

## **Apes with language or the divine animal?**

Symbolic writing systems (like the Latin alphabet) can be traced back to iconic signs, and these all the way back to prehistoric graffiti. For example, did you know that the shape of the first letter of the Greek alphabet, the alpha ( $\alpha$ ) is a progressive stylisation of a bull's head? The horns, represented like a downward curve, shifted from top to right position, eventually becoming the two wings or appendices of the letter, while the head was simplified to an oval. Or, did you know that God and day have the same root in Latin (and Lithuanian?). So the idea that God is light is sculpted in the word itself. During this Mind Sharpener Event, Moreno Bonda has meticulously shown how linguistic signs across different alphabets are progressively stylised in a process of abstraction that took millennia to complete. This daring proposal would challenge the classical assumption that writing is a transcription of speech sounds, and is therefore derivative from them. This was a fascinating event, after which one is left with the impression that the signs we use everyday are not as arbitrary as we use to think: they are inherently motivated, meaningful, stemming from the environment of our ancestors. And speaking of evolution, Moreno ended by citing Roger Wescott's *The Divine Animal* (provocatively proposing that humans show all the features of animals kept in captivity) and Pietro Buffa's works, according to which humans did not evolve linearly, but rather according to big jumps or leaps – sort of paradigmatic shifts which have made us a somewhat separate species from the rest of the animal world. Quite a lot of food for thought then!

Talk by Moreno Bonda, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2018

Report by Davide Castiglione, 12<sup>th</sup> October 2018