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KANTIAN MONADS IN A PLATONIC WORLD. SOME REMARKS ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND OF JAKOB VON UEXKÜLL'S *UMWELTLEHRE*

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1. The animal as Kantian subject

Chief aim of this paper is to investigate some philosophical assumptions, as well as some consequences, of Jakob von Uexküll's biological *Umweltlehre*. I will focus on Uexküll's philosophical background with particular regard to his intent to grasp and describe the perceptive and operative ways through which animal organisms *shape* and *share* their experienced reality. In other words, I will highlight some philosophical reference points of the yearlong process through which Uexküll develops his most famous contribute to philosophy of biology: the idea of the *Umwelt* as a subjective, species-specific, and (at the same time) intersubjective and inter-specific sphere of perception and action. One of the aspects that most make Uexküll's theoretical biology and behavior theory original is, indeed, the importance he gives to animal subjectivity. Without going into a detailed analysis of the textual references [cf., in this regard, Brentari 2018], I would start my analysis by underlining two key traits of Uexküll's concept of subjectivity. The first is its anti-mechanistic function in biological and zoological research. Uexküll ascribes subjectivity to all animals endowed with an (even minimal) degree of physiological reactivity, even to amoebas and arthropods (such as the tick). Being often regular and predictable, the behavior of such lower animals gives the impression of being nothing more than a series of reactions to the stimuli from the external reality.

Uexküll, however, explicitly considers them as subjects [Uexküll 2010, 45] and stresses their capability to "pick up" the stimuli in a selective way [Uexküll 2010, 81], elaborate them autonomously in the organisms' *Innenwelt*, and give them meaning as parts of their *Umwelt*.

This approach is likely to appear uneconomic in the analysis of the behavior of lower animals (one could legitimately ask, why to resort to semiotics to explain the behaviour of a scallop or a tick, if this behaviour is otherwise describable?). Uexküll's choice is, instead, extremely fruitful in the investigation of higher animals, in particular social ones (not surprisingly, the young Konrad Lorenz uses many Uexküllian concepts to describe the social behavior of birds [cf. Lorenz 1970]). What matters most, if we consider the theoretical context of the long-term quarrel between mechanists and vitalists, Uexküll's approach appears well grounded. The Estonian biologist prefers the risk of using concepts that are apparently too complex for the low levels of the animal world to the opposite peril of simplifying the behavior of higher animals by using a mechanizing toolkit (such as reflexes, tropisms, instincts). Moreover, according to the vitalist Uexküll, to assign subjectivity also to lower animals is a necessary preliminary step in order to gain insight into the complex net of inter-specific relationships. For Uexküll, organic nature is pervaded by teleological forces providing an overall agreement among the needs and actions of the different agencies (i.e., the different species). Uexküll often refers to these harmonizing forces with the term «natural factor [*Naturfaktor*]» [Uexküll 1909, 13; all the quotations from Uexküll 1909 are my translation]; and, if on the physiological, morphological, and anatomical level the expression of the *Naturfaktor* is the organism's *Bauplan* (its species-specific construction plan [cf. Brentari 2015, 57-63]), on the behavioural level its direct expression is subjectivity, as organising kernel of perception and action. In this way, Uexküll's anti-mechanistic stance acquires a decidedly teleological dimension.

The second key trait of Uexküll's concept of the subject is its Kantian derivation. Uexküll reads at a young age the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which has a permanent influence on his thought. From the beginning of his activity as a researcher, he tries on the one side to give a physiological basis to the theoretical core of the Kantian transcendental

approach, and, on the other, to investigate the subjective world of experience even of animal species other than humans. «The task of biology» – writes Uexküll programmatically – «is to expand the outcome of Kant's research in two directions: 1) to take into account the role of our body too, in particular of our sense organs and central nervous system, and 2) to investigate the relationships with the objects of the other subjects (animals)» [Uexküll 1928, 3; all the quotations from Uexküll 1928 are my translation]. If one reads his texts against the background of this statement, it is evident that, for the Estonian biologist, both the research on the sensorimotor apparatus of the different species and the investigation of their cognitive performances are part of a unique investigation of the animals' transcendental subjectivity.

