Between trust and domination: social contracts between humans and animals
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Abstract

Tim Ingold’s seminal article ‘From trust to domination’ introduces a hypothesis in which there is a shift from hunter-gatherer cultures to agro-pastoral cultures regarding perceptions of, and engagements with, animals. Whereas hunters regard prey as kindred brothers, farmers regard, and treat, their domestic livestock as slaves. On the basis of this hypothesis, archaeologists frequently take this to be a universal given. In this article, Ingold’s hypothesis is critiqued via an in-depth discussion of the concepts of trust, reciprocity and intimacy. The author suggests an alternative model to the dualism of either trust or domination, namely the notion of a social contract between humans and animals. The uses of this model are explored through Bronze Age case studies from southern Scandinavia.

Keywords

‘From trust to domination’; human-animal relationships; social contract; intra-action; Bronze Age; Scandinavia.

Introduction

The environmental archaeologist Dincauze (2000: 506) has suggested that ‘[a]nimals provide an array of resources, including food, raw materials, work, energy, and companionship. Ideologies define the terms in which we evaluate our roles in the biosphere: dominance or kinship.’ This implies that there are various ways to perceive and construct human-animal relationships. In this article I want to muse upon various perceptions of kinds of relationships, and changes in terms of engagements (Ingold 2000). In particular I want to critique Tim Ingold’s hypothesis that domesticated animals per se are slaves and wild (prey) animals are seen as brothers or equals to hunter-gatherer societies (2000: 73–4). This hypothesis is widely adopted by archaeologists regarding how roles of animals in past societies are envisioned. I suggest that such a one-sided view of this
relationship is over-simplified, and does not take into account the relationship and trust between humans and domestic animals embedded in the process of caring for animals (Knight 2005). Alternatively, I follow the philosopher Mary Midgley’s (1983) proposal of human-animal social contracts. This idea will be explored in depth concerning domestic animals, and the potential of such contracts will be investigated using Scandinavian Bronze Age case studies.

From trust to domination?

Ingold’s paper ‘From trust to domination’ (2000), addresses changing perceptions of the relationship between humans and animals in different historical situations. He claims that hunters, of hunter-gatherer groups, share a view of nature fundamentally based on trust and reciprocity (2000: 69–72), where people live in the environment in the same way as animals do (2000: 62). In societies depending upon pastoralism and husbandry, the attitude towards animals is different: they are ‘slaves’, ‘subject to the authority of their human master’, restricted and controlled by ‘the whip, spur, harness or hobble’. Domestic animals are thought unable to reciprocate, dominated by humans who wish to control and exert force over them (2000: 72–4). The process of domestication thereby constitutes a transition in which the terms of engagement between humans and animals become fundamentally changed (2000: 75).

Important to note is Ingold’s emphasis on an engagement between humans and animals, and animals’ ability to be perceived contextually as having different statuses of being. I do not want to question the validity of anthropological studies that demonstrate a sense of kinship and trust between hunter and prey and the potential complexity therein (see, for example, McNiven 2010). However, I argue that Ingold’s narrative is untenable as a universal model. It cannot be applied directly to prehistory. Based on modern anthropology and historical sources (for example, Marx), it does not consider the particular conditions of prehistoric societies.

Ingold’s ideas have become a cornerstone for theoretical frameworks in studies of human-animal relationships in archaeology. They are frequently employed when talking about the domination over domesticated animals (e.g. Denham and White 2007: 9–11; Wengrow 2006: 81; for a more reflexive view, see Dransart 2002: 5–7; Jones and Richards 2003: 50; Whittle 2003: 80). However, using this cornerstone, the framework stands on murky grounds.

Ingold’s hypothesis under attack

Knight (2005: 4–5) questions the basis of Ingold’s argument: the trust and reciprocity between the hunter and his prey is not described in terms of the actual individual hunt of individual animals, but rather as generic hunting of the animal category. When Ingold likens hunters getting to know animals to people getting to know people, a crucial slippage is exposed. Several problems with Ingold’s argument are seen upon closer examination. For instance, the hunters get to know people in particular (as individuals), whereas they get to
know animals in general (as a generic animal category); ‘[h]uman sociality is based on a recognition of other human beings as individual persons, whereas hunter sociality with prey seems to be based on a view of empirical animals as substitutable tokens in a class’ (Knight 2005: 4–5). Further, whether intimacy with prey animals is at all possible is doubtful, since encounters between hunters and prey are episodic and unrepeated; the prey is killed on the spot, provided that the hunt is successful. Also, hunter-prey interactions are serially repetitive, but cannot be repeated with the same animal, therefore hunters lack familiarity with individual animals, even though they might have a generic familiarity with the animal species (Knight 2005: 5). This also implies that animals are not necessarily a coherent category; different kinds of engagements can exist with different animals simultaneously.

