

Jacques Derrida and zoomorphism: an inquiry

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The article discusses zoomorphism as part of the anthropocentric discourse aimed at establishing human dominance over animals. Basing on Jacques Derrida’s 1997 paper “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” the article approaches anthropomorphism and zoomorphism as culturally sanctioned ways of misrepresenting animality and shaping human attitudes towards real-life animals. A symptom of the misrepresentation is the gap between animals and their linguistic denotations. The specific aim of the article is to demonstrate that zoomorphism as used in everyday language conserves the human-centered vision of the world by ignoring the differences between individual animals. The discussion concludes by arguing that zoomorphism can be remedied by the individualizing aspects of anthropomorphism.

KEYWORDS: Derrida, animals, animality, zoomorphism, anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism

Deconstructing the notion of animality, Derrida concentrated in particular on the manner in which the cultural representation of animals influences attitudes towards real-life animals. In his research, he analyzed popular understanding of animality, the linguistic associations, and discourses which animals are part of. He also studied the ethical consequences of ascribing anthropogenic meanings to animals. From the ecocritical perspective, the conclusions that Derrida reaches, especially in his 1997 paper “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” constitute a thought-provoking starting point for an inquiry into the manner in which language reinforces the anthropocentric perception of animals. In the essay, I am going to employ Derrida’s theory to analyze zoomorphism, that is, the attribution of animal traits to people. Specifically, I would like to argue that zoomorphism is secondary to anthropomorphism, and that it eventually preserves the superiority of man over animals. Following Derrida, I conclude by arguing that the zoomorphic dissimulation of animal heterogeneity can be remedied by anthropomorphic individualization of animals.

The proponents of animal rights, among them Peter Singer, Tom Regan and Gary Francione, reconsider the man-animal binary, searching for a principle of equity which would require moral consideration not only for people but also for animals. Singer designates the capability to

feel pain as such a principle.¹ For Regan, moral significance is accorded to beings which could be defined as “subjects-of-a-life.”² Francione claims that animals, similarly to people, should not be treated as property.³ Other positions within animal rights discourse also approach animals as a generic group; Martha Nussbaum bases animal rights on their capabilities.⁴ Stephen R.L. Clark and Mary Midgley argue for an equal distribution of happiness among all people and animals.⁵ Mark Rowlands claims that animals can be accorded basic rights in ignorance of their individual characteristics.⁶ The difficulty with the above theories is that they deny the variety of the animal world by referring to them not as individual beings but in general as a homogeneous mass of indistinguishable bodies. In his 1987 study *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, Derrida deems dogmatic forms of knowledge, such as the idea of moral value of animals, as reductive because they presuppose “that there is one thing, one domain, one homogeneous type of entity, which is called animality *in general*, for which any example would do the job.”⁷ The reduction occurs in language, and its purpose is to designate a symbolic space in which people can define themselves as the superior form of life by subordinating the realm of the bodily, the animalistic, to the order of spirit attributed exclusively to man. It can be claimed that, for Derrida, the commendation of the human depends on an anthropocentric rhetoric of the animal, evinced and reinforced by linguistic denotations of animality.

In his guidebook to ecocriticism, *Ecocriticism* (2012), Greg Garrard refers to the reductive representation of animality, and of animal singularity, when he argues that the animal is a narrative trope used to convey human-generated meanings, as in the similes “brave as a lion” or “pigheaded.” According to Garrard, such phrases result from a play of similarity and difference between people and animals, and in general they can be put into two categories: metonymy and metaphor. Garrard’s typology is based on Roy G. Willis’s following thought:

The distinctive peculiarity of animals is that, being at once close to man and strange to him, both akin to him and unalterably non-human, they are able to alternate,

¹ P. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, New York 1990, p. 4.

² T. Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1983, p. 243.

³ G. Francione, *Animals, Property, and the Law*, Philadelphia 1995, p. 4.

⁴ M. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Cambridge, MA and London 2006, p. 388.

⁵ Cf. M. Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, Athens, GA 1983.

⁶ M. Rowlands, *Animal Rights: A Philosophical Defense*, New York 1998, pp. 147–152.

