

From Animals to Humans: Uexküll's *Umwelt* as Read by Lacan and Canguilhem

Jui-Pi Chien
National Taiwan University

Abstract

This paper discusses the influence of the German biologist Jakob von Uexküll's theory of the animal's *Umwelt* on the French philosophers Jacques Lacan and Georges Canguilhem. Uexküll's was a "vitalistic" theory, a "theory of the subject," aspects of which Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger had not really explored. Discovering Uexküll in the 1930s, Lacan further developed the Uexküllian model of the animal's "functional cycle" in the context of the human subject with its split into conscious and unconscious "discourses." From Uexküll's notion of the *Suchbild* ("search image"), which "breaks open" the functional cycle of thinking-behavior, Lacan derived his own concept of the psychotic patient's *imago*. The science philosopher Canguilhem explicated Uexküll's model of the organism's inner/outer world in terms of the conception of (a series of) "intermediary symbolic space(s)," into which it keeps "extending" itself. Canguilhem's focus on the central role of communicative signals in the organism's forming of "meaning" echoes in certain ways Lacan's insight into the psychotic subject's inner-world "isolation," the problem of patient-analyst communication. Both French thinkers are attacking, with their models of a self-generating and self-communicating "closed circuit" that can be "broken open" as it extends out into the world, not only the dominant European trend of mechanistic behaviorism, but also German *Gestalt* psychology, with its (Neo-Kantian) assumption of a pre-determined, *a priori Gestalt* to which all behavior must conform.

Keywords

Uexküll, Lacan, Canguilhem, *Umwelt*, *milieu*, search image, *imago*, psychosis, the unconscious, intermediary space, symbolic space, coding, communication, extension