

## ANIMAL SACRUM. ANIMAL DIFFERENCE

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Philosophers usually find animals conceptually disquieting beings (and perhaps this is precisely why philosophy is full of animal examples). Animals challenge the Cartesianism that lurks within so many of us, within those who suppose a substantial clear-cut separation between cogitations and things, and hence between thinking beings and beings as things: if animals are not machines, as Descartes believed, then where can we situate them in that slot between thinking and things? Yet the vast range of animality, from amoebas to dolphins (which use a digital language), challenges this categorical separation. Animality, an array of endless differences, undermines the strict discontinuity between things and subjects that philosophy usually privileges. Significantly, Jacques Derrida suggested eliminating the singular category of Animal and to talk instead of *animot*, a fusion between the plural *animaux*, animals, and *mot*, word (but should we also capture the Cartesian echo of the robot?), precisely to challenge the unity of all non-human living things in opposition to the human.

### I. Humanization of animality

Today many claim that we are removing animality, both from ourselves by sacrificing our animal demands, and by distancing animal species with regard to our humanity. And yet this accusation is taking place within a regime of growing humanization of animality. Whether we welcome cats and dogs into our homes as members of the family, or squeeze others into battery farms as raw material for the food industry, we have nevertheless allowed nearly all animals into the affective and/or economic system of us humans, into our *polis*. Besides, a portion of Animality is of our own making – certain species, like dogs, are the result of selections made by *Homo sapiens*. Animals have been humanized not only in the sense that we have turned them into instruments to satisfy our (both affective and material) needs, but also in the sense that, somehow, we always end up finding in animals, and not just in domesticated ones, a part of humanity that interests us. We admit that for certain aspects some animals outdo us; for example, dogs have a better sense of smell than we do. But this better or more is in any case

related to something that we also possess. Even when we discover that bats use ultrasound for orientation, i.e. something that by nature we do not possess, it is in relation to one of our technical tools – radar – that we talk about their perception. Animals are always described in relation to a more or a less, a yes or a no, with respect to human traits.

So, the love we feel for our dog is the same we feel for our children; with the difference that dogs are children who never grow up and always remain obedient to their owner-parents. In dogs we see what moves us in children: their defencelessness, the unconditioned love they bear for us. And how not to see in the love for cats a repetition of our childish passion for teddy bears and other objects that Winnicott (1971) called transitional? For this reason, Freud (1936) noted that our feelings towards pets are unambivalent; our love for them is not tarnished by hatred.

Derrida (2008) insisted strongly on his feeling of embarrassment at seeing his female cat watching him while he was naked. And he accused all philosophical interpretations on animality of looking at animals without being looked at by them<sup>1</sup>. Here too, however, we find an example of extreme humanization of the animal: Derrida's embarrassment is connected to the fact that he is ascribing to the cat's gaze the same qualities as a human's, as if it were the gaze of a girl who suddenly sees a naked man. But in fact, we have no idea of what a cat might think of an exposed human sex organ. Derrida too anthropomorphizes his cat.

As a counter example, we could cite the proliferation of national parks, dedicated spaces, inaccessible to human beings, where particular species we fear may become extinct can move in total freedom and independence. But these parks are exceptions that confirm the rule: the humanization of animals allows for some exceptions, indeed, for protective reasons. Some species can only survive if *Homo sapiens* protects them; thanks to man they become living fossils. *Homo sapiens*, rather than Darwinian evolution, now selects the species that will survive.

But animals have become humanized also in the sense that today, our love for them acts as a model for our love towards humans. Compassion or consideration for animals is the basis of what I would call our elementary ethics, the fact we are compassionate. We love someone not

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<sup>1</sup> On this point, see Cimino (2015: 104-09).

necessarily because they are rational, intelligent, good-natured or good-looking, but because of a sort of sympathy for them as a fragile human being who needs protection. On the one hand there is a symbolic ethics, a system of norms that regulates our relationships with other humans, and on the other an elementary ethics of generosity and compassion, a sort of pre-ethics that invests the other human being primarily as a life that suffers and enjoys. Symbolic ethics makes us judge or punish the other inasmuch as responsible, while ethics as elementary care and indulgence invests the other as it would an animal. It is by no means irrelevant, in my opinion, that Nietzsche went mad after embracing a coachman's horse in the city of Turin; becoming insane for compassion.

