

Experiencing Animals from Corporeal Perspective in Contemporary World

JUSTINA ŠUMILOVA

Department of Contemporary Philosophy, Lithuanian Culture Research Institute, 58 Saltoniškių Street, 08105 Vilnius
Email: Justina.sumilova@protonmail.com

The research hypothesis is that language impacts the way we understand and define animal body. The article analyses the relationship between language, body and signification. The second hypothesis is that a gaze and a phenomenological relationship with animals can open up a dialogical relationship with animals. Later, the article investigates certain case studies of animal bodily experience starting from animal representations in our world, zoo animals, animal cloning to human bodily relationship with pets which is impacted by the capitalist system. The article is using the phenomenological approach of M. Merleau-Ponty as a research method which emphasises the importance of the experience of animals and their representations from a corporeal perspective. M. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological method focuses on the lived experience of the body as central to our understanding of the world. The hypothesis of the research is that animals are viewed from a corporeal perspective from the human point of view and that humans humanise the animals. The research's results prove that language forms the way we understand animals from bodily experience because it creates a narrative and a way of prehension of the animal body. Secondly, representations of animals in our daily life create a humanised view of animals which is a non-realistic depiction of animals. Finally, the article reveals that M. Merleau-Ponto phenomenology helps to create a connection between animals and humans, creating a realistic relationship between humans and animals.

Keywords: animals, experience, body, corporeal

INTRODUCTION

In the 19th century, people moved to live to cities due to industrialisation and urbanisation which had a limited access to nature. This environmental shift creates the issue of the modern humanity – the radical loneliness of humanity which emerges from removal of nature and animals from human's daily environment. In 20th century, industrial innovations and emerging cities destroyed the forests and places that remained inhabited by animals. Animal inhabited places became scarce and rare, there is an on-going extinction of animal species and decreasing of their populations. The remaining animals are usually kept in national parks or reservoirs (Berger 1971: 13).

Nature and animals were transcribed into the realm of reflection – animals and nature were described in philosophy, literature and art, therefore the postmodern animal came from

the lost object which is mourned (Lippit 2000: 1–3). Humanity started to create itself via the world of differences which lead to metamorphosis of animals to another being. However, humans also started to humanise animals in the postmodern world. The humanisation of animals refers to the process in which animals are portrayed, depicted, or treated in ways that anthropomorphise them – attributing human characteristics, emotions, or behaviours to animals that are not connected to real animal nature.

In the past, humans understood themselves as unique species while the others such as animals, things and plants were understood as distinct others that cannot be active participants in human's life and history (Berger 1971: 13). This is the start of the myth of human exceptionalism which is proven to be false by the recent discoveries in the cognitive sciences proving the differences between humans and animals to be smaller than humans would like to admit (Toadvine 2009: 76–77).

This article aims to investigate the relationship between animals and contemporary humans from a corporeal perspective. The novelty of this article is that it is using philosophy of language as well as Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a method to analyse the corporeal experience of animals from a human perspective as well as talk about the gaze as a possibility to open a contact with another consciousness.

The research also focuses on phenomenological aspects of the relationship with animals from a corporeal perspective by analysing animal breeding, pet cloning and animal laws. The article also aims to discover how animals are functioning *together* with humans in the postmodern world and how animals are shaped by humans in contemporary society via perspective of the body.

The philosophical field of exploring animals from a corporeal perspective is not broad and not investigated. Animal studies are overall a new field in philosophy which aims to investigate animal and human interactions from a philosophical perspective. There is not a lot of research done regarding the animal corporeality and phenomenological experience. The most notable works are R. Acampora's research 'Corporeal Compassion: Animal Ethics and Philosophy of Body' which investigates the corporeal aspects of exploring the animals from a bodily perspective relating it to ethics; C. Ciocan's article 'Embodiment and Animality' that investigates the corporeal perspective of animals by using Husserl's and Heidegger's philosophy and arguing that empathy is a way for us to connect with animals; J. S. Martin and M. L. P. Penaranda's article 'Animal Life and Phenomenology' which investigates the animality of animals and humans by arguing that humans experience the world from their own animate body perspective which connects us with animals.

