Human Development as Transcendence of the Animal Body and the Child-Animal Association in Psychological Thought

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This paper explores the association of children and animals as an element in Western culture’s symbolic universe. Three historical discourses found in the West associate animality with immaturity and growing up with the transcendence of this condition. The discourses differ in how they describe and evaluate the original animal-like condition of the child versus the socialized end product. All, however, tend to distinguish sharply between the human and the nonhuman. This paper explores expressions of this tendency in developmental theories that set as the criterion of maturity the actualization of some capacity that is believed to set humans apart from animals. Seeing relationships with animals as marginally important in human development and life is a consequence of these assumptions. Simultaneously, these assumptions also marginalize the body. This constitutes a dual renunciation of body and animal, criticized for its effects both on inquiry and on our realization of the roles and values of nonhuman animals in development. Such research can help reveal the self-organizing nature of the human animal body.

The mental association of children and animals is a powerful one. Enumerating parallel social roles and behaviors of companion animals and children, for example, is not difficult. Americans almost saturate children’s environments with animal imagery and experiences, and children, themselves, take a keen interest in animals. All this seems commonplace. But do these perceptions and practices also tap deeper patterns of cultural beliefs? If so, examining how our past ways of thinking influence present perceptions may be important.

Concealed in our everyday beliefs are ideologies of childhood (Borstelmann, 1983) that equate or associate childhood and animality. These beliefs reflect Western culture’s long-standing value judgments about the body and animality and the proper distance of humanity from these two. Such beliefs are examples of the roles of animals in the symbolic orders that societies create to orient their members.
This paper explores the symbolic association of both children and animals in ideologies of childhood animality and in formalized definitions of human development. In them we find a rigid separation of humanity and animality. Once this separation is set aside, however, possibilities include new avenues of insight into child development and fresh evaluations of our connections to nonhuman animals.

**Animal Metaphors in Symbolic Universe Maintenance**

Qualities that children and animals seem to share appear largely a matter of culture, convention, and figures of speech. Indeed, cultures use animals in symbolically ordering their human worlds. These cultures make comparisons between specific groups of people and certain animals, as classically studied by anthropologists (Durkheim & Mauss, 1903/1963; Hallowell, 1960/1975; Levy-Bruhl, 1966; Levi-Strauss, 1966; Douglas, 1975; Lawrence, 1982; Crocker, 1985; Urton, 1985). More recently, researchers in the areas of history, literature, animal studies, and developmental psychology (Thomas, 1983; Malamud, 1998; Hirschfeld & Gelman, 1994; Ritvo, 1995) also have studied these comparisons.

We can understand this aspect of our relations with animals as part of the symbolic ordering of society. Humans are a generalist species, dependent to an unusual degree on learning. Human cultures demonstrate the resulting openness to different patterns of life, implying that we might experience the natural world as offering no single definite cognitive ordering, and events in our lives as showing little inherent pattern. Nonetheless, we have needs for both meaning and for interindividual coordination. Thus we create "symbolic universes" that provide the broadest system of legitimation employed by a society to make experience coherent and somewhat consistent for its members (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The symbolic universe serves to explain away or subsume things that threaten society’s cognitive order. Such "marginal realities" might include dream experiences, unallowable urges, death, deviance, and the behavior of members of other cultural groups. Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) social constructionist theory provides an intriguing lens for looking at animal behaviors that could potentially threaten the hold of “proper” conduct, thinking, or sense of self. As Tapper (1988) put it,

Animals… can be seen to perform the same basic functions as people (eating, excreting, moving, copulating, being born, giving birth, dying…) in ways that people conceivably could, yet which are forbidden to them by the rules that are fundamental to any cultural and moral system (p. 51).
At least in some societies, the manner in which the defenders of the symbolic universe preserve it against deviance or out-group cultures parallels aspects of the symbolic treatment of animals. Several types of symbolic defense are possible. Specifically, the “threat” posed by animal behavior can be eliminated outright by annihilation, corrected by taming (parallel to therapy), neutralized by employing it as a “bad example,” or subsumed by using it as an analogy of “exemplary” traits or acts.

