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ANIMAL COGNITION, SPECIESISM, HUMANISM: REFLECTIONS ON THE NOTION OF "SEMIOTIC ANIMAL"

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The goal of this article is to assess the epistemological "suitability" of humanities to discuss the question of "humanity" and "human identity", and their reiterated dialectic opposition to "animality". The case study shall be the notion of "semiotic animal" (Deely 2005) within the framework of similar anthropocentric definitions aimed to establish a qualitative and dualistic distinction between the human being and the other animals. The motivations behind this differentiation – it is here maintained – appear to be more ideological than methodological, as illustrated by the long history of definitions of "humanity", as instruments for qualitative distinction from the rest of the animals. On the contrary, the article defends the thesis of the (ethical, but not only) necessity to produce certain statements on a solid empirical (or at least scientifically-informed) basis. By analyzing notions like "semiotic animal", the article seeks to expose some of their many scientific inaccuracies and to challenge their speculative construction.

KEYWORDS: semiotic animal, animal cognition, Umwelt, zoosemiotics, animal ethics.

The relation between humanities and animal studies is becoming more and more relevant in modern research. As Francesca Ferrando (2013) has correctly noticed,

we entered in an age of "post-anthropocentrism", which is "*post* to the concept of the human and to the historical occurrence of humanism, both based [...] on hierarchical social constructs and humancentric assumptions (Ferrando 2013: 29). However, encouraging such overcoming sounds (at least in the posthumanist program, which is what Ferrando is talking about), many open questions and many challenges remain. Humanism is a philosophical practice that espouses reason, ethics and justice as its main values. How does a "human" science discuss the subject of animals – and: is that a "humanist" discussion?

But most of all: has Ferrando's (and other scholars') analysis sedimented into the socio-cultural practices yet? Has it at least fully spread throughout the academic discourse in a similar way as gender or ethnic correctness have? Some examples seem to prove otherwise. An impressive amount of non-fiction books, on all possible topics except animals, start their arguments by emphasizing that that very topic is something that "distinguishes us from animals". One opens, say, an essay about interior design, and read things like "To be creative is part of the human psyche. It is one of those traits that set us apart from other animal species" (Dodsworth 2009: 8). Let alone that this statement is scientifically false (not only creativity in general, not only art, not only architecture, but even interior design specifically is something that other animals practice, and the case of the Satin bowerbird *Ptilonorhynchus violaceus* it is possibly the most outstanding): what is very interesting is to notice that emphatic incipits like this do *not* have a purpose in the economy of a text's contents: writers like Simon Dodsworth are not going to mention human uniqueness again, later in their book: what they need is a rhetorical device to kick off the book, and to (erroneously) claim the human uniqueness in whatever activity that book deals with sounds nice and solemn enough. So, what is actually worth of reflection is the *need* of recurring to this strategy, and its consequent appeal on the readership. For the record, a basic survey on Google of something like "unlike animals, man" (imagining any possible continuation after "man"), gives, as of mid 2016 (while I am writing these lines), 2,750 entries, most of which consisting of expressions and contexts where an anthrozoological comparison is either *not* called for, or terribly outdated ("Unlike animals, man is given a spirit in the likeness of God", "Unlike animals, man has the capacity of progress", "Unlike animals, man is endowed with a greater number of instincts", and so forth).

Naturally, the roots for such attitudes go much deeper than what Google or an interior design book may ever reveal. The basic belief of humankind as an entity separate from and superior to other animals, and as holding an intrinsic value within all forms of life (the latter regarded as resources that may justifiably be exploited for the benefit of human beings) is embedded in many religions and phi-

