



The Feral Child: Blurring the Boundary between the Human and the Animal

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Abstract

This essay examines the human-animal relationship through an analysis of the behavior and cognitive abilities of four feral children. The cases range from the 18th to 20th century and each offers a perspective on the contemporary, cultural views of what it meant and still means to be considered human. The accounts of Peter the Wild Boy, Victor of Aveyron, and the Wolf-Girls (Kamala and Amala), serve to define humanity with the demarcating features being socialization and civilization. Finally, the societal view of these children mixed fact with fiction. Each child therefore became an amalgam of the human animal and the non-human animal, which allowed for the boundaries between the two to become blurred.

I speak for the man's cub. There is no harm in a man's cub. I have no gift of words, but I speak the truth. Let him run with the Pack, and be entered with the others. I myself will teach him. – Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book*

In *The Jungle Book*, Baloo the bear makes this statement above in reference to a young wild child named Mowgli. Mowgli was found and saved by a she-wolf and is up against the rest of the wild animals' judgment as to whether he can be initiated into the wolf pack. Baloo is interpreted as a symbol for nature itself and his statement, "I have no gift of words, but I speak the truth" (Kipling 1893, 19) is rather halting. Baloo, as an embodiment of the wild, explains here that although he

cannot communicate with humanity, he will take responsibility for the young, *human* child. Baloo's statement can also be applied to the idea of the feral child itself. The term "feral children," as defined by historian Michael Newton, "describes children who have been brought up by animals, or who have grown up alone in the wilderness of the woods and forests" (Newton 2002, XIII). Mowgli is isolated from the rest of humanity and devoid of human socialization; therefore, he lacks the human ability to communicate through spoken and understandable language.

Throughout the human past, accounts of wild children suggest a ceaseless attempt to understand what it means to be human. Like Baloo, a wild child has no words, but can speak to the meaning of human existence which suggests a blurring of the boundaries between the human animal and the non-human.

Besides Kipling's fictional story of Mowgli the wolf-boy, another rather commonly known tale involving feral children is the myth of the founding of Rome. Newton explains that although the story of Romulus and Remus is mythological, it reveals an early attention to the difference between the human and the animal. In the story, twin boys are abandoned by their mother, per request of the gods, and are then taken in by a she-wolf who nurtures them into young adulthood. In another version of the tale, the wolf mother is turned into a prostitute. This interesting shift from animal to human parent addresses an underlying anxiety over the links between humans and animals (Newton 2002, 5). Turning the wolf mother into a human prostitute suggests that the abilities of a human animal are more valued than those of a non-human animal. It also proposes the need for a clear distinction between the two.

Interest in wild children is further expressed in medieval period accounts of children either being abducted or rescued by wild animals and folk tales of "swan-children" (Newton 2002, 6). During the Middle Ages, the woods were believed to be a strange, mystical place. This belief fueled the philosophical interest in the wild child well into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Travel writers of this time created a mythical view of foreign lands and foreign people. Newton states that, "distance (between lands) was a fact of life, and distance produced strangeness," which then cultivated an anxiety over the differences between the human and the

animal (Newton 2002, 36). Artists of the Middle Ages depicted hybrids of animals and humans in travel manuscripts and termed them to be monstrous races. The tenth century English text, *Wonders of the East*, visually expressed these growing fears of half-human half-animal creatures. Further, apes in particular were contentious in terms of their relationship to humans. According to a medieval bestiary, “they are called *simia* in the Latin language because people notice great similitude to human reason in them” (Young 1968, 441). The monkey became a symbol for sin and took on the role of the inferior in Christian medieval art, while also evoking the idea of Adam and the Garden of Eden (Young 1968, 443).

Since the origin stories of wild children were usually shrouded in mystery, their existence was linked to these fictional folktales and hybrid creatures. Although this historical fascination with the feral child is largely one of myth and imagination, it nevertheless suggests an interest in the idea of a human without a connection to humanity. This interest also suggests the idea of studying deviance as a means to establish societal norms of behavior and intelligence. These medieval folktales of “swan-children” and children abducted by animals represent the beginnings of the feral child. They intrigued the public and engaged one’s mind, which influenced one’s perception of the world. These tales perceived the wild as mysterious and full of possible dangers, which was both frightening and fascinating to humans. The potential existence of animal-like humans persists in Western, cultural mythology as evidenced today with the increasing interest in supernatural creatures. Throughout the history of the Western human, myths and scientific studies have merged in interesting ways that raise anxiety over the definition of humanity.

