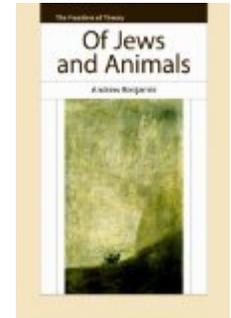


Andrew Benjamin. *Of Jews and Animals*. The Frontiers of Theory Series. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. Illustrations. 224 pp. \$32.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7486-4317-2.



Reviewed by Aaron Gross

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

As the first monograph devoted to the exploration of the interconnections between the European imagination of Jews and of animals, *Of Jews and Animals* is a landmark, bridging Jewish studies with a stream of reflection on animals in critical theory that can be traced back at least to Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin and that became one of the most persistent themes in the work of Jacques Derrida. The volume follows the recent surge of critical reflections on animals known as “animal studies,” and its greatest significance perhaps lies in its demonstration that we cannot responsibly think Jew and animal in separation. It is valuable both as a history of ideas and a theorization of oppression, but its principle aim is philosophical: to rethink Jew and animal and thus particularity and universality. To do so, it employs an innovative technical vocabulary--phrases like “the work of the figure” and “the *without relation*.” Less than two hundred pages, the volume is divided into two parts and a pair of bookend chapters that respectively introduce the volume and attempt to sharpen its

most important implications. It contains fourteen images and a brief index.

From the outset, Andrew Benjamin warns against a misunderstanding of bringing together Jews and animals as some attempt at “reduction or a forced similarity,” while insisting that “nonetheless, there is an important relationship between Jews and animals. They appear within the history of philosophy, art and theology in ways in which the differing forms of conjunction mark the manner in which dominant traditions construct themselves” (p. 3). Chapter 1 identifies the two most salient concerns that guide the volume. First, “the Jew and the animal ... can be attributed a privileged position ... in the way philosophical systems create and sustain identities” in the form of what Benjamin theorizes as “figures.” Benjamin defines the figure “as the constitution of an identity in which the construction has a specific function that is predominantly external to the concerns of identity itself,” for example, functioning to render particular beings the legitimate target of violence (p. 4). Second, the volume is concerned

with the privileged role of Jews and animals in the conceptualization of universality and particularity.

The second chapter, beginning part 1 of the volume, considers the thought of Descartes then Heidegger, ultimately concluding that both engaged animals through what Benjamin calls, in an evocative phrase the meaning of which is filled out as the volume progresses, “the *without relation*.” The *without relation* is a disavowal of relationship (in this case, certain relations between humans and animals) that, Benjamin argues, played a founding role in both Descartes and Heidegger’s attempts to think what is properly human. Chapter 3 begins by examining a variation of this same process of asserting a *without relation*, this time focusing on Maurice Blanchot; then the chapter turns to Walter Benjamin as an alternative voice within the European tradition that does not rely on the pervasive and troubling anthropocentrism of the *without relation* (a move also employed by Giorgio Agamben in *The Open: Man and Animal* [2002]). Andrew Benjamin explicates Blanchot’s anthropocentrism as following a “logic of sacrifice” that makes the “common measure” of humanity the “necessity of sacrifice,” the (nonliteral) sacrifice of the animal (p. 60). Walter Benjamin, by contrast, points the way toward a “relational ontology” that Andrew Benjamin champions at the end of the chapter—an ontology “in which the animal continues to figure as the site of a *continual* negotiation demanded by the *already present set of connections* [precisely those connections disavowed in the *without relation*] that hold the complex variations of life in play” (p. 70, emphasis added). The idea of “play” is taken up in the next chapter as part of an alternative to the *without relation*.

Chapter 4, the closing of part 1, draws explicitly on Derrida, whose deconstructive method Andrew Benjamin helpfully explicates as, in part, the affirmation of the repetition of “play” without end against the finality and fixity introduced by the

“metaphysics” implicit in the *without relation*. One of the most original ideas in the volume emerges in this chapter: the ethical problem of the *without relation* is not simply the denial of relation but the particular “way the *without relation* works to establish the propriety of the human being” (p. 84). The *without relation* is problematic because it imposes “on the site of an original plurality” and “singularizes the relation in the sense that the divide is then between the human and the animal such that each element of the divide takes on a *single* thus *unified* presence” (p. 88, emphasis added). This “unified presence” of the human attempts to overcome all particularity in a universal human identity that, Benjamin goes on to show in part 2, simultaneously excludes both animal and Jew.