This critique shows that the foundation for creating a relationship based upon trust is missing in the hunting of wild animals. Moreover, I suggest that, by attempting to ascribe perceptions of animal personhood to the hunters, Ingold is in fact exposing the hunter’s sense of guilt and psychological defence mechanisms to lessen the feelings of guilt (Serpell 2005; but see Nadasdy 2007 for a different view). Although the hunter might trust the animal, from the animal’s viewpoint this trust is not reciprocated; the prey flees in the presence of humans and exhibits no trust.

Alternatively, in farming and pastoralist societies, relations between individual humans and individual animals are definitely formed: ‘domestication does provide the temporal and spatial conditions for human-animal intimacy to emerge’ (Knight 2005: 5). Living and working with domesticated animals demands a continuous daily association with these animals which generates a high level of mutual familiarity.

The intimacy that is formed in the proximity between humans and domestic animals is highly dependent upon trust. Humans trust animals to be docile and cooperative, while animals trust humans to protect them, feed them and care for them. ‘All creatures which have been successfully domesticated . . . were originally social. They have transferred to human beings the trust and docility which, in the wild state, they would have developed towards their parents, and, in adulthood, towards the leaders of their pack or herd’ (Midgley 1983: 112). Fundamental trust forms the basis for animals to give up their autonomy, and for humans to claim responsibility. Even small domesticates like sheep and goats are potentially dangerous animals, but the in presence of trust harmful situations (both for humans and animals) are avoided. This demonstrates that Ingold’s idea of a universal transfer from trust to domination is over-simplified. It does not take into account the relationship and trust between humans and animals embedded in the process of caring for animals (Knight 2005). Thus, as a rhetorical device, I turn Ingold’s (2000) argument around: the development from hunting to husbandry signified a shift from domination to trust.

A social contract between humans and animals

I suggest an alternative understanding of the human-animal relationship, namely that it can be perceived as a social contract (Larrère and Larrère 2000; Lund et al. 2004a). The idea of a human-animal contract differs fundamentally from a black-and-white worldview of either a relationship of trust or one of domination. Rather, the notions of trust and
reciprocity are at the core of the social contract. Theodossopoulos describes farmers' relationship to their animals in a small, traditional island community in Greece thus: ‘[d]omestic animals, through their inclusion in the household economy, are seen as forming close relationships with their owners. They exist within a clearly defined and reciprocal system of order and care, one which consists of rules, duties and rights’ (2005: 16). The idea of a human-animal contract thus has contextually specific ramifications for how the relationship is articulated.

The idea of a ‘pact between man and beast, sought by each for their mutual aid’ (Larrère and Larrère 2000: 55) goes back to antiquity (Larrère and Larrère 2000; Lund et al. 2004a: 37), from the Epicureans to Lucretius, Montaigne and Hobbes. A social contract defines the terms of engagement and the duties, responsibilities and rights of the parts involved (Lund et al. 2004a: 35). The notion of a human-animal contract is found in gender research, where the notion of a ‘gender contract’ indicates the type of compromise made about the gender division of labour, both at work and, by implication, at home (e.g. Gottfried 2000; Kapustina 2005). The gender contract is a useful tool given that gender categories and relationships between them are fluid and negotiable. It is also found in organic farming (Larrère and Larrère 2000; Lund 2002, 2005; Lund et al. 2004a) and in biology: ‘[b]oth the cat and the dog are animals with which we humans have entered into a solemn contract. We made an unwritten, unspoken pact with their wild ancestors, offering food and drink and protection in exchange for the performance of certain duties’ (Morris 1986: 3).