Love for animals has no ulterior motives, whilst love for humans always includes the suspicion of a secondary aim lurking behind it – sexual pleasure, perpetuation of lineage, expectations of solidarity, esteem, support, and so on. Love for animals is mostly a pure love. Who today loves a cat just because it gets rid of rats? Today we are more likely to protect our cats from rats. And love for the human other is pure, I would say maternal, when we are mostly concerned with his physical well-being, when we worry whether he eats enough, keeps warm, stays healthy...

After all, our common language shows an animalization of human behaviour, which is the other side of the affective-industrial humanization of animals. Someone can wiggle in delight; a local resident might bark at the neighbours; two lovers are love birds; a speaker can growl at the crowd; someone might lead a roaring life; when humiliated we leave with our tail between our legs; we ape someone; we ruminate on something; and so on and so on. These expressions are more than metaphors or similes: they show that we consider particular animal behaviours more eloquent than the equivalent human ones. The fact that dogs wag their tails is a model for our being delighted, the wagging tail seems to reveal something about our human joy.

Some people have more compassion for animals than for human beings. If they hear of the death of a dog, they are more touched than if they hear of the death of a human being. It would be easy to tag such people as lacking humanity; but in actual fact they are extending to certain animals the instinctual responses we usually have with regard to certain humans, in particular the pity and tenderness we feel for children, for the weak and the defenceless. In our societies, therefore, the taboo of not eating dog or cat meat is in force, feeding on it is perceived as a form of cannibalism. A very cultivated female friend remarked: 'I don't believe in God, I believe

in animals'. In other words, our pro-animal feelings are the product of our humanization of animals. One consequence is that the industrialized Western world is heading towards becoming an evermore vegetarian society; soon the rights of at least certain animals will be upheld and their slaughter will be prohibited. For Corridas, I think, if not the days, at least the years are numbered.

Some protest and say that vegetarianism goes against nature, as *Homo sapiens* is a carnivorous species. Why deprive humans of a natural function? Furthermore, to be coherent, we should force vegetarianism on the species we mustn't eat, but which are nevertheless carnivorous; in short, we should force many animals to in turn become vegetarian. Indeed, animalist ethics does not follow the Darwinian line, and vegetarianism is not an adaptive strategy. But all universalist ethics go against nature and are non-Darwinian: even fraternity among all human beings, the ideal of modern political ethics, clashes with the natural strategies of the selfish gene. There is always something absurd in ethics from the biological point of view. Hence, vegetarianism is absurd too.

In short, what moves us in other human beings – in particular defenceless ones – is not their humanity, but their animality. On the one hand, we equate animals to weak, dominated human beings, but on the other, it is because we assimilate weak, exploited, dominated and poor human beings to animals that we are prepared to fight for them.

Idiko Enyedi's film, *On body and soul*, tells of the difficult love story between a lonesome mature man and a clearly autistic younger woman. What adds dissonance to the tenderness of the story is the fact that both work in a wholesale slaughterhouse where industrial quantities of cows are killed. Blood everywhere. At one point, the heroine even tries to commit suicide by slitting her wrists, from which blood similar to that of the cattle gushes out. There is an allusion to the fact that an autistic person feels scarcely human, and hence a sort of animal. Furthermore, the two come into contact while dreaming of themselves as deer, he a stag and she a doe, in a winter landscape, in a sort of miraculous coincidence of dreams. Of particular interest is the way a condition at the limits of humanity – Asperger Syndrome – is turned into something quite touching through references to animal life. The animal condition, from the freedom of deer to the slaughtering of cattle, becomes the key to understanding the love relationship between two human beings isolated from their human context.

## II. Von Uexküll and the invisible bubble

Thomas Nagel (1974) wrote, ‘What is it like to be a bat?’. A question that, while it will continue to remain unanswered, is nevertheless perspicuous. In fact, the animal experience will forever remain enigmatic to us, even that of the female cat that watches Derrida naked or in a very intimate act. Our relationship to the experience of various animals is similar to how those blind or deaf from birth understand something they have never experienced and never will, like colours or music, which they usually describe in the scientific terms they have learned, like waves, light absorbers, and so on. Similarly, we use the scientific description of animal behaviour to talk about something that will forever escape our experience.

