of people, and the social rules and conventions for dealing with human people are different from those governing social relations with rabbit people, which are different again from those governing relations between humans and moose people, and so on.

Human–animal sociality

It is perhaps not surprising that anthropologists should be reluctant to accept the notion that humans and animals might actually engage in social relations with one another. Despite the fact that humans are animals, Euro-Americans invest a great deal in maintaining a sharp conceptual distinction between humans and animals. Ingold (1994; see also Noske 1989; Tapper 1988) has argued that anthropologists in particular, because of the discipline's stated purpose of studying humans, has always had a special stake in maintaining this distinction; indeed, he argues that cultural relativism, a central tenet of anthropology for a century now, is essentially built on the assumption that humans, as bearers of culture, are absolutely unique in the animal world (i.e., that it is our common participation in culture that makes

all human societies equally evolved and so distinguishes us from the lower animals). Recent work, however, has shown that a rigid theoretical boundary between “human” and “animal” is extremely difficult to maintain—even from a Euro-American academic perspective (see Ingold 1988; esp. Clark 1988), and other research has begun to question the assumption that only humans are capable of conscious thought, which we tend to view as the basis for human culture and social relations.

In his pioneering work on animal behavior, Donald Griffin (1976, 1984) questions the prevailing assumptions in ethology that animals are capable of only preprogrammed and mechanical responses to external stimuli. He argues that the standard behaviorist assertion that animals are mindless automatons should be recognized as dogma that is not only unproven but that requires all sorts of theoretical contortions to maintain. Rather than developing overly complex and unwieldy theories to explain animal behavior that appears to (but obviously could not) be the product of conscious thought, he argues it is more parsimonious to explain such behavior by assuming that animals are indeed capable of thinking. He maintains that because we do not know for sure whether or not animals engage in thought processes like our own, we should at least be open to the possibility as a working hypothesis until proven otherwise. Griffin (1976:148–152) even advocates the use of anthropological techniques as one important means for studying animal behavior (see also Haraway 1986:91–92; Noske 1989:168–170). Numerous more recent studies of animal behavior seem to support Griffin's position by describing situations in which animals communicate and forge social relationships not only with others of the same species (e.g., Cheney and Seyfarth 1990; Goodall 1986; Pennisi 2001) but also with members of other species, including humans (e.g., Heinrich 1999).¹⁶

Of course, northern hunting peoples did not need to wait for verification from ethologists and animal psychologists to know that animals are intelligent creatures capable of learning and interacting with humans. In his analysis of goose hunting among the Wemindji Cree, anthropologist Colin Scott (1989, 1996) argues that Cree hunters' conception of geese as sentient and communicative persons is eminently practical and arises, at least in part, from hunters' empirical observation that geese are aware of humans as hunters, learn from their interactions with them, and communicate what they learn to other geese. To hunt geese successfully, it is important for Cree hunters “to arrive at precise estimations of goose learning and communication, particularly in relation to themselves as predators” (Scott 1996:77). This does not mean Cree hunters believe that geese communicate and think in exactly the same way as human persons; indeed, Scott notes that they distinguish not only between the way geese and humans think but also among different kinds of animals—including among

different species of geese—and that this differentiation is critical to successful hunting (1996:77).

Geese, of course, are not the only animals that interact with humans in this way. Successful hunting and trapping require detailed knowledge of animal behavior, including especially an understanding of how animals react to and learn from predation by humans. As I noted earlier, many stories told by Kluane hunters recount a battle of wits between the hunter and his or her quarry; and, as often as not, it is the animals, rather than the humans, who emerge as the victors. One experienced Kluane trapper, for example, told me a story about a wolverine who learned to run his trapline ahead of him, devouring all the animals in his traps before he could get to them. In retaliation—and in an effort to salvage his trapping season—he began setting traps to catch the wolverine. Despite his efforts, the wolverine managed to spring all the traps set for it and continued making easy meals of the furbearers caught in the hunter's traps. The trapper clearly relished describing to me the ingenious setups he had devised to catch the wolverine and the even more ingenious techniques the wolverine had used to avoid them. Scott argues that Cree concepts of animals as sentient persons is not only of practical value to them in the hunt, but that this view has “oriented [them] to aspects of animal behavior that Western science, inured by Cartesian metaphors of mechanical nature, has admitted rather belatedly” (Scott 1996:76). I suggest that it is more likely the other way around; it is, rather, the way animals behave in their regular interactions with humans that causes northern hunters to regard them as intelligent social beings. Indeed, to northern hunters, who are confronted on a daily basis with animals who behave like the wolverine or geese described above, Euro-American behavioralist notions about animals as automatons appear absurd.¹⁷ In fact, one of the main complaints Kluane hunters have about wildlife biologists is that they think animals are stupid, an assessment with which they vehemently disagree (Nadasdy 1999:8).

Northern hunters, then, engage in ongoing two-way relationships with animals who are not only aware of humans but are also able to learn from their experiences with them and modify their behavior accordingly. Drawing on Scott's work among the Cree, Ingold agrees that animals should be accorded the status of autonomous and sentient actors, and he echoes Hallowell's call for anthropologists to rethink their concept of “society” in studying northern hunters. Unlike Hallowell, however, he makes it clear that he is not simply urging anthropologists to take into account northern hunters' own particular culturally constructed notion of society. Rather, he argues, we need to acknowledge that their notion of human–animal social relations is literally accurate:

In short, animals do not participate with humans *qua* persons only in a domain of virtual reality, as represented within culturally constructed, intentional

worlds, superimposed upon the naturally given substratum of organism environment interactions. They participate as real-world creatures, endowed with powers of feeling and autonomous action, whose characteristic behaviors, temperaments and sensibilities one gets to know in the very course of one's everyday practical dealings with them. In this regard, dealing with non-human animals is not fundamentally different from dealing with fellow humans. Indeed, the following definition of sociality, originally proposed by Alfred Schutz, could—with the assertions indicated in brackets—apply with equal force to the encounter between human hunters and their prey: “Sociality is constituted by communicative acts in which the I [the hunter] turns to the others [animals], apprehending them as persons who turn to him, and both know of this fact” (Schutz 1970). [Ingold 2000:52; see also Ingold 1989]

Animal personhood and sociality

Ingold accepts the notion that animals are sentient persons capable of conscious action and that there is something social (in the Schutzian sense) about human–animal interactions. But are his definitions of animal personhood and sociality really compatible with northern hunters' conceptions about human–animal relations, as he suggests? I would argue that they are not. Rather, his concept of animals remains in important ways at odds with northern hunters'. This incompatibility is evident in Ingold's critique of Donald Griffin, whose work I discussed earlier.

