

DARWIN, THE SOCIALITY COROLLARY, AND CRITICAL ANIMAL STUDIES

Carmen Dell'Aversano

Università di Pisa, Italy

This paper aims to connect PCP and Critical Animal Studies through an exploration of some usually neglected implications of Darwin's evolutionary theory on the one hand, and of a radical constructivist position and, more specifically, of the Sociality and Construction corollaries on the other.

Keywords: *Personal Construct Psychology, Critical Animal Studies, Darwinism*

To the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another, he may play a role in a social process involving the other person.

G.A. Kelly

As many of you know, I am not a psychologist. I came to PCP through rhetoric; more specifically, through the initiators of the Western rhetorical tradition, the Sophists, who, not entirely coincidentally, also happened to inaugurate another tradition, that of radical constructivism. At the most abstract level a conference, about any topic, is a rhetorical occasion. Because the conference participants have so much in common, the rules which apply are those of what ancient rhetorical theory calls epideictic or ceremonial oratory: basically, the orator is supposed to highlight and celebrate what she and the audience have in common; this, of course, is a great way of strengthening social bonds but is not necessarily conducive to learning. In organising this plenary session, my intention was to question this construction: I wanted the speakers to share their experience about constructs they and the audience probably did *not* have in common.

When I learned that *Maria Armezzani* would be unable to attend and wondered how to fill her place at extremely short notice, it occurred to me that I might push the envelope of this format by sharing my own experience of some consequences of a fundamental tenet of PCP which probably most of my audience had never envisioned, and which would strongly question their

anticipations. My own anticipation about this is that our discussion will be lively. I very much look forward to it.

We all know how controversial Darwin's theory of evolution was when it first appeared. The reason is that, before Darwin, the relationship between humans and other animals was based on the idea of the *Scala naturae*, the Great Chain of Being (*Figure 1*). The natural world was assumed to be organized hierarchically: in creating the world, God was thought to have established for all eternity the categories of beings it was to contain, and to have assigned to each category a place, above or beneath other categories. This meant that all beings (dogs, trees, kings, cows, priests, ants, algae, farmers, lions...) were part of an eternal, immutable hierarchical order mandated by God. This, of course, was the foundation not only of the subjection of all non-humans to man, who was conceived to have been made in the image of God, but also of absolute monarchy, and of the division of society into estates with hugely different rights and duties.

Politically, this vision was overthrown by the Enlightenment and by the French revolution; but scientifically it was only seriously questioned when Darwin replaced the Great Chain of Being with the *Tree of Life* (*Figure 2*). The Tree of Life is a genealogical tree; it shows that all life forms on our planet make up one big family; just like in a family, there are differences between the various branches, but no hierarchy. According to Darwinian theory, which is the foundation of the

life sciences today, mankind is not the crown of creation but simply one animal species among innumerable others. Each species has peculiarities setting it apart from others (we attend conferences, dolphins use sonars from navigation, spiders spin webs...), but the common origin of

all species implies that all traits which we consider uniquely human, from intelligence to emotions, to the ability to communicate, to attachment to loved ones, are actually shared with other animals.