The first account of a feral child given widespread attention was that of Peter the Wild Boy. Both as a child and as an adult, Peter was unable to fully relate with other human animals. Douglas Keith Candland, a professor of psychology and animal behavior, explains that the boy was found in 1724, in the woods of what is now known as the German town of Hamelin and that the name ‘Peter’ was given to him by a mob of street boys (Candland 1993, 9). Peter showed few signs of socialization or civility upon discovery and he sat on all fours, slept on the floor, ate raw vegetables, and was always alert. These attributes are generally associated with

animals, and therefore Peter appeared as a human in form, but as an animal in behavior. The historian Roger Moorhouse further reveals that Peter repeatedly attempted, and sometimes succeeded in, escaping the confines of society. Peter was viewed as an oddity by the general public and was especially interesting to the upper class of Europe and some leading scientists during the Enlightenment era. He found himself in the center of a royal battle for guardianship. Caroline, the Princess of Wales, ultimately acquired him and kept him as if he were her “pet” (Moorhouse 2010, 17). The threat of being hit with a rod kept his uncivilized behavior in check when in the public eye (Candland 1993, 9-10). He was assigned a teacher, Arbuthnot, and entered into an attempt at education, which revealed that he learned simple actions through imitation. He was also quickly baptized (Newton 2002, 33-34).

Peter’s story suggests an attempt by society to understand the human world and separate it from that of the animal. Peter was behaviorally an animal; he moved on all fours, ate raw food, caught and dismembered birds, and had keen senses of hearing and smell (Candland, 1993, 9). His guardian, Caroline, kept him as her pet and dressed him in the most fanciful clothes in order to force him into the mold of society which had developed without his presence (Moorhouse 2010, 18). Peter was exploited for his unusual character and not treated as a *human* animal. Therefore, he was considered an amalgam of the human and animal in eighteenth century culture thus blurring the boundary between these classifications. Further, through Peter’s inability to clearly communicate with others, he enforced the idea that true human animals displayed a complex social system which included verbal and nonverbal language. This aspect of his mentality is what interested Enlightenment thinkers the most. How could a human be unable to communicate with his or her own species or any species for that matter? The existence of Peter began a new conversation in reference to the power of language within the relationship between humans and animals.

The question of Peter’s mind and cognitive ability was a popular topic for many of the leading philosophers of the eighteenth century. With the presence of a “savage” creature such as Peter in the cultural world, there was growing anxiety around

what it meant to be human. Peter was the opposite of the cultured and the civilized (Newton 2002, 40). Peter was believed to have a blank mind, the embodiment of Rousseau's "tabula rasa" (Candland, 1993, 16). Because of his inability to ever fully acquire language, his inability to make and use tools, and his inability to transmit culture, Peter reinforced eighteenth century distinctions between humans and animals. People proposed that Peter had a blank mind because he lacked core human abilities that are taught in society, which allowed for him to fall into the category of the non-human animal. His unnatural and anti-social tendencies further hindered his chance at adaptation due to the belief that humans understand themselves through others of their kind (Candland 1993, 3). Although he was a human animal, and therefore thought to be a social creature, Peter strove to be on his own. He repeatedly attempted to escape society and return to the woods in which he was found (Moorhouse 2010, 17). In addition to Peter's desire to physically separate from society, he emotionally ostracized himself because he lacked empathy for others, which made it impossible for him to understand or relate to them. He was an isolated creature, and therefore not perceived as being a human animal in the eighteenth century, but not quite a non-human animal either. Peter existed in a liminal space, in the blurred boundary between the human and non-human animal.

