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IN THE MIRROR

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1) Introduction

**“The Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Justice are one.”
Simone Weil**

Picture: Fearless Vampire Killers, Film Still (Polanski 1967)

Let’s begin, as it is the season for eerie encounters, with a creepy fictional character. When he is looking into the mirror, there will be no reflection. This is what happens with vampires. This well-known phenomenon is explained by their lack of soul. Without soul there will be no reflection.

In a way, this example might well describe the attitude of homo sapiens sapiens, or more generally speaking, of our “culture”. It illustrates the mindset that society bears towards non human animals – a greedy position, a live-taking position, in need to get life energy out of sources outside ourselves. Exactly like the vampire. This is mostly happening without a glimpse of a guilty conscience. Seemingly, the human has the right to use everything as material, even other living beings.

In this presentation, we will try to look for possibilities to find a reflection of ourselves again, in the mirror. We will examine positions that could help achieving that goal. The contexts of our research will come from philosophy of mind, psychology and European and Amazonian mythology. For the different steps in the search I put forward a pictorial or artistic association and a quote.

2) Mirror – we look into it and see nothing

QUOTE

“Animals do not exist to serve human ends: animals are not servants or slaves of human beings, but have their own moral significance, their own subjective existence, which must be respected.”

Sue Donaldson, Will Kymlicka

Picture: Lynx in winter, © Gabriela Kompatscher

The mirror is and long has been a powerful symbol. Mirrors are dealt with in mythology, fairy tales, ghost stories, in narrations of literature, psychology and psychoanalysis and even in neuro-science. Its magic lies in its properties of reflection. But it is not only a tool for vanity. A very important association to the mirror appears in the neurological sphere.

Scientists have, since the 1990ies, begun to research the activity of mirror neurons. The impact of the discovery is constantly evolving and is entailing serious consequences. Psychology and philosophy are directly affected scientific areas. Inês Hipólito, who is an expert on philosophy of mind, explains their principle of operation as follows: „A common functional mechanism mediates our ability to share the meaning of the actions, intentions, feelings and emotions with others, allowing self-identification and connection with others. Social identification, empathy, and we-ness, seems to be the foundation of our development and self.“¹

This enlightens the position of need we are actually in when dissociating from other living beings. In order to retrieve our souls we will have to acknowledge the souls of others, human and non human persons. Our future reflection might be surprising in its colours and habitus. But it will feed our souls that starve from lack of connection to non human animals. It will help to find answers to the heavily depressing mechanisms of turning living beings into things.

¹ Inês Hipólito: A Philosophical Approach to Embodied Cognition through Mirror Neuron System (http://ceur-ws.org/Vol-1283/paper_15.pdf)

3) Wild Self/ Animals as representatives of „our storied wild selves“

“The Great Divides of animal/human, nature/culture, organic/technical, and wild/domestic flatten into mundane differences—the kinds that have consequences and demand respect and response—rather than rising to sublime and final ends.”

Donna Haraway

Picture: Bearded vulture

Relationships with animals are crucial in keeping our inner wild self. They seem to remind us that deep down in our heart, we still maintain a feeling of connection to life in its various, untamed forms. Most of us admire – at least secretly, and this could also mean subconsciously – the untamed energy of free roaming animals. This shows, for example, in the ongoing popularity of safaris. Also Arts have taken a deep interest in animals, they seem to be everywhere – at least the idea of them. Their appearance inspires paintings, photography and sculpture. While there are many reasons to be sad about this merely „representative“ presence, and it is necessary to take sides with the corporeal animals, it also shows the high ranking validity of animals as symbols. They speak to our heart, we could say. The admiration might well reflect our own love for freedom. Donna Haraway refers to this when she is talking about meetings with other people walking their dogs in the off-leash park in Santa Cruz. Especially when the dogs resemble, in their outer appearance, wolves, people seem to be proud to “have”, at least a semi-wild dog. They pronounce their dog’s closeness to a wild wolf as if this notion of being wild referred to something mystical and sacred, as if the physical and emotional closeness to such a „wild beast“ would upgrade/upvalue their own personalities. She describes these dogs as manifestations of these peoples’ „storied wild selves“².

