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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF OTHER ANIMAL-
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The meaning of "animal" is contested. This struggle is vitally important - by defining the word, we are also trying to define the world. The power of definition becomes especially evident when we run across descriptions that simply do not correspond with our own understandings. For example, much cited because it is such a captivating example,¹ Michel Foucault quotes a Chinese encyclopedia:

Animals are divided into: a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camel hair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.

Recounting his reaction to that passage, he ably characterizes the heart of social construction theory:

In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*. (1970, p. xv)

So begins his *Archaeology of the Human Sciences* in which he demonstrates that the categories and concepts which we treat as truths are not as universal as they may at first seem. This notion can be difficult to grasp. As Neil Evernden illustrates:

A medium is invisible to an organism until it is removed from it: Water is unknown to a fish until it discovers air. Our cultural medium is similarly transparent, and as a consequence we accept as common sense what persons in other cultures might find incredible. (1985, p. 48)

Social construction theories gained considerable currency in semiotics, the science of signs or in what, as Terence Hawkes asserts, could just as accurately be called the study of communication. (1977, pp. 123-4) In a simplistic nutshell,

social construction theories challenge the notion of an objective knowledge of "truths" out there waiting to be discovered by the diligent and written by the insightful. Raman Selden, in his description of poststructuralist theories, quotes Nietzsche: "Ultimately, man [sic] finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them." And what is imported very much reflects the times. Selden concludes:

People recognize a particular piece of philosophy or scientific theory as 'true' only if it fits the descriptions of truth laid down by the intellectual or political authorities of the day, by members of the ruling elite, or by the prevailing ideologues of knowledge. (1989, p. 100)

Thus the study of scientific, philosophical, or any other discourse quickly becomes the study of power, for "discourse determines what it is possible to say, what are the criteria of 'truth', who is allowed to speak with authority, and where such speech can be spoken." (1989, p. 16)

These theories have obvious implications beyond the realm of literary theory and are now bandied about in a variety of academic disciplines, especially those concerned with power relations. Christopher Norris notes that deconstruction has "become something of a buzzword among commentators on the postmodern cultural scene. It is a term that now comes readily to novelists, politicians, media pundits, pop journalists, TV presenters, newspaper columnists ...and others with an eye to intellectual fashion or a taste for debunking such pretentious jargon." He bemoans these popular uses of the word, however, classifying them as "a species of out-and-out hermeneutic license, a pretext for critics to indulge any kind of whimsical, free-wheeling or 'creative' commentary that happens to take their fancy." (1991, p. 136, 138)

Such unwillingness to define terms is one of the characteristics of post-modernism. Thus it is not surprising that "there are as many postmodernisms as theorists." (Selden,1989, p. 74) Post-modern deconstructionism, however it may be defined, has certainly found its way into ecosophy circles. What follows is an exploration of how some aspects of social construction theories are relevant to how we study other animals and our subsequent relations with them.

The Other

Central to deconstructionism is the concept of the *Other*, the concentration on differences rather than similarities, on self-creation and self-definition based on what's "not-me." In Selden's words: "We define our identities always in relation to what we are not, and therefore what we are not... must be demonized and

objectified.” (1989, p. 107) Being able to conceive of an Other has been a central concern for many ecosophers. For example, just as Foucault reminds us that the concept of ”Man” has not been with humans forever, so too does Morris Berman discuss the rise of the concept of ”Nature”:

The view of nature which predominated in the West down to the eve of the Scientific Revolution was that of an enchanted world. Rocks, trees, rivers, and clouds were seen as wondrous, alive, and human beings felt at home in this environment.... The story of the modern epoch, at least on the level of mind, is one of progressive disenchantment for it insists on a rigid distinction between observer and observed. Scientific consciousness is alienated consciousness; there is no ecstatic merger with nature, but rather total separation from it. (1981, pp. 2-3)

Not only does nature then become separate from human, but as Barbara Noske points out: ”Nature has become the Other and the lesser.” (1989, p. 41)

Still, as both Foucault and Berman indicate, although the ability to conceive of the ”Other,” ”Man,” and ”Nature” is a source of alienation, we cannot simply return to a pre-Cartesian, medieval worldview. We can, however, begin the healing process by acknowledging that while

there is a sense in which we cannot know the Other (whether it be other species, other cultures, the other sex or even each other), we must remind ourselves that other meanings exist, even if we may be severely limited in our understanding of them. (Noske,1989, p. 160)