One application of this idea lies in socialization. Animal symbolism can make proper behavior more salient to the young (Hirschman & Sanders, 1997). An earlier study by the author found that children, from preschool to high school, identified with animals who presented “appropriate” metaphors for the self’s gender and age characteristics and rejected ones who did not (Myers, 1986). But the use of animals as markers of both the preferred and the renounced also reaches into adults’ discourses about humanity and animality.

The most perilous human-animal comparisons exist where animals appear most like us and thus have the most potential for disturbing our sense of what is proper or socially sanctioned. Discussions of “higher” mammals’ abilities carry special significance. The converse is also true. Situations where human behavior deviates from conventions and rules, shows poor self-regulation, or reveals an “animal” aspect of ourselves are very likely to be loaded with evaluative metaphors and tensions. Feminists, anthropologists, and historians studying mental illness have discerned such patterns (Haraway, 1989; Urton, 1985; Eaton, 1980; Howells, 1975; Rosen, 1968). Similarly, childhood—at least in the West—is a place where the human condition is felt to closely approach the animal state.

Indeed, the use of animals as evaluative metaphors has special expression in discourses connecting children and animals in our culture. Reviewing three interwoven historical discourses that associate animals and children because both are “natural,” as opposed to “civilized,” will lead us to a deeper level, where our culture has been anxious to distinguish humanity and animality more absolutely. A critique of these patterns can inform a fresh look at theories of human development and relations of children with animals (Myers, 1998).

The Untamed Child

The metaphor of the untamed child places a high value on the outcomes of proper socialization. Animals, animality, and wildness play the role of “bad examples.” In the West, metaphors in which the beastliness of youth represents basic human
nature have long occurred in both popular thought and political and psychological theory.

Hobbes and Calvin provide examples of this theme in secular and Christian thought, respectively. Hobbes' "state of nature" was both an analytic construct and a proposition about childhood: just as adult self-interestedness had to be overcome by Leviathan, so too had children's tendencies by instruction and discipline. A similar idea occurs in Freud's writing. The id's infantile selfish impulses, never modified, express themselves in adults' dreams, where they may be represented by wild beasts (Freud, 1900/1965). Bodily openness, lack of self-control, and antisocial impulses worried both socializers and social thinkers. Animals provided not only clear examples but also good imagery, and the idea of taming enforced authoritative prescriptions for upward civilizing.

The Child of Nature

Another tendency in Western thought evaluates the socialized and the unsocialized in an opposite manner: natural is good, civilized is bad. Thus, in these metaphors animals serve as examples of what is good about children. The "child of nature" (Thorslev, 1972) is like the animal, in that at least for a while it exists somewhat apart from the fallen world of civilized adults, and thus is superior.

Rousseau (1755/1986; 1762/1979) provides a sophisticated metaphor. Animals, the Noble Savage, and children possess a positive self-love but not yet the vanity and self-division that afflict civilized people. Self-love enables a life of feeling, happiness, and independence and is not incompatible with a measure of natural sympathy for others. But seeking what we want from others and weighing what we get in comparison to others lead to self-deceit, resentment, and arrogance. Rousseau was as interested in how to avoid raising children who suffer the worst of this fate as he was in envisioning a society that could use reason to substitute for sensibilities lost in socialization.

The child of nature is in evidence in many places today. Later romantic period simplifications held that the child was inherently good and that its inclinations should be relatively unrestrained (Borstelmann, 1983)—a dominant theme in discussions of childhood since the Progressive Education movement near the turn of the nineteenth century. The moral status that innocence imparts to both animals and children is reflected in the historic application of humane laws to both groups. Today, both animals and children need protection from present and future environmental and social pathologies, for which they are clearly not responsible; sometimes they are even allied in a fight for a better future.
Childhood Animality as a Stage in Evolution Re-enacted

The two themes in modern thought discussed so far enlist animals and children in the service of ideological arguments about human nature and social control versus freedom. A third discourse adds two additional elements: a literal similarity between children and animals and a valuing of contact between children and animals at a particular phase of development.