The wolf’s resistance to domestication reminds us of essential issues of life. The idea of the untamed self appears in various contexts, and I would like to focus on the phenomenological aspects of this idea. Phenomenology refers to experiences made by an embodied, living, individual subject.

Here I allow myself a short digression: It is not self-evident that we can access our experiences. Some of them are locked away and exist only as ghosts of their own. One of the reasons for this is what psychology describes by the term „dissociation“. Many of us are disconnected, or even dissociated from our own experiences as a consequence of an early-set distrust in ourselves, put forward and enforced by the norms of society.³

² Donna Haraway: When species meet. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008, p. 36

³ An illustration of what I mean may be shown by imagining the following situation: a child refuses to eat meat in order to save the animal’s life, and this aspiration is commented by statements like „But this is what animals are made for“ or „But it is normal to eat meat“, or worse even „It is necessary for

4) Experience/Phenomenology: Our own perceptions

“We can think the world only after experiencing it.”

Maurice Merleau Ponty

Pictures: Cat looking into the Mirror © Gabriela Kompatscher

Experiences are binding us to the world and its events. I refer to it as a practice, generating a „subjective reality“, as it is perceived before intellectual interpretation. It is, indeed, active work, rather than the influence of an outside world that we passively accept. Even though there is no „pure sensation“ and no „pure impression“, because we react in relation to former experiences – and there is no „objective reality“, this is still the primary only access we have to the world. And we will have to work with what we have.

The inner wild self is containing the hidden treasures of experiences from which we create our perspective, from where we enter the world. Perception cannot provide us with certainties like geometry can, but with presences. This is crucial. Only things we can perceive become existent for us⁴ even if the perception is not clear and distinct⁵. On the contrary, also the small unnamed parts of perceptions⁶ make up elements of our world as it shows up for us. Perception depends on a bodily vessel, on material instruments, on corporeal existence.

„Movement, sound and rhythm are all anterior to symbolic verbal communication“⁷ says Anna Gibbs, and, I like to add, the peripheral, the atmospheric, will become part of the information and be taken for real. Already when two beings meet, there is some kind of exchange happening.

We perceive, and we are being perceived: A communication unobstructed by the distance of language and its abstractions. This moment is lending presence to me, making me a reality which I wouldn't have without this perception.

A reflection of myself that is created through this special encounter. In the mirror-reflection of other living beings we can find the inspiring facettes in which we come close to ourselves. To let go of the possibilities of reflections through non-human beings seems like an unestimable loss.

Our experience of the world would shrivel to boring human scale.

you to grow and stay healthy.“ This situation of inner contradiction, where, essentially, the child is told that his or her feelings – in this case, empathy for the animal – are wrong – is a crucial part in starting a career in self-doubt and, as a consequence, as a person who needs guidance to know what's wrong and right.

⁴ cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "Das Primat der Wahrnehmung und seine philosophischen Konsequenzen", Vortrag vom 23. November 1946, in: Das Primat der Wahrnehmung. Suhrkamp 2003. Quote translated by S.K.

⁵ clare et distincte

⁶ cf. Leibniz' „petites perceptions“, Monadology

⁷ Anna Gibbs: After Affect. Sympathy, Synchrony and Mimetic Communication. In: Melissa Gregg / Gregory J. Seigworth (eds.): The Affect Theory Reader. Durham: Duke UP 2010, p. 186–205

5) Changing perspectives

Human and animal persons

“And I wonder if, in the dark night of the sea, the octopus dreams of me.”

