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Shared life: An introduction

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ssi.sagepub.com**Dominique Lestel**

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Humans form their self-representations not *in opposition* to animals, as all Western histories of human evolution recount, but *with* them and *through* them. In other words, to be human does not mean to have fled animality, but on the contrary to live within it and to let it live within us. The phenomenon of shared life is, then, a problem of *spillover* and not one of hunting, breeding, domestication, or pets. It concerns human existence itself and, more widely, existence in general. A shared life implies becoming oneself while being other.

Since antiquity, Westerners have lived in a culture that has constantly insisted on the man/animal opposition. Today, probing the convergences and proximity of all life is a major task; the issue of life in common is an attempt, among others, to do so. This problem's central point of departure is not that we must cohabit with others, but that we are the others and the others are us. Therefore, the challenge is how we might consider the specificity of the human in proximity to other living beings (including plants and fungi) rather than setting strict boundaries.

It is therefore wrong to say that we live with animals; it is more correct to say that we are animals and animals are us. The pertinent metaphor is not one of immigrants who must be welcomed but rather the fingers of a hand; in other words, one must consider humans and animals in terms of inseparable difference (Lestel, 2013). The animal question entails the full recognition of our existential physiology, which we share with living beings on earth. Thus, a shared life is more precisely a shared existence – a life that is always lived together from the perspective of the first-person point of view, and with the implied second-person point of view for all living beings (although it could mean otherwise). What is clear, however, is that no life is constituted from the point of view of the third person – even if that is the perspective privileged in Western culture. Life is fundamentally metabolic on the one hand and existential on the other.

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What animals do we relate to and make our own? The answer is simple and complicated: each of us could imagine owning any number of them, but some are more ours than others. The question of life in common is never that of animals in general, but always that of certain animals in particular. The privileged species (dogs, rats, whales, ants, etc.) can vary from one culture to another and from one individual to another; there is no preferred species for all times, in all places and in all cultures. Animals that are significant to me are not necessarily so for my neighbor, even if we have 'animals in common'. What is important is that humans always form their self-representations by means of other animals, not the fact that they do it locally with this or that animal.

Paul Shepard is probably the first Western thinker to really attempt to consider the human in the texture of animality (Shepard, 1978). His remarkable work, however, finds two limits worthy of note. The first is that he fails to really take up the concept of *inter-texturité* (our convergences with animals are not only social but also at the level of metabolism). The second is the lack of attention that Shepard accords to artificial animality, which today has substantially altered the phenomenon of life in common. Shepard was reluctant to take the final step – to acknowledge the fact that man is not only profoundly *influenced* by animals, but that he *is* fully animal, not contingently (by phylogeny) but in an essential way, which is to say existentially. The issue of Life in Common cannot be reduced to that of man and animals but of animals among themselves (man and other animals being only one instance among many). Clearly, the human connection to animals goes beyond the purely intellectual.

The question is not that of knowing how I share my life with others, but how others shape me and how I shape others, which differs markedly. For the purpose of this special issue, we have restricted ourselves to animality, but strictly speaking, it should also include plants, fungi and even landscapes. A major characteristic of all existence is the need to consume others in order to grow and then be consumed to help others grow. Humans are no exception to this rule. The whole question is that of knowing what consuming the other means. We could suggest that this broaches the most intimate of what constitutes us as living beings. To consider life in common is, therefore, to think not in terms of relationships with other living beings, or even the closeness of humans with other living beings, but of *modes of consumption*, which constitute animal life in general and human life in particular. We face a major task that we do not yet know how to perform satisfactorily, because Western thought has always privileged the idea of rupture and discontinuity with other living beings vis-à-vis interspecific hospitality, and because we believe hospitality to be almost exclusively social.

