ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND THE DEFINITION OF ‘CULTURE’ AS A MARKER OF THE HUMAN/ANIMAL DIVIDE

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The aim of this essay is to address the topic of anthropocentrism by focusing on the concept of ‘culture’ as it has been shaped within the humanities and anthropological thought (by scholars such as Herder, Tylor, Boas, Kroeber, and Geertz). More specifically, the human/animal divide and its connotations will be analysed, in order to shed light on how the definition of the culture concept has generated an unbridgeable hiatus between the two domains. Given this consideration, two questions arise: is it fair to accuse cultural anthropology—the discipline that occupies itself with ‘culture’—of being anthropocentric? And is ‘culture’ the very trait which defines and characterises ‘humanity’ as opposed to ‘animality’?

Nature (Animals) vs. Culture (Humans)

The reflection on the nature/culture divide, and on the supposed boundary between humanity and animality, is a topos in anthropological thought. The relationship between nature and culture, humans and animals, innate and learned behaviours, phylogeny and ontogeny, and other correlated topics have been discussed within the discipline in the past, but they currently seem to have lost their appeal to mainstream anthropology. However, I believe that re-analysis of the human/animal divide can play a central role in updating social sciences in general. In other words, I am convinced that it is not possible to work properly on defining human culture from an anthropological perspective without having previously untied the Gordian knot of the human/animal opposition.

This speculation does not regard humans and animals as categories per se. It will be drawn against the background of a wider reconsideration of the core tenets of cultural and social anthropology: to be more precise, I refer to those heuristic devices, cultural categories
and concepts commonly used by anthropologists in arguing about humans and animals, nature and culture, which present a certain ambiguity, and therefore require critical scrutiny.\(^1\)

**Dichotomies**

Iconically, in binary opposition to the human, counterpart animals are polysemic representations in the process of human autopoiesis. From this reductive and mechanistic perspective, animality functions as a definer of humanity. However, the human/animal dichotomy constitutes an unverified *a priori* assumption on which the development of anthropological discourse regarding humans, human cultures, etc. is based. It seems therefore necessary to clarify what the *content* of each of these opposite concepts is, and to verify the *heuristic value* of the opposition itself.

In many respects it is possible to define the dominion encompassed by the term ‘human’, since we refer to one species,\(^2\) *homo sapiens*, and we can trace its *ethos*, as the *anthropos* (humankind). But when it comes to the opposing polarity, animals, the lack of homogeneity within the category creates an impasse, because animals


\(^2\) However, the concept of ‘species’ complicates the matter, instead of simplifying it. In fact, as it is shown by taxonomic studies, there is no clear-cut definition of ‘species’. While we learn form Mayr that ‘species are groups of interbreeding natural populations that are reproductively isolated from other such groups’, and from Lancaster that ‘species is ‘the basic taxon among sexually reproducing animals’, we should also note, with Duprè, that species ‘are not evolutionary units, but merely classificatory units’. See Ernst Mayr, ‘Species Concepts and Their Application’, *The Units of Evolution: Essays on the Nature of Species*, ed. Marc Ereshevsky (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1992); Jane B. Lancaster, *Primate Behavior and the Emergence of Human Culture* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 90; John Duprè, *Humans and Other Animals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 5–6.

The following admonition from Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* warns us against the risk of ‘naturalising’ categories and essentialism: ‘we shall have to treat species in the same manner as those naturalists treat genera, who admit that genera are merely artificial combinations made for convenience. This may not be a cheering prospect; but we shall at least be free from the vain search for the undiscovered and undiscoverable essence of the term species’ (quoted in David L. Hull, ‘The Effect of Essentialism on Taxonomy—Two Thousand Years of Stasis’, *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 15:60 (1965), 320).