

# Four ages of underrating: Philosophy and zoösemiotic issues

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## *Abstract*

*The present article focuses on the most significant instances of intrinsically semiotic philosophical reflections about animal cognition and communication. It ideally acts as a small complement to the massive treatise on anthroposemiotics provided by Four ages of understanding, and indeed deals only (if only is the word) with those scholars and thinkers mentioned in John Deely's work, selecting among them those, like Hume, Locke, and others, who approached zoösemiotic issues in diverse ways (theoretical, ethical, or explicitly proto-semiotic).*

*Keywords:* anthrozoosemiotics; animals; cognition; ethics.

When you deal with such an enormous work as John Deely's *Four ages of understanding*, it is quite difficult to say something that the author has not already said, implied, or — more probably — described in every detail. Deely's ambition was to write a text that could be a methodological point of reference, and at the same time could produce new and important theoretical reflections for the semiotic debate in general and the postmodern one in particular. A reading of human thought that is brilliant, original, at times neurotic (John will forgive me for this, since I had a first-hand experience of the writing process of his monumental index)<sup>1</sup> with one big leading character that emerges in crescendo: the sign, in each of its theoretically constitutional parts.

For those — like myself — who deal with zoösemiotics, Deely's work offers interesting elements for reflection, though one must be aware that zoösemiosis is after all a marginal feature in the treatise. *Four ages of understanding* is doubtlessly a book focusing on anthroposemiosis, and this is what it should do, given its programmatic intentions. This, however,

does not mean that the zoösemiotician is not properly stimulated. On the contrary, zoösemiotics owes to Deely some of its most important theoretical formulations, plus a lovely eccentric dieresis, that — in Deely's own words — allowed zoösemioticians to deal with all animals, instead of only the ones kept in captivity. Some fundamental topics in the whole zoösemiotic context are very central in Deely's works, *Four ages* included. I am referring to the theory of Umwelt, to the hypotheses on the definition of language, to the studies on interspecific communication (on which Deely, unlike myself, fully shares Sebeok's sarcastic skepticism), and to the theory of evolution.

At the same time, in contexts foreign to zoösemiotics, Deely focuses his attention on some philosophers and scholars, according to a selection whose common denominators are the sign and the theories of sign. Such a criterion leads, on the one hand, to providing characters such as Porphyry and Poinset with a higher status than what is usually granted in traditional history of philosophy. On the other hand, the selection excludes — or mentions only briefly — traditionally important figures such as Schopenhauer or Voltaire.

To deal with the latter group, apart from being inevitably pleonastic (given the wide attention guaranteed by other texts), is — as a matter of fact — rather out of context, in that it would fail to create a connection between Deely's work and the zoösemiotic context. This is why I would like to use the notions illustrated in the book as a sort of hypertext, i.e., as “clickable” areas from which virtual text windows can be opened. In particular, apart from the purely semiotic fact, there is another factor shared in common by Deely's central figures:<sup>2</sup> almost all of them speculated on animal communication, and — more often — on the human/other-animal relation. Usually, the terms of such speculations are typically anthropocentric, but every now and then we also find precursors of the biocentric approach.

The history of philosophical reflections on nonhuman animals is a peculiar one, that — as a matter of fact and with very few exceptions (see Descartes' mechanism) — proceeded at the margins of the “official” human-related one. Because of its marginality, this history has very often been underrated, almost as if it was for philosophers a picturesque *divertissement* among the serious speculations.

In a specific history of zoösemiotics, however, such diversions are of fundamental importance. The aim of this article, thus, is to focus on some of Deely's key philosophers (namely, Plato, Aristotle, Porphyry, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant), in the light of what they had to say about zoösemiotic issues. To show this marginal, parallel history seems to me a fair way (one of the very few avail-

able) to add something interesting to such a complete text as the *Four ages*.

### 1. The semiotic value of the human/other-animal relationship

Before proceeding, permit me to explain why I consider speculations on the human/other-animal relationship as part of the zoösemiotic discourse. Indeed, to say that zoösemiotics concerns animal communication is not only generic; it is probably imprecise, too, for it paradoxically gives, through an omni-comprehensive expression, a quite partial picture of reality.

In my opinion, at least two main branches should be distinguished within zoösemiotics, both to be divided, in turn, in two more sub-branches. On the one hand, I shall refer to zoösemiotics in the traditional sense, i.e., a discipline dealing with the animal behavior “communication,” through the most obvious theoretical tools of semiotics. I shall call this branch *ethological zoösemiotics*. In turn, ethological zoösemiotics can be divided into a *traditional* current and a *cognitive* one. The former includes the studies performed by the early Sebeok, or Lindauer, or other scholars belonging to Lorenzian or behaviorist traditions. Within the field of cognitive zoösemiotics, I shall mention at least the latest Sebeok, Cimatti, and Bekoff (not to mention strong anticipations provided by Darwin).

As for the second branch of zoösemiotics, which I here call *anthropological*, I intend to refer to the studies dealing with the semiotic interaction between human beings and other animals, including those of cultural and/or sociological type. Interspecific communication experiments are one example (although very sceptical, Sebeok dealt quite often with these, and so did Petrilli, Deely, Cimatti, Bekoff and others). Such types of study fall under a subcategory of anthropological zoösemiotics, which I call *communicational*. This term refers to the contexts where human-animal interaction is of a communicative type, i.e., interactive, reciprocal, and intentional. Moreover, studies of applied zoösemiotics, such as human/pets or human/cattle interaction, fall under this group, too.

The second subcategory within anthropological zoösemiotics is, by consequence, named *significational*: here, the nonhuman animal is a pure source of meaning, an object, rather than a subject, of signification. The model is thus of an ecosemiotic type: whereas, indeed, ecosemiotics is the study of human representation of nature, this typology of zoösemiotics deals with the human representation of other animals. It is evidently the

case of myths, tales, allegories, but also of systematic classifications, such as taxonomy.

It thus appears that ethological zoösemiotics has a close relationship with natural sciences (starting, obviously, from ethology), while anthropological zoösemiotics is a closer relative of human sciences, especially the so-called anthrozoology and the social sciences, which nowadays show an increasing interest in animal-related issues. In a way, the definition of zoösemiotics provided by Nöth (1990: 147) appears as the most appropriate for this framework: zoösemiotics 1) is interdisciplinary, and 2) occupies an intermediary position between natural and human sciences.

The reflections I will propose from here on primarily seek to investigate the human/other-animal relation (with few exceptions, like the case of John Locke), and are thus very likely to fit the anthropological zoösemiotic section.

### 1.1. *Plato*

The relation that Plato establishes with reality is at least creative. Plato does not speak of reality as it is, but rather as it should be: his main speculations (the Demiurge above all) aim somehow at the constitution of a better world, founded on intelligence and not on chance. This concept fits perfectly with Nature and its constitutive elements: it is a human duty to refine the natural order, “collaborating” with the Demiurge in order for Beauty to prevail over *Kaos*.

