

A Report on the Animal Turn

*I*t has been over thirty years since Peter Singer introduced the term *speciesism* into philosophical parlance and wrote eloquently against a form of discrimination that went largely unnoticed both inside and outside academia. But while Singer has had enormous influence over the years in the area of animal rights, his effort to put the discrimination against non-human species on par with the prejudicial treatment and injustices caused by sexism or racism has had less success; the fight against speciesism has not had the same force in the academy, perhaps until now. In the past few years there has been an explosion of conferences, books, and discussion networks around the question of the animal. On the online discussion network H-Net Animal, a lively and heated discussion took place on the questions of what animal studies is, whether it is already or should become a new discipline, and if so, whether it should model itself on women's studies or ethnic studies. Such questions are both pertinent and misconceived. Women's studies and ethnic studies programs demanded that the academy acknowledge and address the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of groups of people under the forces of sexism and racism. This redress was

to be done not only by focusing on gaps and misrepresentations but also, and more important, by bringing the voices of women and minorities into the academy to write and represent themselves. The result was that previously marginalized or silenced groups were no longer to be confined to the status of object but would be subjects of representations; their voices were loud and demanded to be heard. How can that situation be comparable to animal studies? True, for centuries nonhuman animals have been locked in representations authored by humans, representations that, moreover, have justified their use and abuse by humans. But unlike in women's studies or ethnic studies, those who constitute the objects of animal studies cannot speak for themselves, or at least they cannot speak the languages that the academy recognizes as necessary for such self-representation. Must they then be forever condemned to the status of objects?

Many of those who have taken nonhuman animals as their objects of study over the past ten or fifteen years (if we think back to the founding of the Great Ape Project in 1993) have nevertheless worked to prove that a variety of animal species possess the basic capabilities deemed necessary for subjectivity: self-consciousness, rational agency, the capacity to learn and transmit language. Given a long tradition in Western philosophy that has declared the capacity for rational thought and its manifestation in language as that which distinguishes human from nonhuman animals, the proven ability of apes to learn and to teach sign language to other apes aims both to show that a God-given human-animal divide is untenable and to confirm Darwin's apparently still controversial view that humans and apes are not so different. For Peter Singer and Paola Cavalieri, who founded the Great Ape Project, such findings are at the base of efforts to include chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans into a "community of equals" with basic rights that must be protected by law ("Declaration" 4).

Alongside and sometimes against such attempts to bring (some) animals within the community of humans, an emerging facet of animal studies has increasingly questioned the justification for granting legal rights or protection to nonhuman animals on the grounds or to the extent that they are like humans. Influenced both by postmodern theory and by feminist and postcolonial critiques of the ways Western, educated Man has acted as the norm for what counts as human, recent discussions in animal studies have questioned to what extent our understanding of rights and protection are adequate for animals. Following feminists who have been critical of the way that the very notion of "women's rights" may reify a fictional identity of women as subordinate and thereby entrench women

within their subordination, one might ask how the notion of “animal rights” might similarly entrench animals within a falsely unifying idea of “the animal.” The inequities of rights discourse, whether for humans or for animals, seems inevitable, and just as a prejudicial definition of the human has been used to grant privileges to some while excluding others, so the notion of animal rights privileges a particular group of animals—those who can demonstrate a capacity for so-called rational agency—and leaves others unprotected.¹ In this way the question of the animal becomes an extension of those debates over identity and difference that have embroiled academic theory over the past quarter century. If animal studies have come of age, it is perhaps because nonhuman animals have become a limit case for theories of difference, otherness, and power.