For this reason, Wittgenstein said that if a lion could talk, we wouldn’t be able to understand it.<sup>2</sup> Because we do not have the same experience of the world. Of course, we can describe lions scientifically, but science is necessarily anthropocentric, and describes animals as part of our human environment; science cannot go beyond the limits of the human environment.

Johannes von Uexküll (and Kriszat, 1934) called *Umwelt*, environment, the world-around an organism, what is relevant and significant always and only for the organism of a given species. Von Uexküll gave the example of *Ixodes ricinus*, the sheep tick, an animal that reacts selectively to only three external signals: a) the smell of butyric acid, b) the temperature of 37 °C (98.6 °F), and c) a particular type of mammal skin. These three things alone are its ‘carriers of meaning’. Nothing else is of any relevance to this arachnid; in the terminology of communication theory, everything else is noise, not signal.

The *Umwelt* is that set of traits that constitute relevant signals, capable of triggering certain pre-scribed reactions in an organism. At the same time, Von Uexküll called *Umgebung*, the surroundings, the objective space in which we see a living being move; but the *Umgebung* is nothing other than the human *Umwelt*, given that of the world even the human being only sees what he needs to see. The *Umgebung* is the illusion that makes us confuse our environment with the world. In this way several species may live in the same territory, but each species will have its own environment. Hence von Uexküll’s Kantian-like statement that ‘no animal can enter into a relation with an object/ being as such.’<sup>3</sup> The being-as-such would thus be a sort of

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<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein (2008: 190); Dolar (2014).

<sup>3</sup>The correct translation would be ‘being’, but in English it was translated as ‘object’: <http://www.paratext.co.uk/index-to-issue-1>

unknowable thing even for the human animal, given that every species is closed inside its own surrounding world, in its own ‘invisible bubble’, as von Uexküll calls it. Significantly, he called his book *Wanderings (Streifzüge) between Environments*: wandering from bubble to bubble.

The fact that the surrounding world of *Homo sapiens* is much richer than that of a tick leads us to think that the *Umwelt* of *Homo sapiens* coincides with the world as it is; but for the naturalist this is an illusion. The definition for the environment of *Homo sapiens* is no different than that for the environment of the tick.

In other words, the naturalistic approach leads to a sceptical philosophical conclusion: of the universe we suppose to exist we only notice what represents a signal for our species, what triggers a reaction in us. Inevitably, *Homo sapiens* anthropomorphizes everything, even and especially when it is being scientific. Science is not the work of angels or Martians, but of a particular species, *Homo sapiens*, which only reacts to its own environment. Biological science is a life’s knowledge about itself. We may land on the moon, but in biological terms we never leave our environment. That is to say that on the moon we will always and only be interested in its terrestrial aspects.

Heidegger (1983), quoting his pupil von Uexküll, calls these ‘carriers of meaning’ disinhibitors; and renamed disinhibiting ring (*Enthemmungsring*) what the biologist had called *Umwelt*.<sup>4</sup> But to counter the sceptical relativism to which biology leads, Heidegger praises human difference: beyond the disinhibiting ring there is a *Welt* of which the human being is a builder. For him, the animal is poor of world (*weltarm*), and man is a builder of world (*weltbindend*). Therefore, the animal is not devoid of world, it is only poor of world, in the sense that it can do without the world. In the end, Heidegger’s is a classic humanist position that rests on a clear-cut separation between animality and humanity. The exceptionality of the human subject’s *Dasein*, of its being-there, compared to any other animal, consists in the fact that the human is in relation, beyond the disinhibiting ring, with the being (object) as such. For Heidegger, an animal uses a staircase, for example, it climbs it, for the animal the stair is indeed a disinhibitor; but only a human being is open to the staircase as such (*etwas als etwas*), as pure being.

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<sup>4</sup> See also G. Agambem (2002).

Hence Heidegger insists on the irreducible difference between man's being-toward-death (the Dasein) and the immortality of the mere living being (the animal perishes, ceases to live, it does not die).

The animal is a living creature that is only living, as if it were an 'immortal' living thing. As Heidegger states [...], in terms of what binds the logos to the possibility of 'deceiving' or 'being deceived' – the animal doesn't die.

