

The Inspiring Journey of SIUA through Animal Lives

A Report on the *Animal Mind Conference*, Italy, 2013

Eleonora Adorni

Independent Scholar, Member of the Centre of Posthuman Philosophy

doi: 10.7358/rela-2014-002-ador

eleonora.adorni@gmail.com

The event *Animal Mind (Mente Animale)* organized by SIUA across Italy in 2013 registered a great success of audience. SIUA, the *School of Human-Animal Interaction* founded and directed by Roberto Marchesini – the well-known cognitive ethologist who is also considered worldwide a leading figure within the field of human-animal interaction – planned in fact several conferences open to everyone who may be interested or intrigued by nonhuman animals lives. The major Italian cities touched by the event throughout the entire year were Turin, Milan, Rome, Verona, Trieste and Bologna. The events hosted scholars, animal rights activists and stakeholders who are in different ways involved in the animal issue in order to spread largely a new way and culture to think about nonhuman animal worlds.

The model proposed by SIUA derives from Roberto Marchesini's approach, carried out in twenty years of ongoing research in cognitive ethology, and it is aimed to shift the focus of the cognitive model from a thought understood as having self-awareness and consciousness of external world to the behavior, that is what is effectively observable. As a matter of fact, Marchesini proposes to throw aside the three traditional explanatory paradigms still in use to interpret animal behavior – behaviorism, classical ethology and cognitivism – in favor of a single model which combines the mentalistic and cognitive-relational approaches able to explain any behavior, from the simplest to the most complex one. The main difference in this outclassed schema lies in considering true a behavior if it arises from an informational elaborative process and not from a mere reflex or feedback. According to this interpretation, the cognitive model does not reject the innate dimension but explains it as an "elaborative innate schema" that is, in other words, a particular software capable to lead a dog to process infor-

mation in a different way from a cat or a human being, for example. In this sense, the cognitive model suggested by Marchesini replaces the Stimulus-Response-Reinforcement chain with the Goal-Comprehension-Solution one. What does it change? By making this sample change of perspective, the landscape of the animal mind appears absolutely overturned. At this point, three main aspects come to light.

First of all, to look at animal behavior through this interpretative lens means that the subject needs a goal in order to learn. The first *movens* of this process lies into him/her and it does not belong to the external world: nonhuman animals play an active role in the stage of evolution and they are the owners of their destiny living in a “here and now” moment. Secondly, with the aim to learn the subject does not accidentally react to something that happened, but he/she searches useful solutive keys that we may call heuristics and with these analyzes carefully the situation. Lastly, the learning process generates knowledge not necessarily conscious, that is to say, the subject has got a proper equipment that he/se will use in the future in order to solve other kinds of problems (not imperatively connected with the one which generated it). Following Jean Piaget’s idea of accommodation and assimilation in the cognitive theory, it occurred a redefinition of the subject’s inner resources to reorganize himself in relation to new “check-mate” conditions or goals. Furthermore, Marchesini’s cognitive model is not anthropomorphic, that is it considers each animal species as owner of expressive and learning tools and the subject constructs new forms of knowledge from the evolution of these tools. Doing so, he poses himself in the nutshell of learning acts (especially in its unconscious sides), while the behaviorist model theorizes the environment with a subject as a mere expositive being. Therefore, the behaviorist and the cognitive approaches are in opposition as, quoting Marchesini, the Copernicus and Geocentric models: the difference lies in interpreting not the exceptional nature of the behavior but its daily banality. According to Marchesini, the cognitive model induces a much richer dialectics while the behaviorist approach remains close to expressive causality and reinforcement. Hence, through this perspective nonhuman animals are not machines and their behavior cannot be interpreted through automatism, as Descartes’ followers would do. Concepts such as “instinct” and “conditioning” must be overcome because any animal expression is the outcome of a state of mind.

The event *Mente Animale* by SIUA was characterized by several interesting presentations of scholars who have embraced this way of reading nonhuman behavior. As well as Marchesini was present during all the events, each city hosted different speakers. The famous Italian astronomer and writer Margherita Hack gave a talk in Trieste just before she died a

few weeks after. She shared a beautiful and emotional interpretation of her personal relationship with her beloved cats. Always in Trieste, the posthuman artist Massimo Deganutti, alias Degas, the author of the *Post-species Art Manifesto*, has depicted his idea of art as the result of hybridization with nonhuman alterities who, under a non-anthropocentric light, become protagonists and not secondary characters of the paintings. The young philosophers Leonardo Caffo and Matteo Andreozzi gave a talk respectively in Turin and Milan. Caffo traced the major phases of continental philosophy dealing with the animal question and inside that he sketched out his proposal for a “weak antispeciesism” that is generating a lot of debate in Italy. Andreozzi instead delved into deep the roots of anthropocentrism and our idea of “animal mind” – too often flawed by our anthropomorphic projections and desires about animals. Important Italian journalists as Antonella Mariotti, Paola D’Amico, medical vets as Paola Fossati and Sergio Canello, animal right activists as Davide Majocchi and Denis Colombo and various exponents of many institutions contributed with their participation to enrich the proposal of the event with different perspectives. In conclusion, what is worth in Marchesini’s idea about the cognitive lecture of animal behavior and what arises from SIUA tour, is a mind which expresses better qualities in uncertain moments where to be animals means to limp along within the proper species dimension, vulnerable and maladjusted, able but in a different way.