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critical animal pedagogy: liberating the nonhuman learner?

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This essay discusses the nonhuman learner in the context of critical animal pedagogy. While critical animal pedagogy (CAP) aims to liberate nonhumans from human oppression and exploitation, applying the notions of liberation and learning to nonhumans is not straightforward. In particular, the dichotomy between educating humans and training nonhumans represents an unwarranted speciesism that should not be reproduced by CAP.

Keywords: critical animal pedagogy, Freire, learning, nonhuman animals, training

The Challenge of Animal Ethics in Education

Modernity has not only seen dramatic changes in human societies but also in human-animal relationships. As working animals were increasingly replaced by motorised vehicles and machines, slaughterhouses were banished to the outskirts of cities, and a hitherto close (even if not non-violent) daily co-existence with nonhuman animals ceased (Franklin, 1999). Over the course of the 20th century, the exploitation of non-human animals in the context of the Animal Industrial Complex (Twine, 2012) has reached unimaginable proportions through the centralisation and technologisation of production, globalisation, and the financialisation of capital (e.g., Nibert, 2013). The animal industry as an essential pillar of Western and global economies is based on institutionalised forms of anthropocentrism and speciesism that legitimise the devaluation, objectification and exploitation of non-human animals (Sanbonmatsu, 2011). Today, 70 billion land animals are killed each year in the meat industry alone (Sanders, 2020) not counting those millions of animals killed in research and development, hunting and fishing, and the fur and leather industries, as well as those sacrificed for agriculture, forestry, and other forms of human land and water use.

Early abolitionist positions appeared with the Romantic movement and its anti-modern stance that went beyond the animal protection narrative and demanded an end to the exploitation of nonhumans as working animals, livestock, zoo exhibits and even pets. This demand later resurfaced in Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975) and the animal rights movement (Franklin, 1999), which, for their part, have influenced the development of Critical Animal Studies (e.g., Nocella et al., 2014; Sanbonmatsu, 2011; Sorenson, 2014) and, more specifically, Critical Animal Pedagogy (CAP) (e.g., Nocella et al., 2019). A total liberation or critical animal pedagogy "does not seek to just destabilize human power in the abstract, but roots this in the need to support cultural and political practices that actively seek to overthrow speciesist relations across society" (Kahn & Humes, 2009, p. 182). CAP has therefore developed a wide spectrum of non-invasive and non-interventionist possibilities for different age groups and school subjects. They include an age-appropriate deconstruction of the

animal industrial complex, its myths and tactics, and the underlying carnism (Joy, 2011), anthropocentrism, and speciesism as well as the consideration of individual or collective strategies such as a vegan lifestyle or political activism (e.g., Gunnarsson Dinker & Pedersen, 2019).

CAP sees its aims and practices in the tradition of Critical Pedagogy that strives for liberation (Freire, 1990). Indeed, the banking model in pedagogy which Freire critiques also applies in this case: It treats learners as objects, or empty containers that can be filled with knowledge deemed appropriate by the elite, thereby silencing the students and reproducing the oppressive system – here anthropocentrism, speciesism, and the carnistic ideology. While these are certainly present in society at large and reproduced via socialisation the education system also contributes to this state of affairs in a number of ways (e.g., Fonseca, 2022; Pedersen, 2010). Beyond this similarity, however, the applicability of Freire's approach to human-animal relations is less clear, especially because of his explicitly anthropocentric humanism that makes the liberation of nonhumans and a non-exploitative relationship with them impossible (e.g., Bell & Russell, 2019; Corman, 2011; Kahn, 2010). However, as suggested elsewhere (Gu ć, forthcoming; Spannring & Grušovnik forthcoming) a rereading of Freire's extensive work from an anti-speciesist perspective might provide some mutually inspiring provocations. One such issue is the relationship between species, learning model, and liberation, which shall be discussed in the following.

Liberating Animals Through Critical Animal Pedagogy?

Contrary to Critical Pedagogy, CAP engages with human learners as oppressors rather than victims of oppression (Gunnarsson Dinker & Pedersen, 2016, p. 417; MacCormack, 2013). Although this is an important strategy, the view of animals as learners for liberation remains either absent or strangely speciesist. This constitutes a theoretical inconsistency and ethical shortcoming. On the one hand, the liberation of non-human actors as the goal of CAP is predominantly understood in the sense of abolitionism, i.e. 'empty[ing] cages' (Regan, 2012) and feedlots. This can imply the end of all relations with domesticated animals and ultimately their extinction – a position that seems neither feasible nor just and desirable (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011) – or their liberation from exploitative and abusive conditions. In the latter instance, the animals continue to be reduced to species representatives and objects that, according to human moral concepts, are transferred into a presumably liberated life situation. Subjectivity is granted to them as a species or a particular group, e.g. cows in the dairy industry. What cow Berta experiences and how that differs from that of cow Lisa, and how it could be facilitated is not considered. It thereby remains bound to a well-meaning but paternalistic speciesism that continues to refuse to engage with a learning animal subject. A process of emancipation of an animal subject is not implied here, although CAP likes to refer to the agency of animals (e.g., Hribal, 2011) to legitimise the moral claim of animal rights.