Plato believes that life began happy, without concepts such as property, hunting, war, and other types of violence. He describes this original life as a time when human beings and other animals established relations and conversations mostly philosophical in character, exchanging information concerning each other’s knowledge. The work wherein Plato mostly reflects upon nonhuman animals is the *Timaeus*, i.e., — most probably — the most delirious of his writings, an off-the-limits attempt to mathematize reality at all costs. According to Plato, each body is provided with a soul, plants included, although these latter are much more limited than other beings:

For everything that partakes of life may be truly called a living being, and the animal of which we are now speaking<sup>3</sup> partakes of the third kind of soul, which is said to be seated between the midriff and the navel, having no part in opinion or reason or mind, but only in feelings of pleasure and pain and the desires which accompany them. For this nature is always in a passive state, revolving in and about itself, repelling the motion from without and using its own, and accordingly

is not endowed by nature with the power of observing or reflecting on its own concerns. Wherefore it lives and does not differ from a living being, but is fixed and rooted in the same spot, having no power of self-motion. (Plato 2004)

The soul is strictly related to the body, for the former determines the aspect of the latter, as expression of guilt or merit. Indeed, human and nonhuman beings were born with faults for which to be punished. To be male or female, to belong to one species instead of another, are all exact consequences of such faults or merits. In particular, almost all nonhuman animals were in the past human beings that wasted their life in some way.

The animal world has two dimensions. One is the divine: animals are not divine, but even so they anyway “tend” towards the Divine, the Light, the Perfection, and the Good. The other dimension is that of ipseity (i.e., reflected on the animal itself): this is an obscure, imperfect, and fallacious dimension. All living beings have this double face, and their Light depends on how close they are to the Divine. The maximum distance from Divine implies the presence of just a single weak fragment of light.

Further, it is no surprise that, in *Timaeus*, Plato also attempts an explanation on the origin of animals. There is no real need to make further premises, for the quotation is self-evident:

The race of birds was created out of innocent light-minded men, who, although their minds were directed toward heaven, imagined, in their simplicity, that the clearest demonstration of the things above was to be obtained by sight; these were remodeled and transformed into birds, and they grew feathers instead of hair. The race of wild pedestrian animals, again, came from those who had no philosophy in any of their thoughts, and never considered at all about the nature of the heavens, because they had ceased to use the courses of the head, but followed the guidance of those parts of the soul which are in the breast. In consequence of these habits of theirs they had their front-legs and their heads resting upon the earth to which they were drawn by natural affinity; and the crowns of their heads were elongated and of all sorts of shapes, into which the courses of the soul were crushed by reason of disuse. And this was the reason why they were created quadrupeds and polypods: God gave the more senseless of them the more support that they might be more attracted to the earth. And the most foolish of them, who trail their bodies entirely upon the ground and have no longer any need of feet, he made without feet to crawl upon the earth. The fourth class were the inhabitants of the water: these were made out of the most entirely senseless and ignorant of all, whom the transformers did not think any longer worthy of pure respiration, because they possessed a soul which was made impure by all sorts of transgression; and instead of the subtle and pure medium of air, they gave them the deep and muddy sea to be their element of respiration; and hence

arose the race of fishes and oysters, and other aquatic animals, which have received the most remote habitations as a punishment of their outlandish ignorance. These are the laws by which animals pass into one another, now, as ever, changing as they lose or gain wisdom and folly. (Plato 2004)

Regarding “folly,” one should also mention Plato’s explanation about the origin of women. He claims that women are the result of men, who, in previous lives, had been cowardly and unjust.

*The Laws* are definitely more interesting from an ethical point of view. Here, Plato firmly condemns all types of hunting, including hook-fishing and traps, the two latter particularly blamed, as they are metaphors of falsity and lie, and so opposed to the virtues the ideal citizen of the *polis* is supposed to have. Plato believes that violence against other animals is the basis of war and other human injustices. Already in the *Republic*, he had anticipated this topic, proposing a vegetarian (thus, cruelty-free) diet for philosophers and politicians, in a very similar fashion to what Pythagoras had already proposed:

Let us then consider, first of all, what will be their way of life, now that we have thus established them. Will they not produce corn, and wine, and clothes, and shoes, and build houses for themselves? And when they are housed, they will work, in summer, commonly, stripped and barefoot, but in winter substantially clothed and shod. They will feed on barley-meal and flour of wheat, baking and kneading them, making noble cakes and loaves; these they will serve up on a mat of reeds or on clean leaves, themselves reclining the while upon beds strewn with yew or myrtle. And they and their children will feast, drinking of the wine which they have made, wearing garlands on their heads, and hymning the praises of the gods, in happy converse with one another. And they will take care that their families do not exceed their means; having an eye to poverty or war . . . of course they must have a relish-salt, and olives, and cheese, and they will boil roots and herbs such as country people prepare; for a dessert we shall give them figs, and peas, and beans; and they will roast myrtle-berries and acorns at the fire, drinking in moderation. And with such a diet they may be expected to live in peace and health to a good old age, and bequeath a similar life to their children after them. (Plato 2000)

## 1.2. *Aristotle*

The contribution to biology and animal studies provided by Aristotle is extremely controversial. On the one hand, we have a first great example of systematic observation of animal species, in a way that remained a point of reference for the next several centuries. On the other hand, the

number of aberrations and mistakes of these observations is amazingly high.

In the book *On the parts of animals*, Aristotle soon makes clear the difference between his approach and that of his maestro Plato:

We therefore must not recoil with childish aversion from the examination of the humbler animals. Every realm of nature is marvellous: and as Heraclitus, when the strangers who came to visit him found him warming himself at the furnace in the kitchen and hesitated to go in, reported to have bidden them not to be afraid to enter, as even in that kitchen divinities were present, so we should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste; for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful. (Aristotle 1999a)

Aristotle is at the same time an attentive observer of Nature, and a philosopher seemingly incapable of interpreting fairly his observations when they are somewhat in contrast with his whole, internally coherent, philosophical system. Very paradigmatic is his definition of the *Scala Naturae*, which served as a model for all classifications to come before Linnaeus. Though based on a principle of finalistic continuity of species and of correlations between organs, the scale aprioristically refuses the proto-evolutionary principles postulated by Anaximander; in the Aristotelian classification we simply find a hierarchical scale from the most to the least perfect being, whose levels are organized in such a way that — if we were speaking of a twentieth century philosopher — we should consider racist, sexist, classist, and speciesist, all at once.