The research uses Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach is crucial for the study because it emphasises the body as the vehicle through which we perceive and interact with the world, rejecting the traditional mind–body dualism. Merleau-Ponty argues that our bodily experiences shape our perceptions, actions, and understanding of the world around us. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body emphasises the embodied nature of human existence and an inseparable connection between the body and consciousness. Also, it is crucial to note that in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, consciousness is understood as inseparable from the body and the world it inhabits. He rejects the idea of a purely detached, objective observer and emphasises an embodied consciousness that is always situated within a context and engaged with the world.

ANIMALS, SYMBOLS AND LANGUAGE

Before analysing the animal and human relationship from a corporeal perspective, firstly we will describe the relationship between animals and language in order to understand how humans use language to create animal representations in their thinking. This is a crucial aspect of our research because language forms a certain attitude towards the corporeal experience of animals.

By naming the animals, humans conquer the concept of the animals by not allowing it to be what it is. Instead, they force the concept of the animal to be only what humans think this concept is (Derrida 2008: 43). The animal world, as much as we can reconstruct it, does not form coherent systems while humans seek coherence, systems, hierarchy and structures (Toadvine 2009: 76) which constitute the form of what kind of corporeal relationships can be experienced between humans and animals.

Humans find in every single thing the roots of their own thinking because thinking emerges from being. The non-human reflection comes from animal emergence in human dreams and myths. Caricatures and bizarre becomings show lateral relationships between humans and animals. The concepts of animality and humanity can shift according to the mode of becoming-animal which was invented by G. Deleuze and F. Guattari. According to these philosophers, the animals enter the block of becoming which leads to shift in who or what one is (Deleuze, Guattari 1987:93). However, theory talks only about symbolic and mythical animals.

Humans do not understand the meowing of the cat and do not consider those sounds to be language or words. Therefore, it seems that animals cannot speak because they cannot articulate and express themselves in such a way as it would be understandable to humans. This is one of the reasons why humans see animals as objects or tools, and this quality of humans is what Heidegger would call 'world-forming'. For Heidegger, animals are creatures which lack something because they do not have language while the humans form the world and Dasein via language (Weil 2012: 30).

On the other hand, Derrida views language and its created animal representations differently. He states that language is like a trap or a tragedy because human languages have no real meaning in the animal world. Humans experience the tragedy of language when one understands that there can be a different consciousness which is impossible to discover via language (Weil 2012: 7). Remembering T. Nagel, what would be left out of the bat if we removed the view of the bat? (Nagel 1974: 443).

If the animal is forced to speak, then the consciousness of the other is destroyed making the human close to the limits of one's rational mind neglecting the existence of other consciousness. Therefore, contemporary humans understand animals only by their representations, while the corporeal contact with animals is limited, scarce and humanised.

In this situation, there is a subject that forms the discourse and the second element which is described when the subject has the positive constitution, while the described element has the negative one (Ferrando, Braidotti 2019: 46). Such describing creates a certain context in which the animal can be experienced from the corporeal aspect. It is crucial to note that such described body becomes an imaginary body that is full of stereotypes. This means that corporeal relationships between humans and animals are dependent on the meanings, cultural and social features given by humans to animals.

HUMAN RELATIONSHIP WITH ANIMAL CORPOREAL REPRESENTATIONS

Animals are seen by humans only as food, pets, toys and zoo animals that are adapted to the life of the human beings. For example, children's toys are usually plush toys, while animations for children also feature animals. Toys that look like animals create an illusionary corporeal reflection of the animal because such fierce animals as lions or bears look small and cute, thus they are not represented as real corporeal bodies. This is why fierce animals are reduced to the corporeal form of a toy that deflects the human understanding of animals to the illusionary direction.