Derrida 2002: 15

This privilege of dying the human being apparently enjoys is commonly associated with other privileges. For example, only man laughs. Umberto Eco said that the human being is the only animal that can laugh because it is the only animal that knows it must die. But recent research has shown that – as Lactantius believed<sup>5</sup> – many animals laugh, only that we cannot tell when they do.<sup>6</sup>

### III. From the world to the Real

In my opinion, however, the naturalistic approach is correct in its denial that *Homo sapiens* is open to being as being. In other words, the *Welt* (world) is always and only our *Umwelt* (environment). Even if this approach raises inevitable philosophical question: insofar as we say that we cannot give a sense to the *Welt* outside our *Umwelt*, for this very reason do we pose an out- of-the-environment that we cannot help taking into account. Some say: Man is a tick who is aware of being a tick, and hence ceases to be only a tick.<sup>7</sup> But what is man's way of ceasing to be a tick while still being a tick? This is the core of what I would call the human paradox. In other words, *Homo sapiens* (but we don't know whether this is the case for other species) is profoundly split: on the one hand it lives in a world that is only its *Umwelt*, on the other certain humans (or all?) know that beyond our environment a Real exists, an elsewhere beyond the coherence of our environment, which we have to assume. An idealist philosopher would say that the real is a question of reason, not of intellect. Indeed, to say that 'for the animal all is *Umwelt*' already in itself falsifies the statement, because saying it already puts oneself outside it, because there is an animal, *Homo sapiens*, saying it, and because of this it is contradicting itself.

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<sup>5</sup> *Divine Institutes*, 3, 10. For Lactantius animals could converse, laugh and exercise foresight.

<sup>6</sup> Panksepp (2000).

<sup>7</sup> See Cimatti (2013: 16).

Indeed, the consequence of von Uexküll's thesis is an irreparable crack between the *Umwelt* on one side, and a Real on the other— such as what cannot be reduced to our environment — which we must assume. A Real we cannot reduce to Being, because not even human beings have direct access to it. And with regard to this Real we should ask: Does it manifest itself to us in any way? Do we have any contact with the Real?

There are two possible attitudes towards the extra-environmental, which I call the Real. One consists in assimilating this Real to a Kantian thing-in- itself, thinkable but unknowable, something we must suppose without however being able to state anything about it. We are closed inside our animal bubble, even though we know that we are closed in, surrounded, and that there is something other'. Another attitude — to which I adhere — consists instead in saying that somehow the Real does manifest itself to us in particular ways, in paradoxical experiences, at the fringes of the world. In our experience of the world we include the experience of the fringes of the world. We can add our encounters with the ethical, the aesthetical, the sacred and ecstasy to the list of this manifestation of the Real. Somehow, the Real imposes itself on us, albeit obliquely, not as a signal that disinhibits us, but as an experience of a breaking of environmental consequentiality, as a crisis. As an impossible that actually happens. ('The real is the impossible', Lacan often said).

As each species has a different environment-world, each has a relation to its own Real, to something absolutely problematic for it as a species. If the Real is the noise that disturbs this system of signals that represents the world of a species, we must conclude that each species is challenged by a different noise. Of course, many things that are Real for one species may be environmental for us humans, but it is also possible for some species to be in relation with something of their environment that for us humans is Real. Biology, like every science, tends to make these flashes of the Real recede or disappear, completely plunging every species into *our* human surroundings, particularly our conceptual ones, and representing each species as a relation, still insufficient for us, to *our* (human) world-around. We humans consider ourselves the best-adapted to the planet, also considering that there are over seven billion of us. Of course, the most serious inadequacy of the *animots* is the lack of language. And so there is no longer an Uexküllian rambling between unknowable worlds, but a Linnaean classification. Indeed, we classify species according to the degree of our dominion over them.



## The triumph of the weak

Jacques Derrida (2008, 2009, 2011) tried to deconstruct this hierarchy. In his later years, as a result of his anti-humanist philosophical campaign, he lost no opportunity to speak about the animal.

