

# ***What Can Ecofeminism Learn from Cognitive Ethology?***

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## **Overview**

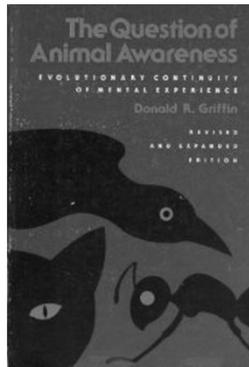
- Introduction to cognitive ethology
- Characterization of ecofeminism
- The continuities between ecofeminism and cognitive ethology
  - What ecofeminism offers cognitive ethology
- The tensions between ecofeminism and cognitive ethology
- What cognitive ethology offers ecofeminism

## Introduction to cognitive **ethology**

- Ethology: the biological study of animal behaviour
- Tinbergen: On Aims and Methods of Ethology (1963)
- Four causes:
  - (Efficient) Causation
  - Ontogeny
  - Survival Value
  - Evolution
- Distinct from sociobiology and current Evolutionary Psychology
- Cognitive ethology adds a fifth cause – cognition/mind/consciousness (?)
  - Tinbergen opposed the investigation of subjective states



## Cognitive ethology



- Origins – Donald Griffin
  - Interested in what animals think and feel – consciousness
- Cognition can be distinguished from consciousness
  - **Cognitive** ethology
- Jamieson and Beckoff: On Aims and Methods of Cognitive Ethology (1992)
  - Distinguish weak and strong cognitive ethology
- Proviso – scientists don't tend to identify as cognitive ethologists

## Weak cognitive ethology (most common)

- Uses cognitive vocabulary to explain behaviour but not to describe it
  - Not actually committed to the reality of nonhuman animal minds
  - Instrumental explanations
- Problems
  - Leaves out information about the underlying causes of animal behavior - cognitive states.
    - For Griffin it doesn't touch on the interesting stuff - consciousness
  - Double standard when it comes to humans
  - Restricting descriptions of animal behavior to bodily movements, physiology and neural activity omits a great deal of animal behavior

## Strong cognitive ethology

- Uses cognitive (or affective) vocabulary in explanations and descriptions
  - Realist about these cognitive (or affective) states
- Commitments
  - There is no basic (acontextual) behavior set that objectively captures what is going in any particular instance – there's going to be interpretation
  - The best description of a nonhuman animal's behavior will vary depending on the point of view of the researcher and the inquiry underway
  - We risk missing the meaning of behavior if we restrict ourselves to bodily movements
  - A nonhuman animal's behavioral repertoire is organized

## Characterization of ecofeminism

- Brings feminist theory, including feminist analyses of science and feminist methodology, to the study of nature
- Lori Gruen
  - Four conceptual frameworks that separate man from animal
    - Man the hunter - killing of animals as manly activity
    - Man the farmer - domestication and control of animals
    - Man the priest - closer to the supernatural, othering the natural
    - Man the scientist - the mechanistic world view and objectivity as detachment
- Karen Warren
  - Logic of domination: Infers from the moral superiority of X over Y that X is justified in subordinating Y
  - Critique of value dualisms and value hierarchies

## Ecofeminism and 'hearing' nonhuman animals

- Carol Adams - *Neither Man nor Beast* (1994)
  - "Second-person relationships provide the foundation for such a metaphysical shift....[W]e become persons through our dependence upon other persons from whom we 'acquire the essential arts of personhood.'" (154)
  - As Code explains, "Imposing meaning on someone else's existence from a position removed from it and ignorant of, or indifferent to, its specificities is at the furthest remove from second-person relations in their normative dimension... With second-person thinking 'knowledge claims are forms of address, speech acts, moments in a dialogue that assume and rely on the participation of (an) other subject(s).'" (155)
  - This metaphysical shift involves valuing animals other than objects or bodies and repudiating a subject-object relationship premised on domination rather than respect. It acknowledges that animals have a biography not just a biology, and that what is required is an anthropology, not an ethology of animals." (155)

## Continuities

- Variation, complexity, and contingency
- Contextualism and pluralism
- Reconception of what it is to be human
- A reconsideration of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism
  - Situated knowledges and the ethical and epistemological challenges of coming to understand others across differences
- A rejection of traditional account of objectivity
  - Observers bring interests (and values) to observations
    - Maybe good, maybe bad, but you can't pretend they don't
  - Loving perception vs. the arrogant eye

## Love is all you need

Colin Allen on the epistemology of cognitive ethology

- A number of ethologists describe their attitude to their research subjects as one of love.
- “Love is not all you need, but it does make possible the kind of patient animal watching that ethologists believe can lead to genuine expertise, knowledge and understanding of animal behavior” (2004, 597)
- Difference between behavioural psychology, epitomized by the skinner box and laboratory studies, and ethology, epitomized by field studies.