In his biological reprise of the transcendental approach, Uexküll has made some (often very fruitful) changes to the Kantian theory. First, if, for Kant, only the logical forms of subjective experience can be a priori, in Uexküll's approach even the material side of experience can be determined at a transcendental level. This research line is closely reminiscent of Max Scheler's enquiry on the immediate axiological quality of ethical experience [Scheler 1973, 47-48, 71-74; Gasché 2010] and of the phenomenological debate about the existence of a "material a priori" [see Schlick 1969; Husserl 1984]. Since he moves from the physiological structure of the different animal species, Uexküll considers as a priori elements not only space as the general form of sensitivity, but also the particular implementations of this form at the level of the species-specific *Erlebnis*. For example, he sees three-dimensionality as depending on the presence of semi-circular canals – a position wherein, ultimately, the organisms' *Bauplan* is the key of the subjective experience of each species [Uexküll 2010, 56-57].

Second, Uexküll's *Umweltlehre* rests on the semiotization of Kant's transcendental approach. The connection between the external reality – doomed, as the Kantian *noumenon*, to remain unknowable in itself – and the species-specific coordinates of perception and action is thought of as a semiotic operation. «Stimuli from the external world» – writes Uexküll – «are globally translated as a nervous sign language [*in eine nervöse Zeichensprache*]» [Uexküll 1909, 192]; and, as stressed by Thomas Sebeok [Sebeok 2001, 33], even the perceptual and operative

marks that make up the species-specific *Umwelt* are often called perceptive and operative signs (*Merkzeichen* and *Wirkzeichen*) [Uexküll 2010, 122]. What the animal unfolds as a Kantian subject is a peculiar form of semiosis which does not convey any information about the external world (which remains inaccessible in itself) but produces a mutually interconnected network of codes and meanings *in correspondence with* the external objects. The human being, whose experience is broader than that of other species, can produce a larger and more complex network, but certainly not attain the ultimate reality beyond it.[1]

2. The Uexküllian subject as a monad

The peculiar ways of Uexküll's renewal of the transcendental approach exacerbate a problem that was already present in Kant's work: the risk of the solipsism. In Kant, the consistency among the experience worlds of different subjects bases, ultimately, only on the philosopher's belief in the functional homogeneity of all rational beings. The insertion of content elements into the subject's transcendental theory and, above all, its application to different biological species exacerbate the problem. The different *Umwelten* appear to be neatly separated from each other; they diverge as for life rhythm, spatial articulation, and assigned meanings. From the point of view of the subject that constitutes them, the subjective worlds of a mosquito and of the mammal on which the mosquito feeds seem to have very little in common.

Already the first philosophical readings of the Uexküllian *Umweltlehre* embed the problem of the solipsism in Uexküll's theory into a comparison with the Leibnizian conception of the subject as a monad. In 1939, Harald Lassen dedicates a significant contribution to the

[1] Uexküll's modified transcendentalism has a long lasting influence on other scholars. On the one side, Uexküll's attention to the material elements of animal experience stimulates the research that the young Konrad Lorenz dedicates to the innate recognition mechanisms that trigger social birds' instinctive behaviours [Lorenz 1970]. On the other, the semiotization of Kant's theory makes possible the fruitful insertion of the Uexküllian theory in contemporary biosemiotic (from Thure von Uexküll and Thomas Sebeok to Kalevi Kull and many other scholars; for an introduction, cf. Favareau [2009]).

connection between Uexküll's thought and the Leibnizian theoretical coordinates. First, Lassen clarifies a legitimate doubt. Referring to a personal communication from Uexküll, he excludes that Uexküll had a direct knowledge of Leibniz's thought [Lassen 1939, 47]. Second, it provides an accurate reconstruction of the theoretical correspondence between Uexküll's theory of the *Umwelten* and Leibniz' monadology:

> Cardinal points of this correspondence are the following: 1) There is a plurality of subjective worlds = "*Umwelten*" = "monads". 2) They are completely isolated one from another. 3) The subject builds up its reality in a quite autonomous way according to an ideal and specific law = plan = conception. 4) The individual vital laws harmonize according to an optimal general plan. 5) The objective space is denied and regarded as the formalized system of living subjective centres = points of view. 6) Therefrom results the difficulty of explaining a causality of unconscious nature, which is independent from the subject. 7) From this follows the necessity of speculatively amplifying the conception of "subject" or "monad" as well as finally displacing the problem of reality into the metaphysical-religious sphere of a supreme (divine) monad or subject [Lassen 1939, 49].

