

Thinking Perhaps Begins There: The Question of the Animal.

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The question of the animal has thrummed away gently and for the most part harmlessly in the background of philosophy for the last couple of millennia. Plutarch was already wondering in the first century CE how human beings could with a good conscience eat animals. But, for the most part, philosophy has regarded the question of the animal as little more than a sub-topic of the field of ethics, useful for focussing thinking about questions of rights, duties and responsibilities, but not in itself a big issue. Indeed, one might identify the coming into being of modern philosophy itself with the decisive turn away from 'natural philosophy' towards the realm of human meanings and experiences. Philosophy has sustained itself in the conviction that, philosophically, we are alone in the world and perhaps in the universe.

Now, the unignorability of ecological issues and the rise of environmental criticism across the discipline of the humanities are bringing the question of animal to a new prominence. New forms, and names of animal-centred discourse are breeding rapidly: 'zooësis' (Chaudhuri 2007), 'zoontology' (Scholtmeijer 1997, Wolfe 2003), 'zoopoetics' (Atterton and Calarco 2004, 115), 'humanimity' (Surya 2001). 'Animals are the most recent beneficiaries of a process of emancipation that has reached successively through different categories of abused and exploited human being and is now being extended beyond the limits of the human species. 'If not from animals, where will the angel arise?', Michel Serres has enquired: 'If not from these animals, where will wisdom arise?' (Serres 2001, 124, 125)

The twentieth-century European philosophers who are most avidly read by literary and cultural critics are not unique in their inattention to animals, but their inattention has a particular piquancy. It is a mystery that this philosophical tradition, which has been preoccupied to the point of mania with alterity - with human others, and the problem of the 'other' for humans - and has so intensely pondered questions of 'the human', the 'inhuman' and the 'posthuman', should have managed to remain so singlemindedly uninterested in the proximate otherness represented by the animal. It is possible to wonder whether the busy fascination with human otherness does not in fact keep the self-evidence of the human alive and kicking, in much the same way as haggling over whether Yorkshiremen are properly British might keep intact the unthinkability of including the French in the Act of Union.

Animal Philosophy offers selections from the work of the principal philosophers of the Continental tradition, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Bataille, Levinas, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Ferry, Cixous and Irigaray. These are paired with essays by contemporary scholars, including Alphonso Lingis on Nietzsche, David Wood on Derrida, which explicate, criticise and respond to them. This is a useful and interesting way of organising an anthology of this kind, even though it may have been driven by necessity, given the fact that the primary selections are often so glancing and inconclusive. Perhaps the anthology is most illuminating in showing us how oblique the concern with the question of the animal has been in philosophy in the Continental tradition. Michel Foucault is represented, for example, by some pages from *Madness and Civilisation* that tries to show how madness began to be correlated with animality at the beginning of the seventeenth century, such that the mad 'were no longer men whose minds had wandered, but beasts preyed upon by a natural frenzy' (Atterton and Calarco 2004, 68). Clare Palmer's accompanying essay criticises Foucault for apparently sharing some of the assurance regarding the divide between the human and the animal that he explicates, but the real amazement is how, after this brief dalliance with the subject of animals, the inaugurator of the notion of biopower could have succeeded in ignoring it for the rest of his career, despite his corrosive scepticism regarding the idea of 'the human'.

At first blush, it might seem odd to include Luc Ferry in this company, since his *The New Ecological Order* argues that the radical zoocentrism of some ecological thinking represents a dangerous abandonment of humanism. But the robust defence of the singularity of the human to be found in his work chimes with the work of many twentieth-century thinkers who might be thought to have undermined the claims of the human. Descartes may have been subject to the most uninhibited rough handling on every other matter, but, when it comes to securing the absolute distinction between animals and humans, you can't slip a rizla between him and Georges Bataille, who is equally convinced of the transcending power of human consciousness, as contrasted with the immanence of the animal, which '*is in the world like water in water*' (Atterton and Calarco 2004, 34), or Heidegger, who, having proclaimed that Dasein is not to be simply identified with the human, then makes it absolutely clear that, if the animal - let us say his famous lizard on a stone - thinks it has any role in the disclosing of being, or the worlding of the world, it can forget it (or, more likely, can't).

