

○ ON ANIMALS: REVIEWING AGAMBEN, ATTERTON & CALARCO

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Matthew Chrulew reviews two publications: *The Open: Man and Animal*, by Giorgio Agamben (Kevin Attell, translator; W. Hamacher, editor. California: Stanford University Press; 2004. MERIDIAN: Crossing Aesthetics series), and *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, edited by Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (London and New York: Continuum; 2004).



Debates on the relationship between the ‘human’ and ‘animal’ have exploded in the last thirty years, but it is only recently that Continental thinkers have begun fully to participate in this field. The discourse of animal rights was for a long time solely the domain of analytic moral philosophy. Where Continental thinkers have treated animality as a prominent theme, an ethical dimension to their work has most often been lacking. Likewise, the critical theory that draws so heavily on this philosophical tradition has until recently been more concerned to undermine ‘nature’ than to rethink its status from an engaged position.

Fortunately, this is changing: there is a growing cluster of sophisticated critical theory that is ethically committed to animals (Baker 2000; Wolfe 2003). Both of the prominent volumes being reviewed – Calarco and Atterton’s *Animal Philosophy* and Agamben’s *The Open* – follow and attest to this change. One central project is to extend the Continental critique of humanism to the category of species. Though there is little consensus, there is growing insight into how far Western humanism has historically relied on the exclusion of the animal from the domains of language, subjectivity and morality. The notorious Cartesian mechanomorphic picture of animals as machines gives us one example, whose influence can be traced in both philosophical and scientific thinking. Aquinas furnishes us the theological paradigm in his *Summa*: animals exist for the good of man. Scholars of the Bible will require little prompting to recognise similar operations

in biblical texts, whether the creation stories of Genesis, the alimentary interdictions of Leviticus, or otherwise.

The collection *Animal Philosophy*, edited by Calarco and Atterton (2004), includes ten selections from prominent Continental philosophers on the subject of animals, each followed by an expository and critical essay by a commentator. This much-needed volume will hopefully serve to encourage interest in the zoopolitical impact of these thinkers. Famous ethicist Peter Singer's preface does not fail to note the typical Continental ignorance of animal issues; but as he also points out, some of these thinkers 'have unwittingly provided a philosophical framework that cannot, while remaining true to itself, be limited to upholding the special moral status of members of our own species' (p. xiii). Thus the hope that frames this volume and the surrounding debate is that – if we are committed to the hard work of pushing these thinkers beyond their comfortable anthropocentrism – there are useful and unique tools and insights to be found in their thought. But it is hard work: no matter in whose hands, the human/animal relation is one of the most notoriously intractable philosophical problems, a cluster of similarities and differences which disappear and return in perplexing Möbius-strip fashion.

The volume opens with some extracts from Friedrich Nietzsche, who seeks to undermine theological humanism from the biological perspective afforded by Darwin. Nietzsche associates the meekness of Christian moralism with the servile, gregarious animals, and opposes this to the vitality of noble animal instincts. He sees in healthy human virtues a manifestation of animal impulses: 'who grasps the abyss with the talons of an eagle – that man has courage' (p. 6). But as the excellent commentary by Alphonso Lingis makes clear, this is no simple projection: 'Nietzsche's procedure is the reverse of anthropomorphism; he naturalizes the human species, attributing to humans the perceptions, feelings, and behaviors of other natural species' (pp. 9–10). Nonetheless, Nietzsche places 'man' in an organic continuity only to once again differentiate him as the most cunning and anti-instinctual animal. Ironically, it is only through seizing one's instinctual, animal nature that one can become abundantly human: an *Übermensch*.

