



Just past Pinetown on the M13 towards Hillcrest a billboard suggests: “Try to be the person that your dog thinks you are”. This got me thinking about the recent ‘species turn’ now belatedly appearing in academic research. Our dogs put up with their owners, no matter how badly treated. They pine, they get depressed, and often die when their owners precede them to the happy hunting grounds. In contrast, cats just change allegiance.

The dog’s-eye view of us is not new in academic work, though it has been very sparse until recently. Human-animal relations, the relationship between nature and culture and critical approaches to scrutinise scientific and modernist thinking, have been increasing themes over the years, especially in sensory multispecies ethnography. Books like Lawrence Anthony’s *The Elephant Whisperer*, and films like *The Horse Whisperer*, suggest that we humans are complete anthropocentric amateurs when it comes to communicating with non-human animals. Imagine the utter frustration of your dog when you fail him? He can bark, growl, bite and scratch, run around, bang his head, and chew his tail, until his human gets the idea. Why can’t humans just think like us?

Animals catalyse social interactions, healing and community. Just visit any dog park where their humans think of them as people, rather than brutalising them through lack of care and attention. Bored dogs are indicative of just another back up to your armed response alarm system. The ontological distinction between humans and non-humans is being increasingly questioned in what is called critical animal studies, from anthropology to organisational sciences. A social justice perspective on human-animal relations tries to contribute to an intellectual argument to take non-human animals more seriously as “co-citizens” in the (organisational) life world. This may have wide ranging implications for the life styles, ranging

from the types of food we eat, to liquids we drink, to the ways we think about the human superiority in this world, says Harry Wels of the Free University of Amsterdam. Is this what our dogs are trying to tell us?

Did we have to wait for French deconstructionist Jaques Derrida to tell us that most if not all European philosophy has been biased and speciesist in its assuming and sticking to the positivist distinction between human and animal? Remember the Homo Naledi furore, which angered prominent politicians who misunderstand evolution, and who chauvinistically refuse to de-centre humans in the broader scheme of things. Is this rejection not another form of othering, of apartheid, based on species rather than just race? A new inclusive paradigm is emerging.

In the modern world animals are confined to reserves, cages, hunted, branded, and are bought and sold, just like slaves. Animals are assumed to lack affective capacity – even as our dogs welcome us home, lick us, paw us and lie with us. Anyone who reads Anthony's book cannot but be astonished at our dualistic human narrow-mindedness that prevents humans from entering into the metaphysical realms of animals, as crazy as this sounds. It is only crazy because contemporary conventional science has no way to explain it, to verify it, or to mathematise it. Also, many who proselytise such encounters are probably a little dotty. But, then, crazy is a relative term, culturally specific and neurologically indeterminate. Hearing 'voices' may be diagnosed as schizophrenia by modern psychiatry, but as the ancestors or ghosts speaking by subjects of different ontological frameworks.

This inversion of relationships with non-human animals could not be more urgent in the light of current global debates concerning the increasing rapidity of what is known as the sixth mass extinction that started with the spread of mankind 80 000 years ago and which reached a tipping point in 2016. Natural causes are not the sole explanation this time. Solutions that address the natural deficit by working with the 'species turn' by anthropology and organisational studies especially, is way overdue. As the planet faces catastrophe, new paradigms are emerging, but can they travel sufficiently fast and get accepted quick enough by scientists and politicians to make a difference? These include the proposal that it may be fruitful to treat non-human animals as actual agentic stakeholders in research and analysis. How does one request consent from animals if one is not a qualified whisperer?

How would our pets (or wild animals) qualify us? Now, there's a conundrum. Just read Anthony's or Ian Player's books for a new paradigm. Problem is, there are no university

courses in ‘whispering’, so only those in the know know. But there is hope. Horses are now being used by their whisperers to teach management communication [1]. Correspondence courses are springing up everywhere. All the while horses continue to be mistreated well into the Enlightenment [2].

While the bodies of knowledge and associated bodies of practice relating to multi-species ethnographies are relatively new in the Western academic enterprise, they have of course a long history amongst indigenous people who relied on their knowledge of the environment and fauna and flora, the seasons, climate, and astronomy, for their survival and livelihoods. But positivist science delayed the development of this intuitive knowledge in the industrial academy, to the detriment of non-human species and the environment in general. Even so, once hunting communities adopted western weapons, the environment often paid the inevitable price.

The topic is ‘hot’, says my Bayreuth University colleague, Vanessa Wijngaarden. This is due to recent developments concerning animal communicators in South Africa and beyond, but also due to the theoretical discussions in the wider social sciences.

Is there a reason why “pet” and “pest” are so similar in their spelling? Are we humans not the pests? After all, we’ve destroyed nearly all original habitats of undomesticated animals and shot and sold most of the rest. We have denied animals consciousness-awareness-just-like-us, as Stephen Hawking and others have acknowledged [3].

Us humans really need to listen to animals more. Wels calls this “whispering empathy”.

1. Read more at:

<http://www.festo-didactic.co.uk/gb-en/open-courses/all-open-courses-dates/people/management/horse-whispering-leadership-lessons-in-coaching.htm>

2. See Avaaz, Stop the Pregnant Horse Trade

[https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/horse\\_blood\\_loc/?tOJDlab&v=500274238&cl=11597066168&checksum=8a9a26b14375df54d6bb5e0709cb2c896cc258924ecfedeff7e6104826](https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/horse_blood_loc/?tOJDlab&v=500274238&cl=11597066168&checksum=8a9a26b14375df54d6bb5e0709cb2c896cc258924ecfedeff7e6104826)

3. <http://io9.com/5937356/>

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*Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.*