But how do we bring animal difference into theory? Can animals speak? And if so, can they be read or heard? Such questions have deliberate echoes of the title of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s seminal essay in postcolonial theory, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” where she warns that the critical establishment’s attempt to give voice to dispossessed peoples will only result in their speaking the language of Western intellectuals or being further dependent upon Western intellectuals to speak for them. Her essay may serve as a warning to some who, for example, would try to teach apes to sign in order to have them tell humans what they want. Long before the existence of the Great Ape Project, the problematic was exposed in Franz Kafka’s 1919 story “A Report to an Academy.” Red Peter, the story’s narrator and protagonist, is presented as a representative of a minority or subaltern group: he is an ape. But the appropriateness of any of these designations is immediately brought into question as we learn that he is an ape turned human who has been singled out by the “academy” to give a report about his former life. Such a report, he admits, he is unable to give. His memory of his life as an ape has been erased as a result of his efforts to adopt the manners and language of his human captors. Instead, he can only describe the process and progress of his assimilation from the moment of his capture to his current success as an artistic performer who smokes, drinks red wine, and converses like an “average European.”

Language is at the core of Kafka’s critique of assimilation as a process that gives voice only by destroying the self that would speak. What is the self, Kafka’s story asks, that has no memory of its past and no means of representing it? Must that (animal) self be a blank page for others to write upon? Or might there be some other source of selfhood in his body, some physical locus where memory may be stored and known? While “A

Report to an Academy” is most often read as an allegory of German Jews in Prague, it illustrates the significance of a fundamental problematic of “the animal question”: how does one have access to “the animal”—whether the animal who has been “civilized” to exist in human society or the animals with whom we share the world? We might teach chimpanzees and gorillas to use sign language, but will that language enable them to speak of their animal lives or simply bring them to mimic (or ape) human values and viewpoints? Indeed, if they learn our language, will they still be animals?

Animal studies, in this regard, joins trauma studies both because of the violence done to animals and their habitats (what indeed has been called a genocide), and because of the difficulty of assessing how animals experience that violence.² Both raise questions about how one can give testimony to an experience that cannot be spoken or that may be distorted by speaking it. In Kafka’s story, Red Peter has learned to live and, more important, to speak as a human, but with the result that he has lost the ability to remember his former life as an ape. Language gives him access to knowledge that he was an ape, but it does not allow him to represent that life. Indeed, his “report” takes the place of that former life that exists only as an aporia, a knowledge lost along with that of his ape life. Wounded in his initial capture, it is by virtue of his own self-flagellation that he is able to learn to speak. His speech is thus a kind of post-traumatic expression, symptomatic of, if not a repetition of, that original wounding whose scars he readily displays even as he is unable to recall the events that led up to it.

Like trauma studies, animal studies thus stretches to the limit questions of language, of epistemology, and of ethics that have been raised in various ways by women’s studies or postcolonial studies: how to understand and give voice to others or to experiences that seem impervious to our means of understanding; how to attend to difference without appropriating or distorting it; how to hear and acknowledge what it may not be possible to say. In what follows, I want to trace the emergence of the “animal question” by focusing on three trends or moments in literary and critical theory for which the animal becomes a test or limit case: the linguistic turn, a counterlinguistic or affective turn, and the ethical turn. I will continue to make reference, along the way, to Kafka’s story, much as J. M. Coetzee’s feisty vegetarian protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, does in her lecture to an academic audience.⁵ I do so not because I feel like Red Peter, as Costello says she does, but because both she and Red Peter raise doubts about the efficacy of the academy for dealing with this question.

Must Animals Mean What Humans Say?