Recall that Griffin advocated the use of anthropological techniques to understand the mental processes of animals. Ingold (1988:6–9, 90–97) objects to this approach, arguing that the participatory and communicative techniques employed by anthropologists to study other cultures will not be effective when brought to bear on animals because such techniques are designed to access people's thought processes, whereas animals are incapable of thinking. “We cannot grasp the animals' thoughts simply by learning and practicing their communicatory mode,” he states, “*because animals have no thoughts, as such, to grasp*” (Ingold 1988:94). Although such an assertion may at first seem inconsistent with Ingold's position that animals are conscious and sentient persons, he avoids inconsistency by drawing a distinction between “thinking,” on the one hand, and “consciousness” and “intentionality,” on the other hand. Indeed, according to him, Griffin's mistake was precisely to have conflated the two (1988:96).

Thinking, for Ingold, entails “rational deliberation” and “advanced planning” that “envisag[es] ends in advance of their realization” (1988:96–97). This means “attending to concepts” (1988:94), a process that he sees as wholly dependent on the faculty of language. He sees this as a uniquely human ability: “The crucial difference between natives of another culture and animals of another species is this: the former possess a language *which enables them to think*, the

latter do not” (1988:94, emphasis added). This capacity to think, he asserts, is quite distinct from either consciousness or intentionality. He challenges (quite rightly in my view) the Cartesian assumption that rational deliberation and planning are necessary prerequisites for consciousness, pointing out that the majority of activities in which animals—including humans—engage are spontaneous or habitual, rather than the result of rational deliberation or planning. Such unthinking activities are nevertheless the products of our intentions, however, and we remain conscious of ourselves as agents while engaging in them (1988:96). He suggests that humans and other animals are alike in that we are all conscious intentional beings who act, for the most part, without thinking. Indeed, he notes, “much of what we learn consists of learning *not* to think about what we are doing, so that we can concentrate on other things” (1988:95). According to Ingold, it is only occasionally, “when a novel situation demands a response that cannot be met from the existing stock-in-trade of habitual behavior patterns” (1988:97), that humans make use of their unique ability to think and engage in rational deliberation and planning to achieve a preimagined end.

Ingold’s distinction between “thinking” and “consciousness” is well taken. His assertion that it is only humans who are capable of the former, however, does not follow automatically. Rather, it is based on two further assumptions, both of which I find questionable. The first is that *thinking*, as he defines it, is dependent on language. The problem with this assumption is that, as philosophers have noted, concepts are not the same as words (Weitz 1977:ch. 1). Indeed, cognitive anthropologists (e.g., Bloch 1991) have suggested that some—if not most—conceptual thought among humans is actually nonlinguistic in form. If humans regularly “attend to concepts” without using language, why should animals be held to a different standard? And, as it turns out, comparative psychologists have found evidence for nonlinguistic conceptual thought among animals (e.g., Herrenstein et al. 1976; Pepperberg 1990). Nor is it clear why envisioning ends before their realization should necessarily be a linguistic or discursive act. Humans are hardly the only animals who encounter “occasions when a novel situation demands a response that cannot be met from the existing stock-in-trade of habitual behavior patterns” (Ingold 1988:97). The wolverine in the story recounted earlier confronted just such a situation each time it encountered one of the trapper’s cleverly designed trap sets. It had to assess the novel situation presented to it by each trap and figure out how to spring it safely. In doing so, the wolverine surely had to envision the consequences associated with its possible actions. Why should it need language to do so? Whether or not it had a word for *trap*, it could clearly recognize traps for what they are, despite the varied forms and contexts in which it encountered them. It knew their function and the dangers associated with them and was able to devise novel solutions for dealing with

them. This, it seems to me, qualifies as “attending to the concept.”

Even if we grant Ingold his assumption that thinking is dependent on language, however, we still run up against his second assumption: that humans are the only animals that possess linguistic faculties. His principle justification for this position is that, despite considerable experimental effort, scientists have been unable to establish conclusively that animals are capable of using language (1988:91–92). Leaving aside the fact that there is still some debate about this in scientific circles, such an approach is quite incompatible with his own exhortations that we take seriously what northern aboriginal hunters say about animals.

As we have seen, many northern hunters regard animals to be the same as humans in their essential nature, their animal-like appearance but a façade. As Hallowell puts it, “Outward appearance is only an incidental attribute of being. . . . In outward manifestation, neither animal nor human characteristics define categorical differences in the core of being” (1960:35). The true nature of animals is revealed to northern hunters through stories of long ago, dreams, and certain waking experiences. In experiences of this type, animals take on human form (or vice versa), speaking and interacting with humans as though they were human themselves. When encountered in stories and dreams (and even, as we shall see, occasionally when awake)—that is, in their true forms—animals are able to speak and understand human languages.

