

# THE ANIMALS TURN

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The development of a new field of study is very often just as much about a creative meaning-generation, obliging us to think in new ways (to evolve one might say), as it is simply or only about the objects of study themselves. A semiotic view of such an evolution of human knowledge would speak of this in terms of sign-objects which, in engendering new interpretants, grow the endless spiral of semiosis (i.e. knowledge) further.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the (sign) objects we choose for thinking with are telling. The direction and terrain of travel, and the sign vehicles chosen, are all clues to what kind of new knowledge we might be looking for. In the case of animal studies, and the questions addressed in this special issue of *new formations*, these questions seem very often to be about ethics - about our place, and the place of animals, in other words - in a long mutually shaping symbiosis of human and more-than-human relationships.<sup>2</sup> The growing interest in animal life, both without and within us, alongside the growing understanding that all this life is semiotic, might suggest that what we are attempting to think about is life, mind and minding, and thus ethics, from a wider than human perspective.

One of the things which this shift of ethical perspective - in relation both to ecological place and to mutual shaping over time - throws into sharp relief, beyond merely human conceptions of utility, is thus the question of how we think about the meaning of 'mind' as that belongs to animals, humans, or even ecological systems more widely.<sup>3</sup> 'Mind', in other words, might be a property of systems (vegetative, animal, human) rather than of individual consciousnesses only. Indeed, the idea that anything like individual consciousness could exist in the absence of an entity's embeddedness in biocybernetic systems (bodies and worlds and, hence, *differences* and *information*)<sup>4</sup> seems extremely unlikely.<sup>5</sup>

Human consciousness is like a bright spotlight: dazzlingly focused but narrow. But a care for the animals' part in our own constitution and caring involves not only the recognition of 'care' (as caring, concern, *caritas*, minding) for animals, but also the recognition of animal care and consciousness as part both of our own, and also of their, strange consciousness.<sup>6</sup> It is also to recognise, perhaps belatedly in regard to anthropocentric accounts of reason and mind, the 'animal part' in our own reasoning. As recent investigations of human consciousness suggest, by far the greater part of human mind and inventiveness is, like animal mind, intuitive and only indirectly available to conscious manipulation.<sup>7</sup> This strangeness of creative reason is what the biologist Francois Jacob, in distinction to day-time logic, called 'night science'. In his autobiography, *The Statue Within*, Jacob writes:

1. W. Wheeler (ed and Introductory Essay), *Biosemiotics: Nature/Culture/ Science/Semiosis*, *Living Books About Life* Series (liviBL), G. Hall, J. Zylińska and C. Birchall (series eds), Open Humanities Press, 2011. <http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Biosemiotics>

2. P. Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*, Washington DC, Island Press/Shearwater Books, 1996.

3. This cybernetic view of mind was taken, for example, by Gregory Bateson. See G. Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*, Cresskill NJ, Hampton Press, 2002.

4. 'information ... is a difference which makes a difference', G. Bateson, 'Form, Substance and Difference' (1970) in G. Bateson, *Steps To An Ecology of Mind*, M.C. Bateson (Foreword), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p459.

5. This is a view which has only relatively recently dawned upon the (philosophical dualism-influenced) world of Artificial Intelligence research. See A. Clark and D. Chalmers, 'The Extended Mind', *Analysis*, 58, 1 (1998): 7-19. Reprinted in *The Philosopher's Annual*, vol XXI-1998,

Ridgeview, 2000, p59-74. Reprinted in D. Chalmers (ed), *Philosophy Of Mind: Classical And Contemporary Readings*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

6. G. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, K. Attell (trans), Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, 2004.

7. D.R. Griffin, *Animal Minds: Beyond Cognition to Consciousness*, Chicago, 2001, pp1-7. For excerpt, see <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/308650.html>

8. F. Jacob, *The Statue Within*, New York, Basic Books, 1988, p296.

9. M. Bekoff and J. Pierce, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2009.

10. W.H. Auden, 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud' (1939), *Collected Poems*, E. Mendelson (ed), London, Faber and Faber, 1976.

