This paper begins from the notion of signs which Martin Heidegger develops in his early magnum opus *Being and Time*. It asks the question, can the natural behavior of animals both wild and domestic be understood as signs in the Heideggerian sense? For this question to be meaningful, Heidegger’s conception of world must be expanded to include non-human facets – facets which, contrary to Heidegger’s speciest tendencies – have a very real capacity to impact, alter, and shape the world in which humans ‘take their being’.

I argue that a willingness to recognize and study the potential of animals as signs can lead to an enlarged sense of the human’s being in the world. After clarifying how Heidegger understands signs, I analyze two ways in which animals might functions as signs: by their presence and by their behavior. I consider not only the ways in which domestic animals can point us towards new awareness of our environments through close observation of their behavior, but also the ways in which the presence of wild animals can give us clues about the material environment which we ourselves don’t have sensory access to. I conclude that establishing animals as signs in both cases requires a deepening of humanity’s understanding of its range of connectedness. Indeed, ultimately, such an orientation requires a reexamined and renewed sense of humanity’s place in the natural and an acceptance of the degree to which our finitude is bound up with the finitude of nature.

**Signs of Life: The Animal in the World**

**Heidegger and Animals in *Being and Time***

**The World of Animals**

In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* M. Heidegger begins his analysis of the relation between Dasein’s world and the animal with his famous assertion that the animal is ‘world-poor’. Building on the work of zoologist Jakob von Uexküll, Heidegger argues that animals lack the ability to disclose the world outside of a prescribed circle of instinctual stimuli, a mode of being he calls captivation.1 According to von Uexküll, it is a mistake to “imagine that

1 Strict biological behaviorists may argue that human beings themselves operate as ‘captivated’ subjects to their biological and instinctual needs, just on a level so complex that it resists formalization. Heidegger is aware of the danger of this view. He says, “the whole approach
the relations a certain animal subject has to the things in its environment take place in the same space and in the same time as those which bind us to the objects in our human world” (Agamben, 40). Rather, he suggests, “such a unitary world does not exist, just as a space and a time that are equal for all living things do not exist” (Agamben, 40). Heidegger’s thesis of animals as ‘captivated’ by their instincts further suggests that the world, in the Heideggerian sense, can never be accessed as a world by animals. Animals exist, apparently, in a closed, impoverished state, only able to perceive according to instinctual stimuli and with a limited range of response. Uexküll famously uses a tick as an example of this kind of limited stimuli. The tick’s environment is limited to only three factors, a particular odor in the sweat of mammals, a particular temperature, and a typology of skin (Agamben, 46-47; Buchanan, 24-25). Nothing else whatsoever shows up for the tick. This is the extent of the tick’s world.

Nevertheless, even if the animal in its limited environment is unable to partake of Dasein’s world, does this foreclose any possibility of interaction between the two? It seems more likely to suggest that the ‘world-poor’ animal and the ‘world-rich’ Dasein share the same underlying ‘Nature’. Nature provides the setting or ground for animal interactions with their worlds, even if, according to Uexküll (and picked up by Heidegger), these interactions may take place in a ‘space and time’ different from that commonly experienced by Dasein. However, to take just the example of the tick, as anyone who has ever contracted the potentially fatal Lyme disease can tell you, a tick, even if completely unaware, has the ability to radically alter the conditions of an individual Dasein’s perception, and thus, world. In this case, the tick’s place in Dasein’s world, as carrier and potential transmitter of a contagious disease, has significance in the shaping of that does become philosophically problematic if we proceed to talk about the human world in the same manner” (FCM, 263).
world. So, even if we grant Heidegger his thesis that animals are ‘world-poor’,\(^2\) animals represent potential access to pre-ontological *nature* from *a different angle* than that of Dasein, whose access necessarily comes through the prism of its world. Since nature functions as the limit or ground of Dasein’s ability to interpret and thus create its world, new access to nature allows for new formulations of world.

For Heidegger, a sign is “an item of equipment which explicitly raises a totality of equipment into our circumspection so that together with it the worldly character of the ready-to-hand announces itself” (BT 110). While there are many different types of signs, it is never the case that a sign simply ‘equals’, in a one to one correspondence, an intended, single, and isolated meaning. To suppose this is to ignore all of the other things that the understanding of the sign is dependent upon. In order to interpret a red hexagon as having the intended meaning of stop, for example, one must additionally know how to drive a car, understand the range of what stop means when driving, know what system of laws one is operating under, etc. Any sign always functions, as a sign, within a totality, and its meaning then depends on a complex matrix of additional signs. “Signs always indicate primarily ‘wherein’ one lives, where one’s concern dwells, what sort of involvement there is with something” (BT 111).