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, subjectivity is born of a fall from wholeness into sexual division and desire and marked by a fall into language.⁴ Language, as we see with Red Peter, irreparably splits the self between an experiential self and a speaking self who is never in the same place or time as the self that is to be represented. Compelled to speak, he inevitably fails, his speech becoming what might be read as a traumatic symptom. My point here is not to level traumas and equate the trauma of coming to language with the trauma of physical injury or of Red Peter's wound. Rather, I wish to set up two different projects within animal studies that revolve around the question of language. On the one hand are those who look to our nonhuman others with envy or admiration precisely because they remain outside language and thus suggest the possibility of unmediated experience. On the other are those who would prove that animals do indeed speak and can tell us, however imperfectly, of their lives, if not of their traumas. "If a lion could speak, we could not understand him," Wittgenstein wrote in a statement that, according to Cary Wolfe, could stand as an epigraph to debates of the last century regarding animals, language, and subjectivity (*Zoontologies* 1). Wittgenstein's remark stands as an ambiguous retort to Descartes, who, in his claim that speech marks a clear and infallible line of demarcation between humans and animals, warned "nor must we think, as did some of the ancients, that brutes talk although we do not understand their language" (qtd. in Regan and Singer 15). To do so would be to attribute some form of rational thought and hence a soul to animals, and thus, ultimately, to deny God. Since the late sixties and early seventies, however, research has proven both Descartes and Wittgenstein wrong (at least to the extent that lions can speak for animals in general) and affirmed (though not without contestation) that indeed, some animals can be taught to use language and can be understood. Washoe, a chimpanzee, was just the first of the great apes to be taught sign language and demonstrate that he could combine signs in new and even metaphorical ways. The research that Roger S. Fouts began with Washoe and Loulis was continued by Sue Savage-Rumbaugh and the bonobos, Kanzi and Panbanisha, at the Great Ape Trust in Iowa.⁵ Against the skepticism of linguists and scientists who said it was impossible, Savage-Rumbaugh showed that Kanzi and Panbanisha could indeed learn to use and to respond to full sentences and understand the demands of grammar as well as of signs. Moreover, she discovered, they would say

more when they had something to say and thus were not merely imitating. Kanzi used the keyboard more than 500 times the day he was separated from his mother, from which Savage-Rumbaugh concluded: “What I had to do is come up with an environment [. . .] world that would foster the acquisition of these lexical symbols in Kanzi and a greater understanding of spoken human language” (qtd. in Hamilton).

Savage-Rumbaugh’s research seemed to prove that these apes were not simply “reacting” to stimuli in the Cartesian sense in which animals can obey a fixed behavior, but “responding” to humans and to each other with an awareness of language and the world around them.⁶ Moreover, her research also raised new questions as to the relation between language and world and how one might affect rather than simply translate the other. In other words, her research made it imperative to ask whether language allowed Kanzi to express his thoughts or whether it replaced those thoughts with available and communicable signs. “He asked her for food. He asked her for affection. He asked her for help finding his mom” (qtd. in Hamilton).

Similar questions about language are raised by Irene Pepperberg’s research on her African Grey parrot, Alex. In her view, the linguistic deficiencies attributed to the parrot were more correctly deficiencies on the part of the researchers who had not figured out how to give him a reason to speak. “People used to think birds weren’t intelligent,” said Pepperberg. “[W]ell they used to think women weren’t intelligent either” (qtd. in Talbot 12). Much like Savage-Rumbaugh, Pepperberg saw language not as the putting together of sign and signified, but as a response to a social environment in which one is motivated to communicate either by imitating models or challenging rivals for food, affection, and attention. Alex’s last words to Pepperberg before he died were “I love you,” a simple phrase whose meaning has been debated as much as Alex’s ability to understand it. Were these words an indication of cognitive ability (response) or merely reactive imitation? The question, as Verlyn Klinkenborg made clear in a *New York Times* editorial, is not a question for animals alone. “To wonder what Alex recognized when he recognized words is also to wonder what humans recognize when we recognize words.” It is to wonder how recognition and response (or intention) are ever clearly distinct from imitation. When it comes to language, in other words, are we not all dependent upon a field of signification that precedes us, making it difficult to say that language itself is ever not imitative? How do we know what our lovers mean when they say “I love you”?

The alternative to language as imitation entails its own absurdities, as Wolfe suggests in recalling Wittgenstein. “What can it mean to imagine a language we cannot understand, spoken by a being who cannot speak?” (*Zoontologies* 1). The emphasis must be on our own impoverished capacities, Vicki Hearne reminds us, since Wittgenstein did not say that the lion could not speak, only that we could not understand him. A poet, philosopher, and animal trainer, Hearne adds, moreover, that Wittgenstein’s statement, like Descartes’s, has been used to evade the fundamental “tragedy of language,” a notion that she takes from Stanley Cavell. This is the tragedy that comes from acknowledging that there is another consciousness there, a consciousness we desperately desire to know through language, but that may remain impenetrable. Training, for Hearne, is a means to begin to penetrate that consciousness, but only to the extent that we humans can relinquish the stance of impenetrability that we claim for ourselves and with which we protect ourselves from being known by the animals we live with.