It is easy to see how Lassen's «cardinal points» belong to two different groups. On the one hand, there are factors determining the isolation of the subjects; on the other, elements that oppose and lessen such condition. The plurality of the subjects and the autonomy of the *Umwelt* formation process, accompanied as they are by isolation and lack of direct communication, belong to the first group. The conformity of the *Umwelten* to a plan, their mutual harmonization, the replacement of the objective space with a prospective system made of subjective points of views and, finally, the need for a higher-order subject that regulates this system belong to the second group.[2]

[2] It may not be clear, at a first glance, how perspectivism can oppose the isolation of the subjects. Both in Leibniz and Uexküll, however, this possibility arises from the resolute affirmation that the different points of view do not constitute numerically separate objects, but (although in their difference) converge on the same object. Thanks to this, writes Uexküll, «you will understand that the theory of the environ-

For each mentioned common point between Uexküll and Leibniz there are precise textual references. I limit myself to three examples. As for the subject's isolation, Leibniz' claim that «monads just have no windows through which something can enter into or depart from them» [Leibniz 1991, 17] finds a correspondence in Uexküll's metaphor of the *Umwelt* as a «solid dividing wall, which surrounds the animal like the walls of a house it built itself and keeps away the whole world and its extraneousness» [Uexküll 1909, 212]. As for perspectivism, both authors think of the relationship between the subjective worlds in terms of a coexistence of different points of view on the same thing. So writes Leibniz:

> And as one and the same town viewed from different sides looks altogether different, and is, as it were, perspectivally multiplied, it similarly happens that, through the infinite multitude of simple substances, there are, as it were, just as many different universes, which however are only the perspectives of a single one according to the different points of view of each monad [Leibniz 1991, 24].

In a very similar way, Uexküll compares the variety of the species-specific *Umwelten* to the multitude of images of a field that are reflected in the drops of dew hanging on the grass stalks: «Each of these myriads of drops mirrors all the world with the sun, the mountains, the forests and the shrubs, a magical world within itself. […] [E]ach one of these innumerable drops does not only shine in the diversity of the shimmering colours, but also possesses its own subjective tone, the one that distinguishes all living beings» [Uexküll 1938, 47-48; all the quotations from Uexküll 1938 are my translation; on this point, cf. also Langthaler 1992, 162-163, and Guidetti 2013, 77-78].

The third common point I want to highlight between Leibniz and Uexküll is the need for a subject of higher order. This need arises both on the epistemic level and on the ontological one. On the epistemic lev-

ment has nothing to do with the silly solipsism» [Uexküll 1938, 48]. The opposite opinion is supported by Konrad Lorenz in a 1948 conference devoted to Uexküll [Lorenz 1948].

el, the understanding of perspectivism as a general condition of animal life can happen only if the human observer succeeds in taking a superordinate position from which (s)he can see the different points of view converging, as it has been said, on the same object. This kind of superordinate position is a relative one, as in the case of an ethologist observing the species-specific *Umwelten* that different animals build up based on the same oak [Uexküll 2010, 130]. On the ontological level, instead, the higher order subject can be an absolute one. For both Leibniz and Uexküll, the recourse to an absolute higher-order subject aims at explaining the ultimate origin of the harmony between the different lower-level subjective worlds, even in the absence of a direct communication or interaction between them. In Leibniz, it is the super-monad God who plays this role towards the lower-level monads [Leibniz 1991, 23]. Uexküll, who rejects the existence of a personal God, entrusts the coordinative function between the different species-specific *Umwelten* to a non-self-conscious teleological instance (the already mentioned *Naturfaktor*), or, simply, to Nature. Very clear in this regard is the final passage of *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*: «all these different environments are fostered and borne along by the One that is inaccessible to all environments forever. Forever unknowable behind all of the worlds it produces, the subject – Nature – conceals itself» [Uexküll 2010, 135].

3. How to grant harmony to a multi-world nature: the Platonic way

On several occasions, Uexküll affirms the radical unknowability of the *Naturfaktor*. The latter, therefore, risks moving so far away from the single organisms that Uexküll frequently turns to other intermediate instances, which can account more satisfactorily for the regularities observable in animal life. In some cases, Uexküll's choice is to use the Platonic ideas as mediators between the *Naturfaktor* and the individual life forms – a choice that, as Esposito states, recalls Schopenhauer's strategy to rely on ideas as mediator between the noumenic will and its individual concretizations at the level of representation [cf. Esposito 2020, 39].

In Uexküll's view of animal life, to be qualified as Platonic ideas

are four key spheres of the animal activity towards the elements of the Umwelt – in Uexküll's terminology, four key functional circles (*Funktionskreise*):

> The ideas are the meanings of the objects that we see in front of us as colored silhouettes as long as we are tied up in the Platonic sensory cave. The meaning of an object is crucial for the role that the object plays in the drama of life. The meanings are fixed in nature, while the objects change. Every living being needs food, but the objects that for the different living beings serve as food are extremely different [Uexküll 1950, 157; all the quotations from Uexküll 1950 are my translation].