On the other hand, some authors go beyond the abolitionist credo "Hands off!" (MacCormack, 2013) and demand "learning *from* more-than-human teachers" (Lupinacci, 2019, p. 95). However, this call either remains on an abstract, categorical level or refers to companion animals without critically interrogating the power differential in personal relationships with nonhumans and suggesting a robust ethical framework that starts from the nonhumans' point of view. Rather, CAP remains trapped in the behaviouristic paradigm underlying Freire's banking model (e.g., Meijer, 2014, 2020) that ignores subjects as "owners of their own experiences", and learners with their own questions to the world (De Giorgio, 2016).

CAP thereby fails to deconstruct the speciesism in our relationships with nonhumans – especially

those who are our partners and family members and continuously "anthropo-formed" (Marchesini, 2016, p. 180) through behaviouristic conditioning. Very often, animal learning is confused with training animals to fit into human society (as tends to happen for marginalized human groups as well; e.g., Quinn & Blandon, 2020) or to fit the research question and set-up. Such an approach reproduces the differentiation between humans, for whom a behaviourist learning model has come to be seen as inadequate at least in education science, and nonhumans, for whom this is normal, natural, and necessary not only according to animal trainers (e.g., Hearne, 2016; Parelli et al., 2003) but also to social scientists (e.g., Haraway, 2007) and a number of ethologists (e.g., Pepperberg, 1987). Applied ethology is very much entangled with the farm, equestrian and dog training industries, where questions of what humans can do with nonhumans or how their welfare can be controlled in non-natural environments dominate. In research 'testing' animal intelligence and cognitive abilities, animal bodies and minds are manipulated without consideration of their autonomy, dignity, integrity and privacy. Moreover, collecting scientific evidence of animal intelligence and learning whether in domesticated or wild animals teaches us little about learning in the sense of "becoming the owner of an experience" and how to preserve this innate ability in their co-existence with humans (De Giorgio, 2016, p. 173).

This inconsistency could be seen as an indicator of the pervasiveness of behaviourism as a folk pedagogy and the lack of awareness of its negative consequences for humans and nonhumans (De Giorgio & De Giorgio-Schoorl, 2017; Kohn, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Yet ignoring the silencing effect of the banking model is in stark contradiction to CAP's effort to not position nonhumans only as suffering victims but as agents with rich subjectivities and voices (Corman & Vandracová, 2014). The latter are actually undermined by behaviouristic training (De Giorgio, 2016), even if it is euphemistically called education (Meijer, 2020). The lack of scepticism toward this cultural practice of conditioning animal behaviour in CAP is also somewhat surprising since the ubiquity of conditioning and self-commodification processes in late modern societies have led to concern for the role of critical pedagogy and emancipation in education science (Biesta, 2012). While open oppression and violence certainly still exist for many groups of humans and nonhumans, covert oppression through conditioning and its alienating effects have become a pervasive phenomenon. This particularly applies to nonhuman animals whom we train to fit social demands, our personal desires, and our daily routines (Spannring, 2019). As we have convinced ourselves to have humanized our relation with them and to train them for their own good, we still fail to understand and preserve their learning as the constructivist and self-determined process of a subject with his/her own world of questions and projects (De Giorgio & De Giorgio-Schoorl, 2017). Freire's dialogical counter-concept of education thereby remains untapped for an anti-speciesist CAP.

Liberation: From Anthropo-Formation to Animal Learning

Taking an anti-speciesist ethological (De Giorgio & De Giorgio-Schoorl, 2017) perspective I challenge the belief that learning for animals means training and redefine learning and liberation drawing on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Freire's banking model and all forms of conditioning and functionalisation are based on the behaviouristic model that is used to produce desired behaviour and eliminate undesired behaviour by applying rewards or punishments. There are different types of such external motivation on a continuum from heteronomous to autonomous, meaning that as we identify with and integrate social norms and expectations we increasingly experience external motivation as internal. Set apart from this continuum are the experience of amotivation as a result of a lack of perceived competence or perceived behaviour-outcome independence (learned helplessness), and the experience of intrinsic motivation where behaviour is

associated with an inherent satisfaction rather than serving a goal or value (Ryan & Deci, 2017). While it is relatively easy to recognize external, heteronomous motivation and deal with it, internalized forms of external motivation are much more perfidious in that they are much harder to interrogate critically. However, the negative consequences of behaviouristic training, such as decreased intrinsic motivation, ownership, curiosity, creativity, risk-taking, cooperation, and responsibility-taking, have been shown in numerous studies. Indeed, too much conditioned reactive behaviour is associated with inner conflicts, anxiety, drivenness, depletion, and alienation on the individual psychological level (Kohn, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

It is easy to see how these forms of motivation apply not only to humans but also to nonhumans. While punishment is shunned or euphemized (e.g., the seven "games" in "natural" horsemanship by Pat Parelli; Parelli et al., 2003), positive reinforcement is hailed as the manifestation of a caring human-animal relationship. Trained, well-behaved animals are the most agreeable companions since they smoothly fit our interpretations of a situation, needs, and plans. They allow us to read their behaviour as a sign of consent, 'their own choice' or even that the animal is 'having fun'. Resistance is mostly read as disobedience that calls for further training or 'persuasion' with titbits. We conveniently oversee the mechanistic way of producing a desired behaviour (often as a reaction to our own social and personal stimuli), and its negative effects on the nonhuman animal's subjectivity (De Giorgio & De Giorgio-Schoorl, 2017). Of course, nonhumans are not machines, but our unwillingness and incompetence to let go of their control all too often turn them into machines.

