Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Polishing the Mirror of Human Exceptionalism

Silver Rattasepp

silver.rattasepp@ut.ee

University of Tartu

Research Article

Keywords: human exceptionalism, correlationism, lack, animal representations

Posted Date: November 20th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11625247/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Journal: Biosemiotics

Title: Polishing the Mirror of Human Exceptionalism

Silver Rattasepp

silver.rattasepp@ut.ee

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6897-1821

+372 56277457

Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, Jakobi 2, 51005 Tartu, Estonia

Acknowledgements. This paper was written with the support of the Estonian Research Council grant PRG1504 "Meanings of endangered species in culture: ecology, semiotic modelling and reception".

Abstract. The paper provides a selective reading of various ways in which human exceptionalism has been upheld in different philosophies and theoretical commentaries. From classic modern philosophy to today's various strands of thought, the expectation that animals lack some uniquely human characteristic, and that this lack is their primary role to play in thought about the human condition, continues to play a crucial role. It is the „common sense" of thinking about nonhuman animals, in both academia and beyond. Semiotics is often not an exception, as exemplified by depictions of symbol use. Biosemiotics can provide a crucial corrective. The paper provides, among other considerations, an extended discussion of the concept of „correlation" as it relates to considerations of nonhuman animals.

Keywords: human exceptionalism, correlationism, lack, animal representations

Introduction

> We polish an animal mirror to look for ourselves.
> −Donna Haraway (1978: 37)

In addition to being notable for its unique approaches to meaning making in the living world, biosemiotics is also relevant for its interdisciplinary appeal, crossing bridges and extending hands to all and sundry philosophies and branches of the humanities. With this in mind, what follows provides certain specific considerations that may be of interest for biosemiotics, of certain prevalent but limited lines of thinking which biosemiotics is in an excellent position to remedy. An understanding of the limited perspectives on nonhuman animals that are rather commonplace in more traditional philosophies and theoretizations may prove to be useful. In short, what follows will be a selective historico-philosophical reading of the idea of human exceptionalism.

The initial question which originally motivated these lines of though was: "How do philosophers[1] talk about animals—while they are not specifically talking about animals?" The importance and necessity of this question may be cast in doubt. For there is a peculiarity, presumptuousness even, in asking about what thinkers are not doing—as if they should be doing precisely that—, or what they are not doing while doing something else entirely. It is, however, relatively easy to demonstrate that references to non-human animals regularly crop up in the middle of discourses which on the face of it have nothing to do with them.

Examples abound. When John Dewey starts his *Reconstruction in Philosophy* with a discussion on memory, he couches it in terms of difference from "lower animals" and how unlike humans, "the beasts of the field" live "in a world of merely physical things" (Dewey 1920: 1). When Giorgio Agamben discusses the Aristotelian concept of "potentiality", a concept unrelated to nonhuman animals, he says in passing that animals "can only do this or that", unlike humans who are capable of impotentiality (Agamben 1999: 182). And the very last lines of Theodor Adorno's *Jargon of Authenticity* declare that with that jargon "goes that humanity which has its basic nature not in self-reflection but in its difference from a suppressed animality" (Adorno 1973: 165). The book itself does not discuss nonhuman animals in any shape or form.

These three freely chosen examples, from among an endless number of similar ones, depict what is meant with the question "How do philosophers talk about animals—while they are not specifically talking about animals?" All three authors are engaged in themes and topics entirely unrelated to nonhuman animals, yet all three felt it necessary to couch their claims with references to animals. Moreover, all these references to animals can simply be deleted, since they play no substantial role whatsoever in the argument at hand; they are in no wise explanatory, and do not lend support the specific, concrete thing that is being argued for. Indeed, it seems that the primary function of including animals in this particular manner—including them with the sole purpose of immediately excluding them—is to legitimize and lend weight to the given argument by way of an appeal to human uniqueness, and this in complete disregard of the fact that these animal references do not substantiate the specific issue the philosopher is discussing in any way. What we have here is indeed a variant what Giorgio Agamben himself (ironically, for he seems to have failed to apply his own concepts to his discussion of potentiality) in a different context called inclusive exclusion (1998: 8), of including something so that its immediate exclusion could legitimise and lend weight to order and normalcy. The force of an argument is heightened, and its credibility reinforced, by showing what it excludes and pushes to the outside.

Something like the following, then, is the composite narrative of the philosophic discourse on animals (cf. Rattasepp 2016 for a more extended discussion). First, the exceptional nature of humans is determined by mirror-gazing: what is uniquely human is decided beforehand and without any consideration of, comparison with, or study of nonhuman animals. And since the primary

1 I will use "philosophy" and "philosophers" as a shorthand for designating theorists and thinkers of various sorts. This does not imply that they would all be considered to be textbook examples of philosophers; I will simply use them for ease of reference. For all fields of research tend to have those who either inquire into the underlying premises, assumptions, or "givens" of a discipline, or then again who consider and conceptualize the larger models and theories of said fields, or are engaged primarily in conceptual, rather than empirical analyses. A philosopher—a theoretician, irrespectful of the particular domain they are engaged in.

function of this uniqueness is to lend credence to the actual discourse at hand through its negation in nonhumans, the list of such uniquely human traits is positively endless, since they are, in each particular case, generated by that act of negation. Thus, for each idea or concept that a philosopher thinks is important, it will be artificially accompanied by a corresponding lack of that same idea or concept in animals. Language, speech, symbolic forms, rationality, reason, intentionality, freedom, culture, history, consciousness, subjectivity, personhood, individuality, the immortal soul, self-reflection, laughter, ethics, politics, law, rights, property, experience of death, tool-making, labor, wearing clothes, feeling naked, making a fire, lying, pretending, bartering, shame, guilt, the as-such or the *Lichtung* of the metaphysicians…