Hearne writes about animal training in a Cavellian mode, one that is full of tragedy as well as comedy and that is fundamentally about language, about “what it can be.” Language, in her view, is not a matter of attaching a sign to a signified. “If we describe the integrity of a language as the physical, intellectual and spiritual distance talking enables the speakers of that language to travel together, then it looks very much as though the dog and the horse have a greater command of language than chimpanzees do” (42). In other words, through training, dogs and horses are given tools for entering a relationship within which they can be said to speak, not merely to react. We may not always understand them, but it is imperative that we acknowledge that they may have things to say. Hearne gives the example of teaching dogs to track or follow a scent. Once they learn their job, they become much better at it than we humans could ever be because we can’t read or even find the scents that exist as signs for them and that they read. There is no question of imitation.

“What is linguistic in this relation?” asks Paul Patton of the training of horses. Despite Hearne’s insistence that training is a form of communication that depends on the capacities for language of dogs and horses, Patton, a professor of philosophy and a dressage rider, raises doubts about the coercive measures of training. “Both training and riding involve the exercise of power over the animal and, contrary to the view of many philosophers and trainers, relations of communication are not external but immanent to relations of power” (91). What this means is not

that power lies only on one side or the other of the relationship, but rather that horses and humans alike are subservient to patterns of semiosis that precede them—whether those signs be linguistic or somatic; whether they consist in words or in touch, pressure, and tone. Teaching dogs to track as well as training horses in dressage involves communication between beings who are “unequally endowed with capacities for language, for hearing and scent discrimination, or for movement and kinesthetic sensation. As a consequence, human-animal relations cannot be regarded as incomplete versions of human-human relations but must be regarded as complete versions of relations between different kinds of animals” (97). In such relations, the problem of language is less one of imitation than of translation.

Perhaps what is linguistic in training is that relations between different kinds of animals are like relations between humans. Training, like language, compels me to acknowledge that there is another phenomenal world or *Umwelt* (as ethologist Jakob von Uexküll called it), even as it reveals that our worlds (and our means of expressing them) are not commensurate. Training cannot give me your world, nor give you mine—although it may allow us to find a place of intersection between our worlds. Hearne’s writing on training illuminates the problem of skepticism that has been central to the linguistic turn even as it takes it a step further. For her, training necessitates skepticism regarding our knowledge of the other, and through this, our knowledge of the world. It also sheds light on the Cavellian skepticism that concerns what others (myself included) can know of me. Hearne writes that horses stand as a rebuke to our knowledge because they seem to know us better than we can ever know them. Cavell comments on this notion in an exchange with Hearne, where he writes that the horse “is a rebuke to our unreadiness to be understood [. . .] our will to remain obscure” (qtd. in Hearne 115). Here skepticism is revealed as a kind of crutch, a protection against that which may be unmediated and that we may fear as much as we disbelieve it is possible. We may know animals in ways they cannot—we may know their breeds, their color, their weight, their names, their “histories”—but they may also know us in ways that we cannot know because they know the world and us by other means. Thus Hearne agrees with Cavell that when it comes to dogs or horses (or perhaps chimpanzees and parrots), it is not that we are too skeptical (of their cognitive abilities, for instance), but that we are not skeptical enough of our skepticism and why we embrace it.

*Ineffable Animality and the
Counterlinguistic Turn*

If the linguistic turn insisted that we have no access to unmediated experience or knowledge but only to representations that are themselves fraught with linguistic and ideological baggage, the turn to animals can be seen as responding to a desire for a way out of this “prison-house of language.” It responds to a desire to know that there are beings or objects with ways of knowing and being that resist our flawed systems of language and who may know us and themselves in ways we can never discern.