Chapter 5, the first chapter of part 2, begins to link together the figure of animal and Jew—and other “others” (p. 110)—and starts by considering this linkage in Hegel. Benjamin argues that in Hegel the *without relation* “necessitates both activity and invention ... [and] demands a radical transformation of what exists already” (p. 103). Both Jew and animal, in differing ways were, for Hegel, troublesome forms of particularity, analogous to disease, that must be treated accordingly. Against this manner of thinking particularity, Benjamin argues for an understanding of particularity that “affirms” a prior relationality that always limits the processes of exclusion and subsumption.

In different ways, the remaining chapters in part 2 both provide further examples of the *without relation* (and related processes) and clarify what is at stake in this “affirmation” of “relationality.” Chapter 6 does this in dialog with Agamben and by considering different figurations of animals in the art of Piero della Francesca and Bartolomé Bermejo. Chapter 7 continues the work in dialog with Pascal’s *Pensées* 102 and 103. Chapter 8 does so by returning to Hegel and taking up the art of Jan van Eyck and his school, Albrecht Dür-

er, and Diego Velázquez. Chapters 7 and 8 will be of particular interest to scholars of anti-Semitism as they trace the *without relation* as it is expressed in what Benjamin calls “the logic of the synagogue,” for example, in the defeated image of “the synagogue” in contrast to the triumphant church in European painting.

Chapter 9, the final bookend chapter, emphasizes that the linked reduction of both Jews and animals to figures marked by the *without relation* is part of a larger way of understanding the relationships that (should) pertain between particulars and universals—a way of understanding that needs to be challenged. The countermove that *Of Jews and Animals* proposes is to insist on a “primordial relationality” and an affirmation of particularity that is “at the same time enjoining a *defense* of particularity” (emphasis added). This affirmation “as it pertains to animals necessitates the recognition that what is involved are relations” (p. 190). Moreover, “if there is a way of addressing this complex of relations ... then it has to be explicated ... in terms of particularity and specifically how that question opens up the domain of justice and judgment. Jew and animal cannot be “assimilated to a generalised and abstract sense of alterity.” Rather we must acknowledge relationality and, at the same time, resist any final actualization of that relationship in a singular formation. “Jews and animals, in being there, make demands” (p. 191). What *Of Jews and Animals* finally asks of us is no more or less than responding to them in the infinite forms in which we encounter them.

Benjamin’s text breaks important and largely untilled ground for scholars interested in critical theory, Jewish studies, and animal studies, and his helpful endnotes constantly connect the book’s themes with a broader literature. The text’s heavy reliance on idiosyncratic—if also precise—vocabulary, its highly abstract analysis, and the high expectations it has for its readers’ familiarity with

critical theory will regrettably limit its audience, but this also allows for its depth.

While its engagement with questions of particularity, universality, identity, and play seem to benefit from longstanding engagement with these issues, its engagement with animal studies—and simply with the lives of animals—left this reviewer wanting. For example, while the work is appropriately permeated by a consciousness of and occasional direct engagement with the Holocaust, the same is not true of its engagement with contemporary forms of mass violence against animals. If it would be wrong for a volume analyzing modes of thought that necessitate the “elimination” of Jewish particularity to carry on as if the Holocaust had not happened, it is equally inappropriate for a work like this, which analyzes modes of thought that render animal sacrifice necessary to being human, to continue on as if that amalgam of forms of violence we gesture at when speaking of “factory farming” was not *occurring presently*. Yet that is what happens and it is arguably symptomatic of a larger lack of engagement with the “demands” of animals to which the volume theoretically directs us. It is not that I would have wished for more didactic engagement with ethical questions—indeed, much of the merit of the volume is the way in which it takes on the realm of the ethical at its root. Rather, I simply insist that a work like this bears a heavy responsibility to those beings particularized as “Jew” and “animal,” and Benjamin’s text does a far better job of fulfilling the former than the latter. Even if this work does not take us as close as I would like to the demands of animal others or animal studies, it does clear the way for that task in an original and effective manner. Benjamin’s book is an important, insightful, and careful work of scholarship that demonstrates that if we ignore the relationship between Jews and animals we will diminish our understanding of both.

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