Questions about Peter's mind eventually led to questions about the state or presence of his soul. Peter was baptized because he briefly lived with his teacher who was a religious man (Newton 2002, 31-32). Therefore he became a man of God, but without having expressed any knowledge of himself, how could he know anything of God or faith? Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) focused on Peter's religious state in *Mere Nature Delineated* (1726). Although considered to be a speculative work, Defoe recognized that both human and beast-like (or non-human animal-like) characteristics were present in Peter and therefore deemed him as being completely produced by nature—an "animal machine" (Newton 2002, 42-44). This idea was first introduced by Rene Descartes in his *Discourse on Method* (1637). Peter was trapped in a mind and body that knew nothing of culture or religion and therefore was completely alone in his strangeness. This reenforces the Enlightenment idea that one needs culture to be considered human and the

question of whether the savage could have religion or faith further tested the definition of humanity.

Faith and God have continually been at the forefront of discussions of evolution and scientific debate. In 1657, John Evelyn wrote, “religion is alone which makes mankind differ from brute animals” (Day 2008, 50). Matthew Day, a professor of religion, further explains that anti-evolutionists viewed the connections made between animals and humans through evolution as a type of demoralization, and that religion really was the defining human characteristic of the seventeenth century (Day 2008, 70). Religions are learned within the context of cultures and social institutions. Peter lacked exposure to such institutions and therefore Defoe was able to conclude that Peter was “merely nature” (Newton 2002, 43). Peter was caught between the human animal and the non-human, and therefore he was thought of as soulless. Peter evoked the idea that individuals need culture, and perhaps even religious beliefs, to be considered fully human. This seemed especially true in the eighteenth century. Peter was not perceived as a human being; he was beaten and dressed up for entertainment. He was viewed as a valuable hybrid creature to the scientific world. To be considered a human in the eighteenth century, Peter’s case makes it clear that socialization and mental competency of spoken language, knowledge, and religion were needed.

Peter was eventually abandoned by his teachers and drifted out of the public eye. He ended up as a farmhand, without ever acquiring spoken language skills, and without ever convincing the public of his true nature. Whether he was a human, an animal, or both was a mystery, which only incited further exploration of feral children. Upon his dismissal from one of the queen’s households, he was fitted with a collar that served to identify him (Newton 2002, 51). Although this was done for practical reasons (he still had a tendency to run) it was a final act of dehumanization upon him that equated him to an animal. Throughout his life, Peter was the center of a debate over what it meant to be human, when in reality he was rarely treated as one. He served to define what others were as humans instead of gaining an identity for himself. Peter was a wild child of the forests, and grew into a man living in a world that did not want him. In the eighteenth century, he was

characterized as a mindless and secluded savage, which was thought to prove human civilization as being full of intelligent and social beings and that non-human animals lacked these characteristics.

In the time between the discovery of Peter and the next wild child in the western world, Carolus Linneaus released the tenth edition of his *Sytema Naturae*. In 1758, he believed he had classified the genus of *Homo*. Julia Douthwaite, a French professor at the University of Notre Dame, explains that occupying the lowest level of this hierarchy was *Homo monstrosus* and *Homo ferus* (Douthwaite 1997, 3). The first category belonged to monstrous beings that were mythical, yet believed to exist. The latter subgroup was reserved for feral children such as Peter and others who were seen as the “missing link” or as an amalgam of the human animal and the non-human, which resulted in a hybrid creature (Douthwaite 1997, 2). This reveals that during the eighteenth century, the question of what separated humans from animals was unclear and undefined. The fact that the cases of wild children became their own category and that they were equated to mythical creatures emphasizes the uncertainty around the feral child’s nature. Since the characterization of the *Homo* genus was also a hierarchy, it placed the wild child below other human children who were raised within civilization. This classification created inequality within the same species and also made the lower echelon comparable to that of other species considered “less than” human, such as that of animals.

The next case to be analyzed in this essay is that of Victor of Aveyron and his teacher Jean Marc Gaspard Itard. This account began in 1797 and very much fueled a belief in the genus of *Homo ferus*. Victor’s origin story is not very different than that of Peter’s. He was repeatedly caught and recaptured and his behavior was very similar to Peter’s and compared to that of wild animals. He was also, for a time, a very popular subject to be discussed. Victor’s story differs from Peter’s, however, in that he had a teacher and a guardian that both attended to his education and happiness. He was nurtured and genuinely cared for throughout his life. Initially, Victor was just a nameless, wild boy in Paris who was diagnosed as an “idiot”—a medical term of the time—by leading physician Phillipe Pinel (Newton 2002, 101). That diagnosis by Pinel was significant because it addressed the

shifting nature of what “human” meant at that time. Physicians at the time recognized that Victor had a mental disability (Pinel likened him to those in mental asylums) (Newton 2002, 102), but later suggested he more closely represented an early form of humanity. With the French Revolution having just ended, Victor represented both a savage state of an evolutionary past and a symbol for incurable human misery. Victor embodied the idea of the “noble savage” (Newton 2002, 100).

