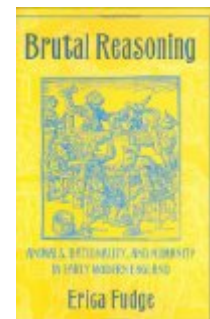


Erica Fudge. *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. x + 224 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-4454-8.



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Published on H-Animal (January, 2008)

In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* Feste schemes to convince Malvolio that he has gone mad, putting his sanity to a mock test with a question about metempsychosis, or transmigration of the soul. "What is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning wildfowl?" he asks. Malvolio responds, "That the soul of our grandam might haply inhabit a bird," a view he quickly rejects to demonstrate his reasonableness. Feste perversely treats this repudiation as proof positive of Malvolio's lunacy, saying, "thou shalt hold th' opinion of Pythagoras ere I will allow of thy wits, and fear to kill a woodcock lest thou dispossess the soul of thy grandam." [1] What appears in Shakespeare as a joke about marking the boundaries of human reason took on a sharper edge in Renaissance moral philosophy, and in later debates surrounding René Descartes' theory that animals are machines. The theriomorphic transformation that Malvolio's grandmother might undergo blurs the boundary between human and nonhuman in a way both comic and indicative of a genuine problem. Descartes denied agency and moral consideration to animals on the grounds that brutes cannot reason. In our own time, proponents of a computationalist theory of

mind also deny consciousness to inarticulate animals, yet extend it to machines on the assumption that consciousness is a sort of neural software that can run on digital circuitry. Taking the long view, we now can see that discussions of human rationality tend to shade into theories about the mental capacities of animals and machines, particularly at historical moments when reason loses its luster and the body reasserts its dominance.

Erica Fudge's *Brutal Reasoning* addresses the long-standing debate on rationality, reassessing how human and nonhuman animals were constructed in relation to one another before the advent of Descartes' beast-machine. The book presents a challenge to "the silent effacement of the animal" (p. 5) by reading the construction of the human in relation to the animal other and insisting on the reality of animals as significant presences in early modern texts. Fudge takes as her subject how human beings historically have thought through animals, theorizing their difference in terms that remain thickly overlaid with questionable assumptions. To defuse the logic that makes human beings animalistic when they fail to

exercise reason or display some moral failing, some early modern writers regarded "la bête humaine" as a purely metaphorical construct—for example, the meaning of the transformation of Ulysses' crew by Circe. Nevertheless, inherent contradictions in the classically derived discourse of reason "became a focus at a time when alternative ancient ideas about humans and about animals were re-entering discussions," and the notion emerged that the beastly other might be, on closer inspection, a second self (p. 83). This shift in perception led some writers (Michel de Montaigne among them) to register the possibility that animals shared sentience with human beings and so deserved moral consideration.

The ambit of Fudge's project takes her on several detours, into discussions of laughter, memory, dreaming, canine syllogism, and so forth, without our ever losing track of her theme that "rationality" opens a gulf between human beings and other species. Her first three chapters go over familiar ground but remap the terrain by reintroducing the ordinarily effaced animal presence into the discussion of human singularity. Navigating through the thickets of intellectual history, Fudge describes how Aristotle and other ancient writers elaborated a discourse of reason and the soul that the Middle Ages transmitted to Renaissance humanists. Almost from the outset the story gets unsettled by a range of problematic instances—women, children, colonial subjects, and drunkards among them. All of us have occupied at least one of these positions, without, perhaps, working through the implications of how such categories structure our thinking about animals and ourselves. Drawing on an impressive erudition, Fudge points the way forward to a fundamental reassessment of Western philosophy's bedrock assumption of our superiority to other species. In following this agenda Fudge uses some of the very same tools (empirical observation, logic, moral passion) that as early as Plutarch under-

mined anthropocentrism from within the discourse of reason.

Traditions surrounding animals in the West are various and conflicted, and Fudge succeeds brilliantly in complicating one-dimensional representations of early modern attitudes. She writes: "The opposition of human and animal which is the foundation of discussions of reason in the early modern period is repeated by many modern commentators with little or no analysis, as if early modern thinkers had stuck at this basic point and had not discussed it further; as if there were no real animals in early modern writings about humans" (p. 176). Fudge spends little time on the sort of Christian moralizing that promoted kindness to animals as a discipline of the self useful for inculcating human empathy (or to avoid becoming inured to human suffering), which Keith Thomas regards as an important break from the Western anthropocentric tradition. Alternative views of animals emerged from a countertradition to the humanist emphasis on keeping our innate animality in check, most notably in the natural philosophy that regarded the human soul as different in degree, not kind, from the souls of animals, or in proponents of theriophily (the love of animals as naturally virtuous). In various contexts Fudge shows how careful observation of particular animals undermined the construction of a supposedly unique human rationality by reminding people of their own beastliness and of the impressive capacities of other species.