Aristotle's wrote no less than three works on biology: *History of animals*, *On the parts of animals*, and *Reproduction of animals*. As already mentioned, clamorous mistakes are not missing. Aristotle seems incapable of understanding the function of muscles and the nervous system, of distinguishing between veins and arteries, and of fully comprehending the reproductive act (to mention one, semen is to Aristotle merely aimed at sexual excitement). As if this was not enough, Aristotle rejects Alcmaeon's opinion that the brain is the actual central organ of the body, maintaining that its sole function is to chill blood. To Aristotle, the heart is the actual core of all organs.

Having said this, several other considerations in his works are absolutely remarkable. The observations on the anatomy of octopus, cuttlefish, crustaceans, and many other marine invertebrates are really accurate, and could only have been made from direct experience (which means vivisection, mainly). Aristotle distinguishes cetaceans from fish, describes the embryological development of a chick, the chambered stomachs of ruminants, and the social organization of bees. Most of his obser-

uations were confirmed only many centuries later. Aristotle groups together animals with similar features into genera (although the term is used in a much broader sense than by present-day biologists) and then distinguishes the species within the genera. Animals are then divided into two types: those with blood and those without blood (or at least without red blood). Such a distinction closely corresponds to our distinction between vertebrates and invertebrates. The blooded animals (the vertebrates) include five genera: viviparous quadrupeds (mammals), birds, oviparous quadrupeds (reptiles and amphibians), fishes, and whales (Aristotle did not know they were mammals). The bloodless animals are classified as cephalopods (such as the octopus); crustaceans; insects (which includes spiders, scorpions, and centipedes, in addition to what we now define as insects); shelled animals (such as most mollusks and echinoderms); and “zoophytes,” or “plant-animals,” which supposedly resemble plants in their form, such as most cnidarians.

However, in terms of anthropological zoösemiotics, I shall insist on the concept of *Scala Naturae*. To Aristotle, there are three categories subordinated to the free male human, as they are simply “useful” to the latter, namely nonhuman animals, women and slaves:

The living creature . . . in the first place, consists of soul and body: and of these two, the one is by nature the ruler, and the other the subject . . . And it is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and of the mind and the rational element over the passionate, is natural and expedient; whereas the equality of the two or the rule of the inferior is always hurtful. The same holds good of animals in relation to men; for tame animals have a better nature than wild, and all tame animals are better off when they are ruled by man; for then they are preserved. Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind.

Where then there is such a difference as that between soul and body, or between men and animals (as in the case of those whose business is to use their body, and who can do nothing better), the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master. For he who can be, and therefore is, another’s and he who participates in rational principle enough to apprehend, but not to have, such a principle, is a slave by nature. Whereas the lower animals cannot even apprehend a principle; they obey their instincts. And indeed the use made of slaves and of tame animals is not very different; for both with their bodies minister to the needs of life. (Aristotle 1999b)

Aristotle’s philosophical-political system has demands for both natural and social hierarchies, the latter depending on the former. Of course, there is a difference between the human slave and the nonhuman animal: however, in terms of such a socio-natural setting, these differences are not



really relevant. What matters is, instead, *utility*. And Nature seems to obey this principle:

Property, in the sense of a bare livelihood, seems to be given by nature herself to all, both when they are first born, and when they are grown up. For some animals bring forth, together with their offspring, so much food as will last until they are able to supply themselves; of this the vermiparous or oviparous animals are an instance; and the viviparous animals have up to a certain time a supply of food for their young in themselves, which is called milk. In like manner we may infer that, after the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and that the other animals exist for the sake of man, the tame for use and food, the wild, if not all at least the greater part of them, for food, and for the provision of clothing and various instruments. (Aristotle 1999b)

The consequence of such a principle is almost predictable, and there is no need to say how highly influential it was for the whole of Western thought in the following centuries:

Now if nature makes nothing incomplete, and nothing in vain, the inference must be that she has made all animals for the sake of man. And so, in one point of view, the art of war is a natural art of acquisition, for the art of acquisition includes hunting, an art which we ought to practice against wild beasts, and against men who, though intended by nature to be governed, will not submit; for war of such a kind is naturally just. (Aristotle 1999b)

In Aristotle's hierarchy, there is no real interaction between superior and inferior categories. The former act upon the latter, they impose an order and affect their nature and behavior, without in turn being affected in any way. Such is reality. If Plato wanted reality to be adequate to Ideas and Forms, Aristotle wants the exact contrary. The result is a totally opposite idea of what justice and order are. A common feature is the total exclusion of any principle of evolution: the order (to be established, for Plato; and already established, for Aristotle) is something stable and unmoving.

### 1.3. *Porphyry*

If John Deely showed the monumental contribution of Porphyry in the field of sign theory, I hope I can give an idea of how monumental Porphyry's role is as an animal rights philosopher. His writing *On abstinence from animal food* (*Peri Apokhês Empsykhon*, also known in English as *On abstinence from killing animals*) is an extraordinarily rich and strong work

in defense of nonhuman animals. Although firmly opposed to Christianity (he also wrote a pamphlet named *Katà Khristianon, Against the Christians*, of which very few pages have been preserved), Porphyry was a fine and attentive reader of the Bible and other Christian texts, and knew perfectly the Hebrew language.<sup>4</sup> His opposition started then from knowledge and not from prejudice. Even Augustine, who knew Porphyry was an enemy of Christianity, could not help defining him as an “eminent philosopher.”

Already in the *Katà Khristianon*, written in 268, Porphyry attacks Paul of Tarsus on the issue of eating meat. In the First Letter to Corinthians, Paul had clearly stated that humans should eat “everything the butcher sells” without feeling guilty, for God owns every living being, and every living being is at human disposal. Immediately after *Katà Khristianon*, Porphyry wrote *Perì Apokhês Empsykhon*, a neoplatonic and — most of all — neopythagoric treatise on animal life, vegetarianism, justice, and peace. Borrowing from Plotinus, Porphyry maintains that we are all intellectual entities that are tied to the sensible because of two forces: our incapacity to remain endlessly bound to the intelligible, and a gravitational force towards the “lower world.” The most efficient ways to “go back” to the realm of intelligible are justice and vegetarianism. Similar to Plato, then, but with less idealism and more ideology, Porphyry puts a strong emphasis on ethics in his work, telling us how, in his opinion, life and people should be. Porphyry fears the destruction of truth and justice, but — unlike Plato — does not speculate only abstractly on the issue: he wants *lógoi* and *érga*, i.e., knowledge and action.

According to Porphyry’s vegetarianism (and his invitation for every philosopher to become vegetarian), the issue does not only concern eating meat: it is a much more radical change, which goes in contrast with the customs of the polis, with ritual slaughtering and sacrifices of religion, and — in sum — with a whole sociopolitical system. Like Plato and Pythagoras, Porphyry also considers violence on animals as an “appetizer” for war. The first instruments used for killing nonhuman animals are exactly the same used in the first conflicts among humans. Hunting and war are inevitably bound, both metaphors of fraud and falsity, both the result of an original violation: not really eating the apple, but eating meat. “For to whom is it not manifest that justice is increased through abstinence? For he who abstains from everything living, though he may abstain from such animals as do not contribute to the benefit of society, will be much more careful not to injure those of his own species” (Clark 2000: 137).