Around the turn of the century, Hall, in the sway of the evolutionary enthusiasm of the time, began to study children closely. Although Darwin had not said so, many believed that the stages of fetal growth retrace the steps of evolution, and the Social Darwinists’ concept that cultures also have evolutionary stages was also prevalent. Hall joined these two ideas by proposing that recapitulation continues after birth, the child re-enacting cultural epochs (cf. Johnson, 1995). According to Gould (1977), recapitulation explained the nature of the child: “We understand children only when we recognize that their behavior replays a phyletic past....Since a human embryo repeats the physical stages of remote ancestors, the child must replay the mental history of more recent forebears” (pp. 135-136).

Hall’s Child Study movement both assumed and supported this interpretation (Hall & Browne, 1904). Parallels between animal and child behavior were discovered (for example, a quadruped period); phobias were explained by reference to earlier evolutionary periods; and child-rearing and schooling practices were evaluated for how well they fit the invariant developmental sequence. Not only are children like animals, they need them. Kaylor (1909) quoted “Dr. Hall” as having said, “Love of animals is inborn. The child that has had no pets is to be pitied” (p.206). Kaylor believed that his own data showed that children prefer animals suitable to the stage of culture they have thus far recapitulated. By adolescence the horse—integral to the achievement of human civilization—was the favorite. Kaylor ventured the following observation:

The acquisition of dominion over animals was of fundamental importance to the development of the race. If the child is to epitomize the race’s experiences, the pet becomes the cardinal factor at a certain stage in the child’s development ... to deprive a child of association with animals is to deprive him of his phyletic inheritance (pp. 236-237).

As in the other discourses, this construction of “the child” answered anxieties of its period, which in this case were spawned as a rural and community-centered existence was felt to be slipping (or catapulting) into an industrial one. A romantic vision of childhood and its animals was preserved, giving the latter a necessary role.
But ontogenetic unfolding carried both child and society forward to a progressive future. All three discourses use animals as metaphors for qualities that are natural in humans, and children have a larger share of such qualities. Whatever the value placed on the origin and the endpoint, child development moves from an animalistic state toward a distinctively human one. In each case, the transformation of the child rationalizes or criticizes the type of person required by the theory of society.

The Categorical Human-Animal Distinction in Western Traditions

In the instances discussed so far, the child-animal affinity—whether based on wildness, innocence, or ontogeny—is, or must be, outgrown. A primary business of being mature, it seems, is to not be an animal. This rigid definition of the human-animal boundary also underlies the pervasive assumption in psychology that animals are of marginal significance in human development. This theme has expressions in classical, medieval, and—in the guise of developmental theory—modern thought.

Although in everyday life we take the biological distinctness of our species from others as self-evident, biologists have moved away from the neat boundaries of the classical typological conception of species. As recent population genetics work has shown, we are a reproductively separate species in a fuzzy biological lineage sharing important common origins with other species—the Great Apes in particular. Yet, even a century and a half after Darwin we are inclined to minimize the blur. Something more than a concern to be biologically accurate in our self-conception must be at stake. Other cultures and the experiences of many who work today in close cooperation with animals illustrate how the human-animal boundary is experientially indefinite and intellectually malleable. The fuzziness need not cause anxiety either. As Hallowell (1960/1975) commented, “While in all cultures ‘persons’ comprise one of the major classes of objects to which the self must become oriented, this category of being is by no means limited to human beings” (p. 143). In the West, however, the human condition denotes not just our place in evolution but distance from, and opposition to, mere animality (Ingold, 1988). Medieval thinkers especially were confident in the separate status of humanity.