The Other as Sub-Human

The search for other meanings is the premise of Donna Haraway’s remarkable deconstruction of primatology, *Primate Visions*, a particularly fruitful source for discussions on the epistemology of science. Describing why she chose primatology as her subject rather than other disciplines in science, Haraway notes that ”monkeys and apes, and human beings as their taxonomic kin, exist on the boundaries of so many struggles to determine what will count as knowledge.” (1989, p. 13)

It was particularly fortuitous for me that Haraway chose primatology as her source of reflection. As a former student of psychology, with an emphasis on animal behavior, I came to her book with all of the baggage acquired from such studies. I rarely questioned in my undergraduate years the findings of primatologists. (For example, although I do recall being nauseated by Harry Harlow’s sadistic experiments in which he orphaned rhesus monkeys, I did not doubt the

validity of his conclusions on mother love). I swallowed the "data" hook, line and sinker as every good student in that particular school should. I was somewhat aware of how ideologies affected other disciplines (like those "soft" social sciences and other branches of psychology), but I was secure in the knowledge that primatology was sufficiently objective to be beyond reproach. Since then, I have had opportunity to critically reflect on some of my foundational beliefs.

To build her argument, Haraway writes about a few key figures in the history of primatology to illustrate how they, like everyone else, are very much products of their culture, and hence interpreted the life of the primates they studied in certain ways. A particularly telling example is that of the study of the famous Koko, the captive gorilla who learned American Sign Language. Koko has been an exciting case study for many reasons, including her ability to use sign language in a way which implies self-awareness. For example, she signs that she is a "fine gorilla animal" (i.e., not a human), recognizes herself in a mirror and even takes photographs of herself. Of particular interest to Haraway was Koko's keeping of a pet cat. As Haraway illustrates, keeping a pet cat is not something that *all* humans do (some cultures eat cats), and thus Koko is a North American gorilla, carrying the baggage for a Western society.

These language experiments, of which Koko is part, indicate an attempt to understand ourselves via the Other. As Noske illustrates, such language experiments often reflect human desires to prove our uniqueness: "The basic question should not be whether animals have or have not human-like language. In having to pass *our* tests as measured by *our* yardsticks, they will always come out second best, namely, as reduced humans." (1989, pp. 143-4) And when non-humans do pass our I.Q. tests, this does not mean that the animals might be considered intelligent. Rather, the test must not have been difficult enough! Noske writes:

Once tool-making had been discovered among chimpanzees, social scientists found themselves in a rather awkward position....They clearly had underestimated the ape's technical skills when defining the uniqueness of humanity. As a result the onus of humanness quickly shifted from making tools to using a tool to make another tool, so as to safeguard human-animal discontinuity. (1989, p. 152)

Thus the animals can always be judged as sub-human. And as Haraway notes, they will also be sub-humans of a particular human culture.²

It is important to note that there is no overt conspiracy in what gets to count as knowledge in primatology. In other words, it isn't about a bunch of white neo-colonialists sitting in a room together plotting how they are going to interpret the lives of non-human primates. Instead Haraway, like Foucault, stresses that we are *all* caught up in Bentham's panopticon, that we are all part of this society and thus susceptible to the dominant ideologies. "It is at the level of

fundamental theory and practice, not at the level of good guys and bad guys.” (1991, p. 68)

Objectivity and Progress

To illustrate her concerns about the ideology of objectivity, Haraway briefly explores Japanese primatology. Japanese concepts of the human/animal/nature relationship are different from typical Western approaches. In this context, unlike in North America, "nature cannot be constructed as a health spa for the ills of industrial society" nor can "the story of Adam's commission in the Garden as planetary park ranger, with the special power to name his charges" be possible in Japan. (1989, pp. 246,247)

Too, the distinction between observer and observed, so important to Western sciences, is fuzzier hence less time is spent in trying to pretend to be distant and separate from the study animals. Japanese primatologists are unconcerned that they provision monkeys to ease their observations nor are they troubled by becoming attached to them. In fact, they "preferred to call their method 'anthropomorphic,' stressing their assumption that since monkeys have 'minds' of some sort, some kind of empathic method would be reasonable and likely required to understand simian societies." (1989, p. 252)

This emphasis on empathy gets to a key point in social construction theory: the importance of context. Hawkes writes:

...every perceiver's *method* of perceiving can be shown to contain an inherent bias which affects what is perceived to a significant degree. A wholly objective perception of individual entities is therefore not possible: any observer is bound to *create* something of what he observes. Accordingly, the *relationship* between observer and observed achieves a kind of primacy. (1977, p. 17)

Thus the divide between subject and object so important to empiricism is challenged.