Derrida criticizes the sacrificial vision that makes the animal the selected victim of our auto-exclusion from the animal world. And he says: ‘Fascism begins when you insult an animal, including the animal in man. Authentic idealism (*echter Idealismus*) consists in insulting the animal in man or in treating a man like an animal.’ (Derrida 2005) Fascism is itself an insult today: in short, Derrida insulted whoever insults the animal. And note: not just those who kill or exploit animals, but even simply the idealist who insults them verbally. Indeed, he says that the vilest thing is not forgetting the humanity of human beings, but rather their animality. The most human attitude towards human beings is one that also recognizes their animality. With the view of putting an end to a sort of perpetual war by *Homo sapiens* against all *animots*.

Because Derrida always deconstructed the authors he loved, he tried (Derrida 2002) to show the extent to which Lacan’s conception of the human being as *être parlant*, as a being determined by language, derives from the Cartesian vision of an irreducible heterogeneity between animal and human being. According to Lacan, the animal never accedes to the symbolic. For example, there are no social forms between animals, but only forms of aggregation: social bonds, which are always also symbolic bonds, are exclusive to human beings. The animal world is one of reactions to stimuli, not one of answers to questions. Therefore, the animal does not act, it does not have a particular conduct (*conduite*), but it behaves (*il se comporte*) towards its environment. And we could multiply the differences: the animal does not know how to pretend to pretend; it does not conceal its tracks. It does not feel boredom – ‘*Dasein* is simply an animal that has learnt to become bored’ (Agamben 2002: 73). And so on.

In this way, modernist anthropology (therefore not only Lacan), which makes the human an animal *linguisticum* – *zôon lógon échon*, follows the traditional metaphysics of the human being as *animale rationale*. Indeed, we discuss the essence of humanity as *animale linguisticum* and not as, for example, featherless biped. Because the specificity of being two-legged and without feathers still appears entirely enclosed within the animal domain: if we discovered another featherless two-legged species, we wouldn’t care much. But what if we

found another speaking species? The mere idea that there once existed a species separate from us that could actually speak (*Homo neanderthalensis*) disturbs us.

This anthropology (with the human as animal *linguisticum*) is closely connected to another that I would call the anthropology of man as an *animal diminutum*, a lesser animal. In this anthropology – dominant today, and influenced by the thought of Arnold Gehlen (1988) and others – what humanity has more of with respect to animality (reason, *res cogitans*, language and so on) is determined starting from something humanity has less of with respect to animality. It is thus rationality and language that ruin our animal completeness. ‘What the animal lacks is precisely the lack in virtue of which man is subject to the signifier’.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the animal is described mainly in idyllic terms such as possessing fullness, lack of lack, perfect spontaneity, and a wonderfully adaptive cohesion with its environment. But ultimately, this is a cliché. Those who actually work with animals are well-acquainted with their ability to suffer. And, undoubtedly, neurotic animals do exist, including my female dog Mila, who since she was small has always started whining and becoming anxious when she realizes we are about to park our car: a truly sophisticated form of phobia. Just the opposite of the blissful animal – according to this culture – man is considered, in the wake of Gehlen, a neotenic animal born prematurely and hence with no innate guide; the human being represents the failure of instinct, and has had to invent culture in order to survive, culture meaning being subjugated to the symbolic, something from which the animal is free. The human being – a dysfunctional and not Darwinially adapted animal – is a romantic species. But I fear that this vision of the animal as successful completeness is a pure philosophical artifact.

In any case, even in this lesser form, it is still the supreme nobility of man, hapless insofar as helpless, that towers above the dull happiness and innocence of the animal. *Humanitas*, rethought as a lack and a wound, is still always conceived as a radical discontinuity compared to an animality at once envied and scorned. And it is precisely this discontinuity – this miserable arrogance of humanity conceived as a deficit, the extreme and sliest refuge of spiritualism – that Derrida wanted to question.

To many the animal is only a fragment of nature – and thus perfectly adapted to its environment – whereas only the human being (the being-there, Dasein) possesses, thanks to language, the

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<sup>8</sup> Derrida (2002: 17). Derrida (2011: 125).

freedom to be contrary to nature, maladjusted, evil<sup>9</sup>, and ultimately unhappy. Not so much the rationality of *Homo sapiens*, but its unhappiness, I would say, becomes the mark of its irreversible emancipation from the biological. This is a modernist version of metaphysics that has always affirmed free will as an essential part of human beings, and hence of their chances of damnation or salvation. The 20th century has reiterated that ‘language makes human beings sinners, hence free beings’.