Theological writers of the Middle Ages clearly distinguished humans as above animals in a spiritual hierarchy. The human estate lay at as great a distance from animals as possible. Built on Plato’s and Aristotle’s ideas, the “Great Chain of Being” as Lovejoy (1936/1961) argued, assigned degrees of soul by their closeness to perfection and thus to God. Below God were eleven grades of angels. Next were humans. Far below our immortal souls came apes, monkeys, lower forms, and,
according to Aquinas, even things deficient in "good" and, therefore, evil. Aquinas believed some animals were satellites of Satan and "instigate by the powers of hell and [are] proper to be cursed" (Aquinas, quoted in Linzey, 1990).

The earlier classical thinkers believed the capacity for rationality and knowledge of "immutable essences" of things set the human soul apart. For Aristotle, the soul or "anima" was a nonmaterial organizing principle. Different types of living thing had different grades of soul. Humans shared with plants the capacity for self-nutrition and with animals, sensation and movement. But only humans could reason. Through Aristotle, the capacity for knowledge of eternal essences was passed to medieval thought, where it became a transcendent spiritual soul.

At the dawn of the Modern Era, Descartes radically revised this received view of living things but kept its conception of human specialness. He convincingly replaced the animating principles of nutrition, sensation, and movement, offering instead mechanistic and materialistic accounts of ten bodily functions (1632/1972). But his own experience with doubt and volition, together with his ability to conceive ideas such as "perfection" and geometrical proofs, convinced him of the transcendent nature of the rational soul, a unique possession of humans. That animals lack language "is evidence that brutes not only have a smaller degree of reason than men, but are wholly lacking in it" (Descartes, 1637/1971, p. 42).

Descartes' injection of skepticism into the culture helped in launching empiricists such as Locke, Hume, and Bacon. Over time, science had a corrosive effect on humans' special status in creation. The dividing line between humans and animals fell more into doubt and contention. In response, ideologies of childhood animality, among other ploys, strengthened the traditional distinctions where they seemed most problematic.

If humans were no longer automatically assured of special status and the basis it provided for social order or salvation, civilized status might still be acquired, and animals were apt analogies for those humans who had yet to acquire it. If hope were to be preserved, that similarity to animals had to be outgrown. Positing a social evolutionary history of humankind, through which the child ontogenetically progressed, assimilated even the Darwinian identification of humanity with animality. On the other hand, any attribution to animals of those higher traits held to make humans unique was contested: animals have only the mechanistic, instinctual body. Our culture clung tenaciously to a categorical distinction between humans and animals. At the same time, the culture conceded more and more continuity, partly by the device of a childhood animality that was to be transcended. This pattern has carried over to the domain of human development theories.
Animals in Theories of Human Development

Psychology, like other social sciences, grew out of the philosophical traditions discussed above, and bears their marks. The Darwinian revolution and the focus on biological bases of behavior notwithstanding, psychology, when it seeks to define its subject as the mental life of humankind, often defines humanity by what makes us unique among species. Consequently, when our human sciences look at our relations with animals, such basic assumptions unavoidably split humans and animals. These premises invisibly marginalize relations with animals, even when these relations are addressed.

In developmental theories, this definitional tendency is observable in the teloi posited as endpoints of psychological growth. The idea of development implies directionality. The endpoints enshrined in many theories of development are the features of humans that Western philosophy has chosen as unique and thus putatively essential to humans: rationality, self-consciousness, and related notions. Such features were classically seen as transcendent of the animal body. Thus, psychologists formalized old philosophical doctrines when they answered the question, “What distinguishes the mature person?” with one of these capacities. At the same time, they also participated in a culturally specific form of using the animal symbolically in defining the human—a form that assumes a value-laden difference.

