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'Non-humans, technology and symbiotic ethics: the challenges of developing an ethical framework for an emerging research area'

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The term 'symbiotic' carries with it meanings such as: close association and mutual benefit.

Considering 'close association', I would argue that our working group's use of 'symbiotic' emphasises that we view as problematic: an anthropocentric view of interactions between humans and other animals, that prioritises the human's significance, rather than recognising the dyadic nature of such interactions.

I would not choose personally to emphasise the implication of 'mutual benefit' in our use of 'symbiotic', as I have concerns that this may lead to a romanticism of interactions between humans and other animals, that may obscure harm to non-humans behind a curtain of 'noble savages', 'everything having its place' and 'the full circle of life'.

Rather, I see our framing of 'symbiotic' as recognising that two or more ethically significant organisms are in close association, with the interests of the human not assumed to be pre-eminent.

Where, in fact, the priority given to their relative ethical significance would be fluid and determined at any given moment by the potential risk of harm to either individual (rather than to a species or culture), at the moment of observation and in the future.

It is giving prominence to the 'ethics' of this close association between significant organisms, that I believe should frame anthrozoological study, as opposed to the assumptions of virtually unconditional 'human participants first and foremost' advocacy, widely supported in anthropology.

I am now going to consider how 'Symbiotic Ethics' relates to my own areas of interest: animal-computer interaction and computational anthrozoology…

- Imagine a relatively new research field, with a focus on the interactions between computers (all digital era technology) and non-human animals
- The researchers working in this field are attempting to identify common ethical principles

This field is: ACI (Animal-Computer Interaction).

I started by posing some questions and then answering them myself…

Question 1

Q. Is it sufficient that our own studying of a process does not directly result in harm, if the eventual outcome of the process itself is harmful and potentially lethal for the other animal?

A. No. I would argue that the term 'animal-centred' (as considered fundamental to this new field) should exclude negative outcomes for animals (not just those outcomes directly caused by researchers, but also those caused by the studied context / process itself).

Question 2.

Q. When we embed ourselves in the world of other animals, can we partition our own involvement (for example, attempts to improve enrichment and welfare) and then walk away from the consequences of the practices under study?

A. No. I believe that researchers should grasp the perspectives of the non-human and appreciate that any research (or the contexts and processes within which such research is conducted) must ultimately improve the lives of the non-human subject. It is also difficult to defend the position that you can contribute to a non-human's welfare and then walk away from their greatest welfare issue of all: avoidance of being hurt or killed. They have evolved to avoid being murdered. Violations to their adaptations impact on their welfare. Therefore, being killed is a welfare issue and welfare considerations do not cease to apply just before their life is ended by a human.

My **guidelines for applying symbiotic ethics to studying interactions between technology and other animals**

I would argue that researchers cannot claim to be truly 'animal-centred' in their thinking, unless they:

(i) Recognise other animals as being substantially* ethically significant

(ii) Grasp the perspectives of the non-human

(iii) Understand the full context of: the interaction between the non-human and the technology, the behaviours expressed by the non-human, the physical, political, cultural and social landscape and any other interactions occurring between other living agents in the

studied environment (including humans).

(iv) Appreciate that any research (or the contexts and processes within which such research is conducted) must ultimately improve the lives of the non-human subject.

(v) Recognise that these steps are both a moral imperative and the only way to truly understand the subject of your research.

… by SUBSTANTIALLY I mean that the ethical significance of the non-human is not just a passing consideration that may be overturned, at a whim, nor is it something that may be addressed during fieldwork through the tick-boxes of a 'research ethics' form. It is not just about protecting the researcher against 'consequences'… it must be a SERIOUS, reflexive and fully-documented attempt to view the non-human as having agency and a desire to exist, without pain, harm or fear.

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