Ingold is, of course, well aware of all this. In his description of what he calls the “poetics of dwelling” (Ingold 2000:esp. 89–110), he attempts to reconcile the apparently mystical beliefs of northern hunters with his own scientifically informed understandings of animals (and other phenomena of the natural world), in the process revealing some of his own a priori assumptions about the world, some of which stand in stark contrast to those of northern hunters. As we have seen, one such assumption is that animals have a capacity for neither language nor thought.¹⁸ Ingold is able to maintain this position in the face of northern hunters’ claims to the contrary by drawing a distinction between *language* and *speech*. Unlike language, he states, “speech is not a mode of transmitting information or mental content; it is a way of being alive” (Ingold 2000:104). The speech of humans and that of animals and even thunder, he maintains, “are alike in that they not only have the power to move those who hear them, but also take their meaning from the contexts in which they are heard. In these respects, no fundamental line of demarcation can be drawn between the sounds of nature and of human speech” (Ingold 2000:105).¹⁹ According to Ingold, it is to speech in this sense—rather than to language—that northern hunters refer when they say animals (or thunder) talk to them. Yet this directly contradicts the assertions of northern hunters themselves, many of whom maintain

that animals are capable of understanding and using human languages.

In stories, animals regularly speak to northern hunters in human languages and in so doing convey important information (such as how they wish to be treated).²⁰ Because many contemporary hunting practices are rooted in these stories (Tanner 1979:137), they take for granted that animals really are as they appear in them, and this includes an ability to understand human language, whether spoken or thought.²¹ Similarly, animals encountered in dreams (as well as in occasional waking experiences) are reported to sometimes speak in human languages.²² Indeed, I was told explicitly more than once that although animals in Klane country probably cannot speak English, they most definitely can “speak Indian.”²³

Following Ingold, we are forced to regard such claims as either mistaken or metaphorical. Thus, although Ingold claims to be taking northern hunters at their word when they say that animals are persons with whom they engage in social relations, animal personhood and sociality for him are utterly different than they are for northern hunting peoples. Quite unlike northern hunters, who regard the animal form as but a superficial façade, the least important aspect of their being, Ingold’s notions of animal personhood and sociality remain rooted in a conception of animals that takes as given the everyday form in which we generally encounter them: mute and clothed in fur. He clings to an ontological position that posits a vast qualitative gulf between human and animal people (i.e., the capacity to think).²⁴ In the end, there is no place in Ingold’s theory for animals as spiritually powerful beings who can think, talk, and interact with humans in all of the ways northern hunters claim they do. For Ingold, animals may be persons, but they are not those kinds of persons.

By denying that animals are fundamentally the same as humans (and explaining away the apparently magico-religious beliefs such a view entails), Ingold is forced at times—despite himself—to treat northern hunters’ conceptions of animals as just cultural constructions. For instance, if animals lack language, as he suggests, then those sorts of social relations that are dependent on language (i.e., those that require the transmission of conceptual information, such as relations of reciprocal exchange, with all their symbolic and social nuances) must also be beyond the capacity of animal persons. And, indeed, in his discussion of the relationship of trust between hunters and animals, Ingold suggests that “animals in the environment of the hunter . . . are *supposed* [by the hunter] to act with the hunter in mind” (2000:71, emphasis added). If this form of human–animal reciprocity (as opposed to merely a Schutzian reciprocal awareness) exists only in the minds of hunters, then it would be nonsensical to analyze it as an actual social relationship, because that would entail a consideration of the animals’ perspective on the exchange. That Ingold is unwilling to engage in such an analysis is evident in the fact that he reproduces the oppo-

sition between reciprocity and domination, which we have seen is predicated on a reluctance to view hunting as an instance of actual reciprocal exchange.²⁵

There is nothing particularly surprising about Ingold’s resistance to incorporating the magico-religious beliefs of northern hunters into his social theory. It is, after all, standard anthropological practice to regard such accounts as elements of “belief systems” that might have important social functions but that are not to be regarded as true (but see N. 4). In Ingold’s case, however, this runs directly counter to his own argument, that hunters’ accounts of animals are not just cultural constructions. If we are to avoid this pitfall, we need concepts of animal personhood and sociality that are compatible with those held by northern hunters, concepts that at the very least enable us to view hunting as reciprocal exchange among thinking (in Ingold’s sense) agents.

The gift in the animal (revisited)

Admittedly, this is a big step for most anthropologists, who generally maintain that we do not need to (indeed, should not) adopt the beliefs of the people we study to theorize about those beliefs and the social relations with which they are entwined. In this view, it is not necessary—nor even desirable—for anthropologists studying human–animal reciprocity in the Subarctic to personally believe that animals are intelligent and spiritually powerful beings who consciously give themselves to hunters. By the same logic, however, one might argue that it is unnecessary for anthropologists studying exchange to believe in the reality of the *hau* and its role in compelling a return gift. Yet anthropologists have long accorded indigenous Maori theories of exchange a status quite unlike that we grant to those of northern hunters. Indeed, following Claude Lévi-Strauss (1987), Maurice Godelier (1999, 2002) points out that Mauss based critical parts of his theory of exchange on Maori exchange theory, namely in his elucidation of the three obligations inherent in the gift. Although Mauss relied on sociological explanations for the obligations to give and to receive, when it came to the third of his famous obligations, the obligation to reciprocate, he relied instead on the magico-religious beliefs of the Maori. In fact, he adopted almost wholesale the indigenous Maori concept of “the hau” and incorporated it directly into his theory of exchange:

what compels the receiver of a gift to reciprocate, [Mauss] argues, is a force, the action of a “spirit” present in the thing received that compels its return to its original owner. Reading Mauss more closely, it would seem, moreover, that the thing given is inhabited not by one spirit but two. One is the spirit of the original owner, who gave it in the first place. But the thing itself seems to have a soul as well and, therefore, to exist as a person with the power to act on others. [Godelier 2002: 23–24]

In spite of successive efforts by Sahlins (1972:ch. 4), Lévi-Strauss (1987), and Godelier himself to replace Mauss's magico-religious explanation for the third obligation with a purely sociological one, other anthropologists continue to find it useful to think about the personhood and agency of objects or of parts of persons inhering in objects (Gell 1998; Munn 1986; Strathern 1984; Weiner 1992:esp. ch. 2).²⁶

It seems more than a bit ironic that, following Mauss, anthropologists studying exchange have been willing to grant inanimate objects a measure of personhood in their theories of society, while those studying hunting peoples have generally balked at doing the same for animals. Godelier is uncomfortable with Mauss's mystical explanation of the third obligation because he refuses to believe that things are persons, that they can act of their own volition. "Things," he states emphatically, "do not move about of their own accord" (Godelier 2002:102). Of course, whether one views the agency of gift objects as real or only apparent depends entirely on one's ontological assumptions. As noted earlier, however, it is becoming increasingly difficult—even for skeptical anthropologists and ethnologists—to deny that animals (as opposed to things) do "move about of their own accord." Thus, it seems prudent at least to keep an open mind about the role of animals themselves in the ongoing human–animal relationship that is hunting. At the very least, this should entail a willingness to consider the possibility that northern hunters' theories about human–animal relations might be of practical (as well as symbolic and metaphorical) significance—and that northern hunters' theories about exchange might prove as useful for constructing social theory as have Maori theories.