To understand how children’s rational thinking, concepts, language, and self-in-society develop is useful. Clearly, all these contribute to creativity and responsibility. But, for the purpose of understanding children’s relations with animals, all produce a systematic, circular denial of the importance of such relations:

1. Development is the realization of some valued human capacity;

2. What is valued in humans is what makes us unique; and,

3. The mature human has actualized its difference from other species.

Although children may be like, or have an affinity to, animals, such connection is secondary or spurious in light of an especially human capacity that develops with maturity. Within such frameworks, animals can mean nothing fundamental to human development. The matter arises, if at all, as an interesting application. As we might expect—given the origins of these endpoints of development—modern theories of development marginalize not only relations with animals but also the body. Three traditional teloi in developmental theory illustrate this: psychological adjustment to society, rationality, and the self-in-society.
Psychological Adjustment to Society

The metaphorical closeness of the child, the animal, and the body—all conceived as asocial or anti-social at root—is very strong in the psychoanalytic tradition. We noted the child/animal parallel of the id’s wishes. The animal-like child is confronted with the egos of others, through whom she or he must try to fulfill these wishes. Clearly, this is a frustrating exercise in the art of psychic compromise and eventuates in the child’s own reality-functioning ego. But the instinctual urges never go away; they are just directed differently, usually out of the ego’s awareness.

Psychoanalysis assumes our animal nature, but its conception of the animal body is asocial. Not surprisingly, some pathologies of development express themselves through animal imagery, and normal development entails the transcendence of too close a connection to the body or to animals. Reality functioning refers to the human domain. Freud’s writing (1913/1950) illustrates the classical psychoanalytic stance toward animals. The bodily frankness of animals, Freud thought, made them attractive and understandable to young children:

Children show no trace of the arrogance which urges modern adult civilized men to draw a hard-and-fast line between their own nature and that of all other animals. Children have no scruples over allowing animals to rank as their full equals. Uninhibited as they are in the avowal of their bodily needs, they no doubt feel themselves more akin to animals than to their elders, who may well be a puzzle to them (pp. 126-27).

Continued or abnormal attachment to animals, however, indicated a weakness of ego functions. In Freud’s case history of Little Hans (1909/1955) who expressed his fear of his father in a phobia of horses, the horse was merely Hans’ vehicle for oedipal anxiety: the real content was his human family. Animal imagery revealed the id in Freud’s analysis of dreams and jokes; severe mental illness was regression to earlier animalistic phases.

Animals also play roles, perhaps inspired by Freud’s ideas, in other branches of psychodynamic thought. These include the following: (a) symbols of the totemic self (Ferenczi, 1916); (b) representations of the shadow self (Jung, 1971); (c) revelations of repressed childhood sexual or hostile urges (Menninger, 1951); (d) transitional objects (Wolfe, 1977; Soares, 1985; Harris, 1993); (e) representations of security or authority figures (Schowalter, 1979; Woods, 1965); (f) psychodynamic phobias (McLinton & Meir, 1978); and, today, (g) projective therapy techniques (Houston, 1982; Gallegos, 1991). Although this list encompasses
considerable theoretical diversity, animal imagery and interests are generally aligned with immaturity.

The therapy-related examples listed above may figure positively or negatively in development, and they may provide welcome or morbid avenues of regression to truer or earlier phases of the self. But growth eventually takes the person beyond them toward a mature social—human—ego in a mono-species adult world. Child-animal associations are outmoded with adjustment and maturity, illustrating the circularity alluded to above. Because of their symbolic meanings, some clinicians believe animals—usually in fantasy—are useful in the working-through of conflictual issues (Heiman, 1956, 1965; Bettleheim, 1976; Kupferman, 1977; Sherick, 1981; Van de Castle, 1983; Levinson & Sanders, 1986).