For Heidegger, the human being experiences this fragility as *Unheimlichkeit* – uncanny – the effect of its relationship to the Being of beings. The animal, instead, lacks *Unheimlichkeit*, and is characterized by *Benommenheit*, a state of stupor or daze. The choice of the term *Benommenheit* is quite eloquent: in the end, Heidegger picks up on the common idea that the animal, compared to the human, is essentially stupid. Whereas we know that animals are far from dazed in their interaction with their environment. But for Heidegger, this environmental lucidity and intelligence of animals is ontological daze.

Yet we know that in the majority of cases our relationship to things is entirely similar to that of animals. For example, a female friend said to me, ‘human beings feel anxiety, animals only fear.’ The difference between anxiety and fear seems analogous to that between dying and perishing, between acting and behaving, between pretending and pretending to pretend... But is the difference so clear-cut? What specific element allows us to say that, for example, a human being’s fear to fly in a plane is an anxiety and not a fear? And when my dog appears terrified by fireworks in the distance, does she ask for my protection out of fear or anxiety? And as to death, which according to Heidegger animals ignore, we consider heroic and admire humans who risk their lives scorning death, who behave as if they were immortal; in short, a certain indifference to death seems more human than animal. The hero perishes rather than dies. The Swedish writer Axel Munthe once said to Italian journalist Indro Montanelli, ‘I am not afraid of Death, I have a fear of dying’. But he said it in Neapolitan dialect (Munthe lived in Capri), ‘*tengo paura e’ muri*’, I *keep* a fear of dying. We could say of many animals that they’re not afraid of death but keep a fear of dying. The agonizing squeal of a pig when it realizes its throat is about to be slit illustrates this eloquently.

Take, for example, a staircase: our relationship to it is only as something to climb up or down

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, *Homo sapiens* is one of the very few species puts to death its own kind. Man lacks the compassion that pushes the wolf to always spare its defeated rival. *Homo homini homo*.

...unless we are philosophers, for whom the staircase may be considered ‘as such’ (*als solchem*). The Dasein we are all supposed to be is guaranteed by the fact that philosophers, or philosophical states, exist with regard to the world. Besides, Heidegger – the twentieth century philosopher who has made the greatest efforts to separate man from the living<sup>10</sup> – habitually defines man starting ‘from above’, from his philosophizing. For Heidegger, human beings are essentially philosophers, even if they often forget this, and it is not an animal sometimes capable, among other things, of bandying around philosophy. But the point is: what does Heidegger know of the relationship animals have with things? Heidegger takes for granted what appears to us within our *Umwelt*. Thus, even Heidegger considers the animal anthropomorphically, as a sort of human being incapable of relating to the things of the world ‘as such’; incapable of philosophizing.

### **Derrida’s campaign**

For both Heidegger and Lacan – and ultimately for the greater part of post-war Euro-continental culture – it was a question of constructing a fundamental anthropology that would move away both from the metaphysics of the animal rationale and from biologicistic, genetistic anthropology. In short, they wanted to answer the question, what is a man essentially? In Heidegger, as in Lacan, the answer assumes an essential separation between animal and man – and thus between the imaginary and symbolic, between (animal) reaction and (human) response. But what is all this if not a prudish form of spiritualism?

Today we have combined the Cartesian vision of the animal as pure machine, and the vision of the animal as blissful spontaneity: the animal does not know evil, lying or deceit. It was perhaps to challenge this vision that Derrida put the *animot* in relation to antithetical figures such as the Sovereign and the Father. ‘The Father, the Law, the Animal, etc.: should one not recognize here basically one and the same thing? Or, rather, indissociable figures of the same Thing?’ (Derrida 2011: 178) In the sacrificial logic which sees the animal slaughtered, is seen the figure of the sacrificed King. The Sovereign put to death is thus the human animality that we continually sacrifice.

In short, Derrida shows us how the clear-cut categorical division between the animal and the human worlds does not hold together: the symbolic world of man is steeped in animal

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<sup>10</sup> Agamben (2002: 44). My translation.

reactivity, and the animal hints at the strategy of the sign.