This lack pertains to all animals in their totality. They can be, it is true, compared to one another, but that would amount to nothing but an indication of their species-specific differences from one another; it would not be an indication of their uniqueness or exceptional status as nonhumans. Compared to humans, animals form a homogenous category and are all indistinct, an undifferentiated collective whose function is to reinforce human uniqueness by their lack. This is not to deny that in empirical research some of these criteria for distinguishing humans from animals may turn out to be accurate—that some particular traits may indeed be uniquely human. Two things must be kept in mind, however. First, this can only be determined comparatively, with respect to particular other species, for to do otherwise and attribute a lack of supposed uniquely human traits to animals *tout court* would be to commit what Gilbert Ryle (2002: 16) famously called a category mistake: the generic abstract category "animals" cannot have properties that characterize (or not, as the case may be) concrete existing species and individuals. To do otherwise would amount to thinking, as Karl Marx once wrote in a rather different context, "as if alongside and external to lions, tigers, rabbits, and all other actual animals […] there existed also in addition *the animal*, the individual incarnation of the entire animal kingdom" (1976: 27). Second and more importantly, the issue is rather that the items in the list of lacks above—which can be extended indefinitely—are usually not at all derived from empirical research but by negation, by denying in nonhumans that which was first decided to be uniquely human.

This then is the unvoiced visage of nonhumans in plenty of philosophy, its "common sense" about animals. It is, in fact, what Cary Wolfe has called the "fundamental anthropological dogma" (2010: xiv). It is precisely that "asinanity" [sic] for which Derrida so trenchantly criticizes philosophers when they "speak blithely of the Animal in the general singular" and attribute to themselves the "right, the theoretical or philosophical right, to distinguish and mark as opposite, namely, the set of the Animal in general, the Animal spoken of in the general singular" (2008: 40−41). Indeed, in that mainstay and classic of today's animal studies and posthumanities, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), it was Derrida who most forcefully among all the philosophers who have discussed animals, animality, and nonhuman alterity in general, rejected mirror–gazing:

> It is *not just* a matter of asking whether one has the right to refuse the animal such and such a power […]. It *also* means asking whether what calls itself human has the right rigorously to attribute to man, which means therefore to attribute to himself, what he refuses the animal, and whether he can ever possess the *pure, rigorous, indivisible* concept, as such, of that attribution. (Derrida 2008: 135, emphases in the original)

Animal Episodes in Human Philosophy

> He fell in love with himself at first sight, and it is a passion to which he has always remained faithful.
> −Anthony Powell (1962: 33)

That nonhuman animals are described as lacking, and as negatively distinct from humans is commonplace. Such declarations are so easy to find that an attempt to put together even an illustrative selection would be exhausting, to the point that I am tempted to appeal to authority and rely rather on Jacques Derrida who, in making much the same claim, goes so far as to declare that it is one that is "by far the one that occurs most abundantly. It is probably what brings together *all* philosophers and all theoreticians *as such*" (2008: 13). Or perhaps one can follow the lead of Akira Lippit, who in his *Electric Animal* traverses Western philosophy step by step, in order to demonstrate how nonhuman animals always retain their place in philosophy, albeit as a ghostly presence and a spectral reminder — "a genus of vanishing animals, whose very being is constituted by that state of disappearing" (Lippit 2000: 3) —, no matter how much the various thinkers have attempted to expel them as unworthy of equal interest and treatment. (For further readings on animals in continental thought, see Calarco, Atterton 2004)

The provision of admittedly selective examples is in order, then. First, some general examples, before proceeding to more philosophically "proper" authors and arguments. Humans as transcending nature is a theme probably as old as thought itself. For present purposes, however, we will mostly omit extended historical digressions. The 20th century alone has seen a plenitude of examples of this kind in widely disparate fields.

The ascent of "man" from the organic to something like a new "superorganic" realm, as it was dubbed by Alfred Kroeber (1917), together with the idea of leaving the animals behind, stuck haplessly in the deterministic world of biology, has a long and illustrious history in Western thought. This history has been told often (e.g. Collingwood 1960). From the story of Creation in the Bible, with its exhortations to "fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion" over it (Gen. 1:28), to Francis Bacon's demand that "mankind regain their rights over nature, assigned to them by the gift of God" (*Novum Organon*, §CXXIX) and all the way to the present techno-scientific domination and management of the Earth, this story need not be retold in full here. With a brief lull during the late 19th century, as a result of the spread of Darwin's theory of evolution and the unfortunate concomitant spread of Social Darwinism (lull in the sense that "man's" superior position could be explained evolutionarily, not transcendentally), it was soon picked up again during the 20th century. Granted, in Kroeber's and many others' case it was as a direct response and reaction to Social Darwinism that they once again postulated a different, radical condition for humans as opposed to nature. Yet the solution to the denigrations of Social Darwinism was to return to the old, albeit by reworking the mental into the cultural:

> The mind and the body are but facets of the same organic material or activity; the social substance—or unsubstantial fabric, if one prefers the phrase—the existence that we call

> civilization, transcends them utterly for all its being forever rooted in life. (Kroeber 1917: 212)

There have been similar engagements with such a practice of division in the domain of semiotics as well. Ever since at least Plato's *Cratylus* and throughout the Middle Ages, signs were customarily divided into natural and conventional ones. There are, however, two ways of thinking the relation between the two. The more commonplace and intuitive—for both the disputants in *Cratylus* to the naïve realists of the present day—was to ground natural signs in nature or the world of things so that they are directly given to experience, and to treat conventional signs as having value only as a result of their fidelity to the natural ones. Truth and its approximation, or the certain and the probable: this was the principled division between the natural and the artificial in the domain of signs.