It seems to me that anthropologists' reluctance to accept this possibility has led to two different (although perhaps related) sorts of problems. First, it has caused us to misunderstand certain cultural phenomena involved in the practice of hunting, such as the misconception, described above, that human–animal relations among hunters are governed by the two mutually contradictory principles of reciprocity and domination. Second, it has led us to ignore some other phenomena entirely, simply because we cannot make sense of them except as instances of exchange between humans and sentient and spiritually powerful animal people.

Much of the time, there is, in fact, no basis on which to evaluate the relative merits of indigenous versus Euro-American theories about animals; each seem to have about the same degree of explanatory power. A case in point is Ingold's (2000:13) example of the habit caribou have of stopping to look back at the hunter who is pursuing them, thus rendering themselves easier to kill. Biologists view this behavior as a result of caribou's adaptation to predation by wolves. In contrast, Cree hunters interpret it as evidence that the caribou are giving themselves to the hunters. Both explanations are reasonable and consistent with the worldview in which they are embedded. There is nothing about the behav-

ior of the caribou themselves that would lead you to choose one theory over the other. Rather, people choose based on their broader assumptions about the nature of animals and of the world. Biologists and Cree hunters can (and sometimes do) each learn the other's theory of caribou behavior—and even the broader view of the world in which it is embedded—without ever doubting that the others' theory is "just a cultural construction."

There are, however, times when biologists' and northern hunters' theories about animals are not equal in their explanatory power; and it is not always the theories of the biologists that prove the stronger. As an example of one such instance, I offer another personal experience I had snaring rabbits. The incident took place in 1998, after I had been living in Burwash Landing for close to three years. A respected elder had just passed away, and in preparation for her funeral potlatch, I set some rabbit snares. One day, as I ran the snare line, I saw ahead of me a rabbit caught in the next snare. It was still alive, and it struggled to escape as I approached. To my surprise, it succeeded in snapping the snare wire and ran off into the bush. When I examined the spot, I realized that the rabbit had snapped the wire near the toggle so that the snare was still tight around its neck. I knew that, as a result, the rabbit was likely to die, but there was nothing I could do; it was gone. Already steeped in Kluane understandings of human–animal relations, it occurred to me that the rabbit must have changed its mind about giving itself to me. I went on to run the rest of the snare line and thought no more about the incident.

Five days later, however, I was outside my cabin with Joe Johnson trying to jumpstart his truck when another friend called me around to the back of my cabin to see a rabbit that was acting strangely. Sure enough, there was a rabbit there that seemed to be trying to get into my cabin. It was scratching at the outside wall and occasionally jumping up as if trying to get inside the large window just above its head. But the rabbit seemed to be sick; its movements were very slow and weak. I approached it slowly, and, as I stepped up to it, it stopped moving and looked up at me. That is when I noticed that it had a snare around its neck. The snare was very tight; the rabbit had probably been having trouble breathing and had certainly not eaten since the snare tightened around its neck. It made no effort to escape—even as I bent down to pick it up. It just stood motionless and continued staring up at me. I picked it up. Not even then did it struggle or attempt to escape; it just kept looking me in the eyes. I stretched its neck and killed it. Right after I had killed it—and almost before I was consciously aware of what I was doing—I found myself uttering a silent prayer of thanks.

Afterward, I returned to Joe in the front of the house and told him what had happened. He did not act at all surprised. In fact, he said nothing; he just laughed a bit. When I offered him the rabbit, he took it, saying he would give it to his uncle Peter, who probably had not eaten rabbit in quite a while. A

few days later, I told Agnes Johnson the story, too. Like Joe, she expressed no surprise whatsoever about what had seemed to me such strange behavior by a rabbit. Instead, she just nodded. After a minute or so of silence, she began telling me stories about animals talking to people. These were not long-time-ago stories about mythic characters but recent stories about people still alive today who had met animals in the bush who began speaking to them “in Indian language.”²⁷

There is no doubt that it was the same rabbit that had escaped from my snare five days earlier. Yet that snare had been set over half a mile from my cabin, and the rabbit had made its way right to my door in particular (out of all the houses in the village) and stood quietly as if waiting for me to kill it. I could not help but feel—and continue to this day to feel—that the rabbit came looking for me, that it quite literally gave itself to me. And, in fact, it is only if one accepts the premise that humans and animals are actually (rather than metaphorically) engaged in an ongoing process of reciprocal exchange that the story makes any sense at all. The standard biological account of human–animal relations simply cannot accommodate phenomena of this sort. What to the Athapaskan or Cree hunter is a perfectly explainable—if not quite everyday—event becomes for the biologist (or anthropologist) an anomaly. Faced with stories of this sort, those of us wedded to a Euro-American view of human–animal relations have one of two choices: we can choose to disbelieve the account, or we can shrug it off as a bizarre coincidence. Either way, we avoid any attempt at explanation.