⁷ J. Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. G. Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Chicago and London 1989, p. 57.

as objects of human thought, between the contiguity of the metonymic mode and the distanced, analogical mode of the metaphor.⁸

The linguistic use of animals proves that there is a “rhetoric of animality”⁹ employed to convey strictly human meanings. The rhetoric is also functional in describing actual animals. Steve Baker thus refers to the scope of the rhetoric: “[c]ulture shapes our reading of animals just as much as animals shape our reading of culture.”¹⁰ What it means is that the animal can never be approached on its own; the other implication of animal constructivism is that “all philosophical discussion about animals will inevitably have to work with the ‘animals’ a culture has proposed to.”¹¹ Garrard employs the claim in his designation of metonymy, likeness, as the rhetoric underlying anthropomorphism and zoomorphism.

Anthropomorphism, argues Garrard, occurs when metonymy is used to represent animals in human terms. Specifically, it concerns cases in which human characteristics, such as human emotions, traits of character or speech, are ascribed to animals. Examples of anthropomorphism can be found in literature, especially in texts dedicated for children as well as in popular culture, science and in philosophical criticism. An interesting example of the latter concerns Michael Leahy’s criticism of the animal liberationist movement; he accuses Singer and his followers of anthropomorphism, arguing that the need of freedom is a human value which animal liberationists unduly project on animals.¹² Scientific anthropomorphism can be detected in ethological research in which animal behavior is explained by using categories employed to describe human social and political relations. It is visible in research on primates. Anthropomorphism is also characteristic of people’s tendency to infer agency in a seemingly intentional behavior of various species. Examples of such misguided inference include the malice of rats or of raccoons, the dolphin’s smile and the idea of the dog as man’s best friend. Anthropomorphism can even be found in texts disavowing anthropomorphic misrepresentations of animals, as in the following passage in which Temple Grandin criticizes the view of dolphins as sociable and peaceful: “dolphins are big-brained animals who commit gang rape, brutal killings of dolphin ‘children,’ and the mass murder of porpoises.”¹³ Anthropomorphism is com-

⁸ R.G. Willis, *Man and Beast*, London 1974, p. 128.

⁹ S. Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation*, Manchester 1993, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, London and New York 2012, p. 160.

¹² Cf. M. Leahy, *Against Liberation: Putting Animals in Perspective*, London 1994.

¹³ T. Grandin and C. Johnson, *Animals in Translation: The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow*, London 2005, p. 252.

mon in wildlife documentaries, in the imagery connected with pro-animal movements and in the trade of agricultural products. It can be argued that anthropomorphic designations are popular in culture and economy because they make the animal world easier to understand and, thereby, to relate to, which is frequently perceived as an asset from the viewpoint of ethology and animal welfare movements, as long as it is handled with caution.¹⁴

The anthropomorphic imagery of animals can also be projected onto people. The process is called zoomorphism, and it is usually intended to bring out a particular feature of a person's character or behavior. Accordingly, zoomorphism depends on a prior ascription of the feature to a given species. Due to the metonymic character of the ascription, zoomorphism is strongly reductive. It is also frequently deterministic, especially in its crude forms, including misogynist, racial and misanthropic misrepresentations of the other. A recent example of crude zoomorphism concerns the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda. The conflict between the Hutu majority and Tutsis was developing throughout the twentieth century; persecuted Tutsis fled Rwanda, mainly to Burundi and Uganda, and those of them who came back in more peaceful times were frequently referred to as cockroaches. In 1993, the ruling Hutu majority agreed to lessen their anti-Tutsi politics, and so a number of Tutsis returned to their homes. However, comparisons to cockroaches intensified, especially in media coverage, which eventually led to a civil war and countrywide ethnic cleansing of Tutsis. During the peak of the conflict in 1994, the dehumanizing comparison to cockroaches was heard almost everywhere, intensifying the genocidal massacre.

