

When Animals Speak: Kant, Enlightenment Philosophy and the Silence of Animals

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Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature [...]. Because she is mute, nature mourns.

– Benjamin (2011, 265)

Silence [...] surely we feel that it is linked to the cry, the voiceless cry, which breaks with all utterances [...] the cry tends to exceed all language.

– Blanchot (1995, 51)

The position of animals, the animal and animality is currently being revised on many fronts. The figure of the animal ceases to be at the margins of philosophy and has become a central concern for rethinking subjectivity and politics. But despite the ostensibly marginal role that animals have played in Western philosophy, they have continued to haunt philosophers, disrupting the anthropo-logocentric order of things: “at the horizon of our thoughts and our languages [...] at the limit of our representations” (De Fontenay 1998, 18), the Subject is looked at by its ghostly Other. The marginality of the animal-spectre must not be understood

as a negative phenomenon, but as a positive, structuring element of philosophy: the margin as a silent/silenced centre (Spivak 1988, 283). Western philosophy, especially since Descartes,¹ has continued to exorcise these uncanny guests in order to avoid a radical polysemia that would undermine the possibility of philosophy itself. “The animal” is at the *limit* of philosophy in the double sense that

1 Erica Fudge (2006, 180) has suggested that scholarship has had a Cartesian bias by “read[ing] the Cartesian human back onto pre-Cartesian writings,” thus eclipsing the intense debates surrounding animals in the early modern period in England.

Derrida uses it (1982), as that which is *excluded* and *mastered*, kept in place, rendered mute: the sovereignty of the subject is guaranteed through the conceptual mastery of its other. Thus, the concept of “the animal” has proceeded by cutting itself off from its source to ensure the universality of its discourse: as Derrida has insistently pointed out, the concept of the animal has little to do with the multiplicity of the living, the excessive heterogeneity that is held together by the name “animal” (Derrida 2002, 399). On the other side of this name, on the other side of philosophy, are the silent/silenced animals. But the repressed always returns: the concept of the animal proves to be unstable and produces slippage between the different fields of philosophy. Elisabeth de Fontenay remarks that the discourse on animals tends to confuse the descriptive and the prescriptive, thus blurring the boundaries between philosophical anthropology, moral and political philosophy, ontology and epistemology (1998, 17). This suggests that the concept of the animal in philosophy has had multiple and often paradoxical meanings and functions: what are these meanings and functions of the concept of the animal? How does it structure the different fields of philosophy? What are the ethical and political stakes for humans and animals?

The ambivalence of the concept is key, as it oscillates between a metaphysical entity and a moral category: on the one hand, the animal is the absolute other beyond the human, the very limit of sense and meaning; on the other hand,

the separation of man and animal takes place *within* man in order to differentiate between the “proper” human (qua rational, Christian, citizen, person) and the animal-human that fails to “transcend” the life of the animal body. The ethico-political dimension of the concept of the animal, which always crosses the border between the human and the inhuman, therefore amounts to detaching animality from actual animals. This means that the concept of the animal does not only rely on a suppression of the living creatures that are called animal, but that animality does not in the first place refer to nonhuman animals but to humanity; that *the animal is the inhumanity of the human*. The animal is thus the dialectical other ‘of’ and ‘within’ man. Throughout this essay, I want to keep in view how the silence of animals (as always already outside) and the animalization of humans are part of the same discourse of reason and yet follow a distinct logic, without either conflating them or erasing one by highlighting the other. My primary focus is on Kant’s 1786 essay “Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History” (2013a),² in order to explore the ethical and (bio) political consequences of the concepts of man and animal. I highlight how the slippage of the ontological and the moral categories of animality are mobilized to ground the possibility of (anthropo-

2 My modifications of the translation are not always indicated.

centric) morality, which *a priori* excludes nonhuman animals and structurally operates to distinguish between humans (i.e., animalization, dehumanization).

Although Descartes' and Malebranche's separation of humans and animals is absolute, the relationship between humanity and animality tends to be more precarious in the Christian and rationalist tradition. Descartes' strict dualism, primarily based on the possession of language (which is equated with thought), does not allow for any differentiation within humanity and extends to "the most dull-witted of man" and "even madmen" who are still capable of some form of language (Descartes 2006, 58). By rendering the animal-other mute, Descartes' beast-machine hypothesis captures the new practico-ontological status of animals in the age of experimental science, producing the foundational silence of animals necessary for "mak[ing] ourselves [...] the masters and possessors of nature" (ibid., 62). This absolute rift, however, gets more complicated through the Christian notion that one has to live up to one's humanity, to cultivate the celestial within to differentiate oneself from the terrestrial "brutes." In the teleological world of Aquinas, it is a God-given fact that the "higher things govern lower things" (Aquinas 1977a, 510). Since animals lack the "property to command" (an attribute of reason; Aquinas 1977b, 688), their lives are "preserved not for

