Where Anyone Can Be Anything? Try Zootopia!

A Review of

Zootopia (2016)
by Byron Howard and Rich Moore (Directors)

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Reviewed by

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The animated movie Zootopia is a story of trust and the insight into diversity as a necessary means to overcome prejudice and evil. Zootopia inspires thoughts regarding the relation between physical appearance and the psychological qualities attributed to the characters as a central reason for the emergence of prejudice and evil, trust and tolerance. On a political-philosophical level, the film may also inspire thoughts regarding the design of an ideal state to best fit its citizens.

The course of events primarily takes place in Zootropolis: a cosmopolis with 12 unique ecosystems providing perfect habitats for mammals of all species. The citizens live peacefully together and work together equally—even animals that used to be in predator-prey relations—as instincts to hunt or flee are vanished. All animals are free to pursue their personal interests and fulfill their dreams. Zootropolis is the place where “anyone can be anything.” However, the harmony of Zootropolis is threatened by mysterious missing mammals’ cases. The protagonist Judy Hopps, who has managed to become the first bunny police officer at Zootropolis Police Department, tries to solve the cases with the reluctant help of the fox, Nick Wilde. The unlikely pair of the righteous and zestful bunny and the streetwise and sly fox turns out to complement each other on their journey. In a remote hospital, the missing mammals, who are all of predator species, are found locked in cages and displaying primitive aggressive behavior. Mayor Lionheart has covered up the cases as he fears that news of savage predators will disrupt the trust between the citizens of Zootropolis. The sheep Assistant Mayor Bellwether is promoted mayor. The story climaxes when Judy realizes that the mammals didn’t “go savage” because of breakthroughs of biological urges but because they were poisoned. Bellwether is revealed as the mastermind behind the scheme. Justice is restored, and Zootropolis returns to its balance wiser than before.

Zootopia is told as a fable. The narrative of a fable can be understood through the concept of archetypes, the assumption that we share unconscious patterns generated by general human experiences (Jung, 2012). Archetypes structure events and psychological activity into meaningful symbolic narratives on an individual as well as collective level. An example of an archetype is the trickster, a rouge without manners driven by primary needs. Another
example is the shadow, signifying personality sides one does not want to recognize, as well as aspects of reality that a society or culture does not want to know of. The archetype as a conception can be embodied into a physical appearance as the personification of an abstract concept, attribute, or feeling evoking expectations of behavior and character.

Apart from the anthropomorphic qualities of the animals—they behave like humans, talk, walk on two legs, wear clothes, drive cars, and live in a large city—the archetype-concept lends a hypothesis as to why we effortlessly identify with the animated animals and establish expectations to their character traits. In the film, the species and physical appearance of the animal represent the personification and embodiment of character virtues or flaws: If one is a fox, then he is untrustworthy. Nick is a fox; therefore, Nick is untrustworthy. The attribution follows the logically valid form, modus ponendo ponens (if P, then Q; P; therefore Q). In the context of a fable, the attribution may alternatively be described as follows: If one is untrustworthy, then the subject should be presented as a fox; Nick is a fox; therefore, Nick is untrustworthy. However, this follows the logically invalid form affirming the consequent (if P, then Q; Q; therefore P) (Forbes, 1994). Meeting fox-prejudice as a pup made Nick give in to them and become a hustler. When expectations are met in the movie, it eases our understanding: the buffalo, police chief Bogo, is indeed thick-skinned and resolute; Mrs. Otterton is slippery; the sloths are slow; Judy is fast and good at multiplying; and Nick is cunning and canny. Much of the humor and narrative strength of the film, however, arises from when prejudices and expectations are contradicted: Lionheart is cowardly hiding the truth; the elephant yoga instructor Nangi has nothing of an elephant’s memory; Mr. Big, a small cute-looking arctic mouse, is a feared crime lord; and Bellwether may appear sheepish but is more of a wolf on the inside. As the characters develop, assumptions and prejudices fall. Judy and Nick incorporate shadow-sides of their personality; she becomes more of a trickster, and he becomes more of a hero. The film demonstrates its depth by creating characters who in part live up to the expected qualities and abilities associated with the animal species they are, only to then defy and exceed the expected behavior with their individual, unique personalities.

The title Zootopia can be read as portmanteau combining the sound and meaning of zoo and topia. Topia or topos, from Greek, means place. Zoo, also from Greek, means animal. Figuratively, zoo may also characterize the zoo-like environments of a modern city, such as Zootropolis. The postfix polis comes from Greek and translates into “city-state.” Pronouncing zootopia creates an auditory resemblance to eutopia or utopia. Eutopia is combined of eu, meaning “good,” and topos, meaning a “good place.” Utopia was originally coined in 1516 by Sir Thomas More in his political philosophical description of an imagined ideal society. More describes how equal rights and distribution of resources will form the behavior of the citizens: “In Utopia, where every man has a right to everything, they all know that if care is taken to keep the public stores full no private man can want anything; for among them there is no unequal distribution, so that no man is poor, . . . yet they are all rich” (More, 1516, p. 185). More’s account of an ideal state was inspired by Plato’s The Republic (1888). Plato’s Republic creates an analogy between the management of the state and of the individual. Laws and ideals should be internalized so that the state and the individual are governed by the same virtues. Zootopia, the animals’ place, has utopian qualities of an ideal state where the wolf and the lamb feed together (Isaiah 65:25, Holy Bible) with a self-control like internalized laws overwriting biology. Zootopia addresses a fundamental challenge of modern society; citizens must balance an inherent biology shaped by thousands of years of evolution from the primitive fight-or-flight behavior with the sophisticated etiquette of modern social life; as Mr. Big puts it, “We may be evolved, but
deep down we are still animals.” The anthropomorphic characters, the city as a habitat, the political structure, and conflicts make Zootopia a possible allegory of modern society. The film distances itself from fairytales, especially Frozen (Buck & Lee, 2013), for example, when Judy is ordered to stay away from the Otterton missing mammal case by Police Chief Bogo: “Life isn’t some cartoon musical where you sing a little song and your insipid dreams magically come true. So, let it go.” The harshness is softened by the fact that the statement comes from a cartoon character. As a fable, the film elegantly addresses real-world problems indirectly, a balance that resembles the animation (Halas & Batchelor, 1954) of the novel Animal Farm (Orwell, 1945) but with more optimism. The similarities to modern civilization are obvious to a degree that transfers the film’s points to insights without forcing them upon the viewer.

Zootopia gives voice to different comments on the origins of the conflicts played out in the film: Mr. Big points out the underlying biology, Bogo points to the harshness of reality, and Bellwether cynically uses fear that “always works.” Zootopia offers an explanation of evil not caused by genes or biology, or race or species, but by the toxins we are exposed to. In the film, the toxin is presented as an extract from the flower night howlers, which will turn any animal, even a bunny, into a savage. In a broader sense, toxin may be any damaging influence such as inadequate attachment to significant caregivers or the envy, inferiority, and belittlement that drive Bellwether to conspire against all predators. Evil may stem from toxic substances, environments, or ideas and be expressed in self-serving thoughts and actions (Goldberg, 2000). In the epilogue of the film, Judy offers an edifying imperative in her speech to the new police officers: “We all have limitations . . . we all have a lot in common . . . the more we try to understand one another, the more exceptional each of us will be . . . no matter what type of animal you are . . . I implore you try. Try to make the world a better place. Look inside yourself and recognize that change starts with you. It starts with me. It starts with all of us.” Zootopia delivers an eloquent combination of idealism and realism that encourages action; try; try everything.

References