

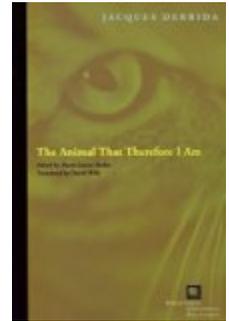
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jacques Derrida. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. xiii + 176 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2790-7; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-2791-4.

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## Do You Believe in the Animal?

Theorists constantly remind us that words like “nature,” “God,” “civilization,” or “consciousness,” except in the most restrictive contexts, have nothing close to the sort of precision that we usually expect from academic work, and it is very easy to dismiss them as incoherent or even meaningless. But, to the immense frustration of many positivists, analytic philosophers, and deconstructionists, no amount of critique or complaint ever seems to make such words disappear. They grow and evolve in ways that seem well beyond the control of those who use them (as even their critics almost always do), as if the words themselves were alive.

In *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Derrida expresses his intense opposition to the concept of the “Animal”:

Confined within this catch-all concept, within this vast encampment of the animal, in this general singular, within the strict enclosure of this definite article (‘the Animal’ and not ‘animals’), as in a virgin forest, a zoo, a hunting or fishing ground, a paddock or an abattoir, a space of domestication, are all the living things that man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbors, or his brothers. And that is so in spite of the infinite space that separates the lizard from the dog, the protozoon from the dolphin, the shark from the lamb, the parrot from the chimpanzee, the camel from the eagle, the squirrel from the tiger, the elephant from the cat, the ant from the silk-worm, or the hedgehog from the echidna. (p. 34)

A bit later, he adds that, “The confusion of all nonhuman living things within the general and common category of the animal is not simply a sin against rigorous

thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority, it is also a crime” (p. 48).

Derrida’s argument appears sound, and his passion does him honor, but there is one huge problem. After a bit of equivocation, Derrida goes on to use the word “animal” constantly, almost obsessively, in fact. Derrida does coin the word *animot*, combining the Latin *anima*, meaning “soul,” with the French *mot*, meaning “word.” He suggests that the reader mentally substitute this whenever “animal” is used (pp. 48-49). But the word “animal” is on the page, and it is not forthright to pretend it is something else. Were the reader to actually follow Derrida’s request and make this mental substitution, it would reduce the book almost to nonsense.

Some critics have seen a fundamental incoherence in Derrida’s position here concerning the differentiation between animals and human beings.[1] Others have seen the apparent contradictions in Derrida’s book as part of a very subtle dialectic.[2] But it might also be possible to explain Derrida’s persistent use of the word *animal* as a necessary concession to practicality. In order to present his position in a way that readers will understand, Derrida must not avoid the use of the word “animal,” whatever his theoretical objections to it. Nevertheless, Derrida’s reluctance to use it cannot prevent the word “animal” from structuring his thought.

The thing all “animals” have in common, which is often enough to obscure their differences, is that they are not one of “us.” Though not cited by Derrida, the French historian Lucian Boia has written of this in considerable

detail.[3] In his view, we visualize the opposite of humanity as a creature of the imagination, which can incorporate features of many animals as well as demons and immortals. This is, in other words, a sort of “personification” of the “animal.” He calls this *l’homme différent* (the human other), which characteristically resembles a human being in most respects but is radically different in a single one. *L’homme différent* may, for example, be a cannibal, be ruled by women, or be headless with a face on his chest. He, or she, may live on an island, a remote continent, the center of the earth, outer space, or even among us in disguise. The nearly endless manifestations of this creature include mermaids, satyrs, Patagonian giants, and Yetis. According to Boia, our attitudes towards *l’homme différent* oscillate between veneration and revulsion. Apparently independently of both Boia and Derrida, the same conclusion has been reached by the Italians Roberto Marchesini and Karin Andersen, and their term of the embodiment of all that is not human is *il teriomorfo* (the theriomorph).[4]

The ideas of Derrida concerning the Human Other are less developed than those of Boia or Marchesini and Andersen, but we must remember that *The Animal that I Therefore I Am* is a book that remains unfinished. The work was conceived by Derrida, but put together from lectures and notes after his death. It has both all of the virtues and all of the defects that we might expect from an uncompleted work by an important thinker. It rambles, leaving fascinating but fragmentary insights and bits of information along the way. It jumps from one subject to the next, with transitions that might have been smoothed over in the lecture hall but seem abrupt on the printed page. The book is delightful in its spontaneity, but could disappoint those who are looking for carefully structured arguments. For those who enjoy the academic task of filling in the gaps in lines of argument, it will offer diversion enough.