This is how humans create false corporeal representations of animals that do not depict the real animal but rather form a deformed object-like image that becomes the cultural norm. It is crucial to note that this object-like animal is controlled by the child who is able to play with the toy and create fantasies in which the toy is doing something. In such a way, the child learns to think that this toy is dependent on one's desires and wishes. Such objectification destroys the possibility of the experience of the corporeal animal. Instead, what we have in the deformation of the animals in their shape, form and size in the form of toys or animated shows which merges the idea of animals with their representations and humanisation.

Humans feel awe and wonder when they see their wild animals in the urban spaces. This explains that in social media we see videos with wild animals in a city environment. M. Blanchot's philosophy of language can be used to explain the understanding of corporeality. Just like the word which we admire, the body of the animal becomes its own shadow that is not possible to understand fully. When we cannot understand something fully, we experience admiration to something that is unreachable to comprehend to the human consciousness and is not possible to integrate in any way (Blanchot 1982:19). Seeing of the animal body creates distance and power which allows human to shift away from a real contact with the animals. Amazement is similar to the observation of a painting or an image, and it can be understood as a passion for the seen image. Such amazement does not allow us to see the real meaning and assess rationally the object that we see. The one who is amazed by the animal body does not see the real object or figure. Instead, one sees only something that does not belong to the reality and belongs only to the state of amazement (Blanchot 1982: 32).

Such a gaze of amazement takes away the power to give meaning and to name animals (Blanchot 1982: 25). Blanchot also emphasised that the gaze of amazement is the gaze of solitude because there is no relation to the other in such gaze (Blanchot 1982: 25, 32). Therefore, the animal in such dialectics becomes seen only as a body but it is never fully understood. The body of the animal arises as a phenomenon that triggers and amazes the post-modern humans which proves that humans recede from the corporeal experience of animals in the daily life.

Zoo animals, on the other hand, symbolise their own extinction. Humans go to the zoos to observe the animals because it is impossible to see them in other places. Such viewing is not equal to the viewing of the work of art or museum exposition because these animals are alive and can look back at the humans. However, when we look at such caged animal, we look at creatures that are completely marginalised (Berger 1971: 24).

Zoo animals are imprisoned in the illusionary environment. They have contact only with a few representatives of their species, their sexual life is restricted and they suffer from lethargy or hyperactivity because they had to adapt to non-natural living conditions. It may seem that the corporeal aspect is taken away from them because they become like 'moving pictures' for the human eyes that seek to consume them. The same could be said about cat or dog cafes in

which animals are touched. The constant contact with human makes such café animals lethargic and indifferent to human contact, and their bodies are also objectified and consumed. Such exploitation of nature and animals creates the ecological issues such as destruction of animal species and ecosystems that may lead to the destruction of the humans themselves that is symbolised in A. Huxley's book 'Brave New World' in which humans become like zoo animals.

ANIMAL BODY FORMATION AND UNDERSTANDING: PETS, PET CLONING, BREEDING AND ANIMAL TRIALS

Capitalism and the humans themselves take away the freedom of the animal body because the animal is exploited in many ways from a work force to a food or genome level. Such exploitation is illustrated by breeding which emerged in 17–19th centuries and is a manifestation of animal and plant body control.

It is crucial to mention the new pet cloning industry which is very popular in China (Dimitropoulos 2022). Cloned animals have inherent defects and die earlier, while thousands of healthy animals are euthanised in animal shelters. Pet cloning reveals the aim not to expand animal's life but shows that humans use the body to expend the idea and the image of the dead pet in order to fulfil one's feelings with a corporeal form of a dead animal as if to prove that the pet continues to exist. In the pet cloning case, we have the idea or the image of the pet that survives and even takes over a newly created body which rises ethical questions of such cloning practices. Such cloning is like the extension of the memory, feelings and emotions in the form of a new body or the expansion of human mind into the form of the body of another live entity.

Cloning of animals is instrumentalisation and selection of animals according to their emotional value, and the question of cloning pets can be related to the issues of identity and authenticity (Harris 1997: 355). Humans falsely think that the cloned animal will be a physical copy of the dead pet, but cloned animals are not identical in their looks and behaviour. Also, such pets that do not meet the market 'requirements' are not good enough for sale which shows that animal is reduced to the body and its appearance completely neglecting the aspect of the animal consciousness. On the other hand, cloning can have positive aspects if it is used for cloning engendered species.