Yet as Michel Foucault has argued, this relation is reversed from the 17th century onward. First of all, the natural sign is no longer the givenness that is the foundation for truth; instead, the natural sign too is constituted by an act of knowing, rather than merely requiring its recognition. It is nevertheless a sign that, as such, is "strictly limited, rigid, inconvenient, and impossible for the mind to master" (Foucault 2002: 68). A conventional sign, on the other hand, is artfully constituted such that it would be "simple, easy to remember, applicable to an indefinite number of elements, susceptible of subdivision within itself and of combination with other signs; the man-made sign is the sign at the peak of its activity" (ibid.). A freely constituted, flexible sign that needs no reference to anything other than other signs, and needs no grounding from anything natural, only that of the collective of similar sign-users. This was the birth of the (Peirce-ian) symbol as we know it in semiotics today. And it has also, from the very beginning, been thought of as threshold which the animals cannot pass: "It is the man-made sign that draws the dividing-line between man and animal; that transforms imagination into voluntary memory, spontaneous attention into reflection, and instinct into rational knowledge" (ibid.). Ever since then, the domain of artificial signs, of symbols, is commonly thought of as almost constituting a separate realm of being, superimposed upon yet wholly distinct from that of nature. This was, for example, the belief of Ernst Cassirer, who wrote in his *Essay on Man* that "As compared with the other animals man lives not only in a broader reality; he lives, so to speak, in a new *dimension* of reality. […] No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe" (1953: 43).

Reference to human uniqueness by way of symbol-use and the corresponding semiotic or symbolic threshold continues to hold sway in semiotic literature (for an overview of the status of semiotic thresholds in current debates, see Higuera, Kull 2017). Since the more prevalent Peircean conception of symbols is not easily amenable to constituting such a radical discontinuity (this would entail reconceptualizing habit as uniquely human—a difficult proposition indeed), Carlo Brentari refers the genesis of this conception back to the German philosophical anthropology of the mid-20th century (Brentari 2018). In their otherwise admirable attempt to rid philosophy of idealism and metaphysics, these anthropological philosophers nevertheless reintroduced a radical human-animal discontinuity through their concept of *Sonderstellung* or "special position," which hangs on the "semiotic organisation of human and animal cognition, a difference that is centred on the respective usage of signs and symbols" (ibid, 333). Animal signs or signals are proxies of

objects and function as stimuli, and thus reside in the external environment, whereas symbols, used only by humans, are related to mental activity, of conceptual thought:

> In talking about things we have conceptions of them, not the things themselves; and it is the conceptions, not the things, that symbols directly 'mean.' Behavior toward conceptions is what words normally evoke; this is the typical process of thinking. (Langer 1954: 49)

Thus, according to philosophical anthropology, the interjection of symbols into the middle of a reflex arc turns reacting into thinking. Similarly, symbol use as the distinguishing trait that sets humans apart is also prevalent in texts which ostensibly are, unlike authors such as Cassirer, directly about animals. The conservationist Jeffrey Bonner, for example, in a fascinating book about his long experience with animals in zoos, nevertheless declares that

> The capacity for symbolic learning sets humans apart. Yes, many animals can communicate using symbols. But all of those forms of symbolic communication are strictly limited. In the case of humans, we can communicate so much more that a quantitative difference becomes a qualitative one. (2006: 54)

It is reasonable to question the philosophical peculiarity of getting from quantity to quality as if it were a steady change or increase until, at some strange point along a number line, it suddenly transforms itself into something entirely different. But this is not a case of arguing about the quantitative and the qualitative. Instead, it represents an attempt at squaring the circle of having accepted both evolutionary continuity and human exceptionalism at the same time.

Much has been made, of course of the arguments whether the distinction between humans and animals is a difference in "degree" or in "kind", but what we have here is a curious case in which some sufficient amount of change in "degree" ends up turning into a difference in "kind". Be that as it may, for the present more general philosophic discussion we should note with Pierre Bourdieu that "[t]he shift from the highest probability to absolute certainty is a qualitative leap out of proportion to the numerical difference" (1990: 99)—and this also applies to the qualitative-quantitative distinction. The difference between the qualitative and the quantitative is itself a qualitative one.

More importantly, we should also note here that the idea of an evolutionary continuity with nonhuman animals is not in itself necessarily free of anthropocentrism, either, at least as a critique of the discontinuity thesis. For it often comes with an unvoiced premise. It is that if humans are "just another" animal, they can then presumably be reduced to a lower level where the rest of the animals are supposed to reside (and in this case, animals are once again not different, but lower). This position retains the idea of a special status for all animals, and the only move is then to "correct" the misplacement of humans into a unique state. But the presumption of all animals constituting a homogenous mass is nevertheless retained: "the animal" is an undifferentiated, general category. The problem here is that there is no such "animal" state. Instead, the presumed "lack" of human propriety in nonhumans indicates another mode of nonhuman existence. The continuity thesis ends up removing, quite similarly to the discontinuity thesis, all specificity from nonhuman animals, whereas in fact there are as many singularities and umwelts as there are

individual species (and perhaps individuals). Continuism is anthropocentric in that it leads to the conception that nonhuman animals have an impoverished version of what is found in a fuller degree in humans. Thus

> animals emerge from continuism enhanced by a sort of pseudo-humanity or humanity in the making, but this making has no future. Animals would be replicas fashioned more or less after a human model that remains the culmination of all cognitive aptitudes, affective dispositions, and performances of any kind. And how could it be otherwise when animals are measured against humans? (Burgat 2017: 54).