Despite Victor’s inability to produce a vast range of emotions, he continuously craved attention and affection. Itard became his teacher and Madame Guerin became a type of mother to him, but it was Itard who gave him his name. In an attempt to teach Victor language, Itard realized that he had an affinity for the vowel “o,” which is why the name “Victor” was given to him (Newton 2002, 120). This simple act of naming by Itard was the first step in fully connecting Victor to the human world. One’s name is often considered a marker of one’s individuality and sense of self, and though Victor appeared to lack self-awareness, he seemed to like his name even though he did not provide it himself. In the case of Peter, his name was provided out of necessity, not interest. Therefore the idea of the name here suggests that humans use the act of “naming” as a type of identification and as an act of caring. Animals in the wild are nameless. Only those animals that are connected to humans have individual names. Victor was humanized by the fact that his name expressed who he was, but also characterized as an animal because he was unaware of his uniqueness.

Victor further portrayed his humanity by eventually showing affection for those closest to him. He initiated touch and friendly gestures between himself and Itard and cried when he was separated from Madame Guerin (Newton 2002, 118). His ability to express limited amounts of emotion, despite his inability to express spoken language, defines yet another key human characteristic: the ability to understand others. The relationship between Itard and Victor was one of student and teacher, but Itard became increasingly attached to the child despite Victor’s lack of reciprocation. Victor cared for Madame Guerin more, but Itard concluded that affection was a key component of education (Newton 2002, 118). Victor never mastered spoken language, except for two French words, but he did express the

idea of morality in a test experiment set up by Itard. In the experiment, Itard purposefully attempted to punish Victor, who in turn forcefully refused to accept the punishment. In a fit of defense, he bit Itard on the arm (Newton 2002, 125). Although violent, Victor relied on his judgment and instinct to protect himself. As a human, Victor knew his punishment was wrong, and through his instinct, he reacted in the only way he could because he couldn't verbally protest. This behavior displays a mixing of human and animal traits. It was suggested that Victor understood that his treatment was wrong and that he didn't deserve punishment, which is arguably an innate human characteristic. Victor displayed a sense of self in this situation, but was unable to express this verbally. He was not able to fully communicate with other humans, and therefore was viewed as being similar to a non-human animal. By biting Itard, Victor showed that he relied on his inner animal-like instinct because he defended himself in a violent, physical manner. Overall, Victor exhibited the potential for humanity, but scientists at the time believed that he failed to fully become human. Due to his emotional limitations, Itard eventually left Victor in the care of Madame Guerin because he decided he could not change Victor's wild nature (Newton 2002, 126).

Peter and Victor both failed to master human language, so therefore the language of the wild child appears to be one of silence (Seshadri 2012, 141), despite their ability to make sounds and gestures. There was no understandable exchange of communication in the relationships with these children, which suggests their inability to fully learn the spoken word. Kalpana Rahita Seshadri, whose research focuses on the philosophy of race, explains that the wild child is first captured and then an attempt at domestication is made (Seshadri 2012, 143). Further, the child's refusal to adapt to societal norms exiles him or her from society. He or she has no connection to the laws of the human world and is therefore "nameless" (Seshadri 2012, 144-45) in their being. Both Peter and Victor were given a name, thus humanizing them, but in the first case the name signified the wild boy as a pet, where with Victor it served to express an aspect of his individuality. The feral child is both human and animal. Both Peter and Victor were wild, but their ties to the animal world are symbolized and assumed, whereas with the next case of Kamala

and Amala, the wolf-girls, a very clear association between them and the animal is made.