themselves, but for man." The ability of commanding oneself through reason (which will later be called "self-governance") is not as categorical as Descartes' dualism and becomes the key feature to differentiate between humans that are properly rational and those unexamined and unrestrained lives that remain tied to the animal realm. Malebranche, combining the "property to command" with Descartes' dualism, paints a picture of Adam as the perfect man, who "before his sin [...] had no enemies; *his body* and everything surrounding it *was subject to him*" (Malebranche 1997b, 209; emphasis added). Just as Adam was a sovereign over the "brutes incapable of reason" (ibid., 210) he was the sovereign over his own body. Man must exercise sovereignty over his own body and over the bodies of the brutes who are incapable of governing themselves. As a result of the Fall humans would seem necessarily to fall into an in-between space, both separated from animals and yet incapable of fully living up to the life of the soul that is reserved for humanity alone. This is the fundamental paradox of the Christian and certain Enlightenment conceptions of the human: it is both an ontological given *and* an ethical imperative. It is this ambivalence between the categorical status of the human and the moral status of the human that produces a slippage from the categories of the human to the animal: through rational self-examination

and self-governance one has to live up to one's humanity. This process is what Agamben calls "anthropogenesis" or the workings of the "anthropological machine" (Agamben 2004, 16, 37). Rather than starting from the absolute separation of man and animal, the anthropological machine *produces* the human through differentiating between humanity and animality within humans.

These complications of the Christian conception of the human and the modern understanding of nature, which leaves the human suspended in-between the realm of reason and freedom on the one hand and the realm of nature and necessity on the other, are synthesized in the work of Kant. The paradoxical combination of the absolute category of man – as distinct from animals – and the contamination of animality finds an expression in the idea that *in so far as* humans are rational they escape the realm of the bondage to nature, the realm of necessity. As animals, humans are unfree and governed from without; as rational creatures, humans are autonomous and self-governing. The Christian structure of this double meaning of the human – as imperative and as categorical – is modified through the 18th century Enlightenment efforts to reinscribe man in nature and history. Kant takes history as the realm of a progression where the proper humanity of the human (i.e., reason) unfolds slowly over time: it is throughout

history that man emancipates itself from the status of the animal. This teleology of humanity transcending "the fetters of nature" in history, as well as the ethical stakes for animals and humans, is all contained in his "Conjectures." Taking the figure of the animal as the main topos of investigation, the following reading of Kant's essay serves to tease out these teleological and ethical investments and implications for the economy of reason.

Kant begins his story not with Paradise but with the Fall. Before the advent of an awakening reason, when man remains within the crudeness of a purely animal creature (*Rohigkeit eines bloß thierischen Geschöpfs*), there is no law yet and therefore also no transgression of the law. The story of man as animal begins in Paradise but the story of the humanity of man begins with the Fall. Put formulaically: "The history of nature begins with goodness, because it is the work of God; the history of freedom begins with evil, for it is the work of man" (Kant 2013a, 227). Kant thus inverts the Christian temporality that moves "from good to evil" and turns it into a linear progression from "raw nature" to human history, that is, the slow unfolding of reason and freedom. The beginning of the road to freedom therefore means inequality, tyranny and misery, but as history progresses and man becomes more rational it moves from "worse to better." In this regard, Kant notes, his history is com-

patible with Rousseau's theory of nature (Rousseau 1966): the advent of culture is the alienation from nature and the cause of human misery. But it is also the beginnings of everything good, moral, rational and properly human. In a proto-Hegelian gesture Kant imagines a moment in time where culture and nature are reconciled, when humanity's realization of its essence (freedom) through reason amounts to the emancipation from nature, out of the "tutelage of nature" (*Vormundschaft der Natur*): once nature has become a recognizable product of human action it no longer stands in opposition to culture. Kant's natural man, with whom the history of reason and freedom begins, is not the paradisiacal man "in his raw natural state" (*gänzlichen Rohigkeit seiner Natur*) but man after a "mighty step in ingenuity" (*einen mächtigen Schritt in der Geschicklichkeit*). Kant begins with two classical markers of humanity, bipedalism and speech. This natural man is able to walk (*stehen und gehen*) and to speak coherently with concepts, i.e., *to think (denken)*.³ For the natural man, on his way out of the "rawness" of nature, language and thought belong together, marking the potential for the passage from instinct (dependency on nature) to reason, leading to freedom over and beyond nature.