The cockroach association depends on a previous "crudely anthropomorphic projection of despised human qualities,"¹⁵ such as dirtiness and ugliness, onto cockroaches. The projection is to justify extermination of the insects as despicable and harmful to people. By comparing Tutsis to cockroaches, the Hutu used the projection to justify their cockroach-like treatment of Tutsis. Similar justifications of animal-like treatment of people is detectable in the comparison of black people to monkeys or Jews to rats. There are also common examples of zoomorphic reductivism in pornography, pop cultural sexuality (Playboy Bunnies) as well as in humanities and science, for instance in Hobbes's theory of pre-political state of nature in which people treated each other like animals, or in Darwinian accounts concerning the development of language, societal structures and civilization.¹⁶ At this point, it is worth mentioning the following claim by Garrard:

¹⁴ G. Garrard, *op.cit.*, pp. 155–158.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 160.

¹⁶ Cf. E.O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, London 2000, p. 547.

“unlike crude zoomorphism, critical zoomorphism involves the rejection of simplistic biological determinism (or essentialism) and attempts to give an evolutionary account of the full range of human traits, including language [...] and morality [...] as well as [...] sex and violence.”¹⁷ Similarly to critical anthropomorphism, there can be value in zoomorphic descriptions of humanity, provided the terms employed are chosen carefully and with empathy for the described people.

The inevitable corollary of zoomorphism is that humans are treated “like animals,” although – as Timothy Morton argues – “animals are not ‘animals,’”¹⁸ that is, objectively speaking they exist beyond their culturally constructed equivalents; they exceed the homogeneous horizon of human denotations, and come in a multiplicity of species and intra-species varieties. The question is why, despite their heterogeneous abundance, animals are treated “like animals,” i.e., as a homogeneous category determined along typically human concepts.

Referring to the above question, in his “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” Derrida argues that the term “animal” is semantically not objective. On the contrary, it projects on actual animals some specific, culturally generated meanings that seldom have anything to do with real-life animals. He refers to such a process of linguistic (mis)representation of animals as *l’animot*. The etymology of the term involves the sound of the French plural for animals, *animaux*, and the French equivalent for “word,” which is *mot*, altogether implying a term which relates to animals *en masse*, as a group, repressing intraspecific differences between individual animals. Derrida provides the ensuing explanation:

Animal is a word that men have given themselves the right to give. These humans are found giving it to themselves, this word, but as if they had received it as an inheritance. They have given themselves the word in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept: “the Animal” [*l’animot*], they say.¹⁹

Accordingly, *l’animot* stands for “the plural of animals heard in the singular,”²⁰ or as he further claims, it is the denotation of animal “plurality [...] assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity.”²¹ Derrida renders the extent of mass homogenization of animals into one animal figure in the ensuing passage:

¹⁷ G. Garrard, op.cit., p. 161.

¹⁸ T. Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, London 2010, p. 41.

¹⁹ J. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*, “Critical Inquiry” Winter 2002, no. 2, p. 400.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 415.

²¹ Ibidem.

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'), [...] *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.²²

On the one hand, Derrida claims that the linguistic suppression of animal variety implies "asininity [*bêtise*]"²³ because it impoverishes language. On the other hand, it symptomizes a "continued and organized [and] veritable war of the species."²⁴ What he means is that the "immense multiplicity of other living things [...] cannot in any way be homogenized, except by means of violence and willful ignorance."²⁵ When we say that someone is "brave as a lion," we make one lion, or a linguistic designation of lions, a lion-signifier, stand for all the lions in the world. What we also do is to define all lions without exception as brave, even if lions have no concept of braveness. In Derrida's view, such a denial of singularity is a crime. He argues as follows:

The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures 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. Not a crime against animality precisely, but a crime of the first order against the animals, against animals.²⁶

According to Cary Wolfe, Derrida reiterates here his theory of animal politics, "carnophallogocentrism," which he discusses in "*Eating Well,*" or the *Calculation of the Subject*, and according to which the reason for suppressing animal singularity is to enable a "sacrificial structure" that allows for the transcendence of man by disavowing the animal, or the materialistically contingent, "in short the *différence*."²⁷ Katherine E. Young confirms Wolfe's idea by claiming that "'the animal' becomes a totalizing sign and fantasy, which effectively crushes real animal differences in order to uphold the authority or voice of the speaking subject."²⁸ It could thus be argued that the underlying logic of *l'animot* is the narcissistic drive of humans to confirm

²² Ibidem, p. 402.