In the social contract there is, unlike in judicial contracts, no independent third party with the power to enforce the contract, and those who enter a contract are bound solely by their trust in the other party. Midgley (1983: 84) suggests that the contract should stand for an ideal area of unspoken trust and agreement. The idea of a social contract stems from Hobbes’ Leviathan (1985 [1651]) where the push and pull of fear persuade the people to give away their freedom to be protected by the sovereign to whom they have an ‘artificial’ trust (Weil 1986). Such a contract is between each individual and the sovereign. The contract is asymmetrical, it does not involve equal partners; rather it creates a bond between unequal partners to secure the rights and duties of both parties. Such social contracts may also involve animals (cf. Rowlands 2006). According to Hobbes’ materialist philosophy, there is no real (ontological) difference between humans and animals (Martinich 2005: 38; Russell 2005 [1946]: 503). Following Hobbes’ broader philosophical discourse, the social contracts between a sovereign and an animal cannot be ruled out.

In organic farming an ethical ‘eco-contract’ between humans and animals is found (see Lund et al. 2004a: 38–43 for an outline of this contract), to ensure that animals are given ethically sound living conditions and treatment (Larrère and Larrère 2000; Lund et al. 2004a). It presupposes that humans and animals are partners in the agro-ecosystem, and seeks a means to regulate human-animal relations to ensure that both parties benefit from it (Lund et al. 2004a: 35). Here fundamental notions such as a holistic view of nature, ecological sustainability and a focus on natural animal behaviour are instrumental to animal welfare (Alrøe et al. 2001; Lund 2005; Lund et al. 2004b; Lund and Röcklinsberg 2001: 409). Implicitly the human-animal ‘eco-contract’ acknowledges animals as participants in contractual relations, where they have rights and obligations towards each other.
The notion of contract has wider implications for considering human-animal relationships both today and in prehistory. First, in the archaeological discourse, considering the human-animal relationship as a social contract allows for factors that are normally not discussed together, such as the role of animals in both economic strategies and cosmological institutions. After all, the same animals are both symbolic transmitters and subsistence, and can therefore be incorporated within the same framework of the social contract (Armstrong Oma 2007, 2008). As participants in the social contract, animals are given multiple roles and can simultaneously participate in different arenas. As such, the social contract is a tool to examine the animals in a community where they have a variety of roles and obligations, rather than seeing them as segregated, for example, as either calorific value or cosmological vehicles.

Second, each contract has its own, particular ramifications, and thus a much wider scope than as a universal catch-all, and goes beyond the idea of symbiosis. Rather, it is historically and contextually specific. Similar to the gender contract, the human-animal contract is negotiable. This means that it can take many forms, and today’s organic ‘eco-contract’ probably does not correspond with contracts that existed in the past.

Third, the agents involved are in asymmetrical relationships. The contract does not imply that humans and animals must be equal partners (Larrère and Larrère 2000: 55), any more than that between the sovereign and the people in *Leviathan*, or that between different gender categories. It is because humans and animals are perceived as unequal partners in modern society that an ‘eco-contract’ is meant to assure a fair and ethically sound treatment of animals – the weaker part in the relationship. It presupposes that there can be some communication between humans and animals, an exchange of affect, of emotion and information interpretable by both parties (Larrère and Larrère 2000: 56). However, Lund et al. point out that, ‘although the relation is essentially one between unequal contributors, both humans and farm animals are equal in the sense that they are members of the agroecological community, and their interdependence will at a closer look turn out to be greater than commonly assumed’ (2004a: 36).

**Animal agency and human-animal intra-action**

The idea of a social contract acknowledges that the relationship between living animals and humans is multi-layered and beyond a one-way communication. I hold that animals are agents by way of their ability to act upon the world as living, sentient beings (see also Argent forthcoming). Intra-action denotes how humans and animals are engaged in mutual decision-making, a co-creation of behaviour, termed a mutual becoming (Birke et al. 2004: 174). Mutual becoming happens at the meeting point between living animals and humans, where animals’ behaviour is formed by social interactions with humans and vice versa, leading to a fundamental reciprocity. Mutual becoming is a discursive process that operates between human/animal conjunctions, meaning that humans and animals adjust themselves to each other in a field of intra-agency (Birke et al. 2004: 168). Such an inclusive understanding of animals is more useful when examining the role of animals in the lives of humans. The agency of animals means that they are a doing or a becoming, formed by social interactions (Birke et al. 2004: 169). For example, baby animals such as...
newborn puppies must socialize themselves in relation to humans, as well as to non-human animals (Birke et al. 2004: 175). As sentient beings, animals are not essentialist objects, neither fixed nor malleable, but living beings with agentive powers. Thus, the human-animal relationship as a social process is learnt by both humans and animals (Grandin and Johnson 2005: 32–3), and intra-action springs from this process.

