

The Animal That Therefore Derrida Is: Derrida and the Posthuman Critical Animal Studies

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the deconstructionist Jacques Derrida's contribution to the contemporary critical animal studies. Derrida is concerned with a critical thinking that starts with a dismantling of straightforward distinction between the human and the animal and he questions the hierarchical position of nature that bedevils the human-animal relationship. By concentrating on his own theory of animal-subjectivity and animal-gaze Derrida puts the homogenizing concept of animal (popular throughout the philosophical history of animal) into a big question. And by referring to the politics of speciesism he points to the big issue of contemporary problem of marginalization that covers all other fields of critical theory. My intention is to deal with all these issues by emphasizing on Derrida's animal based theoretical essays specially *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

[**Keywords:** animal ethics, animal rights, gaze theory, posthumanism, speciesism]

"I have a particularly animalist perception and interpretation of what I do, think, write, live..."
- Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*

The distinction between human and animal has been erased with the advent of 'posthuman' perspectives specially in the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida's radically challenging writing *The Animal That Therefore I Am* subverts this distinction. *The Animal That Therefore I am* published posthumously includes a ten hour lecture by Derrida in 1997 Cerisy Conference on "The Autobiographical Animal". Derrida was one of the first twentieth century philosophers to call attention to 'the animal' question – which for him is "not just one question among others"(Derrida, 2004), as he says in "Violence Against Animals"(an interview with Elisabeth Rondinesco), but "the limit upon which all the big questions are formed and determined"(Derrida, 2004). From his first publications Derrida took the question of animality – the thinking of human and non-human animal life and non-human animal relations. Derrida puts the 'animal abstraction' into question by locating 'the animal' within the tradition of western culture through his focus on the politics of representation of 'the animal' and aims to deconstruct the long tradition of human-animal opposition throughout the western cultural tradition. He advances "a holistic understanding of the commonality of oppressions" (Best, 2009) through a rigid hierarchical power systems and through this the hierarchical ideologies in society and dominant culture are considered "as parts of a larger, interlocking, global system of domination" (Best, 2009). Radically he opens up the questions about 'the animal' at the center of animal studies and the questions are directed to making animal studies a more

critical enterprise. Contemporary disputes over the ‘animal question’ started in 1970s and over the last four decades the human-animal relationship has gone through a sweeping reevaluation. In addition to the human-driven habitat loss and extinction of species, a huge number of animals pathetically are used only for exhibition, recreation, science, labor, consumption etc. ; they are commodified only for their usefulness. Contemporary theorists¹ like Yi-Fu Tuan, David Nibert, Carol J Adams and Steven Mithen now recognize the close link between our relationships with other animals and some of the most harmful social problems, such as slavery, sexism and environment degradation. Over the centuries philosophers and scholars have disputed over the rigid hierarchical view of nature, humans and animals with a specific connection between the injustice on certain human groups and the oppression of animals.

Mapping the critical animal studies: animals as philosophical subjects

The human-animal opposition has a long philosophical history and we can trace its beginning from Aristotle. Aristotle in his book *The History of Animals*² established the hierarchical human-animal natural order. He attributed intelligence to animals, but he thought that this differs only in quantity with those possessed by humans. He also traced some of the psychical qualities or attributes like fierceness, cross temper courage, timidity etc. According to him,

“Some of these qualities in man, as compared with the corresponding qualities in animals, differ only quantitatively...” (*The History of Animals*)

Besides he proposed that the animals lack reason and his thinking leads to the denial of human kinship with animals. He conceptualizes a fixed categories of beings or ‘species’, humans are at the top and insects at the bottom. Later this hierarchical natural system came to be known as the “Great Chain of Being”, a system where God is at the top, humans below God and animals below humans. This intellectual conceptualization of species hierarchy created a belief that humans have dominion over nonhuman ‘lower’ animals and minimized the ethical obligations to nonhumans by exaggerating the distance between humans and nonhuman animals. Later Rene Descartes³ also created a major distinction between humans and nonhuman animals, but his basis was the possession of a mind with faculty of conscious thought . He thinks that animals unlike humans act only by instinct, not by thought. So their actions are mechanical and they lack souls. But it is Montaigne who in his famous essay “An Apology for Raymond Sebond” rejected the perceived superiority of humans over other life forms and argued that as animals are with life and sense they deserve justice as do humans and should not be treated with cruelty. He argued that animals are capable of communication and thinking.