²³ Ibidem, pp. 399–400.

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 399–400.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 416.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 416.

²⁷ C. Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, Chicago 2003, p. 66.

²⁸ K.E. Young, *Beastly Politics: Derrida, Animals, and the Political Economy of Meat*, "Spectra: The Aspect Journal" 2015, no. 2 [online], <<https://spectrajournal.org/SPECTRA/article/view/240/168>> [accessed 10.08.2016].

their dominating position, and at the same time to subdue the animal other by denying the subjectivity of its individual existence.

Crude zoomorphism seems to be based on the same principle; it reinforces the power of the dominating self by rendering the other as morally insignificant or condemnable. As the Rwanda example demonstrates, zoomorphism engenders violence to people by reducing their multidimensionality to simplistic and de-individualizing features, such as the despicableness of cockroaches. Accordingly, while zoomorphism dehumanizes people, it could be argued that *l'animot* de-animalizes animals. They both enact the sacrificial structure which, for one part, confirms the superiority of the dominating subject, and for the other, provides ground for the “non-criminal putting to death”²⁹ of the discriminated entity, as in the case of stock animals and Tutsis in 1994 Rwanda.

It is worth mentioning that the violence of zoomorphism is not only limited to the offensive comparisons of people to animals, but it also concerns positive uses of zoomorphic imagery. Admittedly, phrases such as “eager beaver” or “lion-hearted” reduce one’s complexity, they are generic and simplistic, even if positively meant. Zoomorphism, including its mild inflections, dehumanizes people by presenting them in crude, generic and de-individualizing categories otherwise employed to deny the moral considerability of animals.

Accordingly, zoomorphism means a denigration of people because it denies human transcendence, actualized through the homogenization of animal, by re-directing the logic of *l'animot* onto people. The rhetoric of *l'animot* is hence present both in the linguistic disavowal of animal heterogeneity as well as in zoomorphic descriptions of humans. It seems thus justified to claim that the beings most frequently zoomorphized are actual animals. Admittedly, *l'animot* could be deemed to be the logic of zoomorphizing both people and animals. This two-tier applicability of *l'animot* brings out Derrida’s ironic observation that, in philosophical tradition, he has not “noticed a protestation of *principle*, and especially a protestation of consequence against the general singular that is the *animal*.”³⁰ A lack of such protestation not only perpetuates the abuse of animals, but it also sanctions the dehumanizing reductivism of zoomorphism.³¹

The remaining question is whether anything can be done to counter the violence of *l'animot*. One of the possible remedies is avoidance of generaliza-

²⁹ J. Derrida, “*Eating Well*,” or *the Calculation of the Subject: An interview with Jacques Derrida*, in: *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. E. Cadava, P. Connor and J-L Nancy, New York and London 1991, p. 113.

³⁰ J. Derrida, *The Animal...*, p. 408.

³¹ Cf. C. Wolfe, *op.cit.*, p. 71.

tions and paying attention to individual beings, so that the gap between animals and their linguistic denotations does not escalate. As Garrard argues, we should appreciate “the proliferation of differences within the schema of unfixed hierarchies.”³² However, arguments advocating animal singularity, for example those campaigning for animal rights, prove considerably difficult, if not entirely unworkable, in the reality of factory farming, congeneric feedlots and mass slaughter. Paradoxically, a likely solution to the generic dissolution of animals can be found in anthropomorphism. There are people, for instance ardent pet owners, who approach animals as individuals; not only do they live and spend free time with their pets, but they also give them names, and even provide them with beauty treatment and specialistic health care. It can be claimed that in such cases animals are accorded their own distinctive identities; they are treated and frequently perceived as persons. While such attitudes need to be approached critically, it is still worth considering mild anthropomorphism as a solution, at least a partial one, to the de-individualizing rhetoric of *l’animot*. It can also be hoped that such a solution would help to reevaluate the zoomorphisation of humans.

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³² Garrard, op.cit., p. 150.

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