Birke et al. (2004: 172–3) take the lab rat as an example of how even animals that are perceived strictly as data and exist for scientific uses partake in the intra-action between humans and animals. Lab rats are embedded in the whole industry of activity and institution, and humans perform according to the rat’s biological and social needs. The rat is thereby an agent in a process. This example illustrates that not only domestic animals and prey are formative to human lives and societies; all animals, from guinea pigs to elephants, have agency and the ability to act upon humans.

The encounter between humans and animals is a discursive process that forms the relationship, and a field of intra-action is created by mutual action, becoming and performing. Such encounters are found in spatial locations where humans and animals meet, arenas where mutual becomings are generated. Human-animal meeting points therefore become a potential area of study of human-animal relationships in archaeology.

**Riding the centaur**

The idea of human-animal intra-action is aptly illustrated by the special bond that is formed when humans and horses ride together (Argent forthcoming; Game 2001; see also Grandin and Johnson 2005: 5–6). The human-horse relationship is founded on interconnectedness where a joint participation in the world leads to a state of humans and horses being mixed. Inherently, species that live together come to attune to each other, and a platform of communication based upon sympathetic responses in each other is established. Game (2001: 2) suggests that, when riding, we experience ourselves as creatures (i.e. mixed beings), and the mythical centaur is one example of such an interconnectedness which portrays the human-horse relationship. The metaphor of the centaur allows riding to become an imagining of the seamlessness between horse, human and cosmos. Although this has a mysterious ring to it, these experiences are real within spatial and temporal dimensions.

This seamless relationship needs to be entrained. Game (2001:3; see also Hall 1983) explains this as ‘learning to come in tune with’, and it demands openness and receptiveness of the other (i.e. the animal). Humans and horses entrain riding together in a horse-human rhythm, in which they learn how to tune into one another. In this process the human and the horse are in tune together, the relationship is what matters and species are forgotten. ‘What horses and riders entrain with is the relation, the rhythm between, the transporting flow, the riding’ (Game 2001: 5). Riding well demands that one forgets the human separate self, as riding is ‘absorbing horse, taking horse into our body’ (Game 2001: 9). When one learns and embodies a motion, the motion is inhabited (Bachelard 1969), thus, through rhythm, horse and rider come to inhabit riding. Consequently, thinking of riding in relational terms moves the focus from the rider as carrying out an action to an understanding of the rider and horse as simultaneously carrying and being carried by each other. Fundamental to this particular form of intra-action is mutual trust.
However, regarding both horses and other animals, most scholars adhere to the domination model. Noske (2005) criticizes this as a tendency in zoological studies that look at animals as passive vehicles for stimulus input and response output. She claims that such research is controlled by knowledge based on domination, and not openness, towards the other. The image of animals as neutral is fundamentally flawed. Rather, animals construct their own world, and select the characteristics of the world that have meaning to them, and act accordingly (Grandin and Johnson 2005; Noske 1997, 2005). For example, horse trainers successfully draw upon the horse’s own experiences, sociality and language in handling them (Blake 1975; Game 2001; Hearne 1987; Patton 2003; Roberts 1996), thus accentuating the two-way communication between horses and humans (Noske 2005: 47). This nature of the human-animal relationship is seen in other instances. A mutual rhythm and trust must also be created when milking a cow, when shearing a sheep, when using a bull for traction, when herding or hunting with a dog and when rounding animals up to move them from one field to another.

