

CONNECTEDNESS AS A SOURCE OF INSTRUCTION

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by Susanne Karr

Where do we start? First of all, I would like to tell you that I feel honoured to be invited here, as this conference gives me the opportunity to share some of my thoughts and concerns. The subject, „Connectedness as a source of instruction“ refers to the work in my book (with the title „Connectedness) – and since it was, so far, published only in German, I am very proud to introduce some of its contents to you here, in English, for the first time. The circumstance that the conference is addressing people from various backgrounds, like art and literature, is at the same time challenging and suitable. On the one hand because in my work, I like to approach the subjects from different scientific backgrounds – myself having academic roots in philosophy, anthropology and literature – and on the other hand, I don't believe too much in boundaries and dichotomies. On the contrary, there seems to be a growing demand to merge and combine knowledge from different backgrounds, which practically means bringing real life subjects together. This means that we privilege a worldview (episteme) of relationality in humbly accepting the fact that none of us could exist on her or his own. Living is only possible – and only makes sense – in connection with other living beings.

In my work I am trying to find arguments that can help changing the destructive attitudes towards earth and its inhabitants which are constantly threatening a peaceful coexistence of various life forms, menacing to wipe out this wonderful diversity. One important aspect could be the realisation that our companions – by which I understand human and non-human living beings – as subjects of their own, with their own intrinsic value. This changes the perspective – a subject cannot be taken for granted and used as an object for us to serve. And a subject is very likely to have ways of expressing its intentions. So there is due reason to believe that all these subjects have variations of „language“. The question is – how can we approximate our understanding?

The starting point of my reflections here is the title of the conference. „In other tongues“: what could that mean? Surprisingly, it contains one crucial experience that you probably know of: the ability to understand other tongues. It is the exact image of what I want to share with you, and what I will try to explain by my use of the expression „connectedness“. Communication is key. Communicating „in other tongues“ means a transgression of the verbal exchange, which is often referred to as „language“. My aim is to show that you don't need to rely on sophisticated models of language to be able to connect to other beings. Undoubtedly, many people who have or had the privilege to know animals as friends know about this way of communication. Nevertheless, there is still a lot of ongoing discussions about this fact in scientific circles that consider themselves objective, meaning, most of the time, anthropocentric, because they judge other animals and their abilities solely from their human point of view.

But why would it be desireable to connect to other beings at all? There are two quick answers to this, and many more if you come to think of it. The first answer could be: because we can't live and survive without other living beings. The second answer makes the question look a little bit like a rhetorical question. It simply answers: because you can't avoid it. Being alive, you are already connected.

Thus, you can thrive on this fact. You can feel enriched by the many contacts you have in the living world. You can enjoy the multi-faceted figures of life, not only in other human beings, but in non-humans as well. The wonderful field of successful communication lends its graceful feelings of completeness to everyone taking part in it. This refers, of course, also to the non-human participants.

What I want to find out now, is, how it can possibly work to communicate without using words? In other tongues, meaning, not without expressions, but with expressions beyond our day to day colloquial language, as well as using different languages.

Why is this important? The capacity of speaking a „language“, understood in the linguistic content of the expression, is very often used to differentiate between humans and animals. Many natural scientists know and speak of animals having languages for sure. But the mainstream treatment of animals still relies on traditional taxonomies, describing animals as non-speaking, non-thinking and non-feeling, more things than beings, without culture and social relations. Every obviously well-functioning system is traced down to some obscure idea of „instinct“ (which, by the way, would make it necessary to investigate this idea – if it functions so well in sophisticated systems, it may well be upgraded. Which results in the question: is the expression „instinct“ still adequate?)

Anachronistic as it may seem, many notions which are still widely spread today are deeply rooted in these concepts. Luckily, there are also many bright minded individuals today – and their number is growing – who are able to appreciate their own experiences as well as the insights of diverse research fields. There is plenty of sophisticated evidence of the animal as active agent, which, taken by itself, should already assure its rights. So there is research and data on the one hand. And there are uncountable personal stories to gain inspiration from. Relying on one's own experience marks a tremendously important point, since there is no other way to experience world than through our selves: our senses, our experiences, our psyché, our biography. May the self-proclaimed „objective scientists“ rage that subjectivity be prone to errors. It is important to keep in mind that if you understand „objectivity“ in this way – meaning cutting out the whole realm of non-measurable quantities, such as feelings, relations etc. – it is even more prone to errors, as it has filtered out the most precious element of perception: the momentum of witnessing life through our own personal perspective. This position, the appreciation of one's own perception, might go hand in hand with the claim to acknowledge various subjectivities. This includes the right of human and non-human beings to be accepted as subjects with their own life, meaning, quite literally, having relations, feeling love or fear or pain, having, quite simply, a biography. So this change of attitude in research, which is also the idea of talking about „situated knowledge“ rather than „objective science“, may guarantee the drive of this cause – changing the status of living beings, including non-human ones. Taking into account that knowledge always comes from a viewpoint, and therefore can't get rid of subjective influence, suggests a different way of research. It also keeps in mind that there is no context-free and value-free knowledge. So accepting that knowledge is situated makes insights more accessible and even, in a strange way, easier to comprehend, because you consider the setting of the „fabrication“ of this knowledge. But there is another important aspect here which I think can't be overestimated: when we give up the idea that the scientist is some omniscient god-like observer we gain space to accept the agency of the so-called object that we observe. We are empowered to realise that the object changes with the observer. This means an upgrading of objects into subjects, taking them seriously and admitting them agency. The Belgian philosopher Vinciane Despret is suggesting a „generous approach to do research, which allows its subjects“ – (meaning both, the observer and the observed) „to act and respond in a large space of possibilities. One of the benefits of such an attitude is gaining surprising results.“ As the famous British ethologist Thelma Rowell put it, it is necessary to ask intelligently to get intelligent answers. (Or did she say who asks stupid questions will get stupid answers?)