The therapy examples discussed here reveal this circularity in another way. Because the nature of the distinctively human psychic-symbolic process is, itself, of fundamental interest, the interest has been largely in animals as symbols. Real individual animals and relations to them serve as illustrations, not subjects worthy of investigation in their own right. Excluded from my discussion has been the huge boom in animal-facilitated therapy of many sorts, in which particular relations with individual animals are granted worth in their own right. Much of this newer literature gives animals a real role in human development. But such animals often are valued only instrumentally. A similar bias is evident in research on the role of animals in fostering developmental goals such as empathy, social skills, cognition, and other concerns. Poresky (1996) is an example—though a worthy one—and lists similar studies. Although this may strengthen our understanding of the importance of animals in human development, the key variable of interest, the child-animal relationship, needs to be the object of understanding.

**Maturity as Rationality**

Rationality, in either an instrumental/practical sense or in a discursive/critical sense, has long been upheld as what is unique and, therefore, essential about humans in the West. Beyond the colloquial meaning of self-interested calculation, rationality connotes detachment, objectivity, and dispassion. In the guise of scientific thought, instrumental ingenuity was wedded to criticism of knowledge. Not surprisingly, it inspired a distinctive vision of development.

Piaget conceptualized the mental development of the child as approaching a posited endpoint, “hypothetical-deductive reasoning” (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). Through activity in the world, the child’s logic operates in increasingly complex patterns and creates more adequate cognitive schemata. Piaget does not drastically
cut off humans from organic evolution, but his conception of rationality is demanding. On his criteria, some forms of “participatory” thought by children are animistic and anthropomorphic and, therefore, inferior. Piaget saw the projection of intentionality onto the inanimate world as immature; others have observed that children reason about animals by comparison to a human model. By gradually perceiving discrepancies, the child will correct these conceptions and achieve a more decentered point of view.

Research in this tradition has been very careful to avoid biases in conceiving of children’s thinking and has been useful in understanding children’s relations to animals. Nonetheless, with the exception of new research on children’s biological knowledge (Hirschfeld & Gelman 1994), the interest has been in animals as illustrative contents of human conceptual change, not as subjects in their own right in the child’s thought.

Further, rationality is often conceived in a way that disjoins it from the animal body. Dewey (1934/1980) and others criticized the exclusive focus on rationality for the distortions it can encourage in our thinking. Cognition should not be thought of separately from the social, emotional, and bodily aspects of activity. Unfortunately, these more subjective aspects of cognition are less observable and thus are neither the subject of developmental psychology nor acceptable sources of evidence in science. But in both animals and humans of all ages, the body and the mind are inextricably intertwined. We do experience in our bodies our interactions with the world, and this complex sensing must fund “higher” cognitive activity (Gendlin, 1962). This experience, however, shows up neither in science nor in the conception of thought we derive from our own scientific or other activity. It is, therefore, omitted from our account of child development. Without probing deeply into the nature and cognitive value of the child’s felt sense of his closeness to animals (or anything else, for that matter), it is assumed that desirable development lies in the opposite direction.

Language and the Human Self-in-Society

We would hardly be human were we not socialized into our particular cultures. The idea of a universal “generic” human must be a myth born of the same enlightenment approach to rationality that underlies the telos discussed above. Because we are members of inter-generationally transmitted cultures that are greater than ourselves, some cultural force must impose its patterns on individuals, and language is thought to be the principal medium. That nonhuman animals cannot participate in the linguistically constructed set of meanings setting humans apart from nature

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is, in this perspective, axiomatic. Ingold (1986) has pointed out how culture appropriates nature, and, as Douglas (1975) stated, “In the last most inclusive set of categories, nature represents the outsider” (p. 289).

The use of language is central here, not only because animals don’t have it but because of the high level of self-reflective awareness and thought that language permits. Early twentieth century origins of social psychology and anthropology clearly fall into the pattern of reifying language as a firm dividing line between animals and humans, whose development then proceeds separately. Mead’s (1934/1962) influential theory of social interaction serves as origin and example: “Man’s behavior is such in his social group that he is able to become an object to himself, a fact which constitutes him a more advanced product of evolutionary development than are the lower animals” (p. 37, n. 1). Mead replaced the Aristotelian and Cartesian markers of human difference—soul or mind—with a secularized version: language behavior. Language is the means by which we achieve our social coordination and individual selfhood. Animals, being silent, cannot participate in these processes.