Fudge finds in the representation of animals in the period an uneasiness about "reason" itself and an intermittent awareness that subverts the theory that human beings are uniquely in possession of a reasoning capacity. In a characteristically intelligent and witty chapter on Morocco the Intelligent Horse, she writes: "To state that animals are inferior to humans is to state something that, within a Christian, Aristotelian framework, appears to require no further explanation.... However, what is clear in numerous texts available in

early modern England is that such a statement of animal inferiority is not always present—not only because of the breakdown in the logic of the discourse itself or the reemergence of a lost philosophical tradition, but because all the complications of humans' everyday existences alongside animals challenge it" (p. 145). In this respect animals function for Fudge in a manner antithetical to the symbolic and anthropomorphic roles they played in the bestiaries and beast fables she explored in her equally innovative *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (2000). Encountering animals, Fudge insists, brings us face to face with an irreducible reality that exceeds language and escapes systematization. In Fudge's view, James I's experience of a hunting dog or Montaigne's contemplation of his cat can effectively undermine whole schools of thought and reduce a theological or philosophical edifice to rubble. Carl Linnaeus, who pioneered scientific taxonomy, would probably agree: in his *Systema Naturae* (1735) he speculates that "surely Descartes never saw an ape." Yet we have every reason to think that Descartes knew something about monkeys and that rationalism easily can withstand the pressure of empirical observation. In this book, animals sometimes assume a burden of signification and skepticism almost impossible to bear.[2] The actor Richard Tarlton's jesting words to Morocco, "God a mercy horse" (p. 143), which became a byword in London for a generation, serves Fudge as an epithetic expression of the centrality of animals in demolishing the pretenses of modern epistemology.

On another level, however, *Brutal Reasoning* presents a powerful alternative to a critique of speciesism elaborated on the ground of a posthumanist theory of the subject, which typically pays little attention to particular animals and forms a bloodless abstraction out of the "nonhuman." Fudge's commitment to historical specificity serves as a corrective to the recent tendency to treat animals as a way station en route to an analysis of sexism and racism. As a historical argu-

ment it presents a view of modernity far more nuanced than studies that locate the decisive break between humans and animals in the alienation of nineteenth-century capitalism, or that reduce the polyphonic voices of early modern Europe to simple monody. A fundamental reassessment of the human-animal relation in early modern history, the book succeeds in adjusting our sense of the period's philosophy and literature by restoring animals to a central place in the project of constructing the human self.

Brutal Reasoning includes few extended readings of literary texts, and its six chapters freely intermix poems and plays with evidence from a wide range of contemporary sources. Edmund Spenser's intricate allegory of the human body in book 2 of *The Faerie Queene* (1590), for example, makes a brief appearance (pp. 86-87) in a chapter on "Being Animal," where it mainly serves to reinforce the relatively straightforward point that Spenser, as a neo-Platonist, represents the head as the seat of reason. Yet by juxtaposing canonical literary works with lesser-known texts, Fudge succeeds in producing a genuinely new picture of the animal-human relation and of notions of the self. Readers could easily multiply examples of their own, from Shakespeare, Spenser, and many other poets and playwrights, should they care to bend her argument in that direction. Fudge's key insight, that animals remained central to what it meant to be human in the early modern period, has far-reaching consequences for literary studies as much as for an ethics of responsibility toward animals. The crucial role animals played in constructing the modern self gets overlooked by most scholars, or becomes reduced to a matter of ready-made symbolism. What Fudge proposes here is no less than a radical transformation of how we theorize subjectivity and agency, a reconceptualization of "the arrangements of culture and the structures of thought that organize humans' perception of animals and of themselves in the past," in order to produce "a

better understanding of what it means to be a human now" (p. 188).

Notes

[1]. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will, The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), act 4, scene 2, lines 50-60.

[2]. Quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 23.

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Citation: Alvin Snider. Review of Fudge, Erica. *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England*. H-Animal, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

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