Yet another way of drawing the human-animal divide is to present humans as having rid themselves of all essentialist characteristics. In these cases, to consider humans unique is to postulate humans as having no nature, as opposed to animals who are entirely constituted and thus constrained by their evolved biological makeup and a set of deterministic instincts, and who are therefore indistinctly and inseparably immured in the very fabric of the world: "every animal is *in the world like water in water*" (Bataille, cited in Calarco, Atterton 2004: 34, emphasis in the original). This was particularly prevalent among the existentialists, with the linchpin being Sartre's much-read and much-quoted *Existentialism is a Humanism* of 1946. In it, Sartre declares—accompanied by the unsurprising denunciation that "man's" existence is "rather unlike that of a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or a cauliflower" (2007: 23)—that "man"

> materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. (Sartre 2007: 22)

By far the most commented of such existentialist declarations of the ineffable uniqueness of the human condition with its foundational lack of essence and thus its boundless capacity of constituting itself and the world around it, and which Sartre follows almost to a letter, is to be found in that (in)famous declaration by Martin Heidegger that the animals are "poor in world" and inanimate things are "worldless," as opposed to the "world-forming" powers of man (1995: 185ff). For present purposes we can take Heidegger as a paradigmatic example of the philosophic discourse on animals, for in his writings, particularly in his *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* of 1929/30, he lays down this type of discourse beat by beat.

Now it is true that, at least to begin with, Heidegger casts doubt at any simple hierarchical orientations or value judgments between humans and animals, despite the apparent clarity indicated by the choice of words "poor" and "forming" (Heidegger 1995: 194). For neither animals nor humans can be placed in a simple line of ascent or measurement, where for example one creature's world is richer than that of another's, or that one has more senses or behaviors or more or less degree of freedom. But this is essentially a dodge on Heidegger's part, for he is not, in the end, interested in the sort of knowledge that may be derived from natural sciences to help us decide about the richness of sensation or behavior or lack of them in nonhuman animals. Instead, he is interested in a fundamental metaphysical distinction which would allow him to draw the line

between the animality *as such* of animals from the humanity *as such* of "man" in a manner in which animals in their very essence would be wholly *deprived* of world (ibid, 196). In fact, Heidegger's prohibitions against creating hierarchies and value judgements between animals and humans takes on a rather deceptive tone in light of his initial statement about the *naiveté* involved in treating material objects, animals, and humans "as if the three beings we have mentioned were three things of the same order, as if they were all on the same plane" (ibid, 185). For the conclusion that Heidegger will want to reach is that there is in fact an "abyssal" difference between "man" and "animal" *as such*, which, in Matthew Calarco's summary, is to be "understood in the most fundamental and radical way possible", for that abyss "marks a gap and a rupture which is utterly untraversable" (Calarco 2008: 22). For Heidegger, it is precisely this "as-structure" of which animals are deprived of and is the reason why they are poor in world: animals, too, may experience things, but never experience them as-them; they cannot be open to the Being of their being. Thus, for example, animals and humans both die, but the death (or "demise") of Dasein takes place within a specific modality of being towards death and finitude, whereas animals, lacking this, merely perish unawares. Heidegger stacks up this list: Dasein exists, the animal merely lives; Dasein eats, the animal merely feeds, the animal behaves, Dasein has a "comportment", etc. (ibid, 26).

Moreover, it is a stance which does not proceed from any interest in the possibly unique modes of being possessed by other animals; rather, it is grounded on fear of or anxiousness about the loss of human dignity and is an attempt to prevent this loss of dignity which would supposedly result if the "dignity" afforded to animals were to increase. This prevalent conceit among thinkers of human uniqueness conceives of human-animal relations (particularly ethical ones) as akin to a zero-sum game, a calculus of morals in which ethical dignity decreases on the human side the more it is attributed to animals, as if to give more consideration to one means to give less consideration to the other. In another context Heidegger radicalizes the human/animal divide to the point of declaring them to be entirely incommensurable and fundamentally incomparable even as opposites, for "oppositions, even the most extreme, still require one same domain in which to be posed against each other" (Heidegger 1992: 152). Anxiously acknowledging the "scarcely conceivable, abysmal bodily kinship with the beast" (Heidegger 1998: 248), Heidegger accuses biology and psychoanalysis of complete obliviousness and ignorance of all laws of Being, of the uniquely human openness to the "free of Being", which results in "an uncanny hominization of the "creature," i.e., the animal, and a corresponding animalization of man" (Heidegger 1992: 152), an abandonment of human being to the realm of *animalitas*.

The result is anthropocentrism of the most commonplace kind: the examination proceeds from the presumption of the uniqueness of Dasein; to study animals is to understand what they lack; the difference is not to be found in anything biological but rather in a metaphysical mode of being; the mode of being proper to Dasein is lacking in all animals *tout court*; and the purpose of the entire exercise is to reveal the essential, foundational uniqueness and exceptionality of the human.

There is yet another discursive mechanism, or perhaps it ought to be called a rhetorical bait and switch, by which nonhuman animals are expelled from philosophic discourse by the mechanism of inclusive exclusion. This time it begins by admitting that many nonhuman animals in fact do have capacities which were formerly denied to them. The bait is the admission of a characteristic (say, capacity for surprise), and the switch is a version of self-awareness. That is to

say, when it is discovered that some nonhuman animals do indeed have some characteristic that was previously thought of as uniquely human, the human version of said characteristic is re-described through human self-awareness of said trait. So perhaps animals are also symbol-users, but humans are *aware* that they are symbol users. Perhaps animals are rational in their behaviour, but humans are *aware* that they themselves are rational. The uniquely human version of any such capacity is animal capacity + awareness of capacity.