Day science employs reasoning that meshes like gears ... One admires its majestic arrangements as that of a da Vinci painting or a Bach fugue. One walks about it as in a French formal garden ... Night science, on the other hand, wanders blindly. It hesitates, stumbles, falls back, wakes with a start. Doubting everything, it feels its way, questions itself, constantly pulls itself together. It is a sort of workshop of the possible, where are elaborated what will become the building materials of science. Where hypotheses take the forms of vague presentiments, of hazy sensations. Where phenomena are still mere solitary events with no link between them. Where the plans for experiments have barely taken form. Where thought proceeds along sinuous paths, tortuous streets, most often blind alleys. At the mercy of chance, the mind frets in a labyrinth, deluded with messages, in quest of a sign, of a wink, of an unforeseen connection ... What guides the mind, then, is not logic. It is instinct, intuition.<sup>8</sup>

Recent developments in animal studies,<sup>9</sup> both scientific and cultural, indicate that we are only at the very beginning of this particular journey. Here, contemporary animal studies may remind us (as Auden put it) 'to be enthusiastic over the night' and its 'delectable creatures',<sup>10</sup> and eventually help us to throw as much light on embodied and enworlded mind and *relational* being as computers have thrown on formal daytime logic. Given the exigencies of mass species extinctions due to climate change and other anthropogenic factors, and the effects of these upon both human and non-human phenomenological and ecological experience, our grasp of the implications of this mutual journey may well gain rapid momentum. As with ecological consciousness more broadly, late in the day and losing ourselves, we begin to reach out to grasp our life-system embeddedness with the lives of the others that we seem to be destroying. Just as with new differences articulated in earlier explorations of difference, studies in human-animal relations open up new, and perhaps urgent, avenues and modes of signification, thinking, doing, being and becoming.

Animals are our closest physical and cultural point of connection with the non-human world, and human-animal relations are much older than history itself. Yet, while there has always been some degree of interest in the meaning of human relations with animals, it is only in the last two decades or so that this general interest has developed into an inter-disciplinary field of scholarship and enquiry. This field has been marked by conferences and publications associated with international bodies such as the *International Society for Anthrozoology*, formed initially in the USA 25 years ago, or the *Animals and Society Institute*, also founded in the USA 15 years ago, and now extended to Europe. More recently, in the last 5 years the *Institute of Critical Animal Studies* and the *British Animal Studies Network*, and now *Minding Animals International*, have extended the research field significantly. Recent international conferences have brought scholars from the humanities and sciences - from

fields as diverse as ethology, zoosemiotics, biosemiotics and biology, and also from anthropology, history, and philosophy to cultural studies in literature, film and art - together in new interdisciplinary discussions. Some of these discussions have been fraught with conflicts between disciplinary differences and assumptions, especially around vexed questions concerning scientific, philosophical and culturalist understandings of materialism, physicalism, determinism and 'information', for example. But what all this conflict over mutual interests in animal life goes to show is that there are *new* matters and *new* understandings yet to be discovered in these interdisciplinary encounters.

The essays in this collection address a range of current and symptomatic preoccupations in animal studies. They are ordered in a way designed to help readers familiar with cultural theories, but not necessarily with the field of animal studies itself, to move from more familiar cultural theoretic arguments to probably less familiar (although no less theoretically and philosophically informed) ones. These latter concern engagements with some of the most difficult practical and philosophical implications of animal studies commitments to conservation. The *ecological question* of conservation - of historical continuity, and of what we should wish to preserve and conserve in our understandings of the natural and cultural evolutionary relationship between past forms and present and future ones - of course cuts right across the old modernity divisions between conserving and radical newness.<sup>11</sup> Are we any longer so confident that these are, precisely, the differences which matter when we come to think about ecological questions of relationship and their evolutionary histories? Animal studies may prove to be one amongst a number of emerging fields which helps us to think these two old adversaries differently.

11. J.S. Mill's two essays on Bentham (1838) and Coleridge (1840) remain a still pertinent account of the underlying assumptions of these two attitudes. J.S. Mill and J. Bentham, A. Ryan (ed), *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, London, Penguin, 1987.