losophies. To perform an exhaustive summary of the many speculations on human uniqueness / superiority over non-human animals is of course a hopeless task, in such a restricted context, however, perhaps, a few relevant steps in the evolution of Western philosophy may be usefully reminded. In Aristotle we are presented with a natural hierarchy of living beings, where humans and other animals stand out for the possession of conscious experience, but humans only are considered "rational". This basic template is followed by Thomas Aquinas, who adds that – because of the ability to be rational – humans are the only beings endowed with an intrinsic value: to them, and only to them, we can extend concern "for their own sakes". Moreover, and that is of course very important for Aquinas, only human intellect can reach a level of knowledge and understanding of God. If Aristotle had denied rationality, but at least allowed conscious experience to nonhuman animals, the impact of René Descartes on Western thought also inaugurates a school of denial of consciousness as such, via the notorious equation between non-human animals and machines. In Immanuel Kant, we also witness the emergence of the notion of "autonomy": both human and non human beings have desires, but only humans have "will", that is, the ability of "deciding over desires" (including refraining from them). To conclude this short excursus, and set the tones for the central arguments of this article, it is important to mention Martin Heidegger, and his idea of the "poor in world" animal. In Heidegger, non human animals are excluded from the "worlding of world", and are instead confined within their environment: human beings, on the contrary, are not captive to their environment, they can understand it "as environment" and they can experience entities and phenomena in their objective existence.

The establishment and the strengthening of such perspective(s) had of course an impact at various levels, starting from the moral one: the general assumption of an "inferior animal" became, and still is, ground for different legal treatments, economic forms of exploitation, scientific practices, and so forth: it is therefore no wonder that contributions to this paradigm come unceasingly from nearly all disciplines of philosophical nature – not just philosophy as such.

The semiotic approach to non-human animals

The main semiotic field that deals with non-human animals is famously zoosemiotics, introduced by Thomas Sebeok (1963). Initially a compromise between ethological and semiotic research, zoosemiotics developed specifically into the study of semiosis within and across animal species. This important shift in semiotics (a

discipline which had always been anthropocentric and logocentric) was in fact anticipated already in the late 19th century, as Charles S. Peirce acknowledged the semiotic nature of the non-human world, and a string of contributions was inaugurated (including the fundamental Jakob von Uexküll), leading to the development of biosemiotics first (Rothschild 1962) and zoosemiotics a bit later:

> [...] semiosis is an indispensable characteristic of all terrestrial life forms. It is this capacity for containing, replicating, and expressing messages, of extracting their signification, that, in fact, distinguishes them more from the nonliving – except for human agents, such as computers or robots, that can be programmed to simulate communication – than any other traits often cited. The study of the twin processes of communication and signification can be regarded as ultimately a branch of the life science, or as belonging in large part to nature, in some part to culture, which is, of course, also a part of nature (Sebeok 1991: 22).

If this identification of the concept of "life" with nearly everything has often brought biosemiotics on the verge of metaphysical drift (I have discussed this elsewhere, most recently on Martinelli 2016: 144–152), on the opposite hand, it has not necessarily changed the status of humanity as an ontological domain that, after all, does *not* belong to nature: save few exceptions, the human subject was carefully kept outside the biosemiotic discussion. The obsessive recruitment of every single organism, atom, celestial body, cell in the biosemiotic (and, partly, zoosemiotic) program is counterbalanced by an equally meticulous exclusion of anything "human" from the discourse. Why so? Is *Homo sapiens* not a living form?

That the motivations behind this peculiar status quo are more ideological than methodological is quite clear when one analyzes the way semiotics has tackled the notion itself of "humanity", resolving to defend the thesis of a qualitative / discontinuous uniqueness of our species within the animal kingdom – just like nearly every other field of inquiry. At one moment or another of history, indeed, the human being ("man") has been defined as: the rational animal, the symbolic, the playful animal, the moral animal, the laughing animal, the spiritual animal, the social animal, the cultural animal, the linguistic animal, the abstract animal, the signifying animal, the political animal, the tool-maker animal, and more. Some of these definitions stemmed from authoritative thinkers, who, in a certain moment of philosophical history, reflected on the characteristics of human nature (the notion of rational animal comes from Aristotle, that of the symbolic animal is best known in Ernst Cassirer's formulation, and so forth). Some others derived from recent studies in sociology, psychology or else, and some others, finally, were of a commonsensical or even superstitious / religious nature.