Of course, an isolated incident such as this does not by itself constitute proof that animals literally and consciously give themselves to hunters. Incidents such as the one I have just described, however, are not quite so isolated as one might suppose. Several anthropologists working in the Subarctic (Goulet 1998; Sharp 2001; Smith 1998) have published accounts of experiences that are similarly inexplicable from within a Euro-American view of the world, and many of the other anthropologists I know who have worked with northern hunting peoples have similar stories that they have never published. My experience with the rabbit, and many of these other stories as well, fit what David Young and Jean-Guy Goulet (1994) term *extraordinary experiences*. By this they mean experiences that anthropologists themselves regard as unusual or extraordinary but that are received as normal by people in their host culture, who often respond by relating similar experiences of their own—much as Agnes did when I told her about the rabbit (Young and Goulet 1994:299). Yet the same experiences when related in the context of an academic work will astonish many of the anthropologist’s professional colleagues (Young and Goulet 1994:306). Along with Edith Turner (1992:4), Young and Goulet argue that this dynamic effectively silences anthropologists. No matter how relevant and useful such experiences may be to understanding the people with whom we work, we tend not to report

them for fear of embarrassment or of becoming the objects of suspicion among our colleagues (the “Castañeda effect”).

Given the experiential and embodied nature of so much of human knowledge (Bloch 1991; Nadasdy 2003:94–102), Young and Goulet urge anthropologists not only to report such experiences but also to seek them out by engaging in what Jackson (1989) calls a “radical empirical method,” or “radical participation” (see also Goulet 1998). Radical participation requires anthropologists to take absolutely seriously the viewpoints of their informants. To do so, they must cultivate the skills and immerse themselves in the everyday practices of the people with whom they work—not only practices like hunting and cutting meat but also dreaming and consulting diviners. The point is to “gain the competence necessary to act intelligibly in their [informants’] socially constituted world” (Young and Goulet 1994:313). This enables one to treat one’s own experiences as primary data, which is especially vital for understanding extraordinary experiences that are largely impervious to standard forms of academic inquiry. In this way, Young and Goulet assert, reports of extraordinary experiences “can go hand in hand with a presentation of qualitative data that effectively captures important dimensions of a people’s cultural life” (1994:306). Just as importantly, personal experience (whether with dreams, divination, or animals) “becomes a mode of experimentation, of testing and exploring the ways in which our experiences conjoin or connect us with others, rather than the ways they set us apart” (Jackson 1989:4). And, by directly confronting our own extraordinary experiences, we can gain powerful insights into the unquestioned assumptions we make about the world.

Although his work predated the literature on radical participation, Richard Nelson clearly takes such an approach in his study of animal–human relations among the Koyukon, Athapaskan people of interior Alaska:

nothing struck me more forcefully than the fact that [the Koyukon people] *experience* a different reality in the natural world. This can be viewed as belief, of course, but it also goes firmly beyond belief. For the Koyukon, there is a different existence in the forest, something fully actualized within their physical and emotional senses, yet entirely beyond those of outsiders (Euro-Americans). But however different this reality might be, its impact on the Koyukon is equal in depth and power to the experiences of others elsewhere. Theirs is a pervasive, forceful, highly tangible view of the world, no less than our own. [1983:239]

And the experience profoundly affected his own understanding of the world:

My clear and certain comprehension of the natural world was ended. Fundamental assumptions I had learned about the nature of nature were thrown into doubt. I must emphasize that I underwent no great

conversion and emerged no less agnostic than before. But now I had to face an elemental question: . . . Is there not a single reality in the natural world, an absolute and universal reality? Apparently the answer to this question is no . . . my Koyukon teachers had learned through their own traditions about dimensions in nature that I, as a Euro-American, had either not learned to perceive or had been explicitly taught do not exist [Nelson 1983:239]

Taking seriously the views of our informants means at the very least, like Nelson, remaining agnostic and refusing to dismiss out of hand the possibility that such dimensions in nature might actually exist. This means confronting and taking seriously our own extraordinary experiences, experiences that we might like to forget but that our informants view as a normal and expected part of life. Young and Goulet (1994:306–307) note that an increasing number of anthropologists are choosing to report and take seriously such experiences. Rather than dismissing such stories out of hand, we would do better to treat them as data, perhaps not conclusive in and of themselves but, nonetheless, as real experiences whose significance we must attempt to take into account when producing our theories.²⁸ Not only is this essential if we really propose to take seriously what our informants tell us, but it is also a potential means for gaining powerful insights into the nature of a world that we only partially understand.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, the concept of traditional or indigenous knowledge has become prominent in discourses of development, resource management, environmental assessment, and indigenous land rights. Anthropologists, although increasingly critical of the concept, have generally viewed it as potentially empowering to the people who supposedly possess such knowledge, and we have played an important role in advocating its recognition and use. There is, however, something disingenuous about calls for the recognition of indigenous knowledge that emanate from a field whose own ontological assumptions deny the ontological (vs. social) validity of the worldview within which that knowledge is rooted. Such an ontological stance clearly undermines any arguments we make about the role indigenous knowledge should play in development and management processes. Elizabeth Povinelli (1995), for example, shows how an a priori rejection of the claim that rocks are capable of listening to and monitoring human activity automatically leads to the devaluation of aboriginal labor and weakens their claims to land. Northern hunters' conceptions of land and animals present a similar challenge to anthropologists. How can we champion the knowledge and practices of northern aboriginal people and advocate their use in wildlife management processes when we ourselves refuse to con-

sider the possibility that animals might really be the kinds of beings hunters say they are?

