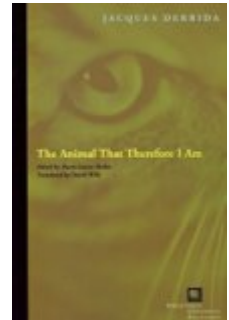




Jacques Derrida. *The Animal That Therefore I Am.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. xiii + 176 pp. \$20.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8232-2791-4.



Reviewed by Kari Weil

Published on H-Animal (October, 2008)

Commissioned by Teresa Mangum (University of Iowa)

The Animal That Therefore I Am is the complete text of Jacques Derrida's ten-hour address to the 1997 Cerisy conference entitled "The Autobiographical Animal." H-Animal readers probably are familiar with portions of the book: the first of the four sections and title essay appeared in *Critical Inquiry* in 2002 and was reprinted in an abridged form in Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco's *Animal Philosophy* (2004). The third section, "And Say the Animal Responded," appeared in Cary Wolfe's edited volume, *Zoontologies* in 2003. This edition presents updated translations of these essays and adds two new sections, now published posthumously. "But As For Me, Who Am I Following," focuses on an often unacknowledged or even disavowed animal question in Descartes, Kant, and Levinas, and "I don't know why we are doing this" offers a further reading of "the animal" in Heidegger, coming back to points that Derrida raised earlier in the conference and in earlier texts such as *On Spirit* (1987). This last section, as editor Marie-Louise Mallet explains in her introduction, posed some specific problems since,

unlike the previous lectures, which were written "in toto," this one was fully improvised. It was published from a sound recording and thus reopens questions of difference between speech and writing that Derrida wrote about early in his career.

With this complete text, readers will gain greater clarity on the significance and stakes for Derrida of what it might mean to be or to follow an animal. (The title in French, *L'Animal que donc je suis*, plays on the double meaning of *je suis*: "I am" and "I follow"). I say "might mean" because the word "animal" is always, for Derrida, a stand-in for something that cannot be seized or contained. "Animal" is a word, more importantly, that misidentifies often with violent consequences, a word that, if we cannot get away from (and that seems difficult), should be "under erasure." Readers will also find that certain themes, which were only briefly alluded to in the single essays, grow in emphasis as they reappear, almost symptomatically, throughout the lectures. These include issues regarding sexual difference, regarding time

(especially time the philosopher may not have), and, especially, issues about tracking. Tracking recalls the early Derridean theory of the trace—that unconscious logic which haunts the path of argument, and here reaffirms the seeking of knowledge or information as a habit that human and nonhuman animals of different species share: we follow signs, scents, clues, not always knowing where or to what or whom they may lead us, indeed, not knowing also how they may become part of us.

Reading these lectures successively one gets a sense of Derrida's own method as a kind of tracking. He picks up a word or sign, follows it a while, lets it drop as another scent overpowers it, then follows that one, only to have it return him to the former, now rediscovered in a slightly changed context. This can be a frustrating journey at times, but in its almost impulsive ferreting, it enacts the idea of following as both an evolutionary and an intellectual activity. As the philosopher tracks the animal question in a tradition leading from Descartes to Heidegger, we sense neither the anxiety of influence nor the anxiety of descent, but a gracious indebtedness to those he follows for what he has learned from them, and for the tools he now turns against them.

Derrida's intellectual tracking, that is to say, takes him to very different ends from those of his predecessors, if not to, in his estimation, new beginnings. Neither Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Levinas, nor Lacan, he claims, has given such sustained attention to the question of the animal. In particular, neither has questioned the singularity of that term, "the animal"—"a name [men] have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other" (p. 23). And yet, the very history of who we think we are as humans is tied up in distinguishing ourselves from this other we have named and subjected—subjected for the sake of claiming subjectivity as our exclusive property. This history, this autobiography of the human, has nevertheless reached an unprecedented moment

that makes such questioning imperative. It is not the fact of subjection that has changed, he emphasizes, it is the means, and volume of this subjection in modernity. Derrida's "following," thus entails both historical hindsight and a sense of urgency: "No one today can deny this event—that is the unprecedented proportions of this subjection of the animal... Neither can one seriously deny the disavowal that this involves" (p. 25). Derrida will not participate in the same disavowal and is not afraid to use the words that others may have shied away from—holocaust, genocide—to describe in detail the kinds of violence done to animals through industrial farming or biological experimentation and manipulation, all for the "putative human well-being of man" (p. 25). As Matthew Callarco explains, Derrida's work is aimed at undercutting the kinds of humanist hierarchies that oppose such analogies as scandalous simply because they compare human and nonhuman life. [1]