Examples from sociological and anthropological studies illustrate the consequences when animals step onto the social stage. One researcher analyzed animals in children’s pretend play behavior only if they took “family” roles (Corsaro, 1985); another watched such play and noted only that it enacted dominance as an element in identity (Fernandez, 1986). Isbell (1985) described how, in an Andean community, a sequence of animal metaphors applied to the individual’s identity across age statuses and “moved” the person through the life cycle. Sanders (1990, 1993b) who has contributed to animal studies by brilliantly applying symbolic interaction analysis, tended to find that the human-imposed frame determined the moves and meanings. Such cases reduce the significance of animals to symbolic meanings. Linguistic interaction is presumed to dominate over modes in which the animal is a more equal participant, and other humans are presupposed to be the significant environment of the person. The diversity in cultural meanings of animals attests to the constitutive power of language and other cultural forces, but again—since what is essentially human sets us apart—we find the circularity by which animals possess no fundamental importance to us.

But doubts have been raised about this separation. Not unexpectedly, they involve a re-examination of the role of the body as well. Sarles (1977) analyzed the barriers thrown up by a too cerebral conception of language, and he pointed to the telling, implicit dogmatism that “whatever language is, animals don’t have it!” (p. 62). He argued that this perspective splits aspects of the person. Similarly, Jackson (1988) criticized the intellectualist bias of much social theory and argued that
cultural analysis should not "reduce embodied experience to a mere sign" (p. 328). Mead (1934/1962) eliminated the body as a source of the sense of self, because, curiously, "we cannot get an experience of our whole body" (p. 136). But as Hanson (1986) observes, Mead's "denial of...the body's reflexivity verges on a denial of the body's integrity" (p. 72).

Evidence from studies of infants, however, suggests a more central role of the body in meaning and the sense of self (Stern, 1985). Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) objected to "linguocentrism" and argued that we don't have to build the world from discrete data bits from outside ourselves; rather, our experience is one of being already in the world. Others are known to us more immediately than through speech only. This possibility simultaneously breaks down not only the isolation of person from person, but also that between mind and modes of embodied experience and between person and animal.

We again find, in approaches discussed here, the familiar circularity and the parallel theme we have been tracing alongside children and animals—the separation of animal body from higher human faculties. It is time to amplify this parallel.

The Self-Organizing Human Animal Body

Two negative consequences arise from this review of the child-animal theme in cultural history and theories of development. First, assumptions about valued human unique qualities disjoin animals and humans. A divergent trend is set between children and animals as mature human qualities are actualized in development. Animals, notwithstanding the attention of a growing community of researchers, are an incidental, secondary, or worse still, regressive focus in development.

The second negative consequence is the implied dichotomy in the person's functioning. The theories posit, on the one hand, a simple and mechanistic body with either primitive instinctual order or no inherent pattern at all and, on the other, a conceptual order imposed by an impersonal logic of social relations, mind, or culture. The complexity of adult culture seems derivable only from some interposed percept, concept, or schema placed there psychodynamically—or by the ascendancy of rational thought or linguistic symbolism.