Against this dominant concern with controlling and manipulating the behaviour of human and nonhuman learners, Ryan and Deci's approach foregrounds "how organisms naturally learn, develop, and self-organise actions" (2017, vii) with the aim of preserving integrity and well-being. Building on the general principle of "organization" in theoretical biology the starting point of their self-determination theory – and the connection to our concern with nonhuman animals – is "the tendency of living entities, under supportive conditions, to progress toward increased differentiation and integration" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 5). Thus, all organisms need and desire to understand their world through gaining information and processing experience, to enhance their complexity while preserving their overall integrity and autonomy (De Giorgio & De Giorgio-Schoorl, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 32). Intrinsic motivation to make experiences, explore and play, has been likened to the emergence of "the first faint thrills of intellectual joy […] in the emotional life of the animal" (Polanyi, 1958, p. 388, cited in Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 35). It is based on the existence of "primordial centres of individuality" (Polanyi, 1958, p. 388, cited in Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 35) that convey an inner organization and a phenomenal sense of self and autonomy.

Inner conflicts, divided selves, alienation, and heteronomy are the result of violations of this sense of "my-ness" and the psychological ownership of experience, learning and actions through conditioning (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 35, p. 22). While this phenomenon occupies clinical psychologists, psychotherapists, educators and social workers in the human domain, we still refuse to consider the effects of our interference with nonhuman animals' autonomy and intrinsic motivation. This is not a question of whether or not we put a dog on a leash (e.g., Meijer, 2014, 2020). Rather, it is about recognizing how we fail to get curious about and preserve the dog's own intrinsic motivation, questions and subjective experience of the world beyond what we think the animal Other is, should be, or should do (De Giorgio & De Giorgio-Schoorl, 2017). For example, looking for what the dog is interested in usually falls short of preserving the dog's quality experience as we search for something the dog positively reacts to and which we can possibly repeat such as throwing the ball. We can facilitate the dog's self-determined exploration, subjective experience and

own understanding only if we break *our* need to reach the dog park, to fulfil *our* idea of a happy dog and if we immerse ourselves in subjective experience rather than simply recognizing a stimulus.

Emptying cages is not enough (De Giorgio, lecture given at the University of Innsbruck, November 7, 2022) just as ending slavery has not abolished racism. Yet, neither have notions of love and care contributed to an extirpation of speciesism, but only to its refinement through conditioning. CAP would be well-served by re-considering Freire's liberating pedagogy of dialogue from an explicitly anti-speciesist perspective. His idea of facilitating subjects' ownership of their learning by breaking stimulus-response mechanisms is an apt and timely inspiration to complement the traditional approach to 'animal liberation' with a commitment to developing a theoretical and practical understanding of liberating animals as learners.

The difficulties that lie in the emancipation of animal learners can be illustrated by Meijer's effort to rescue a stray dog from Romania and integrate him into the city life of Amsterdam (Meijer, 2014). The description of both, his arrival at the airport and his first walks on the leash suggest that he was massively overwhelmed by stimuli. He was certainly not in a situation in which he was emancipated and a learning subject. Further, the owner's focus on teaching the dog 'appropriate behaviour' in the household and the wider surroundings implies conditioning, a sensitization to human cues and desensitization to undesirable stimuli such as traffic noise. While this training is supposedly for his own good as he can now be taken to the dog park, it is actually for the fulfilment of our ideas of human-dog co-existence. The dog learns to function in human culture like we learn to navigate the airport. While we successfully find the route from check-in to boarding, we never get a feeling for the place and our own embodied movement (Rosa, 2019). No matter how often we visit the airport it never becomes a subjective experience that involves curiosity, ownership and self-expression. Rather, it remains an instance of alienation – a chain of reactions to internal and external stimuli such as the need to quickly reach the gate and the succession of display boards at the airport.

Today's discussion of being interested in nonhuman animals increasingly includes their agency, interests and needs. However, we still lack the willingness and ability to preserve an appropriate social context and dynamic, which facilitates their autonomy and ownership as emancipated learners (De Giorgio, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2017). To be sure, this implies a protracted learning process for us. It involves no definite do's and don'ts, no final solution that settles it once and for all. Instead, it requires a journey of sustained deconstruction of one's own expectations and conditionings, of learning to let go of control over other animals and of creatively dealing with structural constraints and social dynamics. Ultimately, the goal of emancipating animal learners asks us to become emancipated learners ourselves who can share subjective experiences in a dialogic transspecies learning space.

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