The difficulty, of course, is discovering how and where to cite what is outside of our language. In fact, animal studies may be seen as both a culmination and turning away from poststructuralism’s insistence that there is no outside of language, or at least none available to us. Animals are at the very origin of our systems of representation. According to John Berger, animals like those drawn on the caves of Lascaux 17,000 years ago were our very first symbols (9). But insofar as language and the possibility for self-representation constitute that by which humans have distinguished themselves from nonhuman animals, we must ask whether our representations bridge or increase the distance between us and them, if not between us and the animals we are.⁷ In *The Postmodern Animal*, Steve Baker writes that there was no modern or modernist animal because pictures had to be about the act of picturing before they were anything else. “The animal is the first thing to be ruled out of modernism’s bounds” (20). In this sense, modernism is the precursor to poststructuralism’s representational cage, the insistence that representation can only refer to itself or to its specific linguistic or ideological system of meaning and that, consequently, any possibility of getting to the animal as animal is ruled out.

Such ruling out of the animal is also at the crux of Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy,” which can be read as an allegory of our entry into modernity through enlightenment and the concomitant loss of animality, a loss that has had regrettable results. This is one reason that Red Peter is quick to dissociate his liberation from his ape cage with freedom. “I fear that perhaps you do not quite understand what I mean by ‘way out.’ I use the expression in its fullest and most popular sense. I deliberately do not use the word ‘freedom’” (198). In “What Is Enlightenment?” Foucault points out that the term *way out* or *Ausgang* is the one Kant uses to define enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) as a negation or difference (34). Kant understands enlightenment as the process by which humans will escape

from their former subjection to despotic rule or irrational authority and find their rightful status as autonomous subjects. The state of subjection, in other words, is comparable to the status of animals or infants who must rely on others to make rational choices for them. For Kafka's Red Peter, however, escape from the state of animal is not to be regarded as the achievement of freedom or autonomy. Even as Red Peter describes his transformation as a "gradual enlightenment," the term indicates an alternative to the cage as a means of coercion and imposed conformity to the "way of humanity." "And so I learned things, gentlemen. Ah, one learns when one has to; one learns when one needs a way out; one learns at all costs. One stands over oneself with a whip, one flays oneself at the slightest opposition. My ape nature fled out of me, head over heels and away" (203). Condemned to be free as a human, Red Peter learns how to beat his ape self into obedience.

Kafka's story poses the question "At what cost enlightenment?" To the extent that the Enlightenment has, as Foucault suggests, "determined, at least in part, what we are, what we think, and what we do today" (32), must we not also wonder what it deterred us from thinking, what it made us leave behind or whip into submission? The turn to animals, in art as in theory, is an attempt to envision a different understanding of what we humans are and consequently to enlarge or change the possibilities for what we can think and what we can do in the world. The postmodern turn to animals that Baker explores in his book is part of this ongoing reassessment of Enlightenment ideals and a concurrent effort to give new definition to the human not as a being opposed to animals, but as animal. The project is similar to the literary and historical focus on the body over the last few decades—whether the body is understood as the inseparable support and interface of thought and language or as the material register or trace of experiences lived outside of or prior to language and interpretation, much like Red Peter's wound.

How to recuperate those experiences that may have been forgotten or repudiated has been the focus of recent historical writings concerned with traumatic events. In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben takes the phrase "the open wound that is my life" from Georges Bataille as a metaphor for the existential trauma of life caught in the caesura between human and animal, "the central emptiness, the hiatus that—within man—separates man and animal" (95). Inferring that efforts to articulate or locate that emptiness can only result in violence, Agamben asks that we "let it be" outside knowledge and "outside being." Similarly,

in *Sublime Historical Experience*, Dutch historian F. R. Ankersmit brings notions of trauma and the sublime together by virtue of their disruption of normal ways of understanding the world and our selves. To focus on the sublime is to recognize the dangerous inadequacy of our language for communicating experiences outside our consciousness, much as Red Peter realized that any human representation of his life as an ape would necessarily be a “misrepresentation.” But even though Red Peter has forgotten his former life and is unable to represent it, it must still be considered a part of who he is. “We are not only the past we (can) remember (as the historians [*sic*] have always argued),” writes Ankersmit, “but *also* the past we can *forget*” (333). The attention to the sublime, as Martin Jay describes it, is an attempt to access that lost or repressed experience that is outside of or prior to language and that might bring us to a “deeper reality” (257).