The critical event in the awak-

3 Kant differentiates between *sprechen* and *reden*, the latter being connected with concepts and therefore thought.

ening of reason, that which "raises men above animals" (*den Menschen über die Gesellschaft mit Thieren gänzlich erhebende Vernunft*), the moment that inaugurates the history of freedom, is when man realizes that he is distinct from other creatures:

When he first said to the sheep 'the fleece which you wear was given to you by nature not for your own use, but for mine' and took it from the sheep to wear it himself, *he became aware of a prerogative which, by his nature, he enjoyed over all the animals; and he now no longer regarded them as fellow creatures, but as means and instruments to be used at will for the attainment of whatever ends he pleased.* (Kant 2013a, 225; emphasis added)⁴

It is worth pausing here: the decisive moment that man realizes he is a rational creature distinct from animals is through a realization of his *prerogative and power over animal existence*: their lack of reason, being "mere" or "raw" nature allows the animal to be instrumentalized for the sake of humanity. Furthermore, this realization of power over bare life *coincides with the advent of morality itself*: by sub-

4 Kant references Genesis 3.21, which reads: "the Lord God made clothes out of animal skins for the man and his wife" (CEV). Whereas in Genesis dominion over the animals is God-given, Kant turns it into the achievement of reason itself – the realization that reason allows him to govern natural life.

jugating the animal as a mere means to an end, Kant's man realizes that he may never speak to a fellow human similarly (*daß er so etwas zu keinem Menschen sagen dürfe*). The moral community, for Kant, is always about humans (or rational creatures) and by its very definition excludes animal life. The categorical separation of man and animal draws the line between rational life (or, to be more precise, those with the potential for reason) and the exploitable bare life that it excludes. To repeat: not only does morality necessarily exclude animals, but the gesture of exclusion *enables* morality. The assertion of power over animal life is structurally interwoven with the possibility of logocentric morality. In this way humanity begins to escape the foreign rule of nature – which is animal life – and begins to affirm its humanity by acting *upon* nature. At a later stage, the cosmopolitan project continues to expand the circle of moral inclusion but without questioning *the foundational boundary* itself.

At first glance, the separation of man and animal seems absolute. But on closer investigation there is again slippage between humanity and animality. Kant begins his *history* at a point where man has already made great advances in “ingenuity,” implying that humans have dwelled on earth long before the beginning of human history where man remained in the “rawness of nature.” These are, among others, the people from “sav-

age nations” (*wilden Nationen*) in whom the animal has yet to develop its humanity (*indem das Thier gewissermaßen die Menschheit noch nicht in sich entwickelt hat*; Kant 1968, 442). The “gewissermaßen” (“in a way,” “to some extent,” or “so to speak”) captures the ambivalent status of the animal – as something outside of humanity and yet a fundamental referent to the inhumanity of the human. “Savages” are technically human because the “kernel” (*Keim*) of the human essence is present but they remain animal insofar this has not been cultivated. Enlightenment is humanity's project of becoming “*more than a machine*, in a manner appropriate to his dignity” (Kant 2013b, 60). This reference to Descartes' machine at the end of Kant's Enlightenment essay mobilizes the Cartesian impasse and shows the anthropological machine in full functioning, placing humans outside of the circle of humanity into a “zone of indeterminacy” (to use Agamben's term).

The concept of animality departs but also parts from living animals and becomes the symbol for the inhumanity of humans: *only humans can be inhuman*. The logocentric metaphysics of morality effects a distribution of animality across humans: the structure of producing the varying degrees of the human and the less-than-human on the basis of the alleged proximity to animals and incapacity of living up to the human potential. Animals are always already outside of this

process of humanization/animalization. Because logocentric morality only takes humanity as its domain, the humanity of the dehumanized other is always presupposed: the animalized human other is always *like* an animal, but never *is* an animal. *It is precisely the proximity with the human other that necessitates active intervention to distance the self from the other by suspending the other's humanity.* The alterity of the human is therefore, paradoxically, "the more marked for being less marked" (Derrida 2009, 203-204). Animals, on the other hand, insofar as they are at a safe distance from *humanity*, are outside of this process. The caesura of man and animal may first happen within man but it relies on a prior exclusion of animals. This silencing of animals leaves its trace in most European languages. The entirety of their moral vocabulary is infused with this Judeo-Christian and Kantian anthropocentrism that differentiates between the human and the animal. One appeals to someone's humanity, fights for *humane* (*menschlich, humain*) treatment, or laments *the inhumane, the brutal, the bestial, the animal* behaviour of someone or some system. The "animal" serves as the referent of the inhumanity of the human whilst being detached from living animals. Outside of the *anthropos*, as a symbol in an all-too-human world, there is no language available that can address ethics outside of this Christian-Kantian moral conception of the human. Cruelty

that is peculiar to humans, like industrial farming for instance, can only be rendered in terms of its lack of humanity or excess of brutality. An ethic that operates differently, outside of the processes of humanization/animalization, without silencing animals, must find a moral vocabulary different from the one that decries inhumanity whilst the inhuman and nonhuman world is crushed under human rule.

"It is a metaphysical truth that all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language," Walter Benjamin writes (2011, 265). This lament would first be an accusatory call coming from within the walls of the abattoirs and out of the depleted oceans and rainforests carrying the suppressed and uncanny truth of the *logos* that rendered the animal other speechless. But since human language, the "naming language" (Benjamin), is not the only language, there is also another possibility for animals "endowed" with language. The extension of languages outside of the *logos* lifts the silence of animals; once animal languages cease to be the "unintelligible" cries as the other of and within *logos* there is space not only for lament but for other signs, symbols and connections between ethical bodies affecting each other, open to infinite possibilities of unexplored natural-cultural worlds.

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