(cf. <http://www.vincianedespret.be/2010/04/sheep-do-have-opinions/#more-16>)

Philosophers, artists, jurists and writers – to name just a few – are constantly gathering material that is supporting the idea that any living being has intrinsic value and the right to live freely and without suppression. It is one of the most significant questions of philosophy, the question of the „subject“, which is at stake here. Reasons and criteria to defend the animal as a subject are piling up and reading them will leave many of us wondering how on earth it was even possible to deny these facts for such a long time. The parallels to other liberation movements like the abolition-movement, the feminist movement or any anti-racist initiatives are striking. Surprisingly, notions of women not being able to act rationally – which was a main argument to deny them the right to vote or study – are not as old as we would wish them to be.

Even more surprising that Descartes' notion of the „animal-machine“ is still lingering and seems to reign many peoples' heads, if you come to think of the violent and forceful structures which instrumentalise animals for solely human consumption up to our days. The wilful allegation that animals' cries and efforts to escape be solely mechanic reactions of a soulless apparatus seem still to be present if you consider the easiness of deciding if an animal has to die simply for the next sandwich or not.

But let's leave these horrid abstractions, standing at the beginning of ultra-rationalist so-called scientific and objective concepts. More suitable than cutting off everything personal and subjective – which is, as far as we know, the only way for us to experience the world – is using the instruments we already have. As sentient human beings, only our human-scale experiences of the world are available to us. But „a world shows up“ for us, as Alva Noë, the American cognitive philosopher, puts it, when we turn towards other living beings and let ourselves be affected by their perceptions – even if these be small („petites“), as Leibniz, the baroque philosopher and physicist put it. Following Leibniz, it is actually “a world”, meaning a whole universe. In his fearless description of the connections in the universe he describes why every movement is perpetuating through all bodies. He is actually talking from the perspective of the physicist, arguing that any single small space of the universe is full of matter. If this matter is moved, it sends the movement farther to the next entity, next to it. So from this point of view we can also experience movement. This could be the base of sharing experiences. But Leibniz has another interesting thought: He maintains that every being contains all of the world, but every one in its individual and peculiar way: “Each one represents the whole of the universe by exactly mirroring (...) the changes that the bodies of others effect on their own.“, as he writes in the „Monadology“. Through experiencing perceptions of other living beings – which is something that especially children love, when they play and take on different personalities – we can “reseed our souls”. This expression I lend from Donna Haraway, because it evokes a poetic event: not only is it endlessly comforting to know of the possibility of “reseeding”. It also shows a process, a growing, and the opportunity to care for that which is growing. To advance human and non-human flourishings “on a planet that is not yet murdered”, as she is framing it, “we need not just reseeding, but also re-inoculating with all the fermenting, fomenting and nutrient-fixing associates that seeds need to thrive. Recuperation is still possible, but only in multispecies alliance.” (Haraway 2013)

One possible way to strengthen this sometimes weak alliance – the connection between living beings – is the presence of our souls reseeded. To me, this sounds like a soul that is strengthened through appreciation. The mere act of taking into account that the echoes of life surrounding us will be heard. The soul of a living being is the instrument to reach out to another living being. It is the transpersonal move towards the other. Soul can be understood as a transpersonal instrument. Imagine soul as the sparkle of life, a dynamic agent which is connecting all living beings. Soul is not something which is tied to the individuality of a person, but facilitates a transpersonal, trans-individual coherence that lies beneath any kind of communication.

Leibniz was speaking of the multi faceted image of the world, when he was explaining that every subject contains the whole world – but every single one from a different perspective. This picture is a good illustration for the importance of every single one. If you cut out one perspective, you lose coherence. Every subject mirrors the world from its own perspective, and the own perspective is the representation of your own experience, feelings, specific perceptions. This unbelievable potentiality of the transpersonal soul invites us to immerse into different worlds. This means communicating beyond verbalisation, and the instrument that is offering this possibility is the soul. In this case, through being affected by the emotions and experiences of other sentient beings, we “become” in a way, these beings, even if only for moments. The expression “becoming” describes the process of what communication can achieve. The act of shape-shifting is lending itself as a metaphor for communication. In being affected we absorb a part of these companion beings. And as any soulful encounter leaves us a different person than we were before, we can't foretell the outcome.