This, of course, shakes the foundations of objectivity in science. Not that this is the first shaking to be done; there is a whole literature devoted to challenging traditional scientific tenets, particularly from a feminist perspective. Still, as Charles Bergman notes: "Objectivity in science is a relatively easy target to knock off; the wonder is how tenaciously we continue to believe in it." (1990, p. 27) Indeed, scientists in our society achieve god-like status and are seen as "subjects apprehending objects through the blank mirror of the senses." (Selden, 1989, p. 76) These gods are not easily dethroned. We find it hard to remember that, as R. C. Lewontin reminds us:

Scientists do not begin life as scientists, after all, but as social beings immersed in a family, a state, a productive structure, and they view nature through a lens that has been molded by their social experiences. (1991, p. 3)

The Japanese empathetic approaches, then, can be seen as attractive because of their cognizance of the importance of relationships. When Haraway describes Japanese primatology, however, she is not being prescriptive, suggesting that we jump on the oriental spiritual bandwagon and assume that these approaches are therefore less cruel to other animals and more appropriate for conservation; Japan's record on both fronts is not particularly encouraging. Instead, it is important to recognize that other approaches, stories or meanings can exist.

Another source of new understandings comes from the work of current feminist primatologists who are interpreting non-human primate lives in different ways than did their predecessors. For example, focuses include "dual-career mothering" of females and an emphasis on the multiple roles both sexes play.³ What is important here is that, like their predecessors, these new feminist primatologists also socially construct aspects of the lives of the animals they study. Therefore, whether a *de* construction or a *re* construction, these stories about other primates (and any other subject animals in science) are still constructions.

But are some stories better than others? Haraway obviously thinks so. As a feminist, she prefers the work of feminist primatologists who, by emphasizing different themes, are destabilizing traditional primatology. But so did Sherwood Washburn, a post World War II primatologist; he saw an opportunity to combat racism and xenophobia and to use the knowledge gleaned from primate studies to enhance communication. Haraway later criticizes his work perhaps because she felt that his work became misguided, but so too may the work of the new crop of feminist primatologists.

Does Haraway believe, then, in the progress of knowledge? Or only in the certainty of change? If she did believe in scientific progress, it would be highly ironic. She has written that the "ideology of progress makes the sciences seem like wilderness preservation areas of the mind, free from the ravages of human culture and history." (1989, p. 125) By putting science and the concept of wilderness, for example, outside of human experience and culture, we can see ourselves as forever progressing in our understandings of the world. Hence, as Berman notes:

Modern consciousness thus regards the thinking of previous ages not simply as other legitimate forms of consciousness, but as misguided world views that we have happily outgrown. It holds that the men and women of those times *though t* they understood nature, but without our scientific sophistication their beliefs could not help but be childish and animistic. (1981, pp. 57-8)

The ideology of progress is a trap not only for science but also for those who would deconstruct science. Implied in some criticisms of objectivity (and thus of those fools who dared to search for "truth") is that somehow the deconstructionists themselves are on their own self-righteous path to truths, perhaps of a different sort, but truths nonetheless. Therefore one must ask: After her deconstruction of primatology, does Haraway (who, after all, was trained as a biologist) also believe that there are some underlying truths waiting to be found by the enlightened?

The tradition of deconstruction, from my reading, continually tries to assert that there is no such thing as "truth," that life is like an onion, where we keep peeling off layers to find eventually that there is no core. Noske describes the work of Barbara McClintock who noted that "modern science can give us at most only pieces of nature. But nature is so vast and complex that 'anything you can think of, you will find.'" (1989, p. 52) Theoretically, then, we can construct myriad stories.

Such a concept is particularly difficult for someone like myself who has had some experience with non-human animals. I suspect that there are limits to what we can "make up" and that it is pretty hard to misconstrue some aspects of our or other lives. For example, you'd be hard pressed to misidentify someone giving birth. That is not to say that how you describe the event, like "excruciatingly painful," wouldn't be colored by your cultural expectations.