“we understand them no more than they us.” (*An Apology for Raymond Sebond*)⁴

To him there is no rational justification by creating a rigid distinction between humans and non-human animals because both of them have more or less similar attributes. In the same way Jeremy Bentham in his “Principles of Morals and Legislation” denounced

cruelty to animals, as they are capable of sufferings and the moral and ethical consideration should be extended to them. Thus abuse based on race as well as abuse based on species is pernicious and unjust. Kant⁵ also struck the same issue and to him our ethical duties to animals are our indirect obligations to other humans. So, our inclination to mistreat our fellow humans may be originated from our maltreatment of animals. Later Peter Singer became the most influential living philosopher to promote an utilitarian approach to animal ethics. He very strictly believes in Bentham's equal-consideration-of-interests principles. Singer thinks that we should treat non-human animals as well as we treat cognitively similar humans. According to Singer,

“Nor can we say that all human beings have rights just because they are members of the species *homo sapiens* – that is speciesism, a form of favouritism for our own that is as unjustifiable as racism. Thus if all humans have rights, it would have to be because of some much more minimal characteristics, such as being living creatures. Any such minimal characteristics would, of course, be possessed by nonhuman as well as by human animals.” (*Animal Liberation or Animal Rights?*)

Singer's writing had a great impact on what has come to be known as the animal-rights movement and on articulations of demands for animal rights. Singer does not invoke a rights-based discourse per se and his ethical argument is not based on the claim that animals are entitled to rights. But a purely rights-based position is promoted by Tom Regan. To him animals must possess moral rights. Like humans, animals are 'subjects-of-a-life' and each and every 'subjects-of-a-life' must have an inherent value and thus moral rights. Regan in his "The Rights of Humans and Other Animals" attacks on the use of animals in some medical and scientific experiments; he thinks that these experiments could be warranted in the interests of the greater good. Actually these experiments violate the individual rights of the nonhuman animals. Martha Nussbaum in her "The Moral Status of Animals"⁶ gives emphasis on animal capabilities rather than on animal rights. She believes that the confinement of circus animals is unjust because it prevents them not only from living with dignity but also from actualizing their capabilities. Environmental historian Harriet Ritvo focuses on the issue of animal domestication and human-animal relationship. She discusses in her article "Animal Planet"⁷ the problem of spreading of zoonotic diseases (diseases that are transmitted from animals to the humans). Very interestingly she thinks that these diseases are sufficient to erode the rigid boundaries between human and animal as diseases increasingly traverse the human/animal divide. Thus she proceeds to reach her seminal argument that animals are not only representative of the nature, but also they are representative of human groups. The postmodern animal theorists like Steve Baker, Deleuze and Guattari focus on 'what animals signify to man'. Steve Baker in his germinal work "The Postmodern Animal" examines the questions of symbolic and rhetorical uses of animal imagery that codify the subject of human identity in Western culture. Baker's *animal-sceptical* art denounces the structuralist idea (of Levi-Strauss) that the value of animal lies in what they mean for humans. Deleuze and Guattari use the idea of 'becoming animal'⁸ as the transformation of human into animal as a greater becoming; becoming animal is a breaking free of constraint of human life.

“we believe in the existence of very special becomings – animal transversing human beings and sweeping them away, affecting the animal no less than the human”(*Becoming-Animal*)

Derrida’s thinking of animal is equal to the concepts of postmodern animal theorists as he proposes to eradicate the human-animal strict opposition and the rigid hierarchical status. Derrida’s main intention is in *The Animal That Therefore I am* to map the history of philosophy from Aristotle to Heidegger and to show how the animals have been denied ‘logos’. We might say, the logos in classical theoretical sense is founded upon the ‘animal’ as oppositional ‘other’. And besides, what might be thought to be ‘proper’ to the humans noticed through the negative implication of the animal as binary opposite structurally. And Derrida therefore challenges the very basis of this opposition between the human and the animal poststructurally. He attacks the Heideggerian thought on the subject of animal. The nonhuman animal is excluded from being-towards-death in Heideggerian concept of ‘Dasein’. Heidegger believed that the animal cannot die properly, yet the animal has been given the character of a living being, in sheer contrast to the inanimate stone. This proposition suggests the possibility of dying fundamental to ‘human’. Derrida points out the limits of Heideggerian concept⁹ on animal and denounces the tradition maltreatment of animal on the basis of speciesism and further maps how some kinds of cultural representations of animal in art forms are politicized.