Besides food, the other «primal meanings [*Urbedeutungen*]» [Uexküll 1950, 157] or «basis ideas [*Grundideen*]» [Uexküll 1950, 158] in animal life are the enemy, the reproductive partner and the medium in which the movement of the animal takes place. Uexküll thinks of the relationship between the *Grundideen* and the reference objects in the *Umwelt* as a process of *expression* («the enemy's idea finds expression in the parasites and in the predators») [Uexküll 1950, 158] or *embodiment* («the idea of the medium is embodied sometimes in water, sometimes in the air, sometimes in the ground» [Uexküll 1950, 158].

On the behavioural level, which includes the relations to the inorganic elements and the intra- and interspecific relationships, Uexküll presents the four *Urbedeutungen* of animal lives as the fixed roles they have to perform. Through the metaphor of the theatre, which can be found both in *Der unsterbliche Geist in der Natur* [Uexküll 1938] and in *Das allmächtige Leben* [Uexküll 1950], the life of an organism is seen as a series of theatrical scenes which come together to make up a whole. To be more precise, Uexküll sees the constitution of the species-specific *Umwelt* as the realization of a peculiar theatrical setting which is irreducible to that of the other subjects. Again, the autonomous spontaneity of the subject in configuring the world of experience leads to a high risk of incommunicability among the actors performing on the world stage. In a dialogue between a mechanistic-minded zoologist and a biologist who, instead, supports the subjective nature of space, time, and, in general, all coordinates of experience, Uexküll qualifies the conception

of the former as «mono-world [*unimondal*]» and that of the latter as «multi-world [*multimundal*]» [Uexküll 1938, 49] (behind the biologist's perspective it is easy to recognize Uexküll's own view of nature).

As mentioned above, Uexküll faces in various ways the danger of the lack of agreement among the different subjects and the species-specific worlds they shape. The main way is the "Leibnizian" use of a supra-subjective instance operating in a teleological sense, i.e., predisposing the *Baupläne* that determine the organisms' anatomy, physiology, perception, and behaviour. This strategy is to be found also inside the theatre metaphor; Uexküll, in fact, qualifies the *Baupläne* as the 'authors' of the drama of the individual lives: «according to the *Umweltlehre*, there are thousands of different life plays on thousands of life stages, each with a different plan as author» [Uexküll 1938, 49].

Next to this main strategy, however, and as its integration, Uexküll adopts also in this context the Platonic strategy of limiting the expressive possibilities of the animal subjects to a few 'ideal' life schemata: «The technique of living nature works with roles as with fixed unities. But roles, even if they reach out to body and space, are not material units, rather platonic ideas, whose spiritual tissue serves as foundation to nature» [Uexküll 1950, 156]. Here, Uexküll's Platonism emerges in a particularly clear way: the four spiritual roles have a marked ontological priority over the physical level of the animal's body structure. This is reinforced by the idea of the ontological prominence of the *Umwelt* (as a subjective creation) over the physical component of the organism: «since any role in any life scenario requires its counterpointistic counter-role, the animal's body is the reflection of its environment, which represents all the counter-roles» [Uexküll 1950, 69]. Thus, the life form of a species is a particular combination of the four *Grundideen* which objectivizes itself in the body structure of the animal and, further, in its *Umwelt* (as a peculiar constellation of *Merkmale* and *Wirkmale*). And this «tissue of vital scenes which are tied to each other through always renewed roles goes well over the borders of single subjective worlds» [Uexküll 1950, 156].

The recourse to Platonic ideas as an explanatory model for the species-specific regularities of animal life forms is a minor strategy in Uexküll's work. Much more frequently, as we have seen, he resorts to

the postulate of a higher-order subject (Nature or the *Naturfaktor*); in other cases, he considers natural processes as regulated by lower-order teleological factors such as the *Bauplan*, or the «rules» that make up the organisms [Brentari 2015, 57-63; 121-123]. In these cases, Uexküll adopts, rather than a Platonic model, an Aristotelian kind of teleology: the idea of the construction plan is close to the concept of entelechy, which, in Uexküll's times, is having a revival with the neovitalism of Hans Driesch [Driesch 1899; Uexküll 1928, 147]. From the explanatory point of view, Driesch' concept of entelechy and, in general, Aristotelian teleology offer clear advantages over the Platonic model. Although super-material, entelechy is thought of as individual, as the species-specific form of a particular organism. Its greater adherence to the individual being allows neovitalist-minded biologists to use it not only to grasp the general basic form of the species but also, for example, to explain concretely the ontogenetic process of embryogenesis – thus assigning to the notion of entelechy the organizing role that, after the full discovery of the functioning of the DNA, scientists will generally give to the genes.