Even more unsettling is the queasiness of Levinas on the question of whether animals are deserving of ethical regard. Levinas tells the story of Bobby, a dog who adopted him and his companions in a prisoner-of-war camp in Nazi Germany, under conditions in which he had been stripped of his humanity. The lesson he draws from it is that 'for him, there was no

doubt that we were men' (Atterton and Calarco 2004, 40). It is not clear what reciprocation Levinas's ethics of responsibility to the face can offer to Bobby, or to any other animal, and an interview with him on this question produces a hilariously stiff embarrassment: 'I don't know if a snake has a face. I can't answer that question. A more specific analysis is needed.' You bet.

Not all the contributors to the anthology are as sheepish as Levinas. Deleuze and Guattari's chapter on 'becoming-animal' from *A Thousand Plateaus* makes an obligatory appearance. The fetishists, 'furries' and weekend lycanthropes who frolic as wolves, pigs and ponies and book their whisker implants in the name of the Deleuzian principle of 'becoming-animal' would do well to remind themselves that 'becoming-animal' is supposed to have nothing to do with mimicry, representation or identification, and therefore does not in the least mean 'becoming like an animal'. On the other hand, James Urpeth's escort essay, 'Animal Becomings', which suggests that the right response to the essay would be to feel 'oddly feral, inclined to whinny, bark, or howl joyously' (Atterton and Calarco 2004, 110), will, alas, do them no good at all. Hélène Cixous enjoys herself arguing that the category of the unclean ('immonde' in French), is a vileness effected by the wicked 'He-Bible' which places women amid the legions of the loathed - along with Jews, blacks, birds, bards (yes!) and spiders in the bath. Naturally, Cixous urges a joyous embrace of the abominable. For Cixous, the violated are the inviolable, and solidarity with them brings with it a voluptuously self-righteous irreproachability. Given the difficult problems of ethical definition and responsibility raised elsewhere in the volume, this seems evasive and self-gratifying. In the final essay in the collection, Luce Irigaray lets us know that birds are her friends and also that a cat once saved her from falling out of a window when she was feeling dizzy.

Giorgio Agamben is not represented in the *Animal Philosophy* collection, but his short book *The Open: Man and Animal* rhymes with much that is to be found in it. It is glumly unsurprising to find Agamben, who has done more than any other philosopher to advance the thinking about the question of biopower set in train by Foucault, accepting Heidegger's perplexed but ultimately privative account of the human as the discloser of being. It may indeed be, as Agamben argues, that the name and being of man is always in question, that *Homo sapiens* does not designate a species, but rather an 'anthropological machine' for the production of the human, but this indeterminacy is lifted into the very condition of man's exceptionality and privilege. Agamben follows Heidegger obediently in defining Man as the being that must heroically, and, it seems, uniquely, ask itself the question of its own being. Man is now not the only creature that is able to grasp its own essence, but the only creature that is able to experience the anguish of its

lack of essence. Although Agamben looks forward to the demise of the 'anthropological machine', the outcome of this, he hopes, will be the revelation of 'the central emptiness, the hiatus that - within man - separates man and animal' (Agamben 2004, 92).