This tactic is exceedingly commonplace. Here is just one example, derived from classic philosophy in accordance with this paper's theme. In traditional metaphysics, this is the thought process that undergirds the differentiation between *perception* and *apperception*. Thus Leibniz writes that

> it is good to distinguish between *perception*, which is the internal state of the monad representing external things, and *apperception*, which is *consciousness*, or the reflective knowledge of this internal state, something not given to all souls, nor at all times to a given soul. (1989: 208)

And it is precisely this capacity for apperception that distinguishes, for Leibniz, "beasts" from "rational animals", the former of which are only capable of perceiving situational facts and remembering the consequences of effects, whereas the latter are capable of "true reasoning" about causes, of immaterial things and truths, because the souls or minds of rational animals are "capable of performing reflective acts, and capable of considering what is called "I", substance, soul, mind" (ibid, 209).

As we already saw above, this is also the line taken by Heidegger in his "as-" structure, in which animals fail to see things as-such, but only as they engage them in their everyday activities, all the while for Dasein they are open to perception X-as-X. Similarly, in semiotics, this same line is taken by John Deely: "Animals make use of signs without knowing that there are signs" (Deely 1990: 36), but the "human animal [is] the only animal that, besides making and making use of signs, knows that there are signs" (Deely 2001: 736–737; for further discussion on Deely, see Rattasepp, Kull 2016). Many more examples can easily be found.

The final contention from all of these examples and debates should be clear: the majority of line–drawing between humans and animals are not credible, particularly those forms of the question that take as their point of departure the denigration of nonhuman animals. As Viveiros de Castro has put it,

> The point of contesting the question, "what is (proper to) Man?" then, is absolutely not to say that "Man" has no essence, that his existence precedes his essence, that the being of Man is freedom and indetermination, but to say that the question has become, for all-too obvious historical reasons, one that it is impossible to respond to without dissimulation, without, in other words, continuing to repeat that the chief property of Man is to have no final properties, which apparently earns Man unlimited rights to the properties of the other. (2014: 44)

A principled philosophical stance here would be one of indistinction with respect to the "question of the animal", of "what is proper to man", where any line-drawing between humans and animals, as Matthew Calarco has put it, "no longer serves as a guardrail for thought and practice" but would rather mark "an effort to render inoperative any nostalgia for extending human traits to animals or for complicating the differences between human beings and animals" (2011: 54). We have to begin by imagining the existence of living creatures whose diversity cannot be amassed together within the single figure of "animality" that is simply opposed to humanity. Such an attitude would be expectant, and would let go of any desire to determine hierarchically the place and status of all the beings, things and events in the world, and instead allow them to arrive and surprise and "interrupt one's mode of existence and have a transformative effect, as an *arrivant*, an absolute newcomer" (ibid, 52). For, as Roberto Marchesini has put it, "the human being does not emerge from a disjunction or purification from otherness—that is, from a self-referential humanity (as in Descartes' cogito)—but, on the contrary, from a hospitable openness toward otherness" (2017: 140). In fact, perhaps we should entirely let go of talk about "characteristics" or "traits" or "properties" as such, and pay attention to the constitutive relations, connections and semiotic links that embed and intertwine us into our environments and associate us with a myriad of both non-human species and non-living aspects of the world (including technology, and ecosystems, and the built and unbuilt world), since they all constitute humans and nonhumans together. A rejection of State animals, as Deleuze and Guattari once called them (2008: 265), describable through characteristics and attributes; replace them, instead, with the demonic animals, "pack or affect animals that form a multiplicity, a becoming, a population, a tale" (ibid.). For what if, as Lyotard once asked, "what is 'proper' to humankind were to be inhabited by the inhuman?" (Lyotard 1991: 2). What if it is a matter neither of delineating human-animal distinctions nor identifying with animals, but isntead that of symbiosis, affect, alliance, and contagion?

The Correlating Subject

> An animal which could speak said: 'Humanity is a prejudice of which we animals at least are free.'
> −Friedrich Nietzsche (1997: 162)

Around two decades ago, a new concept entered the philosophical lexicon. Found in a slim volume called *After Finitude* (2008) by Quentin Meillassoux, it was the concept of correlation / correlationism. It was quickly picked up by philosophers of all stripes as indicating a symptom of modern philosophy. It eloquently put its finger on the root cause of the unease these thinkers felt about philosophy which had been turned almost entirely into epistemology, into discourse on human meaning-making.

As a now-foundational concept for critiquing anti-realist positions, correlationism is relevant for animal studies and zoosemiotics, and merits addressing. Correlationism, then, is what Meillassoux calls an "explicit decision" by continental philosophers, from transcendental philosophy to phenomenology and postmodernism, that "there are no objects, no events, no laws, no beings which are not always already correlated with a point of view, with a subjective access" (2014: 9). In short, correlationism amounts to the conviction that it is an absurdity to think of

anything (from things in themselves to nonhuman subjectivities) as existing outside and independently of our constitutive relation to it. This is because to think or talk about something is to first posit it, to experience or cognize it, for that something cannot exist without it being first manifest or given. Any argument against such "philosophies of access"—for at bottom all these philosophies circle around the question of how the mind gets to know, to access the external world—is effectively a performative contradiction in which the counter-argument contradicts itself by the very act of being presented:

> every objection against correlationism is an objection produced by your thinking, and so dependent upon it. When you speak against correlation, you forget that you speak against correlation, hence from the viewpoint of your own mind, or culture, or epoch, etc. (ibid, 10)