Figure 1: Scala naturae

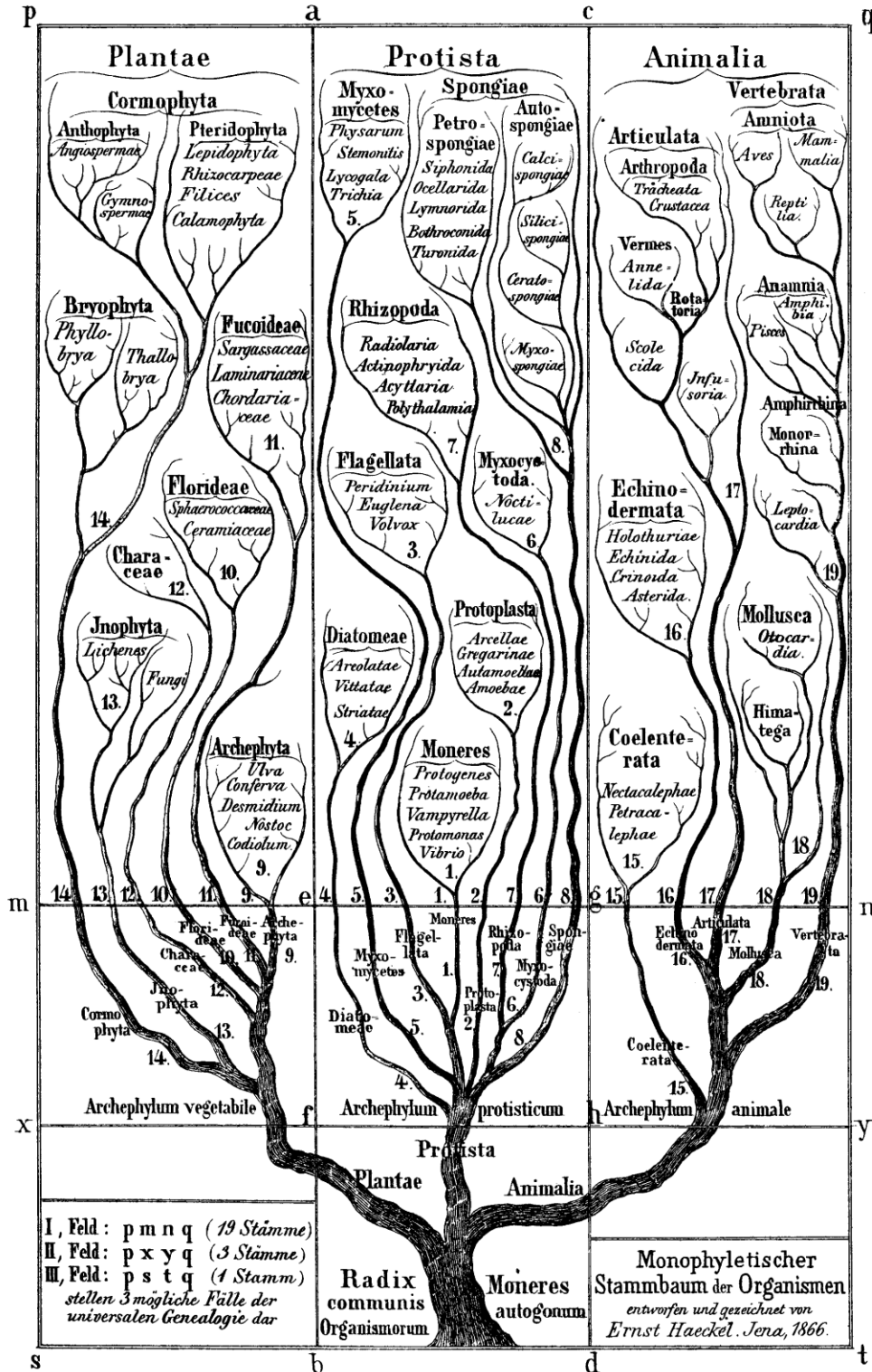


Figure 2: The Tree of Life

We are accustomed to thinking that we can correctly gauge the extent to which other animals possess these traits through observation and experiment, and that this makes us able to evaluate them objectively, and to decide fairly how they should be treated; this is the basis on which most decent people, people who would never harm another human, who find all forms of discrimination and oppression repulsive, and who denounce them fearlessly whenever they come across them, people who spend their lives trying to help others, decide that it is morally unobjectionable to consume animal products.

However, from a PCP/PCT viewpoint, this is a fiction, for at least two reasons. The first is a consequence of the sociality corollary, which clearly states that, in the case of animals as for any other subject, all we can know is not the reality of their emotions, intelligence or abilities, but only *our own construction of their construction processes*; as a consequence, our evaluation of them is by definition not objective, and any decision based on that evaluation is completely arbitrary. The other reason is the intrinsic incommensurability of all construct systems: PCT assumes that there is, and there can be, no 'objective' outer vantage point from which an impartial all-knowing subject can judge all possible construct systems and rank them in a hierarchy from worst to best, and consequently from least to most deserving of respect; in a PCT perspective there are no 'lives not worth living'¹; there are only faulty, superficial or tendentious constructions of others' construct systems. And that our customary construction of some animals as 'lives not worth living' is actually far from rational is shown by the fact that most 'happy meat eaters' in the West would be horrified at the prospect of eating a cat or dog, even though our shared scientific construction of these animals' emotions, intellect, and abilities makes it impossible to draw any meaningful distinction between

them and other animals whose flesh we consume unthinkingly, like pigs or sheep²

I had probably better make clear that I am not saying that animals are in any way 'equal' to humans³; one important reason is that, in a PCT framework, this claim would be meaningless, since equality, as is clear from the Construction corollary⁴, is a collusive concept, which can only be employed by choosing to disregard differences and to concentrate on what we decide to construe as shared traits; therefore, animals could only be perceived as 'equal' by someone who had already *decided* to consider them 'equal', and thus to disregard the traits which they do not share with humans, and to focus on those that they do. But just as important is the consideration that assuming 'equality' with us, however defined, to be a prerequisite for the enjoyment of the most basic rights, such as the

² One piece of evidence among many is the *Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness* (2012) which states, among other things, that ...

Convergent evidence indicates that non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviours. Consequently, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Non-human animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates.

<http://fcmconference.org/img/CambridgeDeclarationOnConsciousness.pdf>

³ Nor, indeed, to one another: indeed, the very "human/animal" construct, which lumps together bonobos and clams, tapeworms and dogs in the contrast pole to "humans", obscuring the fact that, for example, humans are vastly more similar to all other mammals than other mammals are to any invertebrates, is obviously incompatible with a clear and rigorous understanding of Darwinism, and therefore with the theory and practice of the life sciences as Western culture has conceived of them for the last 160 years.