## Loving perception

### Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality*

- Love without entitlement or domination
- “The loving eye is a contrary to the arrogant eye.
- The loving eye is one that pays a certain sort of attention. This attention can require a discipline but *not* a self-denial. The discipline is one of self-knowledge, knowledge of the scope and boundary of the self. What is required is that one know what are one’s interests, desires and loathings, one’s projects, hungers, fears and wishes, and that one know what is and what is not determined by these. In particular, it is a matter of being able to tell one’s own interests from those of others and of knowing where one’s self leaves off and another begins.” (Frye 1983, 75)
- The loving eye does not make the object of perception into something edible, does not try to assimilate it, does not reduce it to the size of the seer’s desire, fear and imagination, and hence does not have to simplify. It knows the complexity of the other as something which will forever present new things to be known. The science of the loving eye would favor The Complexity Theory of Truth and presuppose The Endless Interestingness of the Universe.
- The loving eye seems generous to its object, though it means neither to give nor to take, for not-being-invaded, not-being coerced, not being annexed must be felt in a world such as ours as a great gift.” (76)

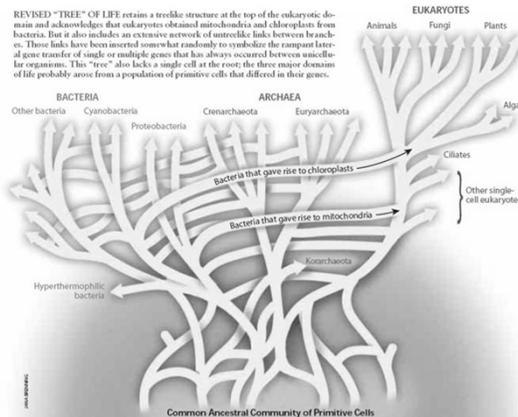
## Love is all you need

### Colin Allen on the epistemology of cognitive ethology

- “It is not my intention...to engage in arguments about which is the ‘right’ way to study animal cognition, or whether one approach [cognitive ethology vs. behavioural psychology] is more ‘scientific’ than the other....At issue is whether to trust the interpretations provided by long-time observers of the animals.” (593)
- Loving perception offers a moral answer to this epistemological question about the ‘right’ way to study animal cognition
  - From a feminist standpoint epistemology and ethics/politics are interwoven
- Cognitive ethology offers an example where emotion and reason are clearly working together epistemologically
  - Ecofeminists need to remember that rationality (especially scientific rationality) and emotion are not necessarily opposed
  - Feminist epistemology has resources for better understanding the link

## Tensions

- Rejection of hierarchical thinking tends to obscure morally relevant differences among organisms
  - Problematic characterizations of human relationships with 'Nature' or 'the environment'
- Careful evolutionary thinking isn't hierarchical
  - Great Chain of Being notwithstanding (no progress)
  - Evolution  $\neq$  adaptation
- Organisms have different traits and capacities some of which are morally relevant
- Some organisms aren't just individuals, but are particular others
  - Agents
  - Subjects



## Identifying and characterizing subjects and agents

- Interplay between
  - the careful observation and interpretivism of cognitive ethology
  - and
  - relational accounts of subjectivity and agency from feminists
- Both approaches partially externalize subjectivity and agency thus making them empirically tractable
- If not all organisms have the same capacities what counts as moral treatment of any given organism will be specific to the organism
  - Cognitive ethology appears to be our best hope for grounding these judgements

## Upshot

- Recognizing the continuities between cognitive ethology and ecofeminism promises to:
  - Bring scientific rigor to ecofeminist discussions of nonhuman animals without the threat of objectifying them
    - Naturalized eco-feminism arises from the epistemic strength afforded by careful study/encounters with nonhuman animals within a non-positivist framework
  - Facilitate critical engagement of accounts of nonhuman animal behaviour that support differential moral regard for nonhuman animals
  - Deflate criticism of ecofeminist sentimentality by recognizing the emotional aspects of careful, thorough empirical investigation

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