In the Indian forests near Midnapore, in 1920, the tale of two wild, ghost-like creatures permeated the villages and caused fear and anxiety. Reverend Singh, a missionary who ran an orphanage in town, discovered the “ghosts,” who were actually two Indian girls about the ages of eight and one and a half, in a wolf cave amongst two other wolf cubs. Upon discovery, the mother wolf prepared to attack the reverend and his men, but was shot and killed before she could begin her defense (Newton 2002, 185-86). The girls were given to the care of the villagers, who after five days abandoned them out of fear. The reverend returned and chose to take them back with him to his orphanage. The girls’ behavior was like that of Peter and Victor, but more closely embodied animal movement. They walked and ran on all fours, cuddled and interacted only with each other, scratched doors, ate without their hands, and howled and growled like wolves (Dowling 2013, 736). Most noteworthy is that their physical morphology was recorded as being non-human. They had developed a strong jaw, elongated and sharp canine teeth, and an acute night vision which inspired their love for darkness (Newton 2002, 186). Here the lines between the wild children and their animal counterparts seem to be blurred to an extreme. The girls were biologically human, but they neither acted nor looked human.

Due to the girls’ strange physical appearance, they are infamously known as “the wolf-girls,” despite Reverend Singh’s naming of them. Like Peter, the children were named out of necessity and not for giving them personality. By being referred to as “wolf-girls” they become both the human animal and the non-human. They are identified as being both wolf and human girl. Further, since these girls were discovered in India, and not in the Western world like Peter and Victor, the geographical differences become significant. Ideas from the Middle Ages seemed to resurface and the idea that distance caused strangeness reawakened. Peter and Victor were both found in a society that desired to learn from them. They were viewed as sub-humans in that they were neither human nor animal. Kamala and Amala were perceived as ghost creatures due to the cultural beliefs of the

surrounding villagers while to Westerners their strange nature was attributed to their exotic nationality and was possibly fictionalized and exaggerated (Dowling 2013, 738). Colonialists similarly perceived the girls' homeland of India as being closely associated with nature and animality (Dowling 2013, 741). This is significant because it conveys how community members and foreigners perceived the children. Both Peter and Victor were recognized as biologically human, but mentally less than human, while the girls were deemed another species by the public. The wolf-girls represented both of Linnaeus' lowest *Homo* categories (*monstrosus* and *ferus*) because they were both mythical and feral.

In terms of the girls' cognitive abilities, people viewed them as indifferent and uninterested in learning. Victor showed more interest eventually in socialization but Peter and the wolf-girls appeared to be representative of Rousseau's blank slate, at least in terms of formal education. The girls, however, may represent a type of animal rearing that allowed them to learn the ways of an animal, where with Peter and Victor it was more likely that they developed in isolation of both human and non-human animals. In an article for *Child Development*, Wayne Dennis (1951) explains that feral children seem to adopt animal traits, such as an appetite for raw meat, running on all fours, aggression towards humans, and most importantly no expression of human language, which replace whatever previous human traits they once possessed. Since most origins of feral children are shrouded in mystery, it is unknown what human traits would have actually been present in the children. Dennis seems to suggest that human traits are essentially the opposite of the animal-like traits exhibited by the children (Dennis, 1951). Although this source is dated, Dennis' writing expresses a viewpoint that reflects the historical approach to the study of wild children. He argues that the girls lost what it was to behaviorally be human, whether they ever "possessed" human behavior or not (Dennis 1951, 153, 156). The girls rejected everything human, and they bonded more with the dogs at the orphanage than the other children (Candland 1993, 60-66). The girls are like Peter in that they did not seek human interaction, which was unlike how Victor craved attention from his guardians. An inspection of the cave where they resided with the wolves showed it was clean of human filth suggesting the mother wolf actually cared for the human girls

(Candland 1993, 62). Such maternal care evokes the fictional stories of Mowgli and Romulus and Remus and demonstrates anxieties over the intimate connections between human and animal.

The girls eventually became ill and after several days of sickness, the younger sister, Amala died. Kamala reacted strongly to the loss of her companion and became even more isolated. Mrs. Singh took it upon herself to nurture Kamala back to health (Newton 2002, 187). Kamala was able to be domesticated somewhat under Mrs. Singh's care, which may or may not have influenced her ability to learn several Bengali words. With the case of Victor, Itard strongly believed that an aspect of nurturing was key. Despite Kamala's original love for the darkness, she slowly became fearful of it and would cling to Mrs. Singh at night (Newton 2002, 187). This fear of the dark is commonly viewed as a human, childhood fear. Perhaps Kamala's eventual aversion to the dark was an aspect of her human nature peeking through her animal upbringing.