Some would reply that we can make use of aboriginal people's knowledge (based as it is on extensive experience on the land) without having to subscribe to their magico-religious beliefs about animals. And, in fact, this kind of epistemological cherry-picking goes on all the time. Elsewhere (Nadasdy 2003:126–132), I have described the process of distillation that accompanies efforts to incorporate indigenous knowledge into wildlife management processes. Because scientific managers can only make use of certain types of knowledge about animals (those that can be expressed quantitatively or graphically, such as population figures and distributions), a great deal of hunters' knowledge (all the stories, values, and social relations that transmute those animals from a set of population figures into sentient members of the social, moral, meaning-filled universe of the hunters) "drops out of the database" as irrelevant (Cruikshank 1998:57–58). Aside from the fact that this distillation process violates long-standing anthropological understandings about the holistic and context-dependent nature of knowledge (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1937),²⁹ retention of control by state managers over the standards of relevance by which indigenous knowledge is distilled may actually be contributing to the extension of state power over aboriginal peoples, rather than their hoped-for empowerment (see also Nadasdy 2005a). To the extent that our theories deny the ontological assumptions on which northern hunters base their conceptions of the land and animals (even as we call for their participation and knowledge), we legitimate—and, indeed, participate in—that distillation process by providing a powerful justification for the dismissal of certain beliefs and practices as just cultural constructions (which, although perhaps relevant in the realm of cultural politics, cannot provide the factual basis for development or resource management).

It seems to me that the only way to avoid contributing to the disempowerment of aboriginal peoples in this way is for us to build a theoretical framework that can accommodate the possibility that there might be some literal truth to what hunters tell us. Ingold (2000) has pointed the way toward such a framework, but we can only achieve it if we forego making a priori assumptions to the effect that "rocks cannot really listen" or "animals cannot really think or engage in relations of exchange with humans." This will require more than the standard ethnographic suspension of disbelief. Rather, it will demand—at the very least—the kind of true agnosticism described by Nelson, combined with a willingness to treat extraordinary experiences as data and take them into account in our theory making. Such an approach not only avoids reinforcing state control over aboriginal peoples and their way of life but also promises to provide important new insights into hunting societies and the nature of human–animal relations.

Notes

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1. From an interview conducted on October 30, 1996.

2. In some areas, including the eastern North American Subarctic, it is widely reported that aboriginal hunters subscribe to the notion that it is not animals themselves who give their bodies to hunters. Rather, it is powerful spirit beings, known variously as “Keepers of the Game,” “Game Bosses,” “Animal Masters,” or the like, who control each species of animal, and it is they who give individual animals to hunters. Some (e.g., Ingold 1987) have argued that this belief is much more widely distributed across the circumpolar North than is often believed. Indeed, Ingold asserts that “in the majority of instances, individual animals are regarded merely as the manifestations of an essential type, and *it is the type rather than its manifestations that is personified*” (1987:247). Among Athapaskan peoples of the western Subarctic, however, it is not clear that this is the case. Indeed, most ethnographers who have inquired into the nature of animal spirits in the western Subarctic have been confronted by conflicting evidence and/or considerable variation of opinion about the nature of animal spirits among their informants. Richard Nelson (1983:22), for example, found no evidence of a belief in species-spirits or game masters among the Koyukon, directly contradicting earlier work by Julius Jetté (1911:101, 604, 605) and others. Faced with similarly ambiguous evidence, Catharine McClellan (1975:67–69) was unsure of how to characterize animal spirits among the First Nations peoples of the southern Yukon. She argued that the spirit of the animal (she translates as “spirit” the Tlingit word *yek*, which she notes is similar to the Tutchone *‘inji*) “can be both one and many,” a notion “implied in the somewhat vaguely expressed idea that there is a master *yek* for each animal species, although at the same time any given animal provides a temporary incarnation for a *yek*” (McClellan 1975:68). Henry Sharp (2001:46–47, 67–68) argues that the apparently ambiguous nature of animal spirits among the Chipewyan is not owing to uncertainty in the minds of the Chipewyan themselves

about the nature of animal spirits but to the inadequacy of the Euro-American conceptual apparatus brought to bear on them. Sharp argues that in Chipewyan thought animals are fundamentally indeterminate phenomena, neither—yet simultaneously—single and plural, natural and supernatural (2001:47, 65–73). As a result, he argues,

Too often it is presumed that the First Nations’ idea of a species is merely a personification of the species, a simple anthropomorphization of the idea of the species in a convenient symbolic form. In actuality, the individual and the collective are not separable even though they are distinct. Mystery is not bound by English grammar. The number of the beast is singular and plural without separation or disjunction. [Sharp 2001:68]

Even among the Cree, who have much more elaborated notions about animal masters, there is variation from animal to animal. Although the Cree have very clear ideas about the existence of a “master of the caribou,” it is less certain that all—or even most—other animals have a master (Harvey Feit, personal communication, March 28, 2005). Kluane people never indicated to me a belief in animal masters, but there was clearly a kind of fluidity between the collective and the individual, as described by both McClellan and Sharp.

3. See Nadasdy (2003:126–128) and (2003:245–247) for examples of this in the realms of wildlife management and land claims, respectively.

4. Here, we might take a cue from recent anthropological approaches to witchcraft. Until recently, studies of witchcraft and sorcery took for granted their culturally constructed nature, never imagining for a moment that there might be literal as well as metaphorical dimensions to witchcraft beliefs. As E. E. Evans-Pritchard put it, “witches, as the Azande conceive them, cannot exist” (1937:63, see also Marwick 1965:14, 105). Because of this a priori assumption, studies of witchcraft have historically “either analyzed witchcraft as a belief system or focused on the sociology of witchcraft attribution” (Ferguson 1999:119–120). Although both approaches have been productive, scholars have recently begun urging us to consider the literal as well as metaphorical dimensions of witchcraft or sorcery (e.g., Ferguson 1999:117–121; Turner 1992; Whitehead 2002; although it should be noted that these authors take very different approaches to the “literalness” of witchcraft). James Ferguson, for example, argues that although “a vigorous skepticism about witchcraft claims is called for . . . blanket refusals to even contemplate sorcery as a literal practice” (1999:120) prevent us from asking important kinds of questions about the sociality of violence in southern Africa. Thus, attending to witchcraft itself as a social practice—rather than as just an idiom people use to talk about social relations—not only provides an important new perspective on social relations in societies where witchcraft is present but also gives us new theoretical purchase on questions of violence and healing more generally.