Speculative statements were usually followed by empirical counter-statements, and invalidated exactly in their claim of human *uniqueness*. Each of these definitions lasted a certain amount of time as "ultimate signs of human distinction", until the likes of Charles Darwin, Karl von Frisch, Donald R. Griffin and others offered evidence of their scientific inaccuracy. Relentlessly, other scholars reworked their theories in search of *another* sign of human distinction, or even the same sign, but heavily narrowed in its definition, with the purpose of creating such a small circumscription of the concept that other animals would finally be kept out. It happened with "culture", "language", "mind", "abstraction", "art", and other critical topics, whose definition and conceptualization are in constant progress, and therefore very liable to be re-discussed (i.e., in most cases, restricted). In more than one case, the process of restriction would generate a "friendly fire"-type of side effect, as the new definition would now be so narrow that several human communities or human subjects would be left out of it – creating a conceptual discrimination that, *in this historical moment*, is not really acceptable. Some of the most recurrent definitions of "music" are for instance so circumscribed that, while keeping out dangerously-melodic species like humpback whales or nightingales, they also end up discriminating the majority of musical cultures around the globe, plus illustrious musicians like John Cage or Karl-Heinz Stockhausen.

The (trouble with) the notion of "semiotic animal"

This "vital urge" (or at least it appears to be so), on the part of human beings, to establish their identity on the basis of claimed radical differences with other animals is the main concern of this article, and I intend to take semiotics is my case study. Just like many other fields, in semiotic history, too, there have always been a) scholarly enterprises in favor of the uniquely human application of semiotic studies (particularly in the European schools of Saussurean and Greimasian extractions), and / or b) attempts to contribute to those processes of progressive restriction of given concepts (semiotics had a go on at least "language", "symbol", "culture", "abstraction" and "signification"), and / or finally c) creation (or participation to the creation) of new labels of human distinction (the linguistic animal, for one).

The last, specifically semiotic creation offered, and my case study here, is the concept of the "semiotic animal". Originally developed by Prof. John Deely in 1990[1], this concept departs exactly from the American, Peircean tradition, which –

[1] That is, the first edition of Deely 2009, in this essay's bibliography.

as we have seen – assumes the stand of "opening" semiotics to the multiple instances of non-human signification, communication and representation, "seeing cultural creation itself as a natural extension of the activities of the semiotic animal according to what is proper to it as part of nature" (Deely 2005: 26). The notion was apparently conceived to overcome the human–animal dualism and create that continuity-discontinuity dialogue envisioned by Giorgio Prodi (Prodi 1983: 180). The very species-specific characteristic of human beings, Deely argues, is the capability of emancipating their semiosis from the constrictions of their own Umwelt and a) access other organisms' Umwelten (also, but not only, at a purely speculative level), and b) create possible worlds, i.e., Umwelten that are distant in time, in space, or that are not even existing at all, but are created through language (there is no such a thing like mermaids, yet there is such a thing like mermaids, at the very moment at least one person linguistically produces a concept, or an idea, of them). Such abilities, Deely points out, do *not* make the human being *something else* than an animal, yet they establish the ground for human biological identity. The bottom line being: the human beings, unlike other species, are *semiotic* animals.

With this in mind, there are a number of unanswered questions. First and foremost, why is it so important, for a semiotician (and other scholar), to establish a clear sign of qualitative distinction between human and other animals. The question is not rhetorical, nor in fact ethical (although it may appear so), but mainly historical and anthropological. There seems to be this "vital urge", on the part of human beings, to define themselves as an ingroup possessing certain characteristics, in relation to a bigger outgroup which does not possess them.

At this specific historical moment, the other animals are identified as that outgroup, but it was not always like this. The original *Scala Naturae* conceived by Aristotle (from which the notion of rational animal is based), was not only an expression of human–animal dualism, but a comparison between a single category of privileged, male and free human beings over three main categories of unprivileged: women, slaves and, yes, other animals. The shaping of the ingroup identity was, until recently, not necessarily characterized by the urge of defining "humanity" *in toto*. It could take all sorts of disguises: male people, free people, white people, western people, sane people, rich people, Christian (or Muslim, or Hindu, etc.) people, heterosexual people, and so forth. What happened is that most of these forms of discrimination finally and thankfully came to an end, at least on a generally-accepted ethical level. There is no ground, anymore, for anybody to say that men are rational and women are not, or to advance any claim that people of Caucasian ethnicity are more intelligent than, say, Afro-Americans, without being taken for a dangerous idiot.