It is less a matter of asking whether what calls itself human has the right rigorously to attribute to man, which means therefore to attribute to himself, what he refuses the animal, and whether he can ever possess the pure, rigorous, indivisible concept, as such, of that attribution.

Derrida 2008: 135

Yet we must avoid interpreting Derrida's pitiful philosophical re-evaluation of animality as a naturalistic statement. What really interests Derrida is the ethical-political stakes of a new way of being in relation to animals. The sophisticated categorical questions he poses find their fullest sense if we view them as moments of exhortation in defence of animals. Thus, the right question seems to him what Jeremy Bentham asked: 'Can they suffer?' An approach is ethical when it measures itself with the suffering of the other. Even if Derrida doesn't like puffing out his cheeks to play the trumpet of militancy, in fact, though discreetly, it is an animalist cause that moves him,<sup>11</sup> and it is not by chance that he speaks of the genocide of many animal species. He was not a vegetarian, true, but he did talk of vegetarianism as something to strive towards.<sup>12</sup> And in fact Derrida included this reflection of his in a series of condemnations of acts of repression against women, children, blacks, slaves, primitive peoples, and so on. But in this list, the emancipation of animals still represents a leap, almost a scandal, because for animals, in contrast to other oppressed subjects, any appeal to the universality of human beings cannot work: we could never say, 'but an animal is still a human being!'

Through his preaching, Derrida tried to make us consider that what is essential in us human beings is not what distinguishes us from other animals, what specifies us, but precisely what for us is other from us-as-men, outside us, different: our animality. In other words, it is starting from what for us is other-than-us, the *animot*, that we should consider the crux of what we are, and hence our eventual difference from every other animal species. Difficult to say what this repositioning implies as a new political *Stimmung*, as a new way of being in the world, of loving and hating.

## The unity of life

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<sup>11</sup> On animal rights, see Singer (1975).

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Roudinesco, personal communication.

In any case, the Derridian critique of the clear-cut man/animal separation does not prevent him from rejecting the ‘continuist’, biologicistic vision between animals and human beings. Derrida says:

I have thus never believed in some homogeneous continuity between what calls itself man and what he calls the animal. I am not about to begin to do so now. That would be worse than sleepwalking, it would simply be too asinine [*bête*]. To suppose such a stupid memory lapse or to take to task such a naive misapprehension of this abyssal rupture would mean, more seriously still, venturing to say almost anything at all for the cause, for whatever cause or interest that no longer had anything to do with what we claimed to want to talk about. When that cause or interest begins to profit from what it simplistically suspects to be a biologicistic continuism, whose sinister connotations we are well aware of, or more generally to profit from what is suspected as a geneticism that one might wish to associate with this scatterbrained accusation of continuism, the undertaking in any case becomes so aberrant that it neither calls for nor, it seems to me, deserves any direct discussion on my part. Everything I have suggested so far and every argument I will put forward today stands overwhelmingly in opposition to the blunt instrument that such an allegation represents. [...] For there is no interest to be found in a discussion of a supposed discontinuity, rupture, or even abyss between those who call themselves men and what so-called men, those who name themselves men, call the animal. Everybody agrees on this, discussion is closed in advance, one would have to be more asinine than any beast [*plus bête que les bêtes*] to think otherwise.

Derrida 2008: 29-30

There is something surprising about Derrida’s contemptuous, almost snarly – but also ambiguous – words against biological continuism. Yet the biological approach, more than on the continuity between animal and man, is based on the fact that animals and men are machines. Authentic modern materialism is mechanistic and, therefore, it believes that the differences between human being, animal, vegetable, and inorganic substance, emerge with one minimum common denominator: everything is living Machine. This has been the materialistic project from Democritus to the present day: a single substance (fundamentally energy for modern science) explains bodies and thoughts, atomic collisions and the arguments

of souls. But biology recognizes that new emergences occur in matter, and the emergence of life from the inorganic is one of these.<sup>13</sup> The emergence of sex-death<sup>14</sup> and of the symbolic function of life itself are another two notable examples.