5. Recently, Rane Willerslev (2004) has argued that ethnographic accounts of hunting-as-reciprocity are mistaken altogether. Ethnographers who pen such accounts, he says, do so because they have incorrectly interpreted hunting peoples’ statements about animals “giving themselves” to hunters. Generalizing from his own research with the Yukaghirs of Siberia, he maintains that hunting peoples view hunting as a process more akin to seduction than exchange: animals “give themselves” to hunters not as gifts of life-sustaining food but, rather, in the way someone who is seduced “gives” him or herself to the seducer. It may perhaps be the case that the Yukaghirs do not view hunting as a process of reciprocal exchange between hunters and animals, but that is hardly generalizable to all hunting peoples. The Kluane people with whom I worked, for example, speak

quite explicitly about hunting as a relationship of gift exchange between humans and animals. In unambiguous language, Kluane hunters have told me that animals give their bodies to hunters as gifts of food; and as we shall see, they even liken the reciprocal obligations hunters incur toward animals to those incurred by gift recipients at a potlatch. This is not to argue that Kluane people regard hunting to be a form of exchange rather than of love or seduction. On the contrary, like other hunting peoples of the circumpolar North (see Brightman 1993:195–196), Kluane people do occasionally speak about hunting in an idiom of love or seduction, and vice versa—as when one young Kluane hunter told me he was off to the bars in Whitehorse, the territorial capital, to “do some trapping.” I would argue that where Willerslev errs is in drawing too firm a distinction between the domain of exchange and that of love and seduction. Indeed, Malinowski himself notes a close relationship between the magic of love and beauty practiced by Trobriand islanders and an important branch of Kula magic: those spells whose aim is “to make the man beautiful, attractive, and irresistible to his Kula partner” (1922:335–336; see also 337–342, 360–361).

6. The view that there are two contradictory principles governing human–animal relations among the Rock Cree was clearly troubling to Brightman. He ended up arguing, in essence, that all people everywhere adhere to beliefs that contradict one another, so we should not be surprised to discover that hunting peoples, like everyone else, subscribe simultaneously to two incompatible views of human–animal relations. The important work, he suggested, is not to render these incompatible principles theoretically consistent with one another, but to attend to their social dimensions by observing which principle hunters invoke in different social contexts (Brightman 1993:200). As will become clear, I see this project as problematic because it assumes that the two principles are mutually exclusive, when in fact they are better thought of as two aspects of the same—reciprocal—relationship. Kluane people, certainly, do not flip back and forth in thinking of animals as munificent benefactors in one moment and as dangerous potential enemies in the next.

7. For a more detailed account of this incident, see Nadasdy (2003:85–88).

8. The neofunctionalist cultural ecologists, of course, were more than willing to expand their unit of analysis beyond human society to include plants, animals, and even abiotic elements of the ecosystem. In so doing, however, they eschewed the concept of “society” altogether in favor of “population” and “ecosystem”; relations between people and animals were important, but they were most assuredly not “social.”

9. A notable exception to this is the actor-network theory espoused by Bruno Latour (1987), Michel Callon (1986), and others, in which they treat all the elements in their networks as agents, including not only animals (such as scallops) but also inanimate objects (such as ships and coastlines). In her analysis of Latour and Callon’s treatment of nonhuman agents, however, Emily Martin argues that rather than granting them true agency, these scholars engage in what she calls the “fetishism of the non-human” (1995:266–267). That is, they grant nonhumans agency only insofar as they, like scientists and other human actors in their actor networks, act as resource accumulating entrepreneurs. Like Marx’s commodity fetishism, then, this fetishism of the nonhuman, Martin argues, conceals and naturalizes the social relations of capitalism by postulating that everything, animate and inanimate nature included, functions according to a capitalist rationality.

10. Although Eduardo Viveiros de Castro does not appear to share Ingold’s goal of reconstituting socioecological theory based on the insights of hunter-gatherers, his (1998) analysis of “perspectivism,” a cognitive orientation widespread among Amerindian hunters, and

the theory of nature–society that flows from it is suggestive in this regard.

11. Here, Tanner echoes Hallowell himself: “The interaction of the Ojibwa with certain kinds of plants and animals in everyday life is so structured culturally that individuals act *as if* they were dealing with ‘persons’ who both understand what is being said to them and have volitional capacities as well” (Hallowell 1960:36, emphasis added).

12. In a telling passage, Brightman describes human–animal reciprocity as functional ideology:

the event of violent appropriation is represented to the animal as its own act of disinterested and voluntary reciprocity. The dominant hunter-eater becomes, in the benefactive ideology, the dependent client of animal patrons who control both the desired material commodity (a “truth”) and the terms of all transactions through which it may be secured (a “deception”). . . . The benefactive ideology probably expresses the relation that Crees desire to create with their prey, a persistent moral and personal alignment that secures material interests more reliably than force. [Brightman 1993:211]

Like Brightman, many anthropologists studying northern hunters have taken a functionalist approach in their analysis of the ideology of human–animal reciprocity. In addition to the psychological function proposed by Brightman in the passage cited above, notions about human–animal reciprocity are also often assumed to have an ecological function. One of the best examples of this can be found in Harvey Feit’s pathbreaking analyses of Cree hunting (Feit 1973, 1979). He, too, regards Cree notions of human–animal reciprocity to be a cultural construction, the chief function of which is ecological. He argues that when animals become scarce and difficult to kill, Cree hunters assume that the animals have become angry and decided not to give themselves anymore, perhaps because hunters have taken too many (and so overtaxed the animals’ generosity). The prudent response, then, is to stop hunting them until the population recovers. Thus, the ideology of human–animal reciprocity, he argues, functions as part of an indigenous system of conservation. My intention is not to deny that ideas about human–animal relations may function in either or both of these ways; I seek only to question the a priori assumption that the beliefs are false (whether true or false, they may function in these ways).

13. Annette Weiner (1992:ch. 5), however, showed that Kula is hardly the balanced form of exchange that Malinowski described.