Thus, gene engineering can damage the relationships between animals and humans due to the power imbalance that allows humans to create animal body according to their own wishes (Ormandy 2011: 545) which opens the way for unstoppable exploitation of animals.

The legal status of the animal is still tightly connected to its corporeal aspects. To show this, I will briefly talk about the legal case of chimpanzee Hiasl that was kidnapped from Western Africa and taken to Vienna where he was supposed to be used for experiments (Balluch, 2007: 335). Hiasl was saved from the being as a test animal, but his unique case sparked a trial that aimed to prove that Hiasl could have the status of a person. The defenders stated that chimpanzee DNR is 96–98.4% identical to humans (Balluch 2007: 337). The second argument was a philosophical definition of the person. Austrian laws were impacted by the Enlightenment Era idea which stated that a person is a biological being that is able to think and have a mind (Balluch 2007: 338). Even though Hiasl met all the requirements for personhood status, the trial did not give the personhood status to Hiasl (Balluch 2007: 339). From the legal perspective, Hiasl still remained to be a thing that had no rights despite having a consciousness.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CORPOREALITY AND GAZE IN SEEKING TO UNDERSTAND THE OTHER AS THE ANIMAL

Only human thinking can see vax as naked (Derrida 2008: 73) because humans seek to create the world around them. But their imagination can limit the understanding of the animal and neglect the possibility of other consciousness. The reflection of what it means to be a bat follows us. Therefore, there are facts that are not articulated in the human languages, and we are forced to acknowledge the existence of such facts despite not being able to tell or understand them (Nagel 1974: 441).

However, it is possible to notice the other consciousness if one is able to communicate with the world and the bodies inside it (Mazur 2014: 9). It is crucial to note that consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, is not just a passive reflection of external reality but an active engagement with the world that shapes and is shaped by our bodily existence. In order to notice another consciousness, human has to learn to notice that another being has a completely different being in the world which is seen via the body and its behaviour in the world. One is able to distinguish a different consciousness of a bat if one spends some time with the bat in one space (Nagel 1974: 438).

Human and animal gaze creates the state of mutual non-understanding, and human does not think about the fact that the animal can look back at the human (Derrida 2008: 6). When animal is able to look back, at such case the animal becomes the other. We find the other consciousness in the form of the body, and we can experience this consciousness only from our perspective. Animals, just like humans, have sensory organs that allow animals to interact with the world (Derrida 2008: 11). Merleau-Ponty stated that we can speak about animal culture; however, he did not seek to talk about the symbolism of animals in human cultures (Toadvine 2009: 89). As Merleau-Ponty states, my gaze sees a body that is doing some short of activity, and this body is not just mere fragment of the world but it becomes an active agent that is able to do something with the things (Merleau-Ponty 2018: 407). Such an example could be the subjectivity of cats in shelters in which they are able to act as agents. Cats behaved with other volunteers as with other cats and even manipulated the volunteers to give them food (White 2013: 95).

Another example could be the example of B. Smuts who learned to behave like a baboon. At first, when she behaved as a rock, the baboons were triggered because they did not know how to behave with her. When she started to behave like baboons, baboons were able to distinguish her as a social subject which proves that corporeal social relationships can create a communication between different species. This example also asks whether the humans are social subjects and whether the subjects have a face in this particular situation (Haraway 2008: 24). Just like humans, animals also construct their own world and can experience differences and limits of social interaction (Mazur 2014: 11).

The example of Barbara Smuts illustrates Merleau-Ponty's idea that in order to find another consciousness, one has to distinguish the consciousness from the objective and physical body because the behaviour of the body proves the existence of the consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 2018: 53). Such embodied behaviour could be understood as the world with its own rules of behaviour which means that B. Smuts learnt the rules of being a baboon in the world via corporeal behaviour which means that animal consciousness cannot be reduced to a thing (Sanders 2008: 143). Therefore, B. Smuts example proves a bodily attempt to get into the perspective of what it means to be a bodily baboon and what it means to behave as a baboon

from baboon's corporeal point of view. Animals are able to interact with the world as well as construct their own meanings just like humans (Mazur 2014: 11).