The next extract is from Martin Heidegger, who rejected what he saw as Nietzsche's biological continuism. Heidegger's phenomenological interrogation of how man relates to world provided him with the famous hierarchy: 'the stone (material object) is *worldless*; the animal is *poor in world*; man is *world-forming*' (p. 17). This problematic of the animal as 'poor in world' has been extensively critiqued by writers such as Derrida (1989), and is central also to Agamben's *The Open*. Though seeking to undermine the metaphysical pre-eminence of 'man,' Heidegger does not fail to reinstitute his supremacy over animals: man, at least, is aware of his own death. Though offering a quite different perspective, Georges Bataille shares Heidegger's exclusion of the animal from self-reflexivity: 'every animal is *in the world like water in water*. [...] if need be, the animal can be regarded as a subject for which the rest of the world is an object, but it is never given the possibility of regarding itself in this way' (p. 34). As Jill Marsden puts it, for Bataille, the paradox of man is that 'human nature is fundamentally animal yet it is in negation of our animality that our self-definition is achieved' (p. 37). For Bataille, as for many other Continental thinkers, including Agamben, 'animality' is in an important sense something produced by human culture: 'The state of nature to which civilized man might "return" is not a state that he ever left. Rather, it is an idea produced in and by the civilized order it is deemed to precede' (p. 43).

The extract from Emmanuel Levinas provides a fascinating and crucial insight into the limits of his ethical thought. Levinas's description of his encounter with a dog, and his discomfort under pressing questions from an interviewer, both witness to the philosophically disturbing potential of animals. Despite Levinas's concession that we have some obligations to the nonhuman, his demarcation of the uniqueness of the human Other is still at the expense of animals, who never quite participate in the ethical priority of the 'face.' But based on his own premises – that is, of an 'ethics that seeks to respect the absolute otherness of the Other' (p. 61) – this should not be the case. Peter Atterton even claims that Levinas's 'ethical theory was perhaps the best equipped of all the theories – with the exception of utilitarianism – to accommodate the inclusion of the other animal' (p. 61).

The case of Michel Foucault is similar, though there is even less pretence here to concern for animals. The section included is from *Madness and Civilisation*, in which Foucault describes the discourse of animality through the Renaissance and classical periods. As Clare Palmer points out in her commentary, Foucault was not concerned with animals as living, suffering beings. The impetus is once again put on to present-day scholars to develop Foucault's critical tools in that direction. What I want to suggest is that, contrary to Atterton's claim for the pre-eminence of Levinasian thought for this task, the historical and materialist dimensions of Foucault's work may figure him as a much more useful contributor. Though his 'archaeological' attention to the discourse of animality is more plainly anthropocentric, his 'genealogical' focus on the way in which relations of power penetrate material bodies in all their specificity – if applied concretely to animals – may be more promising than a focus on the absolute incalculability of the animal Other. The work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari similarly testifies to the potential of a materialist approach. Though the various 'becomings-animal' they describe are too often only convenient deterritorialisations for *human* subjects, their radical ontology of immanence and becoming makes clear the fragile and pliable interconnections of living beings.

One of the most interesting and significant recent critiques of philosophical anthropocentrism has come from none other than Jacques Derrida. In an admirable challenge not only to the philosophers he critiques – including Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, and Levinas – but also to his own deconstructive approach, much of his last years' work was occupied with the animal question. Derrida dramatises the human 'face-to-face' with the animal in his own encounter with his pet cat: the gaze of the feline Other leaves him ashamed of his nakedness. He goes on to deconstruct the violent homogenisation performed by the word 'Animal,' and to demonstrate its centrality to our self-understanding:

Men would be first and foremost those living creatures who have given themselves the word that enables them to speak of the animal with a single voice and to designate it as the single being that remains without a response, without a word with which to respond (p. 125).

Derrida's essay is essential reading for anyone interested in this field.

The volume closes with some thinkers less central to the foregoing stream of Continental thought which, despite its multivocality, is largely male-dominated and anti-humanist. Luc Ferry challenges the tendency to see 'a secret complicity between humanism, which is necessarily anthropocentric, and the exploitation of nature' (p. 150). He contests the simple opposition of

Cartesian domination to post-Heideggerian deconstruction, and defends rather 'a non-Cartesian humanism' (p. 155). The contributions of feminists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray each offer a meditation on the place of women and animals in a context of shared exclusion from the speciesist, patriarchal norm. Cixous traces the connection of birds and women in the work of some peripheral, provocative writers. In her specially commissioned essay, Irigaray merges autobiography with philosophy in her poignant account of the special, healing roles animals have played in her life.