For me, then, studying other animals and our relationships with them requires a balancing act. While recognizing that our observations will be colored by our expectations, we ought not forego trying to understand these Others. As Haraway advocates in this evocative passage:

Inheritors of their own history, and natural history, there is no way for westerners to participate innocently in "reinventing" nature in a world untouched by western hegemony. Western forms of love and knowledge of nature have been profoundly colonial; knowledge of how that has been so cannot be allowed to degenerate into an excuse for losing an historical capacity to know, love, and act in relation to the strange and dynamic category still somehow able to be called "nature." If it once was, nature is no longer simply a western epistemological and social imposition. Like other languages of the colonizer that have been reinvented for other conversations, the languages of nature have become polyglot and international. Rather than loss of innocence being an excuse for *not* participating in these life and death conversations, this loss is a necessary but not sufficient condition for taking part usefully. (1989, p. 274)

Situated Knowledges and Partial Perspectives

For Haraway, one path away from this conundrum is through "situated knowledges." When we talk about our relations with Others, we can only speak from where we are, from our own experiences, and we must recognize that our voices represent only a "partial perspective" which will contribute to the "multiplicity of voices."⁴ This multiplicity of voices may help us better understand the wide array of relationships we experience with other animals; universality, however, then becomes a dubious concept. Raymond Williams, in his insightful essay, "Ideas of Nature," writes:

I am prepared to believe that one or other of the consequent generalizations [of Nature] may be more true than the rest, may be a better way of looking at the process in which we also are involved and on which we can be said to depend. But I am bound to say I would feel in closer touch with the real situation if the observations...were not so speedily gathered...into singular statements of essential, inherent and immutable characteristics; into principles of a singular nature. (1980, p. 70)

Yet universality seems to be something many of us crave. As Lewontin explains:

If one's message is that things are complicated, uncertain, and messy, that no simple rule or force will explain the past and predict the future of human existence, there are rather fewer ways to get that message across. Measured claims about the complexity of life... are not show biz. (1991, p. vii)

To say that we crave universal truths may be an understatement: I think many of us fear a world without them. For example, I once had someone ask me, with what I perceived to be an air of incredulity, whether I could live with the cacophony and chaos created by the "multiplicity of voices." I can. As someone who doesn't feel that my way of experiencing the world has been described by the dominant theories that claim universality, the opportunity to add my voice to the fray is highly attractive.

For what is true for me today may not be true for me forever and may not be true for someone else. Let me finish with a story to illustrate my point. One day my husband and I were walking through the forests of the Tanjung Puting Reserve in Indonesian Borneo where we happened to meet the daughter of an ex-captive rehabilitant orangutan, Siswi. She maneuvered me out of the way and commenced to walk down the path beside John, leaving me tagging along behind. She held his hand, wrestled with him, did a few genital-displaying headstands and absolutely ignored me. (Having had considerable contact with

humans, Siswi appears to be unconcerned about the species boundary and seems to be quite attracted to human men.) Had we encountered Siswi separately on that day, our descriptions of her may have been quite different. And had I based my understandings of Siswi solely on this one encounter, it would have been faulty; subsequently Siswi and I spent a few hours sitting quietly together. She was not some passive object who would behave in exactly the same way every time with every person. Rather, she was an active participant in the building of our relationships with her; she had agency.

Our relationships with the many Others do matter. We must remember the importance of context, of place, and of grounding our knowledge in experience in our attempts to understand other animals and our relationships to them.

Notes

1. For example, Charles Bergman opens his 1990 book, *Wild Echoes*, with this quotation.
2. I would add that all animals are part of cultures as well. The notion that non-human animals might have their own cultures is a difficult one for many people to accept. Rather, it is generally only humans who are thought to have the ability to socially construct their worlds. Noske writes: "So far little attention has been paid (and least of all by mainstream science) to the possibility that it is not just human subjects who socially and collectively construct their world but that animal subjects may do so too. These animal constructs are likely to be markedly different from our but may be no less real." (1989, p. 158)
3. This research, however, has itself been criticized for emphasizing white, middle-class feminist concerns like balancing career and parenting roles.
4. See the chapter, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" in Haraway (1991).

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