



The Inhuman Gaze and Perceiving Otherwise

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Animal gaze and the feeling of being human

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Abstract

When the first psychiatrists introduced pets in a psychiatric ward, in the seventies (Corson, O’Leary Corson et Gwynne, 1975), they mentioned that the dogs’ presence seemed to “humanize” the hospital. Since then, animals (mainly pets) have been introduced in prisons, geriatric institutions, hospitals, etc., with the same effect. When there is a risk of de-humanization, pets seem to help counteract this tendency, keeping people and their micro-society on this side of the frontier of humanity. In this communication I would like to take this observation beyond its apparent triviality and examine how the gaze of a companion animal can make people (feel) more human. I will argue that because they have a gaze, animals have

a presence, an *anima*. Their gaze is a call to be present, but the kind of presence that is called for is different from the presence that is demanded by a human gaze. One of the reasons is that animals cannot have an objective engagement with the world. They are always subjectively engaged in their *umwelt* (Uexküll). They cannot be detached and they are not able to perceive human bodies as things. This has many consequences, that will be examined with the help of the concepts of *Leib* and *Körper*, as they appear in phenomenological psychopathology (i.e. Bowden, 2012). Moreover, it can be argued, following the lines developed by D. Winnicott in his theory of intermediary spaces, that the gaze of a peaceful companion animals can help a fragile self to exist and develop a creative relationship with the world, thus becoming more human.

Bowden H. A phenomenological study of anorexia nervosa. *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology* 2012;19(3): 227-41.
Corson, S.A., O'Leary Corson, E. et Gwynne, P.H. (1975), « Pet-facilitated psychotherapy » in R.S. Anderson (dir), *Pet animals and society*, London, UK : Baillière Tindall, p. 19-35.

Introduction

Here I would like to talk about the encounter with animals, and what it does to the human being experience of oneself as being human, as well as to his/her possibilities of being a human, the potentialities for existence.

As this question hasn't been directly addressed, to my knowledge, I will come to it indirectly, through empirical research that has been done by psychologists, and some of it by myself.

I am not a philosopher of mind, even not a philosopher. I was trained as a clinical psychologist and now I work in an anthropology department, on human-animal relationships.

But as you will see, I still have a clinical interest and bias in how I look at things. I'll begin with what has been (incorrectly) labelled the « therapeutic effect » of animals on human beings.

The modern story of AAT says that one day, in his office, Psychotherapist Boris Levinson received an urgency call from the parents of a very retired boy. He agreed to see the boy immediately, but had forgotten that his dog, Jingle, was in the office. The boy came in and spent the whole session interacting with Jingle, paying no attention to Levinson. The boy agreed to come back again, to play with the dog. He spent a few therapy sessions playing with the dog, the therapists being gradually accepted in his play.

In a study published in 1975, Corson & al introduced AAT to 28 psychiatric (mainly schizophrenics) patients in a hospital. The patients were chosen because they very retired, oppositional, or because the other treatments (occupational therapy, recreational therapy, group and individual psychotherapy, pharmacotherapy, electroshock therapy) were poorly or not effective for them. Each patient was responsible for one dog. They could walk, feed and groom them, as well as interact and play with them during the day. The objectives of the

psychiatrists were that the interactions with the dogs would improve the re-socialization of these isolated patients.

The results indicated that all the patients showed some improvement. They talked more, smiled more, had more interactions with the staff and were more compliant with the treatments. The Staff reported that they saw them differently. For some of them, improvement was spectacular: four patients left the hospital a few weeks later.

Another example comes from the clinical work of Nadine Fossier-Varney (2018). In her work with her dog and deeply invalid old people, this psychologist noticed that even just spending time in the dog's presence, barely interacting, caused in some of them what she called a "psychic resuscitation": the patient was able to look (briefly) at the therapist's gaze, was less distressed, less agitated, and uttered a word. She seemed to find a way for making contact with the human social world again, and to dare to "exist" a little bit.

All these patients are "on the verge" or outside of the human social world. They have lost contact, they seem to be estranged. * But it seems that being with animals (dogs) and sharing a world with them re-humanizes them, in a way that allows them be inhabited by life again. What happens in the contact with the dog that allows this?

Since then, numerous studies have been undertaken to demonstrate the "therapeutic effect" of animals on people. Very often it has been noticed that animals "humanize" hospitals, prisons, retirement homes, etc.

But the great majority of the studies have been conducted in a mechanistic paradigm (evidence-based medicine), with the main objective of demonstrating that animals have a real and independent « therapeutic effect » on human beings, as if animals were a kind of medication that should work the same way on everybody. This approach not only reduces interaction to causes, it also prevents us to understand what is at stake.

However, in a previous anthropological study of « enchanted » encounters with dolphins (Halloy & Servais, 2016) I observed that meeting a dolphin may be a deeply transformative experience.