Given this picture – forgive the sarcasm – what is left to those poor intellectuals who still want to exercise their anthropological urge to be part of a small élite of "special" individuals? Racism, chauvinism, classism, Eurocentrism and all the rest are gone – vanished in that annoying black hole called civilization. How to reconcile the primary need for discrimination with the modern pressure of a civilized and tolerant outfit? The answer is what philosopher Peter Singer named *Speciesism*:

> In recent years a number of oppressed groups have campaigned vigorously for equality. [...] The immediate appeal of the black liberation movement and its initial, if limited, success made it a model for other oppressed groups to follow. We became familiar with liberation movements for Spanish-Americans, gay people, and a variety of other minorities. When a majority group – women – began their campaign, some thought we had come to the end of the road. Discrimination on the basis of sex, it has been said, is the last universally accepted form of discrimination, practiced without secrecy or pretense even in those liberal circles that have long prided themselves on their freedom from prejudice against racial minorities.
>
> One should always be wary of talking of "the last remaining form of discrimination". If we have learnt anything from the liberation movements, we should have learnt how difficult it is to be aware of latent prejudice in our attitudes to particular groups until this prejudice is forcefully pointed out (Singer 1989: 148).

There is still ground for speciesist statements without the latter being labeled as politically incorrect. There is no formal program for a "he or she" formula, as applied to non-human animals, and the same expression "non-human animals" is easily replaceable by "animals", achieving the same understanding of "all other animals except the human one".

So, first and foremost we need to understand *why* such intellectual enterprises seem so important to the scholarly community. The theory of evolution is at present – from both the philosophical and the empirical points of view – the most reliable scientific theory for explaining life on this planet. Among the many important implications of the Darwinian revolution, there is also a firm warning not to discuss anymore the differences across species in terms of *qualitative* distinctions. Everything occurring in life is a natural continuation of a process in continuous development, with traces detectable in different living forms, and aspects that are only *quantitatively* developed in certain forms rather than others. However, and that is crucial, *no more* should scholars be allowed to place a threshold at any point of evolution and construct a *human and-all-other-animals* type of dualism, that is devoid of any scientific basis. Human beings are a species, not the ontological counterpart of the Animal Kingdom. Creating a "special" ingroup for humanity – in other words, creating a category of species-specificness that is not comparable to

other species-specificnesses, but display something radically different and unique – is an enterprise that has failed literally dozens of times, even if nobody likes to admit it. There is perhaps a lesson to learn, here.

Deconstructing the notion

Let us now return to the specific discussion on the "semiotic animal", and to the reasons why, I believe, we should plea for more evidence and less (anthropocentric) assumptions. Another important question is: if humans are *semiotic animals*, what type of animals are the other animals? Deely clarified this during a presentation at the Summer School of Semiotics in Imatra (Finland), in 2009. Non-human animals, it appears, are semiosic animals – with an *s*. And what chiefly distinguishes semiotic from semiosic cognition is the above-mentioned creation of "possible worlds".

So, clearly, a new semiotic threshold is now established and it is set to an extremely high point of cognition: "possible worlds" (after the old times when "intentionality" was the dividing line, in the semiotic canon). *Semiotic* are those animals that manage to create and access possible worlds, *semiosic* are those that cannot. Regrettably, such threshold does not seem a great improvement from the old one, which achieved the same identical result: humans above, other animals below. Not to mention that at this point one probably needs to diversify semiotics into two sub-fields: the logocentric (or metalogocentric) "semiotics", and the huge (99% of semiosis, Sebeok used to say) "semiosics", that is, a field that investigates all semiosic processes, except those that lead to the creation of possible worlds. Also, the upper level of the semiotic threshold should be considered as corresponding to the realm of abstract imagination (the one that, indeed, makes possible worlds cognitively possible, if the play of words is allowed). Or should it? Of course, that is not the end of the story: a crucial precondition to this form of imagination is the ability (this also attributed to humans only, in the "semiotic animal" formulation) of using signs and being aware that they are signs. Only with this *metasemiosis*, as Susan Petrilli (Petrilli 1998: 8) calls it, the human animal becomes aware that "there are signs", and that these signs can be detached from any association and manipulated to create endless new associations, including imaginary ones. It is metasemiosis that makes mermaids (and unicorns, angels, gods, super-heroes...) possible. That, it is claimed, occurs only among humans.