In the *Perì Apokhês Empsykhon*, Porphyry demolishes one by one the arguments of the philosophers hostile to vegetarianism (peripatetics and stoics, in particular), and — in particular — reverses the idea that religion

should encourage meat consumption: to him, indeed, eating meat is no less than a violation of God's will, or at least a misinterpretation of it. Sacrifices and other forms of violence on animals are to Porphyry a vehicle for evil demons to penetrate inside people.

What are then the arguments used by Porphyry to fight the "enemies" of animals? At least three of them fall under the domain of cognitive zoösemiotics:

1. Animals do think and communicate. Differently from stoics and peripatetics, Porphyry maintains that we can find the *logos*, the discourse, among nonhuman animals, and that this discourse can also reach perfection.
2. Animals also have the "inner discourse": the general organization of their organism is similar to the human one, e.g., they suffer the same pathologies. Not only are animals sensible, they probably are more so than humans. To maintain that a different physical constitution corresponds to the absence of reason and sensibility, is like saying that gods are not sensible either, because their physical constitution is also different from the human one. The difference between humans and other animals is a matter of more/less, rather than presence/absence.

And is it not absurd, since we see that many of our own species live from sense alone, but do not possess intellect and reason; and since we also see that many of them surpass the most terrible of wild beasts in cruelty, anger, and rapine, being murderous of their children and their parents, and also being tyrants and the tools of kings [is it not, I say, absurd] to fancy that we ought to act justly towards these, but that no justice is due from us to the ox that ploughs, the dog that is fed with us, and the animals that nourish us with their milk and adorn our bodies with their wool? Is not such an opinion most irrational and absurd? (Porphyry 2000: 139)

3. Animals are intelligent and rational. Here, Porphyry mentions the great amount of information collected by ancient philosophers on the topic. To be able to take care of one's own interests is a first important sign of intelligence ("each animal knows where it is weak and where it is strong, and it protects the former and makes use of the latter, as the leopard uses its teeth, the horse its hooves and the bull its horns, the cock its spur and the scorpion its sting"). *Ratio*, to Porphyry, does not originate from learning, nor from memory, and that applies to all beings, including gods. The sole fact that we cannot see the world through their own senses and figure out their own way of reasoning, is not a good excuse to state that *ratio* is missing (first

gasps of Umwelt theory?). Moreover, nonhuman animals understand our language to many extents, and perceive the diverse signs.

4. Both humans and nonhumans are part of the same ethical system. Both search for and have a sense of justice (“Who does not know how animals that live in groups observe justice towards each other?”), both are victims of cruelty and fights. Violence is, in both cases, a sign of starving and desperation. Moreover, they are reciprocally necessary, and that is when humans break the balance: in exploiting and killing other animals that are not necessary to their surviving, human beings show off a superiority that clearly reveals their evil nature. This unnecessary violence can and must be avoided: the first important step, says Porphyry, is vegetarianism.

... if we depend on the argument of necessity or utility, we cannot avoid admitting by implication that we ourselves were created only for the sake of certain destructive animals, such as crocodiles and snakes and other monsters, for we are not in the least benefited by them. On the contrary, they seize and destroy and devour men whom they meet — in so doing acting not at all more cruelly than we. Nay, they act this savagely through want and hunger; we from insolent wantonness and luxurious pleasure, amusing ourselves, as we do, also in the Circus and in the murderous sports of the chase. By thus acting, a barbarous and brutal nature becomes strengthened in us, which renders men insensible to the feeling of pity and compassion. Those who first perpetrated these iniquities fatally blunted the most important part of the (civilized) soul. Therefore it is that Pythagoreans consider kindness and gentleness to the lower animals to be an exercise of philanthropy and gentleness. (Porphyry 2000: 54–55)

Porphyry continues by referring to the origins of human life. At that time, humans were vegetarian by nature: they would live collecting fruits and vegetables, and — apparently — not only were they healthier, but also more peaceful and worry-free.<sup>5</sup> Then came agriculture, breeding, domestication, hunting, and finally wars. The Eden became a place for killers. Porphyry maintains that the development of wars and fights went hand in hand with breeding and property of lands and animals. The evolution of the human/other-animal relationship is thus a key-event to interpret human civilisation. As Gino Ditadi comments, “The animal case becomes in Porphyry the decisive element for defining a civilization based on pain and religious sacrifices: the sacrifice of human beings in wars is symmetric to that of animals in religious rituals, both being perpetrated with substitutive victims” (Ditadi 1994: 71–72, my translation).

Cases of communities opposed to this status quo are not missing. Porphyry mentions the case of Sparta, the Essenes, the Persians, and the In-

dians. Particularly, these last are a clear proof of his theories. Provided with generous and rich natural resources, the Indians do not need to use violence for surviving; moreover, their religions make a clear point on the unity of living beings. Poverty, starving and violence go hand in hand. The solution goes through a more equal distribution of resources, the state (advised by philosopher-legislators) being the guidance in this process.

#### 1.4. *Thomas Aquinas*

In a way, Thomas Aquinas can be considered the exact opposite of Porphyry. Whereas the latter had promoted a love for other animals, and had condemned conflicts and violence, the *Doctor Angelicus* seems to be very concerned with legitimating human total property and exploitation of all species. The greatest intellectual authority of the Catholic Church, Thomas Aquinas is the main figure responsible for the penetration of Aristotelian ideas in the Western Christian world: in fact, his own work can be read as an attempt to conjugate Aristotle (whom he calls “the Philosopher”) and the Christian precepts. And this, among other things, implies avoiding too mystical and spiritual philosophical formulations (as those of Ugo of San Vittore, for instance), which Thomas replaced with a firm establishment of dogmatism, ratio and hierarchies.

In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas makes a clear point of the difference between humans and other animals. The human being is an intellectual creature, master of his actions; all other animals are subordinated creatures, functional to the intellectual one. The Aristotelian framework becomes soon clear: in the natural world, just like the political one, there are masters and slaves, subjects and objects. The latter are at disposal of the former. Humans are the only ones who know and perceive God, and therefore they are the sole beings created for their own sake. All other animals are created for sake of humans. This is the reason why to kill them is not a fault at all.

There is no sin in using a thing for the purpose for which it is. Now the order of things is such that the imperfect are for the perfect, even as in the process of generation nature proceeds from imperfection to perfection. Hence it is that just as in the generation of a man there is first a living thing, then an animal, and lastly a man, so too things, like the plants, which merely have life, are all alike for animals, and all animals are for man. Wherefore it is not unlawful if man use plants for the good of animals, and animals for the good of man, as the Philosopher states.

