

Humans and other animals, between anthropology and phenomenologies

Theme Session Proposal for the conference *Animals in the Anthropocene* (Stavanger September, 17-19)

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Phenomenology rethinks humanity in respect of its openness to transcendence, its being-in-the world and of the contingent corporeal situation from which it never completely breaks away. As a result humanity appears more confused, problematic and difficult to delimitate than ever. At this point phenomenology – more accurately: phenomenologies, since the issue of animality is one about which their diversity is especially obvious – joins anthropology whose task essentially involves the delicate question of the nature-culture distinction and the exploration of the grey zone where they encroach upon one another. Our relationships with animals particularly manifest this problem, in a most striking way. Phenomenology as a subjectivist approach to Being, or, more fundamentally, as an ontology of Being as appearing and as meaning through-and-through, provides a privileged and original access to the question of animal interiority, animal agency and the conception of life and living beings as creative interpretation processes. It also provides new patterns for defining meaning as embodied, ambiguous and deeply linked with the imaginary field conceived as a field of anonymous sedimented open and dynamic schemas or archetypes that are an integral part of reality. These issues are touchstones in the thought of major phenomenologists (Husserl, Jonas, Henry...) and, even more remarkably, a close dialogue with Von Uexküll is at the heart of the work of Heidegger, Buytendjik and Merleau-Ponty for instance. Recently biosemiotics has quite naturally rediscovered and started to explore its intersections with phenomenology as shown by the work of David Abram, Jesper Hoffmeyer, Ted Toadvine, Morten Tønnessen and Louise Westling for instance

If Heidegger's stance according to which animals have no world, not even an *Umwelt*, may be the most well-known phenomenological – or rather, existential - thesis about animality, it is also possible to unveil more nuanced paths in his work (see for instance Buchanan's analyses). Moreover the fact that Husserl, the father of phenomenology, made possible an approach of life that is radically different from Heidegger's remains to be put forward and more thoroughly investigated. In *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, Husserl goes as far as to say that "Biology, of all sciences, is the one that stands in greater closeness to the sources of evidence and the depth of things themselves" and he gives us theoretical tools to think empathy as a refined and relevant

method for gaining access to other animals' intentionality. Nevertheless, on the other hand, phenomenologists also focus on human specificity and address human responsibility in the emergence of a cultural technological world that made problematic its relationship with « nature ». One of the guidelines of their reflections is to determine in what exactly consists the threshold crossing toward a new structural level and a new epoch that we may call the Anthropocene, a process that does not necessarily have to be thought as the emergence of a radical discontinuity with a mythical “pure” animality, as shown by Merleau-Ponty for instance.

In a somehow provocative way, but following paths instituted by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty or Jonas for instance, we want to ask how phenomenology helps us to think and conceptualize posthumanism and interanimality. Phenomenologies undoubtedly provide crucial conceptual tools (Intentionality, passive syntheses, Lifeworld [*lebenswelt*], structure [*Gestalt*], empathy [*Einfühlung*], *Mitsein*, *Mitgehen*, transposedness [*Versetztheit*], lateral kinship, institution [*Stiftung*], flesh [*chair*] etc.) to better analyze the “multiple, overfolded border” (Derrida) between humans and (other) animals, the possible modes of communication between them, as well as the exact nature of their relationships to meaning. These concepts largely remain to be more systematically analyzed through a lively dialogue with contemporary posthumanisms, biosemiotics and animal ethics theories.

During this session speakers may address relationships between biosemiotics and Phenomenology, phenomenology and posthumanism, phenomenology and an ethical and political approach of animal studies. They may investigate more thoroughly the concepts of *Einfühlung*, *Umwelt* and *Lebenswelt*, lateral and carnal kinship, the imaginary and creative dimension of meaning in life structures, as well as the role that a phenomenological ontology can play in a shift of paradigm in biology.