14. During the fur trade era (and likely before that as well), Kluane and other Southern Tutchone people maintained long-term trading partnerships with their Tlingit neighbors on the coast (who had access to Russian trade goods) as well as with Upper Tanana and Northern Tutchone peoples further inland. The exchanges in which Kluane people engaged with their coastal and interior trading partners may have been structurally analogous to the balanced reciprocity that exists between hunters and animals. Even if we postulate that these trading partnerships were the model on which the metaphor of human–animal reciprocity is based, however, we are still faced with the question of why we should grant the human–human relation primacy, because hunting must have both predated long-distance trade and exceeded it in day-to-day importance.

15. My thanks to Rebecca Allahyari for pointing this out to me.

16. The notion that animals are other-than-human people who engage in social relations with humans is not really so foreign a concept to most Euro-Americans, despite the behaviorist assumptions of many ethologists. Clinton Sanders (1999) notes that many Euro-American pet owners perceive their relationship with their pets in exactly this way. He examines “the ongoing, intimate, day-to-day interactions between people and their dogs” and shows that, as a result, “owners typically come to define their animals as socially

defined 'persons' possessing unique personalities, tastes, and responses to specific situations" (Sanders 1999:17). "The human caretaker," he argues, "comes to construct the personhood of the animal by seeing him or her as a unique, communicative, emotional, reciprocating, and companionable being who is a true member of the family" (Sanders 1999:10). Although she, too, focuses on dogs, Donna Haraway (2003) makes a similar argument for "companion species" more generally.

17. Significantly, Griffin (1984), too, looks primarily at animals in the wild—searching for food, avoiding predators, using tools—for evidence of conscious thought. Others, much like Scott, focus on animal interaction with human predators as evidence that animals are intelligent social beings, rather than biological automatons (Coy 1988; Reed 1988).

18. Another is evident in his discussion of hunters' assertions that humans can take on animal form. He suggests that although such metamorphoses may not actually occur "in ordinary waking life," they do occur in dreams, which, as already noted, many northern hunters regard as every bit as real as events experienced in waking life (Ingold 2000:101). This is an interesting point, but in discounting the possibility of waking metamorphosis, he directly contradicts the assertions of many northern hunters (e.g., see Sharp 2001:81–82).

19. Yet Ingold's position is based on the existence of a very clear "line of demarcation" between the way meaning is created in human speech (at least that carried out through the medium of language) and the speech of other entities, precisely because he insists on denying those entities any linguistic abilities.

20. For the southern Yukon, see, for example, Julie Cruikshank (e.g., 1990:208–213, 221–226, 258–262, 282–297, 336–338).

21. Hunting practices that are based specifically on the assumption that animals can speak human languages include the injunction against "talking badly" about animals (see Nadasdy 2003:88–89) and the use of circumlocution and indirect speech when talking about animals and/or hunting plans so as to prevent animals from "overhearing" what people say (see Nelson 1983 for numerous examples). A recent example of the latter occurred in March 2004 during a conversation I had with Kluane elder Margaret Johnson. We were in a back room of KFN's administrative office building, and she was talking to me about how things have changed over the past 50 years. She said that even the animals have changed; they are no longer scared of humans but now come right into the village in a manner they never used to do. She implied that this was because of improper behavior by humans. "Like that thing," she said, pointing to a bearskin folded up on the floor under a table. I could not see the skin from where I was sitting, so I asked her what she was pointing at. She referred to it again as "that animal" and continued to avoid using its name as she told me that in the old days people would never have treated it that way. I had to get out of my seat to see what she was talking about. If, as McClellan (1975:126) noted, "bear *quani* [people, Tlingit] can hear what humans are saying at any time, and at any place," then it would clearly have been dangerous to draw the bear's attention to the improper treatment of his skin by using his name.

22. A particularly famous example of this in the southern Yukon is when Skookum Jim's frog helper appeared to him in a dream and told him he would discover gold on the Klondike River (see Cruikshank 1990:57–62).

23. See below for a discussion of this in Kluane country.

24. Povinelli (1995:507) makes a similar critique of Ingold's earlier work.

25. See, for example, Ingold's description of efforts by hunters to coerce animals into giving "what they are not, of their own volition, prepared to provide" as a "betrayal of the trust that underwrites the willingness to give" (2000:71).

26. Godelier's explicit project in *The Enigma of the Gift* is to "complete" Mauss's theory of exchange by developing a sociological—rather than mystical—explanation for the obligation to reciprocate (1999:104).

27. She told me that there are many stories of animals talking to people in a human voice. Her own elders had warned her that when this happens, it is a sign that something important—more than likely bad—is about to happen. Some had advised her that if an animal talks to you, you should kill it to avert misfortune to yourself or your family. It should be noted that this is standard advice for dealing with owls when they appear near human habitation: a sure sign of impending death.

28. In so arguing, I echo Donald Griffin's plea to ethologists not to dismiss anecdotes about animal behavior out of hand:

One common objection to attempts to study animal thinking is that the only available evidence is anecdotal, and such evidence is unsatisfying to scientists because it may have been an accidental occurrence. . . . Cautious scientists tend to . . . find single instances of such behavior unconvincing. But as Dennett (1983) has recently pointed out, "As good scientists, ethologists know how misleading and, officially, unusable anecdotes are, and yet on the other hand, they are often so telling! . . . But if their very novelty and unrepeatability make them anecdotal and hence inadmissible evidence, how can one proceed to develop a cognitive case for the intelligence of one's target species?" Even the largest set of scientific data must obviously begin with datum number one, but if ethologists are deterred from pursuing the matter, additional data will never be forthcoming. The obvious remedy is to start an openminded collection of relevant data and make every possible attempt to replicate suggestive observations. [1984:viii]

29. See Nadasdy (2003:chs. 2–3) for a much more in-depth discussion of anthropological approaches to knowledge and how these can inform our understandings of the uses and abuses of indigenous knowledge.

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Paul Nadasdy

Department of Anthropology
University of Wisconsin–Madison
1180 Observatory Drive
Madison, WI 53706
penadasdy@wisc.edu