Now the most necessary use would seem to consist in the fact that animals use plants, and men use animals, for food, and this cannot be done unless these be deprived of life: wherefore it is lawful both to take life from plants for the use of animals, and from animals for the use of men. In fact this is in keeping with the commandment of God Himself: for it is written: "Behold I have given you every herb . . . and all trees . . . to be your meat, and to all beasts of the earth"; and again: "Everything that moveth and liveth shall be meat to you." (Aquinas 2003)

The general invitation to kindness and pity that can be found in the Scriptures, says Thomas, is not to be intended as a duty. Humans should just be careful not to exceed in violence on animals, since, in future, that could turn into violence on other humans. If anything, in such cases when an animal is owned by a person, to kill that animal is an offence to the owner, exactly as killing a slave is an offence to his/her master: "He that kills another's ox, sins, not through killing the ox, but through injuring another man in his property. Wherefore this is not a species of the sin of murder but of the sin of theft or robbery" (Aquinas 2003)

Finally, Thomas discusses whether animals should be loved with Christian charity. The answer is No: rational creatures like humans cannot be friendly with irrational ones. Charity towards animals is exercised by God only, but this happens only because they are useful to the privileged creatures.

### 1.5. *Poinsot*

In terms of semiotics, the main interest of Poinsot, as a follower of Aquinas, is his firm emphasis that in sensation and sense perception together all animals are as one in their dependency upon semiosis.

### 1.6. *Descartes*

Descartes' theories on animals are probably among the very few on the subject to be well-known. Animal-rights activists have always been harshly critical towards Cartesian conceptions, mentioning them as the typical example of human prejudices towards other animals. What is certain is that the Cartesian idea of the animal-machine was a major breakthrough in a discussion that, until then, was mostly animated by theological, ethical, and political reflections.

Descartes' philosophy, as always happens to the most influential thinkers, is to a large extent controversial. While it is generally acknowl-

edged that he marked the beginning of modern philosophy, one cannot avoid remarking that (as Gilson has shown) many of his reflections, starting from his metaphysics, were in fact animated by a truly medieval spirit.

The opinion expressed by Descartes on animals is quite difficult to misunderstand. For once, a philosopher's speculation is firm and clear: animals are totally thoughtless and conscienceless. They are simple mechanisms. To maintain that a cat thinks is to Descartes as silly as stating that a clock does. Descartes does not distinguish between mechanism and organism: his view is a form of reductionism that replaces organic structures with mechanical components. When used as metaphor, the comparison actually works: the problem with Descartes is that he presents it as the full explanation of life. Now, we all understand that there is quite a difference between a machine and an organism. As Ditadi remarks:

Machines are built, organisms grow. This means that a comprehension of organisms must focus on processes. Cells, for instance, can be understood only on the basis of relational processes that reflect the dynamism of an organic system. While the activities of a machine are determined by its structure, such a relation is reversed in organisms, for their structure is determined by processes. Organisms display a high degree of flexibility and plasticity. Machines work according to linear cause/effect chains, organisms work with retro-action and are an open system, in a constantly dynamic balance. (Ditadi 1994: 116, my translation)

Descartes does not deny the existence of emotions in animals: he simply maintains that they have no awareness of them whatsoever. All bodies are machines, in the Cartesian system, including also human bodies:

I had shown what must be the fabric of the nerves and muscles of the human body to give the animal spirits contained in it the power to move the members, as when we see heads shortly after they have been struck off still move and bite the earth, although no longer animated; what changes must take place in the brain to produce waking, sleep, and dreams; how light, sounds, odors, tastes, heat, and all the other qualities of external objects impress it with different ideas by means of the senses; how hunger, thirst, and the other internal affections can likewise impress upon it divers ideas; what must be understood by the common sense (*sensus communis*) in which these ideas are received, by the memory which retains them, by the fantasy which can change them in various ways, and out of them compose new ideas, and which, by the same means, distributing the animal spirits through the muscles, can cause the members of such a body to move in as many different ways, and in a manner as suited, whether to the objects that are presented to its senses or to its internal affections, as can take place in our own case apart from

the guidance of the will. Nor will this appear at all strange to those who are acquainted with the variety of movements performed by the different automata, or moving machines fabricated by human industry, and that with help of but few pieces compared with the great multitude of bones, muscles, nerves, arteries, veins, and other parts that are found in the body of each animal. Such persons will look upon this body as a machine made by the hands of God, which is incomparably better arranged, and adequate to movements more admirable than is any machine of human invention. (Descartes 2003)

However, there is a huge difference between humans and other animals, and that concerns the possession of a soul, expressed through *ratio* and language:

... it is highly deserving of remark, that there are no men so dull and stupid, not even idiots, as to be incapable of joining together different words, and thereby constructing a declaration by which to make their thoughts understood; and that on the other hand, there is no other animal, however perfect or happily circumstanced, which can do the like. Nor does this inability arise from want of organs: for we observe that magpies and parrots can utter words like ourselves, and are yet unable to speak as we do, that is, so as to show that they understand what they say; in place of which men born deaf and dumb, and thus not less, but rather more than the brutes, destitute of the organs which others use in speaking, are in the habit of spontaneously inventing certain signs by which they discover their thoughts to those who, being usually in their company, have leisure to learn their language. And this proves not only that the brutes have less reason than man, but that they have none at all: for we see that very little is required to enable a person to speak; and since a certain inequality of capacity is observable among animals of the same species, as well as among men, and since some are more capable of being instructed than others, it is incredible that the most perfect ape or parrot of its species, should not in this be equal to the most stupid infant of its kind or at least to one that was crack-brained, unless the soul of brutes were of a nature wholly different from ours. And we ought not to confound speech with the natural movements which indicate the passions, and can be imitated by machines as well as manifested by animals; nor must it be thought with certain of the ancients, that the brutes speak, although we do not understand their language. (Descartes 2003)

The problem with animals is thus the absence of soul. They are *res extensa*, but definitely lack *res cogitans*. The existence of the soul in humans is an indisputable fact: to deny this fact is as huge a mistake as denying the existence of God. In fact, to consider “beasts” as being provided with a soul is also a huge mistake, says Descartes, for it means to put up for discussion well-established theological and moral dogmas, on which the whole civilization is based. Instead, by keeping to Cartesian conceptions, civilization will progress:



... I perceived it to be possible to arrive at knowledge highly useful in life; and in room of the speculative philosophy usually taught in the schools, to discover a practical, by means of which, knowing the force and action of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us, as distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans, we might also apply them in the same way to all the uses to which they are adapted, and thus render ourselves the lords and possessors of nature. And this is a result to be desired, not only in order to the invention of an infinity of arts, by which we might be enabled to enjoy without any trouble the fruits of the earth, and all its comforts, but also and especially for the preservation of health, which is without doubt, of all the blessings of this life, the first and fundamental one. (Descartes 2003)

Thus, Descartes' philosophy is highly ideological and guarantees supposedly scientific support to a conception highly promoted by Christianity: the absolute domain of humans on Nature. This is probably one of the reasons why Cartesianism was so successful in the following centuries, and — to some extent — is still alive in certain scientific environments. Together with Aristotle and Christianity, Descartes constitutes the most important step in the formation of the highly anthropocentric human attitude towards other animals.