Alternatively, as history has shown, animals are dominated and sometimes treated brutally, abused for the sake of entertainment and most domestic animals are slaughtered. How does this accord with the idea of trust and social contract between humans and domestic animals? Each relationship is unique, and the asymmetrical nature of human-animal relationships leaves animals vulnerable to brutality and abuse of power (see Lindstrom this volume). Different relationships can exist at the same time with different animals, for example, bullfighters on horseback have a relationship of mutual trust with their horse, while simultaneously antagonizing the bull. However, I have two arguments in favour of trust: first, it makes sense in economic terms. Following Hearne (1987; see also Argent forthcoming and 2010), the objection towards brutality is that it does not work. Maximizing gains, be they secondary products, riding, driving, herding or emotional and aesthetic pleasure, is achieved more quickly, with more pleasure and with a quantitatively and qualitatively better outcome when trust is present. A productive relationship is dependent upon cooperation and mutual trust. Second, while life is there, death is absent. The farmer grooming his cattle enjoys their presence in the here and now. Richard Benson portrays this in the story of his family on a traditional farm in modern times in the Yorkshire Wolds:

I thought about Guy [Benson’s brother] and Onkus [their boar]. … After all, how could you possibly claim an affection between men and the animals they bred to kill? … Guy would just say, ‘That’s how it is – if someone weren’t going to eat them, I’d never get to look after them’, and that sounded like a brutalized feeling, a sensitivity warped, deformed or severed, if you had never seen him talking into a boar’s ear, or looking over his shoulder at a trailer carrying one of his pigs out of the yard.

(Benson 2005: 125)

Human-animal rhythms in Bronze Age Scandinavia

Regarding human-animal rhythm, archaeological case studies vary profoundly throughout time and space, even though the rhythm of the human-animal relationship most likely took place in the domestic arena in farming societies. The repetitive nature of intra-action
and mutual becoming sets apart trust as a potential area of study in farming societies. To exemplify, I wish to draw upon case studies of well-preserved Scandinavian Bronze Age households. In general, the household arena was made up of one or more two- or three-aisled longhouses (e.g. Göthberg et al. 1995; Tesch 1992, 1993), in addition to the surrounding land that was used for grazing and farming.

Longhouses used for habitation are particularly salient when considering human-domestic animal relationships. The architectural choices in Scandinavia not only facilitate the human-animal rhythm, but it is fundamentally embedded in type 2 houses (see Fig. 1). These are medium-sized longhouses with a clear division into two sections (Tesch 1993: 162) where humans and domestic animals lived their lives together, engaging in daily intra-action (Armstrong Oma 2007: 135–50).

The shared life-space would facilitate caring for the animals, such as grooming, milking and feeding them, and assisting during difficult births. The presence of strainers testifies to milking (Armstrong Oma 2007: 249–51; Borna-Ahlkvist et al. 1998: 139; Stjernquist 1969: 31). Milking is a daily repetitive practice which requires not only physical proximity, but also a mutual rhythm and trust. It is important to create a calm and comfortable atmosphere to encourage the animals to relax and let down their milk, otherwise people will get kicked and the animal will withhold its milk. Animals are normally milked in the morning and evening, after they are fed. Milking during dusk and dawn assures a tranquil setting, in between the hustle and bustle of everyday life. A stress-free environment creates the ultimate conditions to achieve for both humans and animals. The most important factor to accomplish this is mutual trust. Both animal and human need to know that they will be safe in each other’s presence; therefore the mood of the person who is milking should be calm, not angry, and the animal should be approached gently and kindly with as much physical contact as possible. The more one physically connects oneself to an animal, the greater the degree of mutual trust and commitment accrued.

To milk sheep and goats one would normally straddle them, facing their tails, and let the milk flow into a pail. Goats are particularly vivacious, and would easily get distracted, so creating a calm atmosphere was crucial, otherwise the goats would spill the milk. To milk a cow one would sit on a low stool beside the udder and hold the pail between the knees, and after washing the udder with warm water and moistening the hands, one would pull the fingers down the teats to start the milk flow. Then two by two teats would get milked, the cow and the person falling into a mutual rhythm. The following quote from Thomas

![Figure 1 Example of a longhouse of type 2. This is the late Bronze Age house Köpinge B14:VIII, where animals are presumed to have lived in the eastern part and humans in the western.](image-url)
Hardy captures the required peaceful setting: ‘Nothing in the picture moved but Old Pretty’s tail and Tess’s pink hands, the latter so gently as to be a rhythmic pulsation only, as if they were obeying a reflex stimulus, like a beating heart’ (1979 [1912]: 229). Resting the head towards the flank of the cow has a calming effect (also a habit sported by Tess and the other milk maids, see Hardy 1979 [1912]: 228).