4. Concluding remarks

Uexküll's constant appeal to philosophy is directed to different purposes. On the one hand, the adoption of the Kantian transcendental approach appears to be a founding choice, motivated by the belief that the investigation of the a priori forms and contents of the species-specific *Umwelten* is actually the most valid path for biology. The same can be said for the references to the Aristotelian teleological model, through the mediation of Driesch. As for the references to Plato, two distinct roots can be identified: on the one hand, as we have seen, there is the intent to limit the risky autonomy of the transcendental subject (which can lead to solipsism) through some basic settings of the life form in relation to its *Umwelt* (the above mentioned *Grundideen*). On the other hand, the occasional insertion of the Platonic view of reality in Uexküll's theoretical biology plays the role of an additional weapon, alongside vitalist teleology, against the Darwinism of the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century.

If it succeeds in opposing the materialistic determinism of the Darwinism of his time, the recourse to Platonism has, however, a side effect that clashes with Uexküll's main goal. If, on the one hand, notions such as the fundamental ideas and the pre-established roles are powerful stabilizing factors inside the species-specific biological anlage and ethological repertoire, on the other hand they heavily limit the organisms' freedom and spontaneity. One should not forget that Uexküll's subjectivism has a basilar anti-mechanistic character. It aims at acknowledging the transcendental and semiotic freedom of every animal action, even the seemingly mechanic feeding behaviour of a tick; moreover, for higher species Uexküll opens up the possibility of individual spaces of action [Uexküll 2010, 126]. In domesticated species, animals can even adapt their individual action to particular traits of the *Umwelt* of other species. In front of these cases, the Platonic model of the repetition of fundamental ideas (which determine which *Funktionskreise* are generally viable to the animal) turns out to be too narrow to account for the wealth of animal behaviour.

In conclusion, the composite philosophical toolkit through which Uexküll faces the problems arising from his 'modified Kantism' can give him only limited advantages. The programmatic inaccessibility to empirical research of *Naturfaktor* and entelechies reduces severely the favour such notions can enjoy among 20th and 21th century scientists. Moreover, Uexküll's refusal of evolution by natural selection precludes him from adopting the most viable strategy to keep together the autonomy of the animal *Umwelten* and their mutual interconnection on the life stage. This is not the place to provide a complete evaluation of the topic, but some elements should be mentioned. Contemporary evolutionism is far from the environmental mechanism that (in the form of the "struggle to survival") characterized late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Darwinism. It stresses, instead, the positive survival value of symbiosis, horizontal genomic transfer and other form of synergic interspecific processes [Guerrero *et al.* 2013]. In addition, many scholars today re-evaluate the active and proactive role of the organism, which appears now very far from being mere «raw material» subjected to the joint action of random variations and environmental external pressure [Gould 2002, 1027-32]. Therefore, it is now possible to assign to evolution by

natural selection the role of coordinating and harmonizing the different species-specific *Umwelten*, without any need more to resort to (neo) vitalistic notions, Leibnizian forms of pre-established harmony, or, finally, Platonic idealism.

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Keywords

Jakob von Uexküll; Animal Subjectivity; Aristotelian Vitalism; Leibnizian Monadology; Platonic Idealism; Current Evolutionism

Abstract

This paper aims at investigating some philosophical assumptions of Jakob von Uexküll's biological *Umweltlehre.* After a short exposition of Uexküll's (Kantian) idea of the animal subjectivity, the contribution will focus on the correction strategies Uexküll puts into act, in different places of his works, to remedy the main limit of his subjectivism (i.e., the risk of solipsism). We will examine, in particular, three of these strategies, showing that they resume (explicitly or implicitly) some classical patterns of thought of Western philosophy: 1) Aristotelian (neo)vitalistic notions; 2) "Leibnizian" forms of pre-established harmony; 3) Platonic idealism. In the concluding remarks, the paper will highlight some limits of the philosophical toolkit through which Uexküll faces the problems arising from his 'modified Kantism'. This criticism opens up the possibility to assign the role of coordinating and harmonizing the different species-specific *Umwelten* to evolution by natural selection (in the way some current evolutionists think of it).

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