⁴ "A person anticipates events by construing their replications"

¹ The phrase 'lebensunwertes Leben' was used by the Nazis in order to justify the killing of a number of segments of the population. This has, of course, no bearing on the completely separate issue of the evaluation of *one's own* life, which, together with its practical consequences, is a prerogative of each individual subject.

right to live and not to be tortured (which are routinely denied to animals), is only possible if we believe ourselves to be the ultimate embodiment of objective value. I could not imagine a less constructivist position.

This completely unconstructivist position is, however, the foundation of our attitude towards animals in science, in ethics, and in legal matters. When we study animals, we take ourselves as a reference point; not surprisingly, animals are always found wanting, and this is supposed to justify our using them in such a way that their lives are routinely sacrificed to our convenience, tastes and whims⁵. In its most basic, but also clearest form, the argument on which human exploitation of animal rests goes like this: *we can do anything to them because they are not like us*. The sole epistemological and ethical foundation of human use of other animals is egocentrism.

This is the point at which, in my research, in my experience, and in my life, PCP/PCT meets Critical Animal Studies (CAS). CAS is a new hybrid field which studies the relationships of humans with nonhumans with a view to exposing the power dynamics implicit in them. It is a hybrid field not only because it exists at the crossroads of a number of disciplines, from ethology to anthropology to sociology, but also because it blends scholarship and activism. Part of my work in CAS focuses on the critique of a realistic epistemology, which maintains that we can know animal natures objectively and therefore that we have a right to decide what is morally permissible to do to other animals; the philosophical foundation of my critique is PCT/PCP. Basically, once we start regarding the relations between humans and animals in a PCT perspective, we realise that our construction of other animals is oppressively preemptive and stiflingly constellatory, and that those modes of construing are not only intellectually unsound but also ethically pernicious and politically irresponsible, since the less we understand about

other animals, the more we believe we have a right to torture and kill them. The limits of our empathy are set by our ignorance. They may be very narrow indeed.

As we all realise, one important consequence of the Sociality corollary (which need not only be applied to the therapeutic relationship) is to make us less egocentric: taking the Sociality corollary seriously means to realize that, because we are enmeshed in social relationships, the consequences of our constructions are, to some extent, always for others to bear. Indeed, my own definition of power in PCP terms is “the extent to which the consequences of our constructions must be borne by others”. Believing that humans can fly and throwing myself out of the window is one thing; believing that humans can fly and being in a position to throw other people out of the window systematically and with impunity is quite another. Because the relationship of our species with other species is a relationship of absolute power, if we consider it through the lens of the Sociality Corollary, we become aware that the way we construe the construction processes of other animals frames them in a role that is always oppressive, and most often leads to their torture and killing. Just as knowledge is never objective or impersonal, it is also never ethically or politically neutral: our construction of their construction processes is invariably aimed at maintaining and extending our power.

Thus we take pride in investigating animal cognition and emotions scientifically, but it is a foregone conclusion that nothing we can find out about them will ever lead us to question our absolute domination; of course this makes our scientific investigations absolutely unscientific. Even the staunchest Darwinians often behave as if they still believed in the Great Chain of Being; even the most sincere Kellyans often behave as if the Sociality Corollary did not exist, mistaking their construction of other animals' construction processes for the reality of these processes, which in a PCP perspective are actually by definition unknowable. If we are willing to take Kelly, and the Sociality corollary, seriously, we should be willing to ask the question which a great scholar, not of ‘animal behaviour’ but of animal minds, Frans de Waal, has chosen as the title of the book which crowns his long career:

⁵ Frans B. M. De Waal, *Are we smart enough to know how smart animals are?*, New York, Norton, 2016.

“Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?” [6]

And we should also be aware of the fact that, despite de Waal's optimism, the only possible answer for us as Kellyans is, by definition, "No".

Are we going to make something of this?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carmen Dell'Aversano teaches in the humanities department of Pisa university (Italy) and in several therapist training institutes (Institute of Constructivist Psychology in Padua, Italy; European Institute of Systemic-Relational Therapies in Milan, Italy; Centro Studi in Psicoterapia

Cognitiva in Florence, Italy). Her main research interests, such as Jewish studies, constructivism and animal rights, span the fields of literary theory, psychology, discourse analysis and queer theory. In 2015, together with colleagues from various Italian and international institutions, she founded CIRQUE (Centro Interuniversitario di Ricerca Queer – Inter-University Centre for Queer Research), the first centre for queer research in Italian academia; she now serves as its director.

Contact: carmen.dellaversano@unipi.it

REFERENCE

Dell'Aversano, C. (2017). Darwin, the Sociality corollary, and critical animal studies. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 14, 73-78

Received: 6 February 2017 – Accepted: 6 June 2017 – Published: 1 August 2017