This, then, is the core of correlationism: any given thing or phenomenon is a correlate of thinking. Therefore, any argument about things in themselves, of the *an sich*, cannot but be naïve, or even impossible, for

> thought cannot get *outside itself* in order to compare the world as it is 'in itself' to the world as it is 'for us', and thereby distinguish what is a function of our relation to the world from what belongs to the world alone. Such an enterprise is effectively self-contradictory, for at the very moment when we think of a property as belonging to the world in itself, it is precisely the latter that we are thinking, and consequently this property is revealed to be essentially tied to our thinking about the world. (Meillassoux 2008: 3−4)

Moreover, correlationism is asymmetrical, in the sense that it is the side of thinking or the mind that does the heavy lifting, because the conditions of possibility for any access to reality are to be found on the human side, be it in the transcendental categories of the mind of the idealists, or consciousness or *Dasein* or language, or any hypostatization of these into "culture" or *Weltanschauung*. These, no matter what particular concept or framework is used in a given context, are the conditions that make any manifestation (that is, representation, cognition, phenomenon, etc.) possible, thereby subsuming the manifestation itself and making it secondary to these conditions of possibility (Brassier 2007: 51). For it is part and parcel of Western metaphysics to privilege the immaterial as logically prior to the material, and to claim that while the immaterial requires a material basis at least in some sense, it is nevertheless irreducible to it. It may well be, it is argued, that human beings are an evolved, biological species, just another one among the animals, yet this mode of existence as biological beings merely provides the material basis for the transcendental regime and its means of objectivation. This is the old metaphysical distinction between the transcendental and the empirical, in which the former is merely instantiated in the latter and which provides the transcendental with its material conditions and empirical support, but is in itself nevertheless wholly distinct from it (ibid, 56−57). This is why the prioritization of the correlation between the two—between thinking and being—does not lead to a mutual, symmetrical constitution of the two sides, but instead to the subsumption of things to that which form and regulate them, that is, the subsumption of the empirical under the transcendental (ibid, 64). In short, for this asymmetrical correlationism, the thinking side is conceived of as the more dominant one.

It is in fact that old Cartesian premise, endlessly rejected and criticized yet always returning, always sneakily present again, that the "I" accompanies any thought and therefore self-referentiality is the primary and fundamental condition of all thinking, of all representations. It was precisely on such or similar lines of reasoning that the "modern constitution" (Latour 1993: 13ff) was founded: to know is to filter a singular but ultimately unknowable nature through the ever-multiplying frames of culture. For, as "everybody knows", since it would be naïve to believe in any immediate access to external reality, the only conception left is that there is "the human history of nature on the one hand, and on the other, the natural nonhistory of nature" (Latour 2004: 33): multiculturalism is always accompanied by mononaturalism.

In this conjunction, we must also be mindful of and attend critically to the general focus, in various philosophies and strands of semiotics, on representations—on human representations in the philosophical sense anyway, as hidden replicas of the world tucked away in the recesses of the mind or of cultural representations. For one of the most basic and essential goals of modern philosophy of the past three hundred years or so, roughly starting from the classic triumvirate of Descartes, Locke, Kant, has been to be a general theory of representation. "The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations," as Richard Rorty once put it, and "getting more accurate representations by inspecting, repairing, and polishing the mirror" is the basic task of philosophy (1979: 12). For philosophy as the mirror of nature, animals enter not as themselves as living beings with their own worlds and histories and modes of life, but as caught up in general theoretical and abstract issues for which they function as nothing but "a theme, trope, metaphor, analogy, representation, or sociological datum" or the like (Wolfe 2009: 567). These are Jacques Derrida's *animots*, paper animals, abstract, inexistent.

Lurking at the center of the correlationist doublet, like the spider who, unaware of the fly up until the moment of a fatal collision, nevertheless "spins the size of the mesh to accord with the size of the fly's body" (Uexküll 1982: 42), there is a particular conception of the knowing subject. This is the very model of a modern defense of human uniqueness in matters epistemological: the world, as Kant famously declared in his Copernican turn, is made to circle around the knower, whose powers are such as to constitute that very world from itself. But at least when it comes to philosophy proper, it is at least assumed that the unknowable *an sich* still exists out there, in whatever inaccessible form, and that anything cognized is at least a synthesis of some sort between the knower and the known. At the birth of the human sciences, however, this basic assumption took an unexpected turn for the extreme. For the figure which, according to Michel Foucault, ushered in modernity and laid the foundation for the human sciences, is a historically specific understanding of the nature of "man", of "human nature", a figure which he named the "empirico-transcendental doublet". This doublet is "a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what renders all knowledge possible" (2002: 347), a "paradoxical figure in which the empirical contents of knowledge necessarily release, of themselves, the conditions that have made them possible" (ibid., 351). This conception renders moot any consideration of the things of the world, of any synthesis with the *an sich*, or considerations of human umwelt. By definition this figure, which is central to the genesis and genealogy of the humanities, of the human sciences, is inward-turning and exclusionary, for it finds both its empirical object of study, as well as the conditions of possibility for that very study from the same place—from "man", from "the human condition". The *what* and

the *how* of any inquiry are, from the perspective of the doublet, the very same thing. And it is all this that led Meillassoux to complain, in that famous, now oft-quoted passage, of contemporary philosophers' loss of the *great outdoors* "which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory—of being entirely elsewhere" (Meillassoux 2008: 7).