Now: to tie inevitably metasemiosis with possible worlds, one should assume that metasemiosis *only* produces possible worlds. Because, if it produces something

else, then it is not just alien Umwelten that animals are not able to access: they would also fail to access all the other outcomes of metasemiosis, as metasemiosis, too is claimed to be species-specifically human. However, the awareness that "there are signs" is a precondition for a million of other cognitive abilities. Deception, play, symbolic representation, aesthetic semiosis, ritualization, interspecific communication... They all imply (simple or complex) forms of sign manipulation that are possible *only* by being aware that what is being used *is a sign*, and not the actual entity it refers to. There is no doubt, from the present state of animal studies (including zoosemiotics), that non-human animals are unmistakably capable of all these behavioral patterns: there are differences, of course, across species, and it would be very interesting to finally discuss *those*, rather than posing the problem in a dualistic human-versus-animals way, but few seem to be interested in that, as the outgroup "animals" is systematically treated as one big cauldron, where chimpanzees and cockroaches are more closely related than chimpanzees and human beings.

Returning specifically to possible worlds, would it be right to assert that no animal except the human one is able to cognitively access alien Umwelten, particularly the imaginary ones? It is an interesting question, with several possible answers:

1) Following the logics of Peircean abduction, one could quickly state that "As the unavoidable precondition for possible worlds cognition is metasemiosis", and "As metasemiosis is an existing, empirically proven, cognitive condition in many non-human animals", then there are good reasons to think that many non-human animals are able to cognitively construct possible worlds. That is: language is not the only condition for metasemiosis. If metasemiosis is equaled with possible worlds cognition, there is a *de facto* denial that the latter is produced exclusively by language. And, indeed, there are very good reasons to think so;

2) The concept itself of accessing alien Umwelten may be in fact a contradiction in principle. Taking Uexküll's theories very faithfully, one shall deduce that if we, members of the Umwelt A, manage to cognitively access the Umwelt B, then we cannot really talk about different Umwelten anymore, because the occurrence of this very process would prove that the Umwelt B is simply part of the Umwelt A, therefore not "alien".

3) Even accepting the language's capacity to create strong dialectical, philosophical and possibly rhetorical configurations of alien Umwelten, a few questions remain unanswered. For instance, dialectics, philosophy and rhetorics do not provide *full* access to another Umwelt, even though they certainly allow some reflections and conclusions about it. This is important to remember, especially at an ethical level: too often we take for granted that we understand of other animals

all that is to be understood. For example, we may understand, speculate and dissert about echolocation, but a complete, senso-motorial, psycho-physiological access to a process like echolocation (at least so far) is not possible, and that makes a huge difference (especially when we think of the dominant role that echolocation have in the semiosis of many cetaceans). We can *represent* echolocation, but we do not *have* echolocation;

4) Our ability to invent myths, tales and superheroes should not be pushed to the extent of founding a new definition of "human being" upon it, because all the imaginary entities produced by language are *not* untied to our perception. They might not exist, but they are a combination of (mostly visual) perception-bound elements (a horse plus a horn for a unicorn, a human female plus a fish for a mermaid, etc.).

We know already from narratology (see at least Genette 1972; Searle 1975; Bruner 1986) that possible worlds are forms of a) parasitism and b) limitation of the real empirical world. We know from logic (see at least Lewis 1986; Herrick 1999; Divers 2002) that their ontological status in relation to reality is not independent, and in particular their modal status completely relies on this relation (the six propositions – true, false, possible, contingent, necessarily true and impossible – are no less than hermeneutic variations applied on empirical reality). We finally know, since the early days of psychoanalysis (Freud 1899), that the "true" abstract imagination, i.e., dreams (those we cannot even logically reconstruct after waking up because they escape the cerebral centers for thinking activity, which indeed do not function during dreams), belongs to a realm, the unconscious, which is neither linguistic nor para / pseudo / proto / pre-linguistic: it has simply nothing to do with language, but with cerebral centers for sensorial and nervous activities[2].