Derrida against the politics of representation and the problem of speciesism

All representation of animals in our dominant culture are a facet of speciesism which undermines the human relationship with the animal. Actually all the examples of the use of nonhumans in art forms like literary texts are acts not of reproduction but of representation. Animals are depicted in western culture in various ways. Demonstration of the presence of the nonhuman animals and the impact of that presence on the act of cultural reproduction is manifold. When we are speaking of cultural reproduction we want to figure out the various ways through which aesthetic texts and artefacts are made the vehicle for the exposition, description and analysis of human society. But the representation is different one. By this we mean “the tropes and images through which cultural reproduction comes into being and which are the characteristic marks of the aesthetic experience” (Simons 2002, 86) As the animal experience cannot be reproduced by human, that only be represented through various art forms. Because no human being has the faculty of understanding of the nonhuman to act as its reproducer. Nonhuman animals cannot use complex language like humans and they, it is believed, lack ‘language’. In this sense, traditionally they are believed to be ‘silent’, so we can only imagine nonhuman experience from ethical point of view and sympathetically engage with it only by comparing it with our own. This gives us the ability to represent it. Actually the difference between human and nonhuman experience is necessarily like the difference between human and nonhuman communication system. So, when we are going to represent an animal we actually appropriate the animal experience as an index of

'humanness'; we create imagery-symbol for them. But symbolic representation is an ideational exploitation where animal is absent, replaced by a human fur. These are necessarily reductive moves and Derrida's aim is to catalogue and deconstruct these moves that are disrespectful of animals in order to reconstruct the socially constructed binary opposition between human and nonhuman animals. This will lead to eradicate speciesism which is, as Peter Singer puts it, "a prejudice or bias in favour of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species"(Singer, 1975). Derrida keeps himself on the same line with the critics of speciesism who broaden the critiques of racism, sexism and others to include animals. He argues that not to extend the same rights as humans to animals is immoral.

Derrida and a posthuman perspective

The term 'posthuman' probably was first used by H.P. Blavatsky, later it came to take shape in Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" where she gives emphasis on the ordinary and everyday encounters human and animal that 'baffle the assumptions of humanist discourse and dramatically disturb the reign of man'. Later Cary Wolfe in *Animal Rites* challenges the 'speciesist' humanist binary opposition between human and animal. So, posthuman animal studies reject a kind of modernist tendency that places humans above all. Posthuman animal studies seek not to teach animals human language, but to develop a rich understanding through participation of their worlds by exploring possibilities for new modes of understanding. This posthuman animal studies gained an interesting direction through the writings of Derrida. He gives emphasis on the structuring importance of nonhuman animal question in philosophy. His intention is to trace the classical opposition (between human and animal) stemmed from Aristotle and break this binary opposition. He traced the Cartesian humanists' approach that 'speech, reason, experience of death, mourning, culture, institutions, technics, clothing, lying, pretense of pretense, covering of tracks, gift, laughing, tears, respect etc.' are brought to the fore through the negative determination of the animal as binary opposite to human and animal has been denied 'logos' and is oppositional 'other' where the human has a natural and eternal place at the very center of things and shares a unique-universal essence with other human beings as the human is the origin of meaning. But posthumanist Derrida challenges the privileged position of the human because he thinks, humans are no longer distinct from animals because humans are themselves animals as they are human-animal. Derrida says "there is no animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single indivisible limit."(Derrida, 2008) To prove the centrality of the 'animal' to human discourse he deals with a pun on animaux/animots (animals/aniwords) in order to rebuild the perception of the human-animal continuum and to break free from the homogenizing concept of the 'animal'.

"the homogenizing concept and category of the animal offers violence both to the sheer diversity of animal life and to the irreducibly complex and always deconstructible

relation of the 'animal' to the 'human'." (Wortham, 2010)¹⁰

Categorizing the plurality of other life forms under the homogenizing category 'animal', according to Derrida, is a "crime of the first order against animals."

Derrida and the animal gaze

"The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there."
Derrida (*The Animal That Therefore I Am*)

Derrida's concept on animal gaze is radical and deconstructive. He deals with the gaze of a little house cat.

"[C]aught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment." (Derrida 2008, 3-4)

"I have ... a bad time" is the English translation of the French expression "*j'ai du mal*". The expression evokes the sense of evil or curse. Actually Derrida here uses pun and the pun is linked to the cat's gaze with malediction. In western culture cat's eyes are associated with the evil and the potentiality for harmful thought. But Derrida thinks that this gaze will prove most harmful of animality that traditionally have dominated European thinking for several centuries. To him what is observed is not a mere object of thinking, but also a subject of thinking. This can be the source of a gaze in which humans are objects too.