Also, in order to understand animals, there is a need to create a relationship with animals in the world where we live which is not an easy task (James 2009: 37). Connection with animals can be found if the human is in a some short of communication with the animals.

We can experience another consciousness via anger or love, via face, features, words or sounds which can be connected with animals (James 2009: 39–40). Merleau-Ponty also uses musical figures to discuss animal behaviour, citing the ethologist Jakob von Uexküll that 'every organism is a melody that sings itself' (Toadvine 2009: 88). Therefore, Merleau-Ponty suggests the possibility to open ecological relationships between animals and humans. Merleau-Ponty's conception of consciousness is intertwined with perception, action and the body. He argues that our awareness of the world is not just a mental activity but is deeply rooted in our bodily experiences and interactions with our environment which means that the interaction between humans and animals helps to create a connection between species.

Merleau-Ponty philosophy on animals also points out that the relationship between animals and their environment may show what it means to be a certain animal in a certain environment. Therefore, it is possible to notice the existence of other worlds alien to humans and accessible only from a corporeal point of view as the humans can only comprehend the way animal body manifests itself in the world.

CONCLUSIONS

The relationship between humans and animals has been greatly influenced by advancements in urbanisation, technology and philosophy. The initial migration into cities in the 19th century, coupled with industrial innovations in the 20th century, estranged humans from nature and reduced direct interactions with animals. This shift transformed animals and nature from daily realities into subjects of reflection in art, literature and philosophy.

The article explores this transformation from a corporeal perspective, utilising philosophical underpinnings from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. The research argues that animals, once integral to human life, have now been relegated to entities we interact with mostly through language, symbols, or restrictive environments like zoos and pet cafes. This interaction is often superficial, leading to ethical and ecological concerns about how animals are bred, cloned and legally regarded.

A significant focus is placed on the potential for true understanding through corporeal and phenomenological engagement. Such understanding involves recognising animals as subjects with their own consciousness and interacting in ways that respect this consciousness. Objectification and instrumentalisation of animals highlight the importance of re-establishing a meaningful relationship through a direct and respectful interaction. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception shows that we can notice another consciousness in its corporeal form. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception allows one to create a relationship with animals without deanimalising them.

Received 5 January 2024

Accepted 2 July 2024

References

1. Acampora, R. R. 2006. *Corporal Compassion: Animal Ethics and Philosophy of Body*. University of Pittsburgh Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvs89dhj>
2. Balluch, M.; Theuer, E. 2007. *Trial on Personhood for Chimpanzee*. Vienna: University of Vienna.