These are some excerpt of interviews that I made:

"Looking in a dolphin's gaze is one of the most extraordinary experiences on earth..." "There was nowhere to hide. The dolphin looked right in the depth of my soul".

Through the dolphin's looking at themselves, these people say they discovered who they "truly" are. So, for some people, dolphin encounters afford a transformation of their identity, a contact with their "deep self" and an opportunity to heal. So, I made the hypothesis that these very specific cases of animal encounters might give us some cues for understanding, in a way or another, the therapeutic "effect" of animals on human beings. And I made the hypothesis that it has to do with the properties of human-animal communication and interaction

This is why I would not conceptualize it as an « effect » but instead as an encounter. Coming back to the clinical cases I mentioned earlier, I would ask:

How is it that the sharing of interspecies modes of sociability leads to a kind of re-humanization? What kind of world is shared in the human-animal interaction, that helps to become « more human »? How does the animal's presence affect the way of being in the world?¹

In order to answer that question, I'm going to discuss three points, that I think are useful for understanding what animals do to ourselves.

First one is the statement that Communication with animals is happening in the sensation range (le "sentir")

Second is the hypothesis that the gaze and the kind of presence of the animal allows the patients to re-inhabit their body (and experience themselves as a living body, *leib*)

Third: Because of the alterity and the fundamental indeterminacy that are inherent to them, the animal encounters offer a potential for a reconfiguration and deepening of the identity.²

1. Communicating with animals is happening in the sensation range.

Of course, interacting with animals has to do with the senses: touch, smell, images, sounds. But here I mean something deeper than this. What I mean is that human-animal encounters take place in what E. Strauss calls the "pathic" communication - and we are not talking here about messages that would be "transmitted".

As I understand it, pathic communication is the primary communication with the environment. It is rooted in natural history and belongs to the (non-reflexive and non-linguistic) sensation range. Pathic communication establishes the common background of life and is shared by human and non-human animals. According to Strauss, the possibility of a communication with animals appears in the sensation range.

According to Strauss, animals are limited to pathic communication, and human being are never able to come back to it again. But Another way of looking at this kind of communication is to relate it to the vitality dynamics that have been identified by Daniel Stern in the mother-infant proto-conversations. This communication is independent of any sense modality. And

¹ Before going further, I would like to quickly mention a point that I won't address. It has to do with the perception of animal's presence. Because of course, in order to recognize that the animal is looking at me (that his gaze is looking at me) I must be ready to perceive it as *present*. I cannot go into details in how animals' presence is manifested. But it is obvious that it is more common in some societies than in others. In the western world we mainly live in a natural world (of objects) that is seen, while animist people live in a world that watches. "Traditional Koyukon people live in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes. A person moving through nature – however wild, remote, even desolate the place may be – is never truly alone. The surroundings are aware, sensate, personified. They feel. They can be offended... » (Nelson, 1983, p. 14).

² The main authors that I refer to here are Ervin Strauss (*Du sens des sens*), f. Buytendijk (*Phénoménologie de la rencontre*), D. Winnicott (*Theory of transitional spaces*) and J Roustang (French hypnotherapist who has written a brilliant introduction about Hegel's work on animal magnetism).

according to Stern, the transmodality of rhythm makes it possible for the mutual tuning of mother and child to take place. It is a primary form of intersubjectivity.

This tuning of rhythm and dynamic is a mode of communication that forms the basic layer, usually invisible, that weaves our encounters all life long. Without it, one remains isolated from the human social world : when pathic communication fails, as it is the case in schizophrenia, there is a “detuning” of individual and social spaces; relating to the other becomes impossible and the intersubjective support for the self is lost. In this context, interacting and communication with animals may be an opportunity to experience kinesis, affective and emotional tuning that can support an intersubjective self, as well as (re)experience the common background of life. It is a way of practicing interactive abilities needed to create shared dynamics with others.

This can be crucial for people who have lost contact with the human social world. For them, interacting and being with animals in the sensation range can help to support the kinesis, emotional and interactive abilities needed to create shared dynamics with others and maybe help to restore pathic communication

Indeterminacy is another property of the sensation range that I would like to quickly highlight because it helps to explain the creative and healing dimension of animal encounters. I refer here to the analysis provided by hypnotherapist Jean Roustang in his introduction to Hegel’s Animal Magnetism.

He distinguishes two kinds of sensation: one which is submitted to consciousness and another one which is not. The latter “ignores the distinctions between the senses.” “It stays in a state of indeterminacy. No sensation is privileged to form stable connections.” It is usually unconscious but it appears in hypnosis, as the sensing submitted to consciousness progressively disappears ...

And it can appear in animal encounters. Indeed, indeterminacy is I think a fundamental property of animal encounters.