### 1.7. *Locke*

Apart from being one of the most important proto-semioticians, John Locke had a consistent interest for medical, chemical, and biological sciences. In contrast to Descartes, in Locke we do not find any division comparable to the Cartesian *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. To him, matter itself is able to think. Neither do we find any suggestion that animal life is actually comparable to machines. The sole realm that can possibly be interpreted in terms of mechanism is, to Locke, the vegetal one; there, and there only, the subject is incapable of sensations and ideas. What marks the difference between animals and plants is perception.

Perception puts the difference between animals and vegetables. This faculty of perception seems to me to be, that which puts the distinction betwixt the animal kingdom and the inferior parts of nature. For, however vegetables have, many of them, some degrees of motion, and upon the different application of other bodies to them, do very briskly alter their figures and motions, and so have obtained the name of sensitive plants, from a motion which has some resemblance to that which in animals follows upon sensation: yet I suppose it is all bare mechanism; and no otherwise produced than the turning of a wild oat-beard, by the insinuation of the particles of moisture, or the shortening of a rope, by the affusion of

water. All which is done without any sensation in the subject, or the having or receiving of any ideas. (Locke 1959: 189)

Perception varies in grades according to the single capacities of each species. Animals are thus organisms provided with sense, memory, and ability to make plans and comparisons. In the *Essay concerning human understanding*, undoubtedly his last major work, Locke discusses both human and nonhuman memory and its capacity to activate reasoning.

This faculty of laying up and retaining the ideas that are brought into the mind, several other animals seem to have to a great degree, as well as man. For, to pass by other instances, birds learning of tunes, and the endeavors one may observe in them to hit the notes right, put it past doubt with me, that they have perception, and retain ideas in their memories, and use them for patterns. For it seems to me impossible that they should endeavor to conform their voices to notes (as it is plain they do) of which they had no ideas. (Locke 1959: 200)

From a strictly zoömusicological point of view, this consideration is quite remarkable, for it stresses non-utilitarian characteristics. Locke describes birds as “wasting their time” by recomposing their sound models, without any apparent evolutionary advantage being secured for themselves or their own species. These birds are consequently able to sing “just for the sake of singing,” expending the same effort as they would if it were a matter of life or death. There follows a second reflection on the subject, subtly ironical towards Cartesianism:

For, though I should grant sound may mechanically cause a certain motion of the animal spirits in the brains of those birds, whilst the tune is actually playing; and that motion may be continued on to the muscles of the wings, and so the bird mechanically be driven away by certain noises, because this may tend to the bird's preservation; yet that can never be supposed a reason why it should cause mechanically, either whilst the tune is playing, much less after it has ceased such a motion of the organs in the bird's voice as should conform it to the notes of a foreign sound, which imitation can be of no use to the bird's preservation. But, which is more, it cannot with any appearance of reason be supposed (much less proved) that birds, without sense and memory, can approach their notes nearer and nearer by degrees to a tune played yesterday; which if they have no idea of in their memory, is now nowhere, nor can be a pattern for them to imitate, or which any repeated essays can bring them nearer to. Since there is no reason why the sound of a pipe should leave traces in their brains, which, not at first, but by their after-endeavors, should produce the like sounds; and why the sounds they make themselves, should not make traces which they should follow, as well as those of the pipe, is impossible to conceive. (Locke 1959: 200–201)

However, the mental faculties of nonhuman animals are inferior, in degrees, to those of human beings. Ideas are composed and compared, but not at such a complex level as humans accomplish. Animals do not count, and do not easily distinguish:

Brutes compound but little. In this also, I suppose, brutes come far short of man. For, though they take in, and retain together, several combinations of simple ideas, as possibly the shape, smell, and voice of his master make up the complex idea a dog has of him, or rather are so many distinct marks whereby he knows him; yet I do not think they do of themselves ever compound them and make complex ideas. And perhaps even where we think they have complex ideas, it is only one simple one that directs them in the knowledge of several things, which possibly they distinguish less by their sight than we imagine. For I have been credibly informed that a bitch will nurse, play with, and be fond of young foxes, as much as, and in place of her puppies, if you can but get them once to suck her so long that her milk may go through them. And those animals which have a numerous brood of young ones at once, appear not to have any knowledge of their number; for though they are mightily concerned for any of their young that are taken from them whilst they are in sight or hearing, yet if one or two of them be stolen from them in their absence, or without noise, they appear not to miss them, or to have any sense that their number is lessened. (Locke 1959: 205–206)

The greatest sign of human distinction is the ability of abstraction:

If it may be doubted whether beasts compound and enlarge their ideas that way to any degree; this, I think, I may be positive in that the power of abstracting is not at all in them; and that the having of general ideas is that which puts a perfect distinction betwixt man and brutes, and is an excellency which the faculties of brutes do by no means attain to. For it is evident we observe no footsteps in them of making use of general signs for universal ideas; from which we have reason to imagine that they have not the faculty of abstracting, or making general ideas, since they have no use of words, or any other general signs. (Locke 1959: 207–208)

Yet, Locke leaves no doubt that nonhuman animals “are not bare machines,” and that “we cannot deny them to have some reason. It seems as evident to me, that they do some of them in certain instances reason, as that they have sense.”

Finally, in another of his works, *Some thoughts concerning education*, Locke anticipates a topic that will be central in Kant’s reflections upon other animals, namely our obligations as humans to respect them and treat them kindly:

One thing I have frequently observed in children, that when they have got possession of any poor creature, they are apt to use it ill; they often torment and treat very roughly young birds, butterflies, and such other poor animals which fall into their hands, and that with a seeming kind of pleasure. This, I think, should be watched in them; and if they incline to any such cruelty, they should be taught the contrary usage; for the custom of tormenting and killing of beasts will, by degrees, harden their minds even towards men; and they who delight in the suffering and destruction of inferior creatures, will not be apt to be very compassionate or benign to those of their own kind. Our practice takes notice of this, in the exclusion of butchers from juries of life and death. Children should from the beginning be bred up in an abhorrence of killing or tormenting any living creature, and be taught not to spoil or destroy anything, unless it be for the preservation or advantage of some other that is nobler. And truly, if the preservation of all mankind, as much as in him lies, were every one's persuasion, as indeed it is every one's duty, and the true principle to regulate our religion, politics, and morality by, the world would be much quieter and better natured than it is. But to return, to our present business; I cannot but commend both the kindness and prudence of a mother I knew, who was wont always to indulge her daughters, when any of them desired dogs, squirrels, birds, or any such things, as young girls use to be delighted with: but then, when they had them, they must be sure to keep them well, and look diligently after them, that they wanted nothing, or were not ill used; for, if they were negligent in their care of them, it was counted a great fault which often forfeited their possession; or at least they failed not to be rebuked for it whereby they were early taught diligence and good-nature. And, indeed, I think people should be accustomed from their cradles to be tender to all sensible creatures, and to spoil or waste nothing at all. (Locke 1989: 180)