One of the hallmarks of many of these writers is the prominence given to literature in their philosophical deliberations, and the Bible plays a particularly important role. It has become something of a commonplace to assert that the instruction in Genesis 1 to 'subdue' the earth has provided Judeo-Christian societies with a pretext for ecological imperialism. But a number of these writers seek to interrogate – and complicate – the role of the Bible in thought about animals. In his enigmatic essay 'The Name of a Dog,' Levinas recalls his concentration camp experience when he and his fellow prisoners were bestialised by their captors: 'the other men, called free... stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, a gang of apes' (p. 48). Levinas recounts their encounter with a stray dog who would greet them with joyful barking, and ties this intriguing tale to the story of Exodus 11-12, in which the Lord strikes down Egypt's first-born and thereby brings about the Israelites' freedom – an emancipation heralded by the *silence* of dogs (Ex 11:7). For Levinas, the dogs who didn't bark in Egypt, and the dog who did in Germany, both attest to the humanity of 'man.'

Levinas opens his musing with an equally fraught biblical passage: the prohibition on eating flesh killed in the wild (Ex 22:31). Cixous also takes such dietary prescriptions, particularly those of Leviticus, as the starting point of her meditation, which follows 'a chain of associations and signifiers composed of birds, women, and writing' (p. 167). In an impressive display, she corrects the translation of Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector's work, communicating to us Lispector's understanding of 'those He-Bible' as the patriarchal and anthropocentric hegemony established by excluding the *imund*: 'So those He-Bible, it is *they* who tell us what is unclean and abominable' (p. 168). It is not just the unclean but the out of place that is suggested: 'in the same line of substitutions you find: Jews, women, niggers, birds, poets, etc., all of them excluded and exiled' (p. 173). But Cixous explores the potential for revalorising these subject positions: the theme her paper celebrates is 'to be "imund," to be unclean with joy' (p. 171).

A third site in *Animal Philosophy* in which philosophical reflection on animals opens onto the Bible is Derrida's essay, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)'. Unfortunately, this openings remain just that, a gap, for the portions of Derrida's essay which deal with Genesis are not included in the Atterton and Calarco volume. Why this was necessary at all I am unsure; but the absence is both notable and disappointing, and not only for biblical scholars, nor even for dialogue between biblical studies and animal philosophy. If one takes Derrida's essay as originally published, it is difficult not to note the centrality of the biblical material to his argument. For Derrida, the *placing* of God, man and the animals in Eden is integral to the mythological foundation of Western species humanism, and furthermore provides productive material for confronting and resituating that hierarchy. Readers who come to Derrida's essay through this book will miss how deeply his reconfiguration of human shame and nakedness before the animal's gaze is indebted to his reading of the second creation story in Genesis 2.

Otherwise, the collected abstracts are generally well chosen. The range is broad, although the absence of Freud and Lacan is conspicuous (were one of them included, it may have helped show how, even though psychoanalysis may not deal as explicitly as some disciplines with animal questions, an examination of the ‘animalistic’ dimension of humanity is foundational to that discourse). The commentaries vary in their clarity and helpfulness, but on the whole are excellent. It should be said that the consistency of their approaches attests both to the vision and the necessary limitations of the volume, and helps set up the debates to follow. A number of the commentators draw similar conclusions: firstly, the work of a particular thinker contains useful insights on animality, but is nonetheless contaminated by a form of anthropocentrism; secondly, however, this problem can be overcome, often in the very terms of their own ethical system (e.g. openness to the Other, or attention to material power-relations); thus, said thinker’s (suitably upgraded) critical tools can prove useful from a post-animal rights perspective. Following this groundwork, it is a third step that would be most interesting: *exactly how* might we ‘recover’ each particular thinker’s position? What internal limits did their own thought have to fully apprehending non-human life? What new perspectives might they offer to entrenched problems in human/animal studies? These are some of the questions we need to work on in the wake of this volume. The commentaries in *Animal Philosophy* give us hints, but rarely are any great steps taken toward accomplishing the ‘becoming-animal’ of a particular philosopher’s work.