The difficulty in applying Heidegger’s sign schema to animals lies chiefly in the way in which animals resist conceptualization in terms of involvements for means other than what the human observer sees as ‘mere survival’. Our limited phenomenological access ensures that we

\(^2\) It is not my purpose to refute Heidegger’s claim, though it follows from my arguments that his thesis is problematic. Many commentators have wrestled with how to read Heidegger both sympathetically and critically on the question of the animal’s possible comportment towards the world. For nuanced critiques of Heidegger’s ‘animals as world poor’ thesis, see Chapter 1 of Calarco’s *Zoography* and Chapter 2 of Glenn Mazis’s *Humans, Animals, Machines*.
usually see animals as doing what they do simply in order to ‘survive’ or ‘out of instinct’. Heidegger, speaking of signs, says that “the totality of involvements itself goes back ultimately to a ‘towards-which’ in which there is no further involvement” (BT, 116). This ultimate ‘towards-which’, he says, is “an entity whose Being is defined as Being-in-the-world” (BT, 116).

How is this, at its core, different from survival? If the ultimate ‘towards-which’ of involvements is defined as an entity whose Being is Being-in-the-world, then doesn’t this imply that there is a sense in which all projects ultimately stem from Dasein’s desire to be in the world, that is, to survive, to live?³ So, even if we can’t see animals as participating in the same complex totality of referents and signs in which Dasein participates, this is not because of an essential difference in a ‘towards-which’. 

In a modified Heideggerian sense, animals can function as signs in two ways: by their presence or their behavior. These ways are not mutually exclusive and indeed may occur simultaneously or depend upon one another. On a basic level, when Dasein finds itself in the presence of an animal, its perception of the ‘Here’ wherein Dasein takes its being alters. This could be something so simple as the way in which a dog’s exploring a new room by smell causes Dasein to reconsider the range of smells that may exist in the room. Dasein might look at its surroundings with new eyes, wondering at the sensory web of information of which it is a part whether consciously or not. It may even, by paying closer conscious attention, smell the room differently. Potentially more utilitarian ramifications might also ensue. Stories abound of pets in earthquake areas disappearing in the hours before an earthquake strikes. In the 2004 catastrophic

³ While I am consciously overlooking Heidegger’s existential analysis of death in Division 2 of Being and Time, the basic point still holds. Indeed, if Dasein in its typical everydayness is chiefly constituted by a fleeing in the face of death, this again implies a desire to survive, regardless of what we understand death to mean.
tsunami that struck Southeast Asia, there is evidence that animals in some coastal locations fled before the wave arrived, and that the human populations who were aware of the animals, were able to follow suit (Mazis, 264). If we grant the possibility that animals may be open to entities which are not immediately disclosed to Dasein, then Dasein can use this awareness to expand its own. Animal’s, through their own behaviors, could function as formal warning signals in regions prone to earthquakes. This type of involvement, with better attention and understanding of animal behavior, could be extended to larger contexts, so that, for example, the presence of particular animals could serve as indicators of the relative health of a soil, river, or air sample, and the behavior of animals both domestic or wild could be read for clues to weather changes. These indicators would not necessarily be exclusively positive, but rather, the presence of certain animals might also serve to announce the relative toxicity of a particular region under question. (As maggots, for example, announce the presence of gangrene.) The difficulty in isolating and empirically proving such relationships does not entail that they are to be dismissed. Though the necessary specific knowledge may be currently outside the ken of the average Dasein, the suggestion is less that Dasein master a set of animal as sign relationships, but rather that it remains open to the possibility, and by opening in this manner, begins to build an awareness of its own. In this way, each Dasein might amass its own personal set of animal signs responding to its particular environment and concerns.

Heidegger’s own account is not without precedents for this possibility. Signs, according to Heidegger, can be established anew by Dasein. Heidegger gives as an example a farmer accepting the south wind as a sign of rain. Heidegger makes the strong (and problematic) claim that a ‘sign of rain’ is not added as one of several present-at-hand qualities of the south wind, but rather that the meaning of the being of the wind is as a sign of rain. We might add that the
farmer’s understanding of the south wind as a sign of rain is also, and always, connected with a myriad of other factors, including the barometric pressure the farmer feels altered on his skin, the sight of the cloud on the horizon, the way the leaves of the trees are up-turning, and, very possible, the horses coming in from the field to shelter in the stables or the flock of sparrows seeking shelter out of the wind. All of these involvements function together in an interplay of sign and meaning to announce the oncoming rain.

Regardless of the validity of his ontological claims about the meaning of the being of the wind, nothing in Heidegger’s analysis precludes the possibility that Dasein could better learn to establish signs off of the behavior or presence of surrounding animals, and that these signs could then reveal an enlarged sense of its own Being-in-the-world. Paradoxically, however, this enlarged sense of Being in the world simultaneously involves a renewed humility, in that instead of seeing nature as an obstacle to be overcome Dasein would have to grant the degree to which its own finitude is bound up with the finitude of nature. By coming to understand a greater ranger of involvements and signs in nature, Dasein might hope to come closer to feeling at home there. Such establishing of new signs would not only represent a potential return to lost awareness once held by indigenous peoples, but could also be founded upon new research into animal communication systems. As the work of animal scientists progresses, animal communication systems appear increasingly sophisticated. The possibility of Dasein incorporating some awareness of animal communication and thus having a greater range of signs with which to make its own world intelligible is an enticing one.