Lastly, the question of religion was again raised with the finding of Kamala. Reverend Singh and his religious authority, Bishop Pakenham-Walsh, perceived her as an emblem of Christ's power and mercy because she was thought to have a pure soul produced by the nature of the jungle; a soul clean of original sin due to her lack of association with humanity (Newton 2012, 195). Mentally, Kamala had no concept of good or bad, much like Peter, and because of that her religious state was undefined. It is unclear whether she was baptized like Peter, but the interest over her soul revisits the idea that the human environment can only offer the institution of religion and culture. She was capable of learning, but lacked the social environment that would have allowed for the cultivation of her mind (Candland 1993, 68). Kamala's story was highly publicized and the *New York Times* equated her to Mowgli, but clarified she was also tragically unlike the fictional character in her rejection of society (Dowling 2013, 740). Kamala was directly associated with a fictional wild child, while recognized as being of a different nature. She was not a character but a human individual that seemed to identify as an animal.

Each feral child's case demonstrates the ambiguous boundaries between the human and non-human animal for the time and culture in which they were discovered. Each child was seen as having the *potential* for humanity while simultaneously being identified as not fully human. David Premack, an expert in psychology, explains that in human social behavior, there is a behavioral counterpart embedded in mental states (Premack 2007, 13865). This suggests that despite one being biologically human, the process of *becoming* human and therefore being identified as human, is taught through socialization and culture. Humans are tied in a tight social web (Premack 2007, 13865), which is reproduced through human culture. Feral children challenge what being human means because they are human *and* animal, and they lack socialization, which was, and arguably still is, important to the definition of humanity.

Peter the Wild Boy raises questions about the human mind and serves as an anti-example to it because of his struggles with verbal language and sociability. He also addresses the idea of religion, and a cultural institution and how socialization allows for human behavior to be cultivated. Victor of Aveyron exhibits how emotions and a sense of morality are both aspects of human identity and the wolf-girls Kamala and Amala mix fiction with fact to portray a human reverted to animal. To end this essay the way it began, I wish to return to the beloved tale of *The Jungle Book*. The last lines of the first chapter explain that Mowgli has decided to return to civilization and that he has left the wild "to meet those mysterious things that are called men" at the break of dawn (Kipling 1893, 42). Perhaps, the story of a fictional wild child summarizes what the real feral children in this essay serve to teach. The essence of humanity is mysterious, and the lines between all animals and humans are blurred, undefined, and continuously changing.

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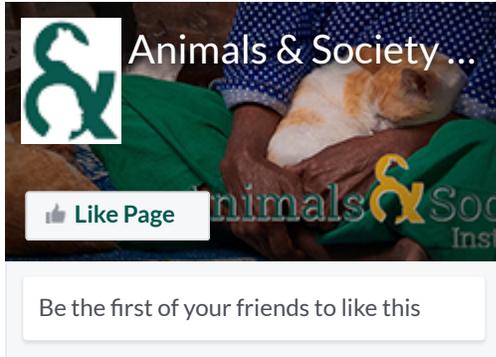
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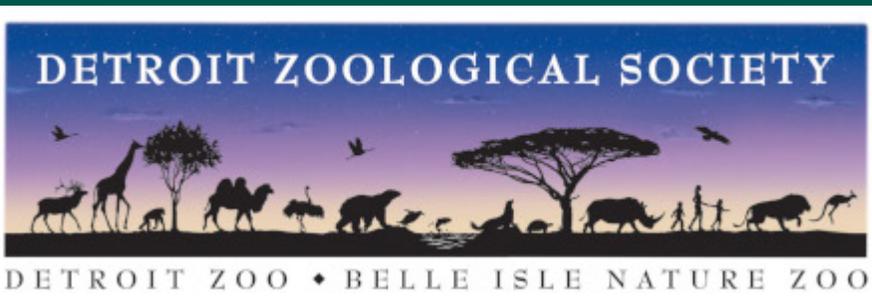
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