While Derrida thus emphasizes the way in which "zoe" or animal life has come to mean a life of suffering, his first concern as philosopher is the result this has on "bios"—the biography or meaning that humans give to themselves. In tracking and deconstructing the subject from Descartes through Lacan, he attempts to uncover the fraudulent grounds on which the human has been defined in opposition to the animal and thereby claimed superiority over it. If thinking is, as Descartes posits, the essence of what or who I am as human, that is the cause of my being as human, Derrida asks how we know that thinking is so different from sniffing or scenting and "why this zone of sensibility is so neglected or reduced to a secondary position in philosophy and the arts?" (p. 55). Following a similar path in Kant, he contends that insofar as the thoughts of those I follow become my thoughts, I must accept, even "welcome," an "irreducible heteroaffection" at my core. In other words, I am moved not of my own volition but by an other within me. My "autonomy," to take the term that is essential for Kant's

delineation of the human and reprisal of the Cartesian cogito, is in no way assured. To the extent that I may be moved by and moved in my thinking by an animal, as Derrida appears to have been moved to write these lectures by the look of his cat, I demonstrate that the self is not autonomous, and its heteronomous “other” is not necessarily human.

So where does this leave Derrida’s now famous cat, we might ask? Those readers looking for an ethology that tells us more of how the world or the philosopher/human looks from the viewpoint of a cat or other animal will be disappointed. Donna Haraway has written of this disappointment and criticized Derrida for missing an opportunity to “seriously consider an alternative form of engagement ... one that risked knowing something more about cats and how to look back, perhaps even scientifically, biologically, and therefore also philosophically and intimately.”[2] Similarly, those looking for an ethics or a guide for how to live or be with nonhuman animals will also be disappointed. But that is not to say that the deconstruction of the subject is without ethical value. Derrida addresses the question of ethics directly in the second section in a number of pages devoted to Emmanuel Levinas whose deeply thoughtful writings on ethics and alterity had great influence on Derrida and concludes that he has put “the animal outside of the ethical circuit”(p. 106). He finds this “disavowal” of the animal/other surprising, given the “great intangible Judaic principle” of life that underlies much of Levinasian ethics. But this principle of life remains unthought, covered over by his notions of death and the face, which remain grounded in a stubborn humanism: only humans properly die (and thus must not be killed); only a human has a naked face that reveals “his” vulnerability and calls me to respond to it, to be responsible to or for it. Levinas thus must be included in the tradition of those whose understanding of the subject, even as it is deeply grounded in otherness be-

cause moved by and responsive to it, is exclusive of “the animal.”

Derrida’s discussion of Levinas uncovers a parallel between this exclusion of consideration of the animal and that of sexual difference, especially in relation to the theme of nudity that runs through Levinas, and as a result, in relation to who/what has ethical standing. Despite what some might want to find in Levinas’s discussion of Bobby, the dog who befriended him in a concentration camp, dogs and women are denied an opening to ethics. Could it be that the “sacrificial war” against the animal,” which Derrida says is as old as Genesis (p. 101), is also linked to the war against “the feminine”—a term that has been similarly essentialized with often violent effects? Derrida briefly addresses sexual difference earlier in a comparison of two narratives of Genesis. In the first version Ish, or Adam, is described as male and female and the couple is given authority over the animals in obedience to God. Naming of the animals, however, only takes place in the second version where Adam is described as male alone, before woman. Responding to the names Adam gives them, moreover, the animals come after or follow him (rather than vice versa), as does woman. Such naming, Derrida suggests through a compelling reading of a passage from Walter Benjamin, is necessarily linked to death and is what renders the animals mortal. The name of “the animal,” delineating the ultimate ethical difference from the human, is also what renders them capable of being sacrificed.

