

Inside an animal's soul

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In this analysis of animal behavior, Florence Burgat brilliantly examines a continent that Freud left unexplored: the animal unconscious. But is psychoanalysis the right framework for such a project?

Reviewed: Florence Burgat, *L'inconscient des animaux* (The animal unconscious) Paris, Seuil 2023, 272 p., 23 €.

In *Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Freud admitted that a "super-ego must be presumed to be present wherever, as in the case of man, there is a long period of dependence in childhood." This hypothesis is the starting point and guiding thread of Florence Burgat's original exploration of the abyss of animal inwardness found in her latest book. The animals eligible to satisfy Freud's bold claim are only the "superior animals." As Burgat wittily observes, readers should expect no insight into "the egos of bugs or the ids of oysters."

In understanding the inner world of animals, language is of no use. Consequently, the book's vast bibliography, which gives pride of place to the classics of psychoanalysis (including Klein, Laplanche, Rank, and others) disregards Jacques Lacan. The animal unconscious, layered in non-verbal representations, could never lay bare its sinuous paths through monologues delivered on a sofa. Incidentally, Burgat asks, should not the primacy that is typically granted to speech in the analysis of psychic reality be approached gingerly even in the case of our own species, given how greatly fluency and refinement in language can vary?

A phenomenological perspective

Burgat adopts a phenomenological perspective, to which she is very attached. She fully recognizes "the mystery of that close communication between two heterogeneous substances, body and spirit." Grasping the "dark side" of animal existence from a Freudian standpoint leads her to discard behaviorism (an objectivizing approach that emphasizes the effect of rewards and punishments on psychic life) and reject views tainted by Cartesianism, which can only conceptualize animals in privative terms, that is, a-conscious beings. She also asks us to free ourselves of speciesist disdain, which results in seeing the animal unconscious as nothing more than a primitive reservoir of the vilest human inclinations--the "animal part of us" that must be reined in, whatever the cost.

Accessing the animal unconscious means recognizing, phenomenologically, a form of selfhood has long been denied by the canons of epistemological reductionism. Because it imposed an impoverished approach to understanding animals' psychic lives and was overly inclined to isolate various aspects of their behavior into artificial contexts, this method colluded in the scientific instrumentalization of animals. The denunciation of animal reification--which, while understated in this book, is a major theme in Burgat's work--aligns itself with her main argument when she notes that Freud himself challenged the notion that the purpose of animal life was to "serve man." It is, of course, this tendency to instrumentalize animals that made it possible to prove that traumatic experiences inflicted on rodents after their birth disturbed their emotional lives and ability to learn. But this form of biopsychological unconscious, which is by no means Freudian, does not lend itself to philosophical reflection any more than do the affective neurosciences. Yet contemporary work devoted to the psychology of emotions, which explores the internal states ranging from the non-conscious to the conscious and their contextual and biographical determinants, might have been worth mentioning.

A contribution to animal ontology

The book fleshes out the vital psychobiological reality that connects large mammals to their conspecific and natural environments. It makes clear that they have an intimate psychic biography, experience a non-verbal subjectivity, and have a dream

life. We learn that they experience internal conflicts and the melancholic dejection associated with mourning. At times, animals stray from their species' criteria of normality and adaptation, as attested by veterinary psychiatry. Animals experience "states of post-traumatic stress; hyper-attachment; acute and chronic depression; involuntional depression; phobias; compulsive behaviors; dissociative disorders (consisting of phases of loss of contact with reality, hallucinations, and stereotypies); skin diseases of psychic origin; pica (ingestion of non-edible substances)..." These ways of being ill-adapted, which are by no means unique to humans, allow Burgat to define her contribution to animal ontology. The latter is not confined to intrapsychic phenomena: animal culture can also be the matrix for transmitting unconscious phenomena that lead living creatures to act collectively and leave their mark on the next generation.

A phenomenology of the unconscious

For Burgat, psychoanalysis is a phenomenology applied to the unconscious, focusing on symptoms. In animals, this decoding can also be achieved through observable behavior, which is a genuine "ambassador" of interiority, as the naturalist and founder of comparative psychology Georges Romanes claimed in *l'Intelligence des animaux* ("Animal Intelligence," Felix Alcan, 1887). But at what level do such observations become enlightening? One of the problems with psychoanalysis is the excessive plasticity it attributes to facts, despite its founder's avowed positivism. Because we are dealing with animals, it is worth recalling that two of psychoanalysis' main showpieces, the famous cases of the "wolf man" and the "rat man," were significantly "rearranged" to support Freud's theories, as has been argued by the philosopher Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, the historian of sciences Frank Sulloway, and the psychologist Jacques van Rillaer. Must we follow Burgat when she refers, however briefly, to the work of the Austro-British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, who contends that children display "a wide range of murderous tendencies and that they take pleasure in cruelty," or when she invokes Ferenczi's claim that "the penis in the vagina, the child in the maternal womb, and the fish in water express one and the same unconscious phylogenetic 'knowledge' tied to the origins of aquatic life, which every animal, including man, seeks to rediscover?"

For Burgat, only an unconscious of the Freudian kind can open the way to a deep psychology of the animal psyche. But can Freud's theory succeed with animals

where it failed with humans? Freudianism continues to vanish from university departments across the world because the unconscious--Freud's key idea--not only existed before him but exists in forms that are far richer than he ever imagined. The book goes into great depth about a theory that the recent history of psychoanalysis and the social sciences has largely discredited. Without even going into the well documented therapeutic disaster of psychoanalysis' treatment of autism, we will simply mention (since Burgat endorses them) the concept of the death drive and Freud's appropriation of Haeckel's recapitulation theory, according to which organisms develop by going through stages that represent their ancestral species. To be clear, Burgat's book is not about human or animal therapy. She believes, rather, that Freudianism is the epistemological foundation needed to understand animals' psychic lives.

A particularly captivating passage address the psychological function of the ritualized conduct in which many animals, human or otherwise, engage. Rituals, which differ succinctly but significantly from discursive thought through behavioral accentuation and anxiolytic functions, is a remarkable total phenomenon in which psychological systems show common denominators across species. This fascinating idea (along with so many others), Burgat's elegant writing, and her compelling narrative about animal interiority suffice to make *L'inconscient des animaux* an important book. But was it necessary to partake in that all too French ritual (as the historian of ideas Sherry Turkle has shown): sacrificing at the altar of Freud?

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