5) Let us anyway stay on this particular (perception-bound) case of abstract imagination – that is: the possible worlds constructed thanks to the rhetorical-narrative properties of linguistic semiosis (having understood that this is an entirely different matter from the truly intangible possible worlds investigated in psychoanalysis). The question is: what elements do we have to affirm that these features of human semiosis are *qualitatively* different from other animals? If many experiments in interspecific communication turned out to be a successful attempt to teach human language to other animals (see particularly the programs on interspecific communication performed on great apes like Washoe, Koko, Kanzi and

[2] Incidentally, dreaming activity in non-human animals, in the neurological (non speculative) sense, has been already investigated, in various degrees of complexity (i.e., beyond the stereotype that cats simply dream of catching mice): interesting readings, in this respect, are Smith (1995); Siapas & Wilson (1998); Poe et al. (2000), and Louie & Wilson (2001).

Chantek, or even other species like the parrot Alex or the dolphins Phoenix and Akeakamai, which gave access to the cognitive potentials of non human species to learn human language), and if language belongs to the human Umwelt, then it follows of their species to learn a sign system of that kind, not that they have learned *all* they will ever be able to learn.

6) The mentioned experiments in interspecific communication provide evidence that other animals are semiotically able to access only alien *existing* Umwelten, not imaginary ones. None of what has been remarked so far suggests actively that non-human animals are able to invent (let alone conceptualize) an imaginary entity. In this very detail, the notion of "semiotic animal" may be accurate: no trace of imaginary possible worlds has been found in non-human cognition. Or: no trace of imaginary possible worlds *appeared* in non-human cognition. It is a crucial correction, because in order to *find* something, we first need to look for it. Did we check whether non-human animals have their mermaids and gods? Namely: is it possible to detect a number of signs in a given animal, to separate the apparently meaningful from the apparently meaningless signs, then to analyze the apparently meaningless ones, and finally to understand that some of them are not in fact meaningless but refer to an imaginary entity?

Possibly, the closest we got to a systematic (and empirical!) study of animal imagination are the following cases:

– Works like that of Robert W. Mitchell (Mitchell 2002), which however tend to present a definition of imagination that is pre-linguistic and closely related to the idea of deception and play.

– Studies like these of Sergio P. Correia et al. (Correia et al. 2007), Nicola S. Clayton et al. (Clayton et al. 2003), Nathan J. Emery, Nicola S. Clayton (Emery & Clayton 2008a), Nicholas J. Mulcahy, Josep Call (Mulcahy & Call 2006), and Caroline R. Raby et al. (Raby et al. 2007), on alternative future-scenarios in the cognition of species like jays and apes. Once again, we might here object that, although "alternative", those scenarios are always perception-bound, therefore providing another proof that it is *not yet* possible to investigate anything else than this.

– Studies like these of Murray Shanahan and Bernard Baars (Shanahan 2006; Shanahan & Baars 2005), where it is argued that the neurological prerequisites for consciousness, emotion and imagination are typical of the mammalian brain. This model – it has been suggested – can be applied to other animals too (Emery & Clayton 2008b: 135). We are extremely far from semiotics, here, but then again that is exactly the thesis defended here: speculative humanities have *not* the appropriate tools to investigate these issues on an empirical basis.

Even with those animals that learned human language the assessment is difficult. It is known that some of them are often caught performing signs at random, for their own entertainment or in front of their trainers. If we proceeded speculatively, we could easily launch the hypothesis that some of those random signs are actually the result of their own imagination. Maybe Kanzi or Koko are accessing imaginary Umwelten, and even describing them to us. It sure sounds a ridiculous hypothesis, and maybe it is, but once we are in the field of speculation, all logically-acceptable hypotheses have a similar ontological status.