Another possibility opened up by this volume is dialogue *between* these philosophers’ various positions as they relate to animals. *Which* tradition within Continental thought will prove most useful for the animal question, and why? What is at stake for animals if we pit, for example, Levinas and Derrida against Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari? How is the Nietzschean animalistic drive deployed or marginalised by his various inheritors? Such conversations will be central to the future of this debate. There are also further, interdisciplinary questions which arise, both scientific and philosophical. What is the status of Nietzsche and Heidegger’s thought given the historical perspective we now have on the ethology which so influenced them? What would be the outcome of bringing more recent Continental thought into dialogue with contemporary ethology? What can Continental thinkers contribute to the Anglo-American debates of the last few decades over the rights and interests of animals, and human duties towards them? Why is it that in the case of animals, the most anti-utilitarian of thinkers (such as Levinas and Derrida) often resort to a form of utilitarianism, still best expressed in Bentham’s question whether animals suffer?

Animal Philosophy successfully accomplishes its goal – to be, as its blurb says, ‘an invaluable one-stop resource for anyone researching, teaching or studying animal ethics’. In assembling these various writings, whose dispersion has too often allowed them to go unnoticed, the editors have provided a means by which the Continental voice can be more fully heard in philosophical debates regarding animals. Indeed, if we take as criteria not simply the presence of concern for animals, but rather the potential for incisive theoretical tools – ethical theories that *include* the nonhuman, social analytics that *see* the nonhuman, literary methods that *write* the nonhuman – we may find the diverse and difficult modes of thought offered to be uniquely valuable sources of insight.

This is certainly the case with Giorgio Agamben. A figure of growing prominence in contemporary philosophy, Agamben is a polymathic scholar equally at home in discussions of literature and political sovereignty. Given another decade, you would expect to find his name among those

included in *Animal Philosophy*. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Agamben challenges the metaphysics of being by rethinking becoming – in his case by centring, via Aristotle, the notion of potentiality. Typically, his books are impressive displays of erudition which pose discomfiting questions, and *The Open*, his recent study of the relation between ‘man’ and ‘animal,’ is no exception (Agamben 2004).

The Open is a little book with a hefty brief: interrogating Western species humanism at the ‘end of history’. In twenty short chapters Agamben pierces a host of significant figures with his needle-sharp intellect: Bataille, Kojève, Aristotle, Aquinas, Linnaeus, Uexküll, with the most space being for his former teacher Heidegger. But though the list of proper names is imposing and varied, the texts he examines often peripheral, and his compelling prose both dense and suggestive, any sense of superficiality is misleading. Rather, what Agamben has done is clutch together a pack of icebergs. On the surface, these figures all intersect at the faces named ‘human,’ and beneath the waters, that excluded term ‘animal’ trails in all its abject otherness. Through this contact, a sense of catastrophe and hope builds: how might we think beyond the ‘anthropological machine’ these figures represent and examine?

This anthropological machine Agamben describes is the mechanism by which Western science and philosophy produces the human by excluding the ‘animal’ of nonhuman species and the ‘animal’ that is in humanity. This ‘anthropogenesis’ is an articulation *within* humanistic subjectivity of the human subject *as human*. The political impetus behind this analysis is significant, for it is precisely this anthropological machine which perpetuates the domination of nonhuman species in relations of subjection and destruction. Agamben is not ambivalent about what is at stake: man’s ‘taking on of biological life itself as the supreme political (or rather impolitical) task’ (p. 76). But though many readers may with good reason still desire more emphatic and sustained attention to the current, specific predicaments of animals, it is possible to build on the connections Agamben makes to his earlier work. In *Homo Sacer* he argues that ‘the first foundation of political life is a life that may be killed, which is politicized through its very capacity to be killed’ (Agamben 1998). This ‘bare life’ that may be killed but not sacrificed is the life of ‘sacred man,’ and it is central to political sovereignty understood as always already relying on the production of a state of exception. It is in this state of exception or ‘abandonment’ that the ‘bare life’ of *homo sacer* may be put to death. If the perennial archetype of *homo sacer* is the Jew, Agamben’s linking in *The Open* of the anthropological machine to the production of bare life (p. 38) allows us to add to this list the fetus, the infirm – and the animal. It is the same logic of exception of modern, biopolitical sovereignty which produced both the Nazi concentration camps and gas chambers, and the (post)industrial factory farms.