An almost autistic animal body assuredly could not achieve maturity alone. It becomes socialized but does not determine this outcome. This perspective assumes that our image of the external world is built only indirectly, in objects of perception the subjectivity of which, like our own, must be invisible (Gendlin, 1992). On such an epistemology, based on divorce of mind from body, no immediately meaningful interaction or genuine sense of connection is possible.
Not asocial, the bodies of many mammals and other groups imply many social moves in long relationships. Our language evolved in already very social bodies that inhabited, moreover, an interspecies context. Evidence of how interaction and language are united in this human animal body would address our dual quandary. Child-animal interaction offers such evidence just because the linguistic capacities of animals are different from those of other human interactants. The meanings children make about animals reflect features of their nonverbal interacting with them (Myers, 1998). This could not be the case if meanings were strictly imposed through linguistic transmission. Because language is not burdened by being the sole source of meanings and disjoined from bodily experience, it seems reasonable to expect that our capacity for speech builds further upon the basis of meaning implicit in interaction.

Of course, the first business in understanding anything about humans—in psychology or anthropology—is understanding basic human ways of encountering the world. It makes sense to apply all the extant findings about children when we ask about children’s relations to animals. Researchers should do this assertively, but also creatively. The older assumptions discussed in this paper still typify much of the empirical work on children—or humans generally—and animals. Because animals present variations on the characteristics of a social interactant, research on child-animal interaction is fertile ground for new discoveries. To be open to these discoveries, we must grant that a unique phenomenon may be present and be willing to assume, at least provisionally, that person or child and animal are equal contributors to interactions (Shapiro, 1989; Sanders & Arluke, 1993; Sanders, 1993a; Alger & Alger, 1997).

Such a tentative assumption is rewarding. Young children’s responses to animals and the meanings they express by imitation or words demonstrate a fine sensitivity to the differences those animals present as interactants. Their social abilities can adjust to varying characteristics of interactants—not following one pattern, whether presumably imposed or instinctual. Children’s meanings about animals do not stop just at those imposed by language. To the contrary, the non-linguistic dimensions of child-animal interaction structure culturally received patterns and continue to exert effects even after children’s thoughts have been influenced by language—in their judgments, for example, about harm to animals (Myers, 1998). These findings support a view of the human animal body as self-organizing in a way that includes and surpasses simple linguistic orderings. Ultimately, this view, emphasizing the primacy of the body, requires a modification of the social constructionist perspective with which we began this paper (Gendlin, 1992).
That animals do indeed provide something important in development is an important, additional result of both these assumptions and these findings. This may be a new realization in a culture that has long assumed that what makes us most human is what sets us apart and that the relevant environment of human beings is exclusively other humans. Children’s relations with animals show that what is essentially human in us is something deeper and older—indeed, something that connects us with other animals. Language and mind can make us yet more human only if that older connection is not lost.

Notes

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2. In addition to the pattern of indifference discussed in this article, the unimportance of animals’ roles in child development is supported by examining the indices of Damon’s (1998) Handbook of Child Psychology, 5th edition, for references to animals in any role in development; pets; or animals under social relations or development. Volume 3 on social development showed no references, nor did Volume 4 on practical applications including therapy. Volume 2 on Cognition, Perception, and language gives three entries on the topic of biological knowledge, with one extended discussion. As discussed later in this paper, this topic is recent; most papers cited were in the 1990s, with Carey (1985) being the oldest pertinent contribution. Moreover, the fundamental concerns of these researchers are the organization of knowledge and mechanisms of developmental change in knowledge and reasoning, not relations with animals per se. Animals are indexed once in Ramachandran’s (1994) Encyclopedia of Human Behavior in a brief discussion of animal phobias.

3. In the views of other cultures, Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde note, “It takes the transforming power of culture and society to turn the animal into a person” (1998, p.636). But the same assumption characterizes their own approach as well, and is common in discussions of processes that depend on cultural and conventional ordering, such as, indeed, personhood. The post-Darwin tradition that views human development in organism-environment terms (which implies an non-categorical difference between humans and other animals) includes Baldwin (1895, 1897) and descendants such as Werner and Kaplan (1963). Here, nevertheless, transcendence of the animal condition is suggested by the idea that human capacities allow “ever-new forms of self regulation to emerge in ontogeny and innovation of cultural meaning systems...in human history (Valsiner, 1998, p. 199).
References