In fact, there are authoritative speculations on this subject. Jane Goodall, during her very long experience with chimpanzees in their habitat, described a group performance that she called a "rain dance", which may show indications that chimpanzees perceive natural phenomena in a mythical way (Goodall 1971: 54). Darwin, too, was convinced that traces of belief in supernatural and transcendental entities were present in other animals as well (Darwin 1871: 67–68).

The hypothesis that only humans have this kind of imagination is constructed on two points chiefly: a) the fact that humans clearly have (and verbalize about) this ability; and b) the fact that no similar ability was "apparent" in other animals. This allows for a fair amount of speculation on the subject, but should not reasonably allow us to affirm that non-human animals, *therefore*, are not capable of imagination.

This seems to be the main problem: in most cases, speculations of this sort are delivered without the support of solid knowledge on animal behavior. Finding "empirical evidence" does not necessarily mean that humanists have to design and perform an actual experiment to prove their theories. It would already be remarkable if they could at least base their reflections on the works of those scholars who did perform field work. In other words, speculation for speculation, one prefers to trust Goodall's or Darwin's reflections on animals' spirituality, since they at least spent a life among non-human animals, so they may have a clue of what they talk about.

All in all, the lack of specific competences is the most puzzling thing in this whole enterprise. Nearly every semiotician (or philosopher, linguist, anthropologist, etc.) sooner or later has a go at non-human animals and at the human qualitative difference with them, yet nearly nobody displays a specific training in animal studies that would entitle them to issue such important statements. With few exceptions, essays on human uniqueness within the animal kingdom display a remarkable background on human knowledge, humanity and human behavior, and at the same time an impressively poor background on animal studies. They speak of what humans do and are and what other animals do not and are not, but

they know only what humans do and are, and display no care in backing their assumptions on what other animals do not or are not.

Defining the Semiotic Animal (Deely 2005) is a 95 page-long book, which, despite its brevity, still manages to contain no less than 134 bibliographical references. In a book that discusses so extensively the uniqueness of humankind over the rest of the Animal Kingdom, one would expect that, if not half, at least one third of the references would actually come from the enormous catalogue of studies in ethology, zoology, sociobiology, primatology, and so forth. If one says that Venezuelan people, *unlike Australians*, are such and such, it would be normal to expect that a comparative study of *both* Venezuela and Australia was performed, and that a respectable balance in the sources concerning both countries was displayed in the bibliography. Apparently, references to Australia are not necessary, because Deely's book (Deely 2005) contains no more than two references from animal studies: von Frisch's classic on bee-dance (1967) and a lesser known article on balloon flies (Kessel 1955). Two out of 134 (with the most recent of the two dating 38 years before Deely's book itself). Another example is "Bodies, Signs and Values in Global Communication", the article in which Augusto Ponzio and Susan Petrilli announce the birth of Semioethics, which displays a strong incipit – with no evidence or reference attached to it:

> Similarly to nonhuman animals being-communication in human animals presupposes the construction of worldviews on the basis of a species-specific modeling device. However, while modeling and being-communication identify in nonhuman animals, in human beings they do not. The specific modeling device in humans, also called language, allows for interpretations, evaluations and responses. Humans are endowed with a capacity for metasemiosis or "semiotics" which presupposes language which is a species-specific primary modeling device. Syntax, deconstruction and reconstruction, the engenderment of infinite possible worlds, the capacity for "semiotics" thus understood, therefore, for evaluation, the assumption of responsibility, inventiveness, creativity and the capacity for planning are all prerogatives of language (Ponzio & Petrilli 2008: 113).

In this case, we have a 34 page long article, with 58 references: the article states that only humans, unlike other animals, display the abilities of interpretation, evaluation, response, syntax, deconstruction, reconstruction, assumption of responsibility, inventiveness, creativity and planning: the total amount of references about animal behavior and cognition is, quite simply, zero.

Conclusions

Explaining this peculiar phenomenon is not easy: maybe there is some kind of *topos* in humanities not to treat the animal subject seriously; maybe animals is one of those topics that everybody likes to discuss even when an acceptable background is lacking (probably because they are one of those things with which we are in a constant and multiple relation anyway); maybe – once again – the "vital urge" (as we called it) of defining human identity makes people rather tolerant towards their own prejudices. It is a fact, anyway, that the animal subject holds a record for being one of the most trivialized topics in the whole sphere of the humanities.