Agamben adds his own twist to the significant knot of scholarship attending to the question of animality in Heidegger. As Calarco states in his commentary in *Animal Philosophy*, ‘Heidegger’s statement concerning the world-poverty of animals is meant to indicate a simultaneous having and not-having of world’ (p. 20). Heidegger uses the image of a ring which acts both to delimit or encircle the animal, and simultaneously open or dis-inhibit its relation with the environment. As Agamben explains, the difference between the animals’ poverty in world and man’s world-forming nature is best understood through the relationship between the human attitude of profound boredom and animalistic captivation:

Profound boredom then appears as the metaphysical operator in which the passage from poverty in world to world, from animal environment to human world, is realized; at issue here is nothing less than anthropogenesis, the becoming Da-sein of living man (p. 68).

The centrality of animality to human self-definition is here made clear: for what man becomes open *to* in becoming man is precisely the poverty-in-world of the animal. What is disclosed is animal captivation: ‘The open is nothing but a grasping of the animal not-open’ (p. 79).

Agamben crosses philosophy and science with theological (§5) and biblical (§1) tangents, destabilising the God/man/animal hierarchy in his own way: ‘perhaps’, he suggests, ‘even the most luminous sphere of our relations with the divine depends, in some way, on that darker one which separates us from the animal’ (p. 16). Messianic thought and art intermingle with the Hegelian/Kojévian ‘end of history’ to provide a sense of apocalyptic, productive change in a time when the anthropological machine is ‘idling’. What Agamben hopes is that in the decline of ‘Historical Man’ we might also destabilise the caesura of the anthropological machine: he evokes the idea that ‘on the last day, the relations between animals and men will take on a new form, and that man himself will be reconciled with his animal nature’ (p. 3).

The Open will be of interest to scholars of Heidegger and of contemporary continental philosophy, but its greatest use should be to thinkers working in the field of critical animal studies. Precisely because of his insistence on carefully articulating the philosophical dimensions of political sovereignty and power, Agamben’s work seems productive for contesting our modern anthropological machines in their industrialised, biopolitical executions by helping us towards the means of ‘understanding how they work so that we might, eventually, be able to stop them’ (p. 38).

The Atterton and Calarco collection, and Agamben’s *The Open*, both further the weighty contemporary debates over human/animal relations, and should both be of interest to biblical scholars. It is imperative that we consider the Bible, as a foundational text of Western culture, in relation to Western species humanism in its philosophical, literary and institutional forms. Biblical critics will have their own expertise to offer these debates in which the drama of Eden – as a central anthropogenetic myth – is made to carry a substantial theoretical load. Further, there is the potential for those informed both by contemporary science and animal theory, as well as sophisticated biblical criticism, to intervene where the Bible is taken up in culturally significant ways, whether the creation versus evolution debates, or where it is used to justify the domination of nature.

A further outcome of the increased attention to the animal in critical theory has been the development of more sophisticated ‘zoocritical’ techniques for reading literary and cultural texts (think ecocritical, but focussed on animals). Cary Wolfe’s *Animal Rites* is a prominent example of how fruitfully to read a text’s ‘species discourse’. The application of such ‘animal-centred’ reading methods to the Bible is a promising endeavour as no other text offers such a wealth of contradictory and profound material so central to the Western understanding of humanity and animality. Adam’s naming of the animals in Eden, a foundational image of scientific nomenclature, becomes, in its repetition in the Ark, one of scientific farce. We find both a central justification for the political structures of ecological imperialism, and a truly radical image of zoopolitical revolution: ‘the leopard will lie down with the goat’ (Is 11:6). For Paul, God does not care for

oxen (1 Cor 9:9); but at the same time, 'The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed' (Romans 8:19). And as for Jesus? He was born in the animals' quarters. He cast demons into a herd of pigs in a biocidal act. Our relationship with God is understood through our relationship with the land and animals: Jesus' teachings are full of agricultural and pastoral metaphors, and Jesus himself is understood through sacrificial substitution as the Lamb. In taking up the perspectives offered by this new and engaging field of research, biblical critics may find their own work challenged and invigorated.

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