3. Berger, J. 1971. *Why Look at Animals: About Looking*. New York: Vintage House Incorporated.
4. Blanchot, M. 1982. *Space of Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
5. Ciocan, C. 2018. 'Embodiment and Animality', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2018.1517505>
6. Deleuze, G.; Guattari, F. 1987 *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
7. Derrida, J. 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. New York: Forham University Press.
8. Dimitropoulos, S. 2022. *Pet Cloning is Getting More Popular Despite the Cost*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-60924936>
9. Godyn, D.; Nowicki, J.; Herbut, P. 2019. 'Effects of Environmental Enrichment on Pig Welfare – A Review', *Animals* 9(6): 383. DOI: 10.3390/ani9060383
10. Haraway, D. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minnesota/London: University of Minnesota Press.
11. Harris, J. 1997. 'Goodbye Dolly? The Ethics of Human Cloning', *Journal of Medical Ethics* 23: 353–360.
12. James, S. P. 2009. 'Phenomenology and the Problem of Animal Minds', *Environmental Values* 18(1): 33–49. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30302114>
13. Langer, M. M. 1989. *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: A Guide and Commentary*. London.
14. Lawlor, L. 2008. 'Following the Rats: Becoming-Animal in Deleuze and Guattari', *SubStance* 37(3): 169–187.
15. Lippit, A. 2000. *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press.
16. Low, D. 2012. 'Merleau-Ponty's Enchanted Nature', *Phenomenological Inquiry* 35: 49–90.
17. Martin, J. S.; Pintos-Penaranda, M. L. 2001. 'Animal Life and Phenomenology', in *The Reach of Reflection. Issues for Phenomenology's Second Century*.
18. Mazur, M. 2014. 'Is There an Animal Consciousness? A Phenomenological Approach', in *Honors Council of the Illinois Region Papers, Paper 4*. Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/hcir2014/4>
19. Merleau-Ponty, M. 2018. *Juslino suvokimo fenomenologija*. Vilnius: Baltos lankos.
20. Nagel, T. 1974. 'What is it Like to be a Bat?', *The Philosophical Review* 83(4): 435–450.
21. Ormandy, E. 2011. 'Genetic Engineering of Animals: Ethical Issues, Including Welfare Concerns', *The Canadian Veterinary Journal = La revue veterinaire canadienne* 52(5): 544–550.
22. Parker, L.; Boland, L.; Warren, A. 2020. "'She's Me": An Exploration of Pet Ownership from the Perspective of People Who Are Homeless', *People and Animals: The International Journal of Research and Practice* 3(1): 1–12.
23. Sanders, M. 2008. 'Intersubjectivity and Alterity', in *Merleau-Ponty. Key Concepts*, eds. R. Diprose and J. Reynolds, New York: Routledge.
24. Toadvine, T. 2009. *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
25. Weil, K. 2012. *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* New York: Columbia University Press.
26. White, K. 2013. 'And Say the Cat Responded? Getting Closer to the Feline Gaze', *Society & Animals* 21: 93–104.
27. Zahavi, D. 2010. „Anapus Empatijos: Fenomenologiniai intersubjektyvumo svarstymai“, *Santalka, Filosofija* 18(1): 69–82.

JUSTINA ŠUMILOVA

Gyvūnų patyrimas šiuolaikiniame pasaulyje iš kūniškumo perspektyvos

Santrauka

Šiuo straipsniu siekiama iškelti kelias hipotezes: visų pirma, teigiama, kad kalba sukuria tam tikrą gyvūnų kūno vaizdinį, antra, kad žvilgsnis bei fenomenologinis santykis su gyvūnais gali atverti dialogišką ir atviresnį ryšį. Straipsnyje pirmiausia analizuojami kalbos, kūniškumo ir reikšmės suteikimo santykiai. Toliau nagrinėjami įvairūs gyvūno kūno patyrimo atvejai šiuolaikiniame pasaulyje: analizuojamos gyvūnų reprezentacijos kultūroje, zoologijos sodo gyvūnai, gyvūnų klonavimas, žmonių santykis su augintiniais, kuris yra veikiamas kapitalizmo sistemos. Šiame straipsnyje naudojama M. Merleau-Ponty kūno fenomenologija kaip tyrimo metodas, pabrėžiantis gyvūnų patirties ir jų reprezentacijų svarbą iš kūniškos perspektyvos šiuolaikiniame pasaulyje. M. Merleau-Ponty fenomenologinis metodas sutelkia dėmesį į išgyventą kūno patirtį, kuri yra svarbiausia mūsų pasaulio supratimo dalis. Tyrimas atskleidžia, kad kalba formuoja mūsų gyvūnų kūnišką suvokimą, nes ji sukuria tam tikrą naratyvą, kaip gyvūno kūnas yra suvokiamas žmogaus. Antra, gyvūnų reprezentacijos mūsų kasdiniame gyvenime sukuria humanizuotą gyvūnų vaizdą. Galiausiai, straipsnyje atskleidžiama, kad M. Merleau-Ponty fenomenologija padeda sukurti realistišką ryšį tarp gyvūnų ir žmonių, siekiant išmokti į gyvūnus žiūrėti iš naujos perspektyvos jų nehumanizuojant.

Raktažodžiai: gyvūnai, patirtis, kūnas, kūniškumas