N. Scott Momaday

Pictures: Octopus

A story told in the famous novel “The Ancient Child” by N. Scott Momaday describes an unlikely encounter of a human and a non human: “Once in the early morning I walked along the beach. The tide was out, and there were pools in the sand. Then I saw something in one of the pools, under a large piece of driftwood. It was an octopus, small, motionless, only partly submerged, and it seemed to be dead. It filled me with curiosity, for I had never seen such an unlikely creature before. I stood over it and studied it, for a long time. It did not move. It was supple and stark in the water, the color of bone, and I was afraid to touch it. Then I picked up a stick and probed at it. Suddenly it blushed pink and blue and violet and began to writhe about. This stiff reaction, total and grotesque, alarmed me, for everything about it seemed to describe some profound agony. It took hold of the stick and clung to it. I carried it away to the surf and laid it down. I supposed, I think, that it would go off at once into the depth, but no, it settled again and lay still. I wanted to think that it might have been dealing with me, that in its alien ocean mind it might have been struggling to take my presence into account, that I had touched its deep, essential life and it should never lose the impression I had made upon it. It was still there when I came away, and it had not moved, except that it rocked very gently to and fro in the water. And I wonder What does it mean, after all these years, I still dream of the octopus? It may be that I saved his life.”⁸ Momaday describes moments of connection. Also in animistic traditions, there is no doubt that communication takes shape in different ways and languages. The stories of the Brazilian Arawaté, which Viveiros de Castro⁹ presents in his work, are populated by beings/entities characterised by a melange of human and non-human qualities. They exist side by side in a shared, non-hierarchical communication space. Before entering the corporeal life on earth, they choose their outfits, either human or non human. The origin of all of them is what we would call “human”, having a soul, intentions, emotions and intrinsic value. The reason why animals choose (by the way) to appear as animals lies in the more exciting lifestyle of animals. With the experience of having been both, animal and human, they can tell their preference. Magnificent plumage or spectacular fur can be easily recognized as dress and adornment. In this conception, it is beyond question that every one of them is conceived to be a

⁸ N. Scott Momaday: The Ancient Child, New York: Harper Perennial 1990, p.56/57

⁹ His approach is part of a paradigm shift in anthropology and philosophy, called “ontological turn”.

person. Soulful beings come in all shapes and sizes, not only human ones. A relatable entity can have various appearances.

This position concedes intentionality and subjectivity to the non human animal. It advocates also for the acknowledgement of animals' agency. The concession of subjectivity of all living beings facilitates a relational connection with others. The way we can relate to each other, beyond species, is therefore the ability of living beings to address the soul of other living beings. Each one of them carries their own power of agency.

Such a concept seems more logic than the idea of a fixed barrier between human and non-human animals. If we follow the reasoning of evolutionary development and we try to go back in time, there must at some point exist a mythical foremother belonging to the animal sphere. In a mirror of ancestry, similar to a time-machine, we could see reflections of beings neither human nor animal – in a mirror reflecting pictures from a mythical time long gone. From the insight that our ancestors are to be found in the non-human realm, there could be developed a radical solidarity with the members of this common shared history, quite contrarily to the dichotomy of humans versus animals. To recognize the common ancestor could be a powerful symbol for the connecting power between all living beings.

6) Shape-shifting

Coyote and other tricksters

“Coyote is about a world that is active in terms that are not particularly under human control, but it is not about the human, on the one side, and the natural, on the other. There is a communication between what we would call ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, but in a world where ‘coyote’ is a relevant category, ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ are not the relevant categories. Coyote disturbs nature/culture ontologies.”

Donna Haraway

Picture: Coyote

Changing perspectives, from human to non-human, proves enrichment of perception. It is not without good reason that wise characters often have the ability to shape-shift- like Coyote, the trickster of many native american stories, or Loki, of the scandinavian pantheon, who could shape shift into a seal, a salmon or a mare, even a fly. Also the famous blind prophet of ancient greek mythology, Teiresias, could at least shift between a male to a female and back to a male body, incorporating the experiences of both forms.¹⁰

But back to the perspectivist experiment: No longer, being human or being animal or being white or black or female or male is determinant. We have to de-colonize our minds, meaning (in addition to discarding the old reactionary ideas of white, male supremacy) we also have to get rid of the dogma of human superiority. Learning to change perspectives means then, becoming the other being.

The realization of the other – be it human or nonhuman – as having reflective and resonant qualities, makes it available for communication. An object turns out to be a subject. And the anthropocentric frontier dissolves. At this point, we retrieve our mirror reflection.

¹⁰ His blindness might even be considered an asset, making him able to perceive more sharply. Clearly, seeing is more than meets the eye.