### 1.8. *Hume*

Hume represents a radical break from the “sick metaphysicians” (this is what he calls them) of the seventeenth century, i.e. Spinoza, Hobbes, and — most of all — Descartes. His points of reference are rather Montaigne, Locke, Bacon, Bayle, and Newton. By consequence, his considerations of nonhuman animals follow more closely a proto-evolutionary approach. Similarly to Locke, Hume makes it clear that the differences between humans and other animals are simply a matter of degree. His attack to Cartesianism is pretty straight to the point: “Next to the ridicule of denying an evident truth, is that of taking much pains to defend it; and no truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endowed with thought and reason as well as men. The arguments are in this case so obvious, that they never escape the most stupid and ignorant” (Hume 1928: 176).

Similarities between humans and other animals concern both the emotional and the intellectual area: all animals aim at seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, all animals care about their own life, all animals share the same principles at the basis of reasoning:

Here we must make a distinction betwixt those actions of animals, which are of a vulgar nature, and seem to be on a level with their common capacities, and those more extraordinary instances of sagacity, which they sometimes discover for their own preservation, and the propagation of their species. A dog, that avoids fire and precipices, that shuns strangers, and caresses his master, affords us an instance of the first kind. A bird, that chooses with such care and nicety the place and materials of her nest, and sits upon her eggs for a due time, and in suitable season, with all the precaution that a chymist is capable of in the most delicate projection, furnishes us with a lively instance of the second.

As to the former actions, I assert they proceed from a reasoning, that is not in itself different, nor founded on different principles, from that which appears in human nature. It is necessary in the first place, that there be some impression immediately present to their memory or senses, in order to be the foundation of their judgment. From the tone of voice the dog infers his masters anger, and foresees his own punishment. From a certain sensation affecting his smell, he judges his game not to be far distant from him.

Secondly, The inference he draws from the present impression is built on experience, and on his observation of the conjunction of objects in past instances. As you vary this experience, he varies his reasoning. Make a beating follow upon one sign or motion for some time, and afterwards upon another; and he will successively draw different conclusions, according to his most recent experience. (Hume 1928: 177–178)

It is exactly on the issue of reasoning that Hume most radically challenges the philosophical tradition. Reasoning, in Hume, departs from the senses, imagination, and experience: they allow the act of deducing and believing that future (whether immediate or not) will conform to given expectations. Hume argues against one of the very foundations of traditional philosophy:<sup>6</sup> mathematical thought is not the expression of reason, but simply a consequence of senses and imagination. In fact, it is expressly the search of the perfect science that makes humans imperfect beings.

Since reason alone can never produce any action, or give rise to volition, I infer, that the same faculty is as incapable of preventing volition, or of disputing the preference with any passion or emotion. This consequence is necessary. It is impossible reason could have the latter effect of preventing volition, but by giving an impulse in a contrary direction to our passion; and that impulse, had it operated alone, would have been able to produce volition. Nothing can oppose or retard the impulse of passion, but a contrary impulse; and if this contrary impulse

ever arises from reason, that latter faculty must have an original influence on the will, and must be able to cause, as well as hinder any act of volition. But if reason has no original influence, it is impossible it can withstand any principle, which has such an efficacy, or ever keep the mind in suspense a moment. Thus it appears, that the principle, which opposes our passion, cannot be the same with reason, and is only called so in an improper sense. We speak not strictly and philosophically when we talk of the combat of passion and of reason. Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them. As this opinion may appear somewhat extraordinary, it may not be improper to confirm it by some other considerations. (Hume 1928: 414–415)

Reasoning, in humans and other animals, is thus caused by passions, but Hume does not mean to be an irrationalist: his goal is simply that of establishing an adequate causal relation between emotions, experience, and feelings, on the one hand, and intellect, thought and act, on the other hand:

In order to decide this question, let us consider, that there is evidently the same relation of ideas, and derived from the same causes, in the minds of animals as in those of men. A dog, that has hid a bone, often forgets the place; but when brought to it, his thought passes easily to what he formerly concealed, by means of the contiguity, which produces a relation among his ideas. In like manner, when he has been heartily beat in any place, he will tremble on his approach to it, even though he discover no signs of any present danger. The effects of resemblance are not so remarkable; but as that relation makes a considerable ingredient in causation, of which all animals shew so evident a judgment, we may conclude that the three relations of resemblance, contiguity and causation operate in the same manner upon beasts as upon human creatures. (Hume 1928: 327)

Finally, although he excludes them from the idea of justice, Hume includes the other animals in the idea of morality and ethics, and in fact asserts very clearly that the exclusion from justice has nothing to do with taking care of them. Morality, as founded on feelings, is a primary virtue: justice is an artificial one. It is no coincidence that modern philosophical utilitarianism — inspired by Hume — includes many of the philosophers most concerned with the animal rights case (Peter Singer above all).

On the fact that other animals are moral beings, Hume seems to have no doubts:

It is evident, that sympathy, or the communication of passions, takes place among animals, no less than among men. Fear, anger, courage, and other affections are frequently communicated from one animal to another, without their knowledge of

that cause, which produced the original passion. Grief likewise is received by sympathy; and produces almost all the same consequences, and excites the same emotions as in our species. The howlings and lamentations of a dog produce a sensible concern in his fellows. And it is remarkable, that though almost all animals use in play the same member, and nearly the same action as in fighting; a lion, a tyger, a cat their paws; an ox his horns; a dog his teeth; a horse his heels: Yet they most carefully avoid harming their companion, even though they have nothing to fear from his resentment; which is an evident proof of the sense brutes have of each other's pain and pleasure. (Hume 1928: 398)

### 1.9. *Kant*

Human beings, and human beings only, are the ultimate scope of creation. This is Kant's basic philosophical point of connection between humans and other animals. No being can actually claim to be the final aim of creation, but since humans are the final aim of Nature and are moral beings, therefore they can be considered the final aim of creation, as well. This moral character is founded on intellect and *ratio*, which — says Kant — are definitely superior in humans than in other animals.

[the rational idea] deals with the ends of humanity so far as capable of sensuous representation, and converts them into a principle for estimating his outward form, through which these ends are revealed in their phenomenal effect. The normal idea must draw from experience the constituents which it requires for the form of an animal of a particular kind. (Kant 2005: 52)

The same applies to aesthetics and aesthetic sense, which are issues that may concern exclusively a being that is at the same time animal and rational. Kant would definitely disagree with zoömusicological theory.