Why in animal encounters? Because they are subject to what anthropologist A. Gell calls a “cognitive opacity”, which means that for one reason or another, symbolization cannot take place.

Because of the alterity of their body and expressive movements, and the puzzle that this might pose on the perception of affordances, animals may engage us in a kind of cognitive opacity that is impairing conscious sensing, thus allowing, like in hypnosis, another kind of sensing to appear. So, this is another reason why interacting and even looking at animals activates modes of sensing that are primary, pre-reflexive, indeterminate, kinesis and not attached to a specific sense. But what is even more important to me is the fact that, according to Roustang, with indeterminacy comes the “power” or the “energy” and the healing potential of the hypnotic experience.

“Potentialities that were “stored” “waiting for” can be integrated thanks to their liberty of movement, and they enlarge and intensify the potentialities of the individual.” (Roustang)

Here are some quotes from an interview of a woman who is talking about her encounter with a horse.

“It was very peculiar. He (the horse) had his head on my shoulder... I had these sensations... I was not thinking anymore... I just felt wholeness...pure existence”

“I was feeling another body, not my physical body, but another one, it is difficult to explain”...

“It is a resourceful moment that I carry with me.”

This is just to illustrate the fact that some animal encounters do indeed happen in the range of sensation and that they have the potential to enrich the patient’s experience of herself.

2. The gaze and the kind of presence of the animal allows the patients to re-inhabit their body (and experience themselves as a living body, *leib*)

To make this point, I will rely on the useful distinction between *Körper* and *Lieb*.

In some interactive conditions, people might be reduced to a *Körper* (for example, old people with dementia in a retirement home) and some patients may have difficulties to live and to inhabit their body as a *lieb*, i.e. a living body that makes sense of the world. For example, it has been suggested that anorexic patients, in a way, see their own body as a *Körper*, as it is looked at (and cared for) by other people. Their illness would be a desperate attempt at getting rid of that *körper*, which prevents them from living.

Anyway, here interacting with animals can help in three ways:

1. Being with animals mobilizes emotions, sensations and movements
2. The communicative cues that are significant to my animal partner are dispatched on my body. Animals don’t have a theory of mind. Only my expressive body counts for them. In their eyes this is what I am: an expressive body, to which they are extremely sensitive.
3. It also means that my dog doesn’t see me as a *Körper*. Indeed, animals cannot disengage themselves from the world. They don’t have an objective vision of it. For them, I’ll never be a detached corpse.

As animals see me as an expressive body, react to me as an expressive body, and create with me kinesic structures that are shared, the intersubjective self that emerges from interaction with animal is very different from the intersubjective self that emerges from human-human interaction. Animals afford for the emergence of an intersubjective self that engages the body, the emotions, the senses, a kind of uncertainty.

The “effect” of animal therapy programs are often trivialized as “animals give self-confidence” or “animals give happiness” etc. But the animals don’t give anything. They don’t even WANT anything for us. They afford the emergence of an intersubjective self that is enriched, embodied, living, emotional, etc.

3. Because of the alterity and the fundamental indeterminacy that are inherent to them, the animal encounters offer a potential for a reconfiguration and deepening of the identity.

Coming now to the encounter,

Here I would like to add just a few things to what has already been said and provide a brief conclusion.

I'll first provide this citation from Buytendijk's book about the phenomenological approach of encounters: "The sense of the encounter is not only projected by the subject. There is the objectivity of the encountered. He asks a question, which is an invitation for the encounter." This question is compared by Buytendijk to a soundbox: the one who meet receives from the one who is met a kind of echo of himself. In the case of animal encounters, the nature of this echo still has to be investigated. But it isn't pure projection.³

It means that animal encounters are not just mere projections. Animals are DOING something to us, they make us different.

In order to make justice of all their characteristics, I have come to conceptualize animal encounters as happening in a transitional space, as it has been defined by Donald Winnicott. A transitional space which is a place where the outside and the inside are not really distinguished, and where the self can relate with what is different from itself, and thus creatively grow. Because of their alterity, animals are a challenge for the mundane interactive skills. But if the encounter happens in a benevolent context, the challenge may lead to a creative aggregation of the experience.

Conclusion

Animal encounters have many properties that can help understanding their healing "power". they support a kind of intersubjective self that could not be supported by human beings.

Animal encounters are both a risk and a luck. There is always the risk of becoming inhuman, but also the luck of becoming more human.

Now we need to explore more precisely what happen in the experience of encountering an animal. In animal encounters there is always some kind of indeterminacy, uncertainty. It can lead to fear, anxiety (the fear of becoming inhuman) but it also free associative resources that can reorganize the self and help the patient to make contact with life again.

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³ I'm not going to discuss the question of the ability of animals to "really" meet us. I argue that animals meet me as soon as they don't react to me as they would to an isolated stimulus. So they meet me, in their own way.