If it had only been finished, what a wonderful book this might have been! And yet, perhaps such an ambitious work could only remain unconsummated. A common criticism of Derrida is that he is overly equivocal, that he always hides behind layers of ambiguity, irony, spurious erudition, and games with words. At the beginning of this book, Derrida resolves to do precisely what many people thought impossible for him—“to use words that are, to begin with, naked, quite simply, words from the heart” (p. 1). Despite Derrida’s reputation for being overly playful, this book is pervaded by a rare philosophical earnestness, an urgency perhaps heightened by awareness of his impending death. He attempts to push

not only beyond the limits of deconstruction but almost beyond those of language itself.

And what does one encounter at the limits of language? Quite simply, the Animal. In this instance, the animal is Derrida’s cat, which observes him naked in an epiphany to which the author continually returns:

No, no, my cat, the cat that looks at me in my bedroom or bathroom, this cat that is perhaps not ‘my cat’ or ‘my pussycat,’ does not appear here to represent, like an ambassador, the immense symbolic responsibility with which our culture has always charged the feline race, from La Fontaine to Tieck ... from Baudelaire to Rilke, Buber, and many others. If I say ‘it is a real cat’ that sees me naked, this is in order to mark its unsubstitutable singularity. When it responds in its name ... it doesn’t do so as the exemplar of a species called ‘cat,’ even less so of an ‘animal’ genus or kingdom. It ... comes to me as this irreplaceable living being that one day enters my space, into this place where it can encounter me, see me, even see me naked. Nothing can ever rob me of the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized [*rebelle a tout concept*]. (p. 9)

Deconstruction does not help us to understand animals, for they do not have language. The silent testimony of the cat contrasts not only with the literature that surrounds it, but also with Derrida’s own torrent of words.

The model, and major adversary, of Derrida in this book is Rene Descartes, the philosopher whose *Meditations* is often credited with, or blamed for, ushering in the modern world.[5] Like Descartes, Derrida writes from profound solitude, and begins with doubt. Descartes concluded that what was most certain was his own existence, an insight that served as the foundation for his metaphysics. Derrida’s foundation is, as he points out, almost the same, yet with an important shift in emphasis. It is the existence of the Other, embodied in his cat. Descartes, contrary to popular belief, never denied that animals could suffer, but he centered his thought on the self and, in consequence, on humankind. By contrast, in the view of Derrida, “The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins here” (p. 29).

And yet, for all its profundity in passages, an equivocation still runs through this book that leaves me dissatisfied in the end. What is Derrida’s cat? It is obviously not just a cat or even an animal. It is also, Derrida to the contrary, not nameless, for he names it quite clearly and many times. It is the Animal of myth, like the avatar of some deity that he has summoned to his home. It is *il*

*teriomorfo, l'homme different*. If it be a crime to embrace the Animal, then Derrida is a criminal, but I do not think it is.

## Notes

[1]. Matthew Calacro, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 144-149.

[2]. Leonard Lawlor, *This is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[3]. Lucian Boia, *Entre l'ange et la bete: Le mythe de l'homme different de l'Antiquite a nos jours* (Paris: Plon, 1995).

[4]. Roberto Marchesini and Karen Anderson, *Animal Appeal: Uno studio sul teriomorfismo* (Bologna: Hybris, 2001).

[5]. Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and The Meditations*, trans. Richard F. E. Sutcliffe (New York: Penguin, 1641/1968).

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