The agreeable, the beautiful, and the good thus denote three different relations of representations to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, as a feeling in respect of which we distinguish different objects or modes of representation. Also, the corresponding expressions which indicate our satisfaction in them are different. The agreeable is what GRATIFIES a man; the beautiful what simply PLEASES him; the good what is ESTEEMED (approved), i.e., that on which he sets an objective worth. Agreeableness is a significant factor even with irrational animals; beauty has purport and significance only for human beings, i.e., for beings at once animal and rational (but not merely for them as rational-intelligent beings but only for them as at once animal and rational); whereas the good is good for every rational being in general a proposition which can only receive its complete justification and explanation in the sequel. Of all these three kinds of delight, that of taste in the beautiful may be said to be the one and only disinterested and free delight; for,

with it, no interest, whether of sense or reason, extorts approval. And so we may say that delight, in the three cases mentioned, is related to inclination, to favour, or to respect. For FAVOUR is the only free liking. An object of inclination, and one which a law of reason imposes upon our desire, leaves us no freedom to turn anything into an object of pleasure. All interest presupposes a want, or calls one forth; and, being a ground determining approval, deprives the judgement on the object of its freedom. (Kant 2005: 32)

The consequence of such statements, in ethical terms, is that human beings have no real obligation or duty towards other animals. What they have is a moral duty towards humanity, in order not to damage it in any form. This may include the exploitation of other animals as well. Kant is not opposed to it when it is useful to humankind, but he is rather clear on the fact that none of these exploitations should be excessive or unmotivated. The reason, we have heard it already from Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Locke, and most of all Porphyry, in a more passionate form: he who is cruel towards animals is more likely to be cruel towards other humans. However, the difference in the spirit animating Porphyry and Kant is enormous: ferocious attack versus wars, violence, Christianity and meat-eating in Porphyry's case; simple invitation to humane attitudes in Kant's case.

Kant's reflections are at any rate of great influence for the modern anthropocentric view. They add kindness and some ethical conscience to the Aristotelian and Cartesian frameworks. The nonhuman animal's life is clearly functional to that of the human being, and the intellectual capacities of the former have nothing to do with those of the latter. Still, a certain respect and the avoidance of gratuitous and unnecessary exploitation are due.

## 2. Conclusions

The goal of this article has been to discuss how philosophers who ended up being fundamental forerunners for the development of semiotic theories dealt with questions of *zoösemiotic* interest. Within this framework, and considering the findings here discussed, I conclude with a couple of remarks.

First of all, the evolution of the philosophical discourse on nonhuman animals turns out to be no evolution at all, i.e., it does not seem to follow a diachronic path where the earlier is the philosopher the more primitive are his ideas on animals. On the contrary, this path hardly inspires a sense of continuity and hardly displays, at least in half of the cases here consid-



ered, an awareness of the past and a will to proceed further. By this, I mean that each philosopher seems to be animated by his own reflections and perceptions only, rather than by a confrontation between these and the thinkers that preceded him. It is a generalization, of course, and, for instance, we learn that Hume does not suffer “sick metaphysicians” gladly, but still, if we compare these speculations with those — say — on the notion of Being, or the notion of God, we understand how much heavier the weight of the past is in these other cases.

Also, these philosophical reflections are always, or nearly always, ethically-minded. A philosopher who speculates over the problem of animal intelligence, communication or whatever, is first of all wondering about the legitimacy of behaving in a given manner over nonhuman beings; how right/wrong is to kill them, how good/evil is to eat them, etc. It seems to me a quite interesting point, in that it brings to attention the primary nature of any discourse on nonhuman animals, which is clearly of moral type. And this we can certainly detect from the widest range of contexts, from present everyday conversations up to the most ancient myths.

As a consequence, philosophers are never (even trying to be) neutral on the topic. Metaphysicians or empiricists, sick or healthy, they have and express opinions that show different yet high degrees of personal involvement. This aspect, although probably keeping the discussion always lively and intriguing, has — I feel — contributed to the general impression, which I hinted in the title of this article, that the issue was not dealt with as thoroughly as it deserved to be. If satisfying from an indeed strictly ethical point of view, the discussion ends up impoverished under an intrinsically philosophical perspective, and consequently fails to fully exploit its enormous semiotic potentials and values.

## Notes

1. Apparently, I am not the only one to be impressed by Deely’s “Index Rerum et Personarum” (2001: 837–1013). One reader’s review on the Amazon web site goes like this: “The Index at the end is astonishing, alone worth the price of the book.”
2. I refer to Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, and others. To have an idea of their importance, see their index entries.
3. Plato speaks here of plants, although he calls them “animals”:

For our creators well knew that women and other animals would some day be framed out of men, and they further knew that many animals would require the use of nails for many purposes; wherefore they fashioned in men at their first creation the rudiments of nails. For this purpose and for these reasons they caused skin, hair, and nails to grow at the extremities of the limbs. And now that all the

parts and members of the mortal animal had come together, since its life of necessity consisted of fire and breath, and it therefore wasted away by dissolution and depletion, the gods contrived the following remedy: They mingled a nature akin to that of man with other forms and perceptions, and thus created another kind of animal. These are the trees and plants and seeds which have been improved by cultivation and are now domesticated among us; anciently there were only the wild kinds, which are older than the cultivated. (Plato 2004)

4. Some persons, desiring to find a solution to the baseness of the Jewish Scriptures rather than abandon them, have had recourse to explanations inconsistent and incongruous with the words written, which explanations, instead of supplying a defence of the foreigners, contain rather approval and praise of themselves. For they boast that the plain words of Moses are 'enigmas', and regard them as oracles full of hidden mysteries; and having bewildered the mental judgment by folly, they make their explanations. (Hoffmann 1994: 86)
5. As a matter of fact, a similar thesis is defended by modern anthropologists. Skeletons 30,000 years old were found to be exceptionally healthy, with physical traces that suggest that those people were vegetarian and would not work more than three hours per day (see Harris 1977).
6. Every rational creature, it is said, is obliged to regulate his actions by reason; and if any other motive or principle challenge the direction of his conduct, he ought to oppose it, till it be entirely subdued, or at least brought to a conformity with that superior principle. On this method of thinking the greatest part of moral philosophy, ancient and modern, seems to be founded; nor is there an ampler field, as well for metaphysical arguments, as popular declamations, than this supposed pre-eminence of reason above passion. The eternity, invariableness, and divine origin of the former have been displayed to the best advantage: The blindness, unconstancy, and deceitfulness of the latter have been as strongly insisted on. In order to show the fallacy of all this philosophy, I shall endeavour to prove first, that reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will; and secondly, that it can never oppose passion in the direction of the will. (Hume 1928: 413)

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