Herding, Training and the Ontology of Being. How Working with Sheepdogs Informed My Approach to Sheep-herding Bronze Age Societies

Kristin Armstrong Oma

Human-Animal Studies combined with a practice perspective informs my archaeological research on human-animal relationships and centers on ways to approach the lives of past animals, rather than their deaths. However, I have found it difficult to break up the "animal" category, that at times leaves little room for understanding the ontological status of each being. However, researching herding—sheep, dogs and shepherds—in the early Bronze Age, allowed me to conceptualize the different kinds of beings as players in a field unto one another. Looking at the dynamics between these kinds of beings, the "animal" category began to disintegrate. The research process was in part guided by my own experience with working with and training Border Collies. This paper outlines some of this work in conjunction with my research.
The Lived Full-bodied Sense-making of Human-Bonobo Interaction: Implications for Animal-Human Agency and Interactivity

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Animals and humans have a long history of engaging with each other and taking part in joint activities of many kinds. Engagement is a kind of full-bodied sense-making that enables humans and animal alike to perceive aspects of their worlds and intentions. The dynamics of action and caring are fundamental to this view. I seek to understand how, in the first instance, engagement and later activity between humans and animals is grounded in biological agency. Accordingly, I seek a clearer view of biological agency and how this, in turn, becomes the forms of social agency and co-agency that define (in many different ways) the modes of human-animal relationality that will be investigated in this research project with respect to the various case studies envisaged. For the purposes of the present paper, I will stay on the relatively familiar ground of bonobo-human interaction that I have previously worked on.

Biological agency is grounded in full-bodied sense-making that humans and animals share without suggesting that this is the same in all species. Full-bodied sense-making allows organisms to engage with each other and later to take part in activity of various kinds. Humans and animals alike do things as they are moved/affected by the movements – the whole-body sense-making – of others. Animals and humans have a long history of co-evolution with each other. Can we imagine a human world that is not also populated by animals and the many complex and diverse forms of relationality that have co-evolved between animals and humans? Relationality is grounded in lived sense-making. The body is central here in the following way: The bodies of animals show intrinsic sensitivity not only to others but also to the sensitivity of the sensitivity of others (Stuart 2010). Stuart refers to this as enkinaesthesia (Stuart, 2010; Stuart and Thibault In Press). The enkinaesthetics of lived sense-making is therefore recursive and historical as the neural, somato-sensory and affective dynamics of agents (human and animal) become entangled with each other over time (Thibault 2011). Importantly, this implicates a transcendental dialogics of agency that underpins enkinaesthetic relatedness.

On this basis, I will consider how the differences (as well as the commonalities) of biology and perspective constitute the motivators of dialogically coordinated pan-homo interaction. I will do so with reference to the presentation and analysis of some relevant video-recorded pan-homo interaction.

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Semiotics of the literary representations of animals

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The keywords for the proposed presentation will be signification, communication, representation, and (bio)translation. A brief overview will be given of all the terms, as defined in the framework of biosemiotic studies. Nature writing and nature documentaries by Swedish naturalist, film-maker and writer Bengt Berg will serve as illustrations to the theoretical framework. In the presentation, I will discuss in a greater detail the notions of representation and translation, and what conceptual difficulties arise when it comes to the mediation of other species’ Umwelten by means of human sign systems.

Translation requires two distinguishable sign systems, and a successful transmission of meaning from one to the other. Biotranslation could thus be regarded as transmission between Umwelten. In case of a regular translation, we can speak of the structure of the text, its poetic function, of the syntax as one of its constituting values. Kull and Torop argue in their article on biotranslation that for other animals, certain rhythmically repeated patterns of movement may serve as pro-syntax. Thus also translation of animals’ life events into a human narrative emerges as a technical, as well as semiotic problem.

Briefly summarising, the following questions might be touched upon in the discussion: do we need the concept of bio-translation? How to tell the difference between representation and translation, when it comes to understanding another species’ Umwelt? Which of these is the concept that has a greater potential to be understandable to environmental protection officials?
Animal agency in politics and eco-existentialism

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What is animal agency? And how are various notions of animal agency explicitly or implicitly presented in different kinds of texts?

In this presentation I will start out by summarizing a survey conducted in the biosemiotic community on the notions of ‘agent’ and ‘agency’ (Tønnessen, forthcoming), with regard to animal agency. I will also briefly outline the semiotics of animal representations as a field of study (Tønnessen and Tüür 2014).

Next I will share observations made in my analysis of mentions of animals in Norwegian political party programs for the parliamentary period 2013–2017 (Tønnessen 2013). One of the findings is that animals are in these documents predominantly described in terms of economic resources, not as sentient beings endowed with subjective experience. Even though animal welfare is now addressed by several (particularly small) parties, even most of the parties that are the most positive to improving animal welfare speak of animals in very anthropocentric, reductionistic manners whenever animal welfare is not the topic.

I will furthermore analyse the essay “The Last Messiah” (1993 [1933]), written by the Norwegian eco-existentialist and mountaineer Peter Wessel Zapffe (1899–1990), with the notion of animal and animal agency in mind. For Zapffe, human compassion with suffering animals is central. But unlike in the case of human beings, he claims, the suffering of animals is limited to their own, more or less immediate, suffering. Likewise animals too feel anxiety, but only human beings can “fear life itself”, or fear their own being. Even though human beings are unique in some respects, including when it comes to relating to death, I will argue that many animals too are in some situations aware that they are mortals.

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