But doesn’t this proposal merely extend the sense of animals as sources of equipment? One response to this objection is to point out that establishing animals as possible signs requires a deepening in Dasein’s understanding of its range of involvements, so that animals are no longer
seen as merely possible sources of material. In this case, it would be the natural behavior of animals which would function as signs. Heidegger might also object that attempts to project significance onto the behavior or presence of animals results from our inherent anthropomorphizing of animals. By seeing animals as signs, isn’t Dasein merely ascribing its own understanding of being onto that of animals? This objection overlooks the necessary connection between world and nature. Even if animals do not participate in the same world as Dasein⁴, we might learn to read their behavior in terms of its response to the same underlying nature out of which Dasein’s world is constituted. That is, because other animals are open to different aspects of nature then Dasein, their behavior can be seen as disclosing new folds of reality. The problem becomes hermeneutical. Though animal behavior doesn’t necessarily conform to the same set of suppositions that governs human behaviors, it can’t be dismissed as insignificant within its own environment, and, crucially, this environment is always linked to Dasein’s world. The task then becomes in developing skills in reading and interpreting behaviors of non-human animals with an eye towards empathy and sympathy. One place to start would be in tracing such an interpretation backwards from an understanding of what is necessary for survival, but, as many pet owners can tell you, non-verbal communication stemming from cross species encounters has greater potentialities than such mere crude Darwinian interpretations. Increased interest and awareness of these encounters may lead in unsuspected

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⁴ It is a woeful simplification to suppose that all of the myriad forms of animal life must necessarily share one kind of world, as Derrida’s forceful objection to Heidegger on this point reminds us: “Compromised, rather, by a thesis on animality which presupposes – this is the irreducible and I believe dogmatic hypothesis of the thesis – that there is one thing, one domain, one homogenous type of entity that is called animality in general, for which any example would do the job” (Buchanan, 68).
directions, enabling Dasein to better understand the unexamined suppositions by which it both governs its own being, and projects its own understanding of being onto non-humans.

Animal behavior and presence can also then be seen as providing persistent reminders to Dasein that what Dasein perceives is not the whole story. Dasein, as the being for whom being in the world is an issue, and for whom being always happens in a world consisting of a complex whole of contexts and involvements, is always at risk of becoming a prisoner of its own assumed significances. Dasein exists in tension between the effort to achieve awareness of the context of involvements that form its Being even while being enmeshed in that self same context. With each layer of significance that becomes consciously revealed, a deeper level of mystery is likewise gleaned. Animals, through their disparate perceptions and behaviors remind us that there is always more significance lurking than we can fully reveal. For Dasein to dismiss that which it is unable to disclose on its own is to run the risk of reducing its potential to a narrower range of possibility. By doing so, Dasein, in essence, shrinks its reality.

Since Dasein “finds ‘itself’ proximally in what it does, uses, expects, avoids – in those things environmentally ready-to-hand with which it is proximally concerned” (my gloss in bold, BT, 155), learning to pay close attention to animals as signs in themselves will lead Dasein to a different way of finding itself. To be sure, Dasein, depending on its individual projects, already does this to some degree. The signs of the fisherman are different then the signs of the stockbroker. The signs of the rural dweller are different from those of the city-dweller. However, all Dasein, regardless of project, stands to have its understanding of being altered if it can learn to enlarge its range of involvements, and accordingly, see signs where previously there were none. If the examples I have provided in this paper seem trivial, that may be seen as a symptom of the degree to which Dasein has already pre-understood the potential for meaning in...
animal behavior. It is, in addition, founded on the degree of difficulty in learning how to read signs in a realm that has little traditional precedent in the mainstream culture at large. Specific sets of specialized skills notwithstanding, average Dasein today has little experience with attempting to understand animal behavior. There is nothing in theory however that bars Dasein from learning to intuit and understand significance in a wider range of relations than it currently supposes. Animals, then, would become valuable as indicators of a variety of natural factors which Dasein is not able to sense on its own. Their presence would perhaps be seen as an integral part of the whole, pushing Dasein to recognize not only its essential finitude, but also its essential inter-connection, and forcing it to reevaluate its projects on the basis of these new understandings.

Works Cited:


Hayes, Josh, “Heidegger’s Fundamental Ontology and the Problem of Animal Life”, *PhaenEx* 2, Fall/Winter 2007


**Additional Background Reading:**