Derrida does not pursue the potential consequences of the first narrative, in which women are present and naming does not take place, preferring to track the disavowals in philosophy and religion that are linked to the “phallogocentrism” of the second. Disavowal is a term repeated frequently in the lectures and with the full psychoanalytic meaning of denying a reality that has potentially traumatic implications. Whether that trauma be the Darwinian one of descent or the

Freudian one of sexual difference, Derrida's experience with his cat seems to bring him face to face with what his philosophical predecessors would not or could not see (hence the exclusions)--that an animal, like a woman, has a point of view--an "other" point of view on me and on the world. As David Wills suggests, Derrida recasts the scene of Genesis in such a way that consciousness of nudity and hence vulnerable subjectivity is awakened by this animal gaze and is strengthened by the gaze of a woman imagined to be witnessing the scene, perhaps in a mirror. If Derrida's readings of his predecessors' disavowals are masterful in their insights, this scene of avowal reveals a "malaise" of identity and shame that cannot be mastered but only exacerbated into a shame of shame. Here are the beginnings of autobiography, the moment when this mirroring of gazes and multiplying selves brings Derrida to posit his "I," a human and male "I," as "a living creature of the masculine sex, even if he does so with all the complexity that he thinks he has to recall and lay claim to at every occasion, even suspecting that an autobiography of any consequence cannot not touch on this assurance of saying "I am a man," I am a woman," I am a man who is also a woman" (p. 58). *Ecce animot*, it would be easier to say--Derrida's invented word for that which cannot be separated easily into species or sex, and whose identity is only maintained by a word, a *mot*.

The scene with the cat thus evokes something of that fluidity of identity (where otherness is explicitly the other--animal or *animot*) that branches of feminism acknowledged and embraced at least since the 70s. While not referencing feminism, Derrida seems to demonstrate what many feminists theorized: that fear of such fluidity is a masculine fear, and the need to guard against it (to disavow) is productive of specifically masculine forms of hiding or dissimulation. The term *animot*, should not be read as a term to stave off or overcome this fear whether through the denial of difference or the acceptance of a transspecies or transgendered appellation. Difference is not to

be overcome, but rather as the plural heard in *animot* (*animaux*) suggests, it is to be pluralized, calling attention to the many differences that may or may not distinguish sexes and species. These are also differences that we harbor in ourselves, differences from the names we give ourselves, differences from the human-animal we think we are. "We no longer know how many we are then, all males and females of us. And I maintain that autobiography has begun there" (p. 58).

This recognition of my indebtedness to the *animot* or to the animal others I follow and whose look calls me and my certainties about the world into question forms the base of what Matthew Callarco has called the "proto-ethical" in Derrida. [3] This look prepares me, if it does not compel me, to address the vulnerabilities we share as living, mortal beings, as they also bring me to acknowledge the qualities and talents of an other I may know little of and may not know despite my efforts to name him or her. Derrida's final lecture on Heidegger suggests that a more ethical *mitsein* or living with our animal/others may, in fact, depend on giving up the knowledge of world that is associated with Dasein. Do we, he asks, really know the world "as such" and in such a different manner from animals who, Heidegger argues, know the world only in a relation of utility, guided by drives or desires (p. 159)? Might not our language be proof of our own inability to know the world outside of our own projects, outside of our own autobiographical efforts, and not the proof of our true apprehension of the world?

Letting animals be in their being, outside our projects and outside our will for knowledge, would, Derrida seems to suggest, constitute the ultimate ethical stance. As autobiographical animals, however, we may have difficulty, as does Derrida, thinking a principle of life outside of our own projects. What we can do is to track and scrutinize those projects, paying particular attention to how and for what purposes we construct difference. In this way we may turn away from those

tracks that trample upon or claim to leave others behind in the assertion of our difference. This is the proto-ethical project that Derrida's work on the animal undertakes. It is unfortunate that there will not be more to follow.

Notes

[1]. Matthew Callarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 110-111.

[2]. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 20.

[3]. Callarco, *Zoographies*.

it

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-animal>

Citation: Kari Weil. Review of Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. H-Animal, H-Net Reviews. October, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=22808>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.