Perhaps this explains, to some extent at least, why it has taken such a long time for something like the animal turn (and even later, the turn to things, to objects, to any kind of nonhuman) to appear as a discipline or a program of research within the humanities. For the logic of the doublet necessarily also impacts that which may at first seem to fall outside its purview. Within the scope of the doublet animals, or more importantly the animality of the human, are left over as a spectral reminder: cast out as irrelevant because of their lack of human propriety, yet brought back as a reminiscence of the animal within. Animals are included in general discourse only in order to signify their own expulsion, as if placed on the outside of the inside, or vice versa. They find themselves within the anthropological machinery of inclusive exclusion, as the always-present rejects of what Giorgio Agamben described as foundational to Western politics and metaphysics: "man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion" (Agamben 1998: 8). And this inclusive exclusion is far from being innocent and merely constitutive of the human condition, for as Massimo Filippi argues, it constitutes a "double move" of

> an appropriating exclusion — which degrades animals to things, goods, labor — and an ex-propriating inclusion — which equates ourselves to angels in order to deny our fragile and mortal corporeality. This double move allows us to place ourselves outside of nature and to have the whole of existence at our disposal as if we were its absolute owners. (Filippi 2011: 1)

As long as the logic of the doublet is operable within the human sciences, knowledge of animals is neither objective nor subjective, but abjective. They are neither the beings who have been put in front (as the etymology of *objectāre* indicates) of human discourse, ready to be brought in as partners in knowledge, nor made subjects of the symbolic flourishing of imagination which reduces the motley lived world into a set of animal representations concocted by humans. Instead, they remain abjects, the out-casts, the thrown-downs. It is that which biosemiotics is in an excellent position to remedy.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to take apart and bring to the open certain premises and assumptions which make large swathes of traditional philosophy inimical to substantial consideration of all things nonhuman. More precisely, even if they consider the nonhuman, the fact that the nonhuman could consider *them* and that there are conclusions and self-critique to be derived from this, has been greatly hindered up until very recent times. But biosemiotics could be precisely that: a study of nonhuman animals that is always open to the possibility that a comparison between the lived world

of particular nonhumans and our conceptions of them may in fact lead to substantial questioning or revision of our concepts and ideas which we cherish the most, and have thought of as stable, well-defined, and universal. Nonhuman animals represent not a lack, but worlds with their own specificity and difference. There is no single, specific relation that humans have with the world, nor one which humans would have with nonhumans, and those between all the nonhumans themselves. The world is motley, and humans should not be conceived of having a unitary, uniquely privileged or constitutive relation to it that would subsume all others.

To develop nonhuman ontologies could be the task of semiotic umwelt-theory.[2] It could be one avenue for highlighting and exemplifying one of Jacques Derrida's core messages, which on the face of it may sound like a commonplace, but which up to very recent times was scarcely to be found in our various philosophies. It is that

> it is rather a matter of taking into account a multiplicity of heterogeneous structures and limits: among nonhumans, and separate from nonhumans, there is an immense multiplicity of other living things that cannot in any way be homogenized, except by means of violence and willful ignorance, within the category of what is called the animal or animality in general. (Derrida 2008: 48)

An exceedingly dominant strand in Western thought, familiar to all, has indeed been human exceptionalism: that there is a unique place reserved for humans in the world, a place which is to be separated and marked down against all others, which signifies human transcendence from nature or from the biological order. This belief, whether implicitly or explicitly, crops up in many disparate fields, often in ones which seemingly have nothing to do with one another. It is the basis of the conception of culture superimposed on nature as a separate, superorganic domain. It is the essence of the idea that the essence of "man" is to have no essence. It is the core of that metaphysics which thinks the transcendental as logically superior to the empirical. It lays the foundation to all forms of anthropocentrism. Often, of course, this happens unwittingly as an irrelevancy, as we saw at the beginning, when we inquired about how philosophers talk about animals when they are not specifically talking about animals. Many more examples could be added. True enough, there are numerous contrary strands as well, as well as those which ignore these anthropocentrisms in general, such as structuralism with its focus to non-individualistic determinants, poststructuralism with its critique of anything static, semiotics with its irreducible relationalities, and the various anti- and posthumanisms that herald the erasure of "man" like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.

It continues to be relevant to bring out all of the above, for the narrative of the Ascent of Man is a major intellectual source for the present polycrisis. The more proper stance today and for a long time now is, to borrow from Derrida again,

---

2 Research in animal studies in this direction is also underway, perhaps best exemplified by Anna Tsing's wonderful *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015). See also Despret 2016 and Kohn 2013.

> to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, through the history of all of his history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game. (Derrida 1970: 264−265)

Further studies could attempt to make good a kind of comparative ontology of umwelts, which akin to perspectivism and the ontological turn in anthropology, would put philosophical concepts and ideas themselves at risk under the gaze of nonhuman animals. Proceeding from a flat ontology of diverse umwelts, such studies would inquire into the species-specific nature of human conceptions and beliefs, and ask whether new, novel ideas could possibly stem from thinking and imagining similar (or different, for that matter) ideas from the perspective of nonhuman animals whose embodiments and umwelts would be different from our own. An intensification of the descriptions of nonhuman umwelts which would place our own concepts at risk. But for the time being, a necessary step toward nonhuman philosophies and modes of thought which would provide their full support to and understanding of alterity, and of the full diversity of life on Earth, is to refrain from the incessant polishing of the human mirror. Hopefully, the rest will follow.

Declarations

Competing interests. The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

References

Adorno, Theodor 1973. *The Jargon of Authenticity.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Agamben, Giorgio 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, Giorgio 1999. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bacon, Francis 1902 [1620]. *Novum Organum, Or True Suggestions for the Interpretation of Nature*. New York: P. F. Collier & Son.