Modern biology reveals what I would call the unity of life: from unicellular beings up to the more complex organisms, life is made of the same building blocks. After all, we ourselves are enchanted by life as life, even in its humblest forms. What is fascinating about a tank full of goldfish if not the fact that life is darting around inside it? We feel related even to ants or lizards, insofar as they move, vibrate and die, just like us. Indeed, sometimes, moved by pity, we spare the life of a toad, a tick or a fly. The charm of the spectacle of life is inseparable from the challenge against death every living being puts into action.

But it is interesting that Derrida addresses all his criticism to the humanistic philosophies – that he seems to want to scale down the deep gap between animals and men – in a vision that is still discontinuistic. The terms we encountered in the quote above, such as stupid, naive, simplistic, seem to shift towards the ‘continuists’, the qualities the humanist tradition attributes to animals themselves. Somehow contradicting himself, Derrida abuses his alleged adversaries like one would an animal. It is here, then, that we encounter the limits of Derrida’s criticism, which inscribes itself, despite everything, in spiritualist premises. We say this, not to embrace the standard biologicistic vision. Biology does its job, it looks for the mechanisms of life common to plants and to human beings, and I see no point in blaming it for this. The question is rather this: can biological research’s scrutiny of life influence our outlook on our relationship with living things?

It is inconceivable that philosophy could completely set aside what biologists have proven. For example, let’s take the biological fact of death: how could Heidegger’s philosophy exist without the assimilation of this biological invariability? And how could Heidegger speak of the animal as ‘poor in world’ without the biological knowledge that states that there are no other speaking species (apart from, perhaps, cetaceans)? Therefore, I don’t think we should apply *epoché* to biological knowledge, especially when we deal with animals. The fundamental unity of life should be thought out philosophically, we cannot entirely refrain from considering it.

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<sup>13</sup> Another fundamental emergence is sexuality and being closely implied. Derrida often states that all animals die. No, not all: species that reproduce through parthenogenesis do not die and do not reproduce sexually, they separate.

<sup>14</sup> Sexed organisms are necessarily mortal, and vice versa.

### *Animal sacrum*

We have seen how even the biological sciences arrive at the humanization of animals, insofar as the sciences can view every animal species only as a part of the human *Umwelt*. It is insofar as we plunge animal species into the environment of *Homo sapiens* – whether to love some or slaughter others – that all these species appear at levels inferior to our own.

But von Uexküll's reflections put us on a completely different path: each animal species lives in an environment different from that of any other; and hence its Real is entirely different from that of any other. Within this perspective, while respecting Bentham's question that Derrida makes his own ('Can they suffer?'), Nagel's question on how it must feel to be a bat seems philosophically richer to me. The animal's subjectivity remains entirely inaccessible to us. Beyond the evermore extreme humanization of the animal, it is this *unheimlich* extraneousness of animal subjectivity that strikes me.

A reflection on animality should lead us to touch the inaccessibility of animal subjectivity. And even ('why not?') the inaccessibility of the subjectivity of so many human beings whom we don't understand. For example, can we say that the cannibal Hannibal Lecter's subjectivity can be understood by us? All humans do not necessarily share the same *Umwelt*.

Derrida wanted absolutely to link the animal to sovereignty, to the Father and to the Law; I would say then that the animal can be linked to the sacred, as happened in different ages and cultures. Primitive cultures placed certain animals in the position of divinities, even if they actually hunted these animal-gods and fed on them. Today, the humanization of animals has made them lose that majesty that different cultures recognized in them.

Animals, in any case, are seen from the point of view of another animal: *Homo sapiens*. The fact that all species have different environments leads to seeing other species as carriers of noise, or rather, of mystery. When certain cultures sacralised particular animals, they recognized the profound heterology between the human world and the world of the species in question. Considering certain species sacred was a way of stating this Real that essentially escapes us, because being exonerated from the world, the not-making-sense-for-us, is in the essence of the Real. Since the dawn of time, the sacred has been the way of stating the unutterable. The sacralization of the beast by many cultures was a humble admission of the



fact that the human world does not cover all the possibilities of being-in-the-world, and that an animal can be in contact with something non-environmental, i.e. something sacred.

Today we no longer have animal divinities, precisely because we no longer respect the difference of animality. And we have created a storytelling according to which all species are a colossal introduction to *Homo sapiens*, the peak of evolution.

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