My conclusions, therefore, shall take the shape of a plea. There is nothing wrong, nor abnormal, in wishing to define the identity of the category one feels s/he belongs to. The formation of ingroup-outgroup dynamics, we learn from social sciences, are the result of a rather basic need to cope with the complexity of reality (see Allport 1954, for instance). It is the second step of this process to be heavily biased, i.e., constructing this identity while actively deconstructing the outgroup's identity (and consequently placing the ingroup in a dominant position). In an ideal "live and let live" type of world, the outgroup's identity is by no means a concern for the ingroup. The identity of the ingroup is not less consistent, if the issue of the outgroup is *not* addressed.

A person may characterize himself / herself as many things – let us say: Vaidas by name, Lithuanian by nationality, teacher by profession, single by marital status, basketball player and jazz listener by hobby. A bunch of characteristics of this type are certainly very relevant for this Vaidas to define his identity: it is obvious, indeed, that these and other conditions / activities of his make him a distinctive individual, clearly recognizable in many circumstances, and so on. That is, Vaidas clearly has an identity. Now, at no point of this process, which led to the definition of somebody's identity, was there a need to outdo one or more persons who are *not* Vaidas: our Lithuanian friend does not need to add to his profile that he is such and such, *unlike* Pedro, William or Mariangela. This step adds nothing to the process. If Vaidas takes that step, it is not identity he is after: it is domination and discrimination. And if, on top of that, Vaidas compares himself to Pedro or Mariangela, without really knowing them, then, after domination and discrimination, one also has to write stereotype and prejudice. All of a sudden, Vaidas's love of basket and jazz becomes very marginal compared to his strong identity trait of being chauvinist, ignorant and arrogant.

If scholars understand this, they might possibly understand also that the entire enterprise of defining human identity does not require compulsory additional comments on other animals. Particularly not if these scholars do not possess the necessary knowledge for making such comments (this way also ending up putting in question significant achievements of modern science, like the Darwinian Revolution). A discussion on human sociality, culture, language, etc. remains extremely interesting and important, if proposed by sociologists, culturologists, linguists, etc. Let other animals be taken care of by those who have devoted the necessary amount of time and energy to their study.

At the present state of things, instead, we find ourselves involved in a discussion that is ethically unfair, scientifically inaccurate and, I believe, philosophically hypocritical.

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GYVŪNŲ PAŽINIMAS, RŪŠIZMAS, HUMANIZMAS: „SEMIOTINIO GYVŪNO“ SAMPRATOS APMĄSTYMAI

Santrauka

Straipsnio tikslas – įvertinti humanitarinių ir socialinių mokslų epistemologinį „tinkamumą“ svarstyti „žmogiškumo“, „žmogiškos tapatybės“ ir atsikartojančios jų dialektinės opozicijos „gyvūniškumui“ klausimą. Atvejo analizės metodu bus nagrinėjama „semiotinio gyvūno“ (Deely 2005) samprata, kuri bus aptariama panašių antropocentrinių apibrėžčių, siekiančių įsteigti kokybinį dualistinį žmogiškos būtybės ir kitų gyvūnų skirtumą, ribose. Teigiama, kad šio skirtumo motyvai pasirodo esą labiau ideologiniai nei metodologiniai. Tai iliustruoja tiek ilga „žmogiškumo“ apibrėžimų istorija, tiek įrankiai, skirti nustatyti kokybinį žmogaus ir kitų gyvūnų skirtumą. Straipsnyje, priešingai, ginama tezė (etinės, bet ne tik) būtinybės ką nors teigti tik remiantis tvirtu empiriniu (ar bent jau moksliškai pagrįstu) pagrindu. Pavyzdžiui, analizuojant „semiotinio gyvūno“ sampratą, straipsnyje siekiama demaskuoti keletą iš daugybės mokslinių klaidų ir ginčyti jų spekuliatyvų aiškinimą.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: semiotinis gyvūnas, gyvūno pažinimas, *Umwelt*, zoosemiotika, gyvūnų etika.