Bonner, Jeffrey P. 2006. *Sailing With Noah: Stories from the World of Zoos.* Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Brassier, Ray 2007. *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Brentari, Carlo 2018. From the Hiatus Model to the Diffuse Discontinuities: A Turning Point in Human-Animal Studies. *Biosemiotics* 11: 331−345. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12304-018-9329-8

Burgat, Florence 2017. The Unexpected Resemblance between Dualism and Continuism, or How to Break a Philosophical Stalemate. In: Mackenzie, Louisa; Posthumus, Stephanie (eds.). *French Thinking About Animals.* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

622 Calarco, Matthew 2008. *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida.*
623 New York: Columbia University Press.
624 Calarco, Matthew 2011. Identity, Difference, Indistinction. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 11(2):
625 41−60. https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2012.0008
626 Calarco, Matthew; Atterton, Peter 2004. *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental*
627 *Thought*. London New York: Continuum.
628 Cassirer, Ernst 1953 [1944]. *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*.
629 New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.
630 Collingwood, R. G. 1960. *The Idea of Nature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
631 Deely, John 1990. *Basics of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
632 Deely, John 2001. *Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from*
633 *Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
634 Deleuze, Gilles; Guattari, Felix 2008 [1987]. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.
635 London: Continuum.
636 Dewey, John 1920. *Reconstruction in Philosophy.* New York: Henry Holt and Company.
637 Derrida, Jacques 1970. Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences. In:
638 Macksey, Richard; Donato, Eugenio (eds.). *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of*
639 *Man: The Structuralist Controversy.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
640 Derrida, Jacques 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. New York: Fordham University Press.
641 Despret, Vinciane 2016. *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* Minneapolis:
642 University of Minnesota Press.
643 Filippi, Massimo 2011. Pissing Angels. *Humanimalia* 2(2).
644 https://doi.org/10.52537/humanimalia.10081
645 Foucault, Michel 2002 [1966]. *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*.
646 London and New York: Routledge.
647 Haraway, Donna 1978. Animal Sociology and a Natural Economy of the Body Politic, Part II: The
648 Past Is the Contested Zone: Human Nature and Theories of Production and Reproduction in
649 Primate Behavior Studies. *Signs* 4(1): 37−60. https://doi.org/10.1086/493568
650 Heidegger, Martin 1992. *Parmenides*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
651 Heidegger, Martin 1995. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude.*
652 Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
653 Heidegger, Martin 1998. *Pathmarks*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
654 Higuera, Claudio Julio Rodríguez; Kull, Kalevi 2017. The Biosemiotic Glossary Project: The
655 Semiotic Threshold. *Biosemiotics* 10: 109–126. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12304-017-9289-4
656 Kohn, Eduardo 2013. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Berkeley:
657 University of California Press.
658 Kroeber, Alfred L. 1917. The Superorganic. *American Anthropologist*, New Series 19(2): 163−213.
659 Langer, Susanne 1954. *Philosophy in a New Key. A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and*
660 *Art.* New York: The New American Library.
661 Latour, Bruno 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
662 Latour, Bruno 2004. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge,
663 Mass: Harvard University Press.
664 Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm 1989 [1714]. Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason. In:
665 *Philosophical Essays*. Ariew, Roger; Garber, Daniel (eds., transl.). Indianapolis: Hackett
666 Publishing Company.

667 Lippit, Akira Mizuta 2000. *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife.* Minneapolis:
668 University of Minnesota Press.
669 Lyotard, Jean-François 1991. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Stanford: Stanford University
670 Press.
671 Marchesini, Roberto 2017. *Over the Human: Post-humanism and the Concept of Animal Epiphany.*
672 Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
673 Marx, Karl 1976. *Value: Studies by Karl Marx*. Albert Dragstedt (transl.). London New York: New
674 Park
675 Meillassoux, Quentin 2008. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. London and
676 New York: Continuum.
677 Meillassoux, Quentin 2014. *Time Without Becoming*. Mimesis International.
678 Nietzsche, Friedrich 1997 [1881]. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*. Cambridge,
679 New York: Cambridge University Press.
680 Powell, Anthony 1962. *The Acceptance World, a Novel*. London: Penguin Books.
681 Rattasepp, Silver 2016. The philosophical discourse on animals, and the philosophical animals
682 themselves. In: Maran, Timo; Tønnessen, Morten; Armstrong Oma, Kristin; Kiiroja, Laura;
683 Magnus, Riin; Mäekivi, Nelly; Rattasepp, Silver; Thibault, Paul; Tüür, Kadri (eds.), *Animal*
684 *Umwelten in a Changing World: Zoosemiotic Perspectives*. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus,
685 51−65.
686 Rattasepp, Silver; Kull, Kalevi 2016. The semiotic species: Deelying with animals in philosophy.
687 *The American Journal of Semiotics* 32(1/4): 35–48. https://doi.org/10.5840/ajs2016112316
688 Rorty, Richard 1979. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
689 Ryle, Gilbert 2002 [1949]. *The Concept of Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
690 Sartre, Jean-Paul 2007 [1946]. *Existentialism is a Humanism; including A Commentary on The*
691 *Stranger*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
692 Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life*
693 *in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
694 Uexküll, Jakob von 1982 [1940]. The Theory of Meaning. *Semiotica* 42(1). Mouton Publishers.
695 Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo 2014. *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-structural Anthropology*.
696 Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing.
697 Wolfe, Cary 2009. Human, All Too Human: "Animal Studies" and the Humanities. *PMLA* 124(2):
698 564−575. https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.564
699 Wolfe, Cary 2010. *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis, London: University of Minneapolis
700 Press.