"The animal is there before me...And from the vantage of this being-there-before-me it can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also- something that philosophy perhaps forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself- it can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me." (Derrida 2008, 11)

The word Derrida uses to delineate his own position in the eyes of his pet cat is 'naked', literally meaning "down to one's hairs". The cat is a real cat. It is not the 'figure of a cat'. The gaze directed at him by this little cat invites Derrida to deconstruct the boundary between humans and animals through language. Derrida is not interested in the fact whether nonhuman animals are capable of using language in the human sense. Instead his suggestion directs us to broaden our thinking of the meaning of language, so that the gaze of a cat may be thought not as a mere 'reaction', nor as 'speech', but as a 'response' and obviously an 'address'.

Derrida and the animal subjectivity

Derrida meditates on the possibility of an 'animal autobiography' that really gives consciousness to the animal. It can be done without giving the animal the image of the human. He does not want to turn the animal into a puppet for human words. Many animal-rights theorists have worked hard to assimilate animals to the stereotyped model of human. Derrida faces this problem and encounter it with the 'anthropocentric metaphysics of subjectivity and presence'. Traditionally the animal is denied to have, it is often argued, self-awareness and consciousness. It is also denied that animals are 'full

subjects'. Very recently animal theorist Tom Regan has argued that 'animals are worthy of moral respect' because they like human beings are 'subjects-of-a-life'¹¹. Derrida very wittily questions the very meaning of subjectivity and he goes beyond the anthropocentric aspects of the metaphysics of subjectivity. Derrida's concerned neologism 'carnophallogocentrism' [sacrificial (carno), masculine (phallo) and speaking (logo)] is coined to highlight the classical conceptions of subjectivity. Thus he points out how not only animals but also other beings like women are excluded from the status of being full subjects. In this way we can include various minority groups who have been denied the basic traits of subjectivity. Derrida thinks, there have been many subjects among mankind who are denied to be a subject (we can find example in the status of the subaltern). Many nonhuman animals traditionally continue to be excluded from legal protection, and they receive the same kind of violence typically directed at human minority group. So, the problem of marginalization is the key issue in Derrida's thinking as we can find certain groups of human beings who share their abject subject position of marginalization alongside animals. Derrida aim is to unveil the functioning and consequences of the metaphysics of subjectivity through the tradition of human and animal marginalization. The marginalization of both the human beings (minority groups) and animals has occurred along distinct historical lines. But joint implication of human and animal subjection can give boost to render clear the emphatically "violent nature of the exclusionary logic of the metaphysics of subjectivity." (Calarco, 2008).

Conclusion

Derrida challenges the philosophical grounds of the opposition between the 'human' and the 'animal' emphasizing on the centrality of the 'animal' in the humanist discourse and concentrates on the 'animal gaze' and the 'animal subjectivity' in order to reconsider the human/animal bond in the 'posthuman' world. His iconoclastic concepts based on difference-beyond-opposition calls for new forms of thinking- ethical as well as philosophical and appeals for reinvestigation of 'animal ethics' and 'animal rights' for future theorists.

Notes

1. See Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald, pp. 117-192. The ideas have been derived from Steven Mithen's essay "The Hunter-Gatherer Prehistory of Human-animal Interactions", Yi-Fu Tuan's essay "Animal pets : Cruelty and Affection", David Nibert's essay "The Promotion of Meat and its Consequence" and Carol Adams' *The Sexual Politics of Meat*.
2. Ibid., pp. 5-7. The text is based on the translation of *The History of Animals* by D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson.
3. Ibid., pp. 59-62. The extract is from *Descartes : Philosophical Letters*, translated into English by Anthony Kenny. The "Cartesian" thinking had a great implication for the moral and ethical issues on animal question.
4. Ibid., p 58.
5. Kant believes that abuse based on species, like abuse based on race is unjust.

6. See Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald, pp. 30-36.
7. Ibid., pp. 129-140.
8. Ibid., pp. 37-50.
9. See Derrida 2008. Derrida finds faults with the Heideggerian thought on where the animal is excluded from 'being-towards-death'.
10. The homogenizing concept of the 'animal' in western philosophy is constituted upon the 'animal' as oppositional 'other' to 'human'. This concept popularized by humanists was challenged by posthumanists in recent times. Posthumanists believe in the diversity of life, not in the opposition.
11. Bentham's equal-consideration-of-interests principle is the source of Singer's theory.

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