Although hospitality implies thinking in a social or even political perspective, hospitality can equally be metabolic. Examples abound: parasitism, symbiosis, pregnancy, addiction, disease and witchcraft are such cases. The Cartesian cogito can be characterized as a willingness to believe that thought is a purely cognitive affair, one that is private between me and God, and not a public and metabolic affair between me and my neighbors, one that is perhaps a bit intrusive. We Westerners have become so accustomed to the image of a triumphant forward march (whose history recounts how man became so autonomous that he reached freedom) that we have neglected the possibility that such a history could be in the end frankly pathological (given how we have bent over backwards to become autistic).

However, a return to animality can be thought of more positively. This *return* resonates with the notion of *repetition* found in the work of Slavoj Žižek (2008), who would have us conceive of the present not only as the result of what truly happened in the past, but also as the possibles that came to nothing but which were contained in that same past. A key question now is to know how the human of the 21st century can reactivate his animality and *animalize* himself anew when all Western thought since the Greeks tells him that he is human precisely because of this rupture with animality. In other words, how can we develop nostalgia for an animality turned towards the future – nostalgia for animality that has been our past but also appears to be our future?

The following pages argue for a trajectory from segregation towards integration and from isolation towards relationship. Each of the seven papers assembled for this special issue of *Social Science Information* explores our theme – *la vie partagée*, shared life, life in common – with a number of co-authors, in the sense that a veritable menagerie on and with whom to think accompanies the writers: Galápagos tortoises, spotted hyenas, elephants, songbirds, great apes, humans, goats, fish and hermit crabs join lions, bears, tigers, wolves, monkeys and other ‘exotic’ animals of the black market. These empirical and theoretical forays span five continents.

Jeffrey Bussolini presents an overview of four recent French, Belgian and Italian scholars not widely available to Anglophone readers. At once synthesizers and provocateurs, these intellectuals all concern themselves with the status of human–animal relations, penning critical interpretations of the ethological tradition, suggesting new approaches, and challenging human exceptionalism. Bussolini summarizes several useful and stimulating concepts from each writer.

Marcus Baynes-Rock challenges our limited conceptions of the social with his study from Harar, Ethiopia. In it, he frames a dramatic narrative of the shared life of spotted hyenas and a tangle of humans in a multispecies commons: in this case, ‘the common area outside a gate in the ancient, defensive wall around the historic city’. Baynes-Rock identifies this as an area of mutual co-shaping that extends beyond social processes to ecological ones as well.

Authors Eben Kirksey, Nicholas Shapiro and Maria Brodine invite the reader to New Orleans’s Multispecies Salon for an exhibit that follows the lives of goats, fish, human artists and hermit crabs in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill. Their strategic storytelling takes the form of a multispecies ethnography and para-ethnography as they explore ‘the persistence of life in the face of catastrophe’.

Another multispecies ethnography finds David Jaclin on a journey into the ‘jungle’ backyards of North America, shining light on emerging and problematical contemporary landscapes. He documents the lives of black market ‘exotic’ animals (neither entirely wild nor domestic, some of whom ‘shuffle traditional taxonomical and ontological conceptions’) and the humans who share their lives, drawing on compound words like *aniculture*, *humanimalities* and *arkeography* to negotiate the terrain.

Both Hektor KT Yan and Hollis Taylor examine the challenges involved in attributing *music* and *art* to nonhuman animals in their deliberations on human exceptionalism. Yan problematizes issues of agency, intentionality and identity in his inquiry into the meaning and function of music in human life, stressing that music is a social concept. His inquiry into attitudes of human exceptionalism draws possible parallels with racism,

where in some cases humans are also denied certain attributes. Taylor, who researches Australian songbirds, traces how and why birdsong is regularly excluded from definitions of music, citing disconnections both within and across disciplines. She problematizes two assumptions: the superiority of Western art music and a nature/culture dualism, which is nearly invisible in current Western thought and discursive space (despite considerable recent activity framing nature/culture as a continuum).

Dominique Lestel confronts how the limitations of quotidian Western thinking have played a role in the loss of biodiversity. He argues that the preservation of endangered species is relevant not only on the ecological level but in the semiotic dimension as well, since every species contributes to the diversity of meaning. He warns that 'each species that disappears is a part of our imagination that we amputate perhaps irreversibly'.

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