Fortunately, we are not wholly reliant on Continental philosophers for our understanding of animals. There is another tradition, which focusses, not on the consequences of thinking on the animal for definitions of the human but rather on animals themselves, considered, not as metaphysical conundrums but as living beings and possible subjects of rights. Stimulated and encouraged by the recent arguments of animal rights theorists such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan, biologists, ecologists, animal trainers, anthropologists and cultural historians have undertaken a substantial work of rethinking with regard to animals and our relation to them. The material gathered together in Berg's *The Animals Reader* emerges from this tradition. The scope of the volume is impressively large, and, with material from Aristotle, Plutarch, Bentham, Singer, Regan, Montaigne, Descartes, Berger, Levi-Strauss and Haraway, as well as contributions from a large range of cultural historians, ecological writers, contemporary animal rights activists, it certainly earns its claim to provide the 'essential classic and contemporary writings' on the question of the animal. The book is helpfully organised, with sections on the question of animals as subjects, and on their capacity for reflexive thought, including interesting evidence of the capacity of elephants to feel grief. Another section brings together essays that reflect on the entanglement of human and animal lives, in the keeping of pets and the eating of meat (two practices that are of course related by the fact that they seem so different, in the unthinkability of tucking into Rover or Peter Rabbit). Other sections concern animals as spectacle, in hunting, zoos, and the staged combats of the bullring and the dogpit, as symbols, and as scientific subjects.

It would be possible to feel that the range of *The Animals Reader* is bought at the cost of argumentative coherence. Some of the material included is pedagogic or broadly informative rather than developing any serious kinds of argument. Harriet Ritvo's survey of the many different kinds of relationship human beings have had with animals is always interesting, but disappointingly lacking in edge or outcome. The same cannot be said for the passionate arguments in favour of animal rights, and against human exploitation and degradation of animals, to be found in the volume. Perhaps the most illuminating philosophical contribution to the volume is Martha Nussbaum's 'The Moral Status of Animals', an essay adapted from her recent *Frontiers of Justice* (2006). While acknowledging the force of utilitarian arguments like those of Peter Singer, Nussbaum maintains that the utilitarian concern with maximising pleasure and minimising suffering

homogenises the experience of different creatures, Nussbaum argues instead for a 'capabilities' approach, which urges on us a duty to permit or promote the flourishing of every creature, in its own terms.

The historical relations between humans and animals is also attracting increasing attention, and one can expect much more work to appear following the path set out by Reaktion's *Animals series*, edited by Jonathan Burt, which to date includes volumes exploring the natural-cultural histories of the ant, bear, bee, cat, cockroach, cow, crow, dog, falcon, fly, fox, oyster, parrot, peacock, rat, salmon, shark, snake, tiger, tortoise and whale. Early modern studies are particularly rich in such explorations of historical 'anthrozoology', due in very large part to the pioneering and commanding work of Erica Fudge, who has not only herself produced a stream of essays and books on the history of human-animal interactions in early modern culture, but has also stimulated the work of others, not least in the fascinating essays collected together in *Renaissance Beasts*. Defined between the extremes represented by Montaigne, who, in his *Apology for Raymond Sebond* in 1580, argued that animals had feeling and understanding and famously enquired 'When I play with my cat, who knows whether she has not more game with me than I with her?', and Descartes, who denied Montaigne's ascription of sense to animals in his letter to the Duchess of Newcastle of 23 November 1646 (both of these being included in the Berg *Animals Reader*), the Renaissance was a period in which animals moved decisively and probably irreversibly from being participants in social life to being insensate objects of scientific enquiry and industrial production. Fudge would like us to find in these essays much more than the explication of animals as emblems or vehicles of human meaning. The aim of the collection is to show animals not merely embodying human vices and virtues, or dramatising human desires and conflicts, but as coactors, 'beings in the world who may themselves create change' (Fudge 2004, 3). There are certainly moments in the collection where this is true. 'Shakespeare's Animations', Erica Sheen's subtle, if occasionally cryptic meditation on animals as possessions connects them with the kind of portable property represented by the very plays in which they feature. Elspeth Graham's essay shows that, for all the many emblematic uses to which horses were put in the 17th century, their deep implication in every aspect of British culture allows us to read in them 'the interdiscursive mingling of the textual and the corporeal, the human and the animal, the material and the verbal' (Fudge 2004, 134). S.J. Wiseman brilliantly shows the ways in which the figure of the werewolf allows an exterior wildness to figure various forms of interior civil discord. Peter Harrison's 'Animals and the Experimental Philosophy' usefully summarises the evidence that, despite the widespread practice of vivisection and animal experiment, many investigators remained extremely uncomfortable about the suffering they were inflicting on their subjects and