Animals follow their own yearly rhythms. Wool has to be shorn once a year. A particular rhythm is necessary for sheep shearing to be at all a feasible task. Older sheep are found in faunal assemblages from Scandinavia, and woollen clothes are found in burials (Harding 2000; Kristiansen 1998). Bronze Age sheep herders must have developed a rhythm which enabled them to shear sheep successfully, consecutively, year after year. Another yearly event would be the rutting season. The sheep go with the ram in the autumn and lambs are born in spring. Shepherds keep an eye on the females to see when they come in heat and make sure the ram does his job. Often it is necessary to interfere and give the animals a push in the right direction (e.g. Kennard 2004). Securing the life force of the flock would be vital for a Bronze Age farm, therefore it was imperative to understand and interact with the natural rhythm of the animals. Upholding the numbers in the flock would, as a result, mean that not only was an intimate knowledge of the flock, the species and the individual animals essential to be successful, it was also crucial to act according to that knowledge. Thus, practices that were developed from the particular situation of the shared life-space inside type 2 longhouses and in the household arena came into being.

These practices exemplify the effects and outcomes of the proximity manifest in Scandinavian type 2 longhouses and the household arena. In addition to the shared life-space of the household, rock art testifies to shepherding and arding, activities where human-animal relationships are performed and a rhythm needs to be established. Several rock art panels depict arding, in which a man (identified by a clearly marked penis) steers the ard that is harnessed to two bulls (see Plate 1; see also Rasmussen 1998).

A panel at Valhaug 1 in Rogaland in south-western Norway depicts a rather uncommon scene: a shepherd with his arms open drives a flock of four horned animals. A smaller animal without horns seems to aid the shepherd in rounding the animals up; this is probably a depiction of a dog (see Plate 2). In modern and historical times, dogs have been indispensable to shepherds, and one dog can do the work of ten men (beautifully illustrated in Kennard 2004, 2005).

A deeply intuitive relationship between shepherd and dog is needed, and serves well to illustrate the expediency of trust. The well-known sheepdog handler and trainer Derek Scrimgeour puts it like this: ‘Instead of adding additional pressure on your dog when he is already confused or worried you must be the one he relies on to make things easier for him to understand. If you can do this he will learn to trust you. In fact, he will begin to think he needs you. This is when a really special relationship begins to happen’ (2002: 24).

The practices that these examples suggest are the results of particular human-animal social contracts. Such contracts would deepen mutual human-animal relations of trust, and trust played a crucial role in the contractual development. These social contracts were set up to facilitate and benefit the dealings that humans had with animals, and ultimately to be an advantage for household production. The shared life-space of the type 2 longhouses, as well as rock art panels, testifies to a trust in, and care for, domestic animals in Scandinavian Bronze Age agro-pastoral societies. Effort and care is needed to aid the mutual trust and commitment that took place in these societies. To make the relationship thrive, openness, receptiveness and sympathy towards what the animal conveys is essential. This is not, as some might dismissively state, sentimentalizing; rather it is necessary to create a setting in which domestication and husbandry practices can take place. The notion of trust is crucial for creating the foundation on which a reciprocated rhythm may happen, and the enactment of mutual becoming cannot take place without mutual trust. In this sense, trust is antithetical not to domination, but rather to the less intimate encounter between hunter and prey. While the hunter sentimentalizes brutality, the herder needs to develop a mutual relationship based upon trust with her flock. The architectural choices in Scandinavian type 2 longhouses facilitated the notions of trust, care and openness towards domestic animals, thereby constructing space for the human-animal rhythm to take place, and were ultimately places where mutual becomings happened.

The above discussion demonstrates that intra-action comes from both economic strategies and cosmological institutions, but above all from social practice. Studying these households through animals reveals the underlying rationale by which the household structured its life-spaces, demonstrating how animals were embedded as a structuring principle in the household. The social contract between humans and animals structures the framework for intra-action. Thus, the underlying rationale of these societies is seen through the social
contract, since it grasps the full complexity of the human-animal relationship and allows for ritual and economy (and other notions) to be discussed together.

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References


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