far from convinced by Descartes's reassurances that animals were merely machines. And yet, most of the essays in the collection settle for the kind of critical epistemology that has become so normative in cultural history: that is, animals are shown as signifying devices with which the world may be known and the human order of things propagated. Time and again, we are told that it is the role of the animal at once to establish and to agitate the borderline between the animal and human. Whether tonic or toxic to established structures of power and understanding, animals emerge as fundamentally good to think with.

Animals have a much more constitutive relationship to the work of thought in Jacques Derrida's mighty *L'Animal que donc je suis*, which also provides an unexpected hinge between Continental and Anglo-American thinking. A lengthy excerpt from the first part of this book appeared in 2002 in *Critical Inquiry* in David Wills's English translation, which could do no better with Derrida's title than 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', and is reprinted in an edited version in the *Animal Philosophy*. The book arose from an invitation given to Derrida to review his work at a C erisy-la-Salle conference in 1997, under the general rubric of *L'animal autobiographique*. In a lengthy digression from the opening (understandable but ironically not included in *Animal Philosophy*), Derrida constructs an imaginary anthology of passages from his own work in which animals have featured, including silkworms, monkeys, hedgehogs, ants, horses and eagles (naturally he calls it a 'zoo-auto-bio-bibliography'). 'Animals', he declares 'are my concern' (Derrida 2002, 403). Compared with the shiftiness or sentimentality of so many of his contemporaries, Derrida's sets out the facts of man's systematic dominion over animals with scorching starkness. The industrial slaughter of animals is not merely genocidal, since it involves 'raising for slaughter' on such a huge scale. Derrida asks us to imagine that Nazi doctors and eugenicists 'had decided to organise the overproduction and overgeneration of Jews, gypsies and homosexuals by means of artificial insemination, so that, being more numerous and better fed, they could be destined in always increasing numbers for the same hell' (Atterton and Calarco 2004, 120). And to this must be added the global organisation of the forgetting or concealment of this vast suffering. The essay is a prelude to investigations of the (non)place of the animal in the work of Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Lacan and Levinas. But none of these philosophers are able to provide Derrida with the resources for thinking about the animal that an English utilitarian can. For it is Jeremy Bentham, in a short passage from his *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, first published in the revolutionary year 1789 (and also reprinted in *The Animals Reader*), who announced so devastatingly that philosophers who worry (as they continue to do on every front) about the capacities of animals, about whether animals can speak, reason, plan, remember, exhibit kindness, and so on, are asking a wrong or

irrelevant question. The question to be asked is 'can they suffer?' Arrestingly, Derrida reads this as the opposite of capacity, as a *not being able*, an *impouvoir*. The capacity of animals to suffer is so screechingly undeniable that it ranks with the cogito as indubitability itself. So the ground of our concern with animals is 'the possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower' (Atterton and Calarco 2004, 121). Derrida snarls superbly against the idiocy (*bêtise*) of what he calls the 'general singular' of the word 'animal', a word 'that men have given themselves the right to give' (Atterton and Calarco 2004, 124), reserving for themselves the exclusive right to language and the power to name, the very thing of which those named by the word 'animal' are definitionally deprived. Rather than simply letting animals in on language, Derrida urges us to accede to a thinking 'that thinks the absence of the name and the word otherwise, as something other than a privation' (Atterton and Calarco 2004, 126). This is both a huge departure within Derrida's work and brilliant reconstruing of it. Late in his life, almost as late as possible, in an essay that announces the question of the animal as a decisive turning point in philosophy as such, Derrida makes animals the provocation to his own vast philosophical endeavour. 'The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there' (Atterton and Calarco 2004, 122).

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