The privileging of a “sublime” disruption or disassociation of normal ways of knowing is central also to the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which have inspired a postmodern if not posthuman project in animal studies. Their notion of “becoming animal,” which they elaborate in *A Thousand Plateaus*, is an attempt to undo accepted and recognizable definitions of the human by replacing notions of exterior form and function with those of affects, intensities, and flows of movement as means to describe and value life. Their notion of experience as a tactile or visceral affair exceeds the possibilities of language to contain or identify it. This is because becoming “produces nothing but itself” (238). There is no identity or subject that precedes becoming, and no identity that a subject becomes. Hence, one cannot even be said to become *an* animal, one becomes “becoming.” Becoming animal is a creative rather than intellectual endeavor, and Deleuze and Guattari associate it with the writing or artistic process. “Either stop writing or write like a rat” (240), they write. Art’s purpose is to undo stable identity. The artist must be responsible to the ever-changing intensities of speeds and matter that are the life of a body.

It should come as no surprise that the author Deleuze and Guattari most associate with “becoming animal” is Kafka. They describe Kafka’s writing itself as a form of becoming where words are wrenched or uprooted from their meanings and turned into “deterritorialized sounds.” Thus, in reference to Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, they write:

Kafka deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification, no less than all designation. Metamorphosis is the

contrary of metaphor. There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the word. [. . .] The thing and other things are no longer anything but intensities overrun by deterritorialized sounds [. . .]. It is no longer a question of a resemblance between the comportment of an animal and that of a man [. . .]. The animal does not speak “like” a man but pulls from the language tonalities totally lacking in signification [. . .]. To make the sequences vibrate, to open the word onto unexpected internal intensities—in short, an asignifying intensive utilization of language. (Kafka 22)

Such privileging of becoming and the sublime are part of what can be called a counterlinguistic turn and effort either to lay claim to what lies outside language or to destroy language and the meaningful relations it enables.⁸ In contrast to Hearne’s attempts to found a community of humans and animals through the meaningful relations that language makes possible, Deleuze and Guattari want to free humans and animals from meaning altogether and thus undo the very identities that confirm a distinction between human and animal. For them, Kafka’s animals are unidentifiable creatures who effect upheavals of the human self, turning it into something it was not and could not conceive of. Indeed, in a theoretical move familiar to students of deconstruction, differences between animals and humans are displaced onto differences within the human: to deterritorialize is to become aware of the animal-otherness within the human.

Animals and the Ethical Turn

With Agamben, as with Deleuze and Guattari, theory’s concern for the animal moved quite a distance from questions of rights or even protection for animals. In both we find an attempt to locate what might be called a “postmodern sublime” in extreme experience that risks an aestheticization of trauma or, at the least, a denial of its effects on the flesh. Thus, what Deleuze and Guattari see as a liberatory plunge into animal difference, outside the confines of human signification and into a state of animality (like that of Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*), has, indeed, little to say about the actual animals we live with. Donna Haraway’s recent assessment is more than telling in this respect. Referring especially to their dismissal of domestic animals as figuring into ideas of

becoming, she writes, “I am not sure I can find in philosophy a clearer display of misogyny, fear of aging, incuriosity about animals, and horror at the ordinariness of flesh, here covered by the alibi of an anti-Oedipal and anticapitalist project” (*When Species Meet* 30). In a related vein, Dominick LaCapra warns against Agamben’s evasive fascination with a sublime abyss. Noting that Agamben “does not thematize the relation of his thought to trauma,” LaCapra does it for him: “One could redescribe Agamben’s ‘central emptiness’ as an insufficiently situated version of transhistorical, structural, or existential trauma that, in Agamben’s account, may well induce an evasion or misconstruction of specific historical, social and political problems, including the status and use of the animal in society” (*History* 170).

It is partly in reaction to the inability of such theories to deal with the concerns of live animals (including aging women) that animal studies is coming of age in conjunction with theory’s ethical turn. Animals are and should be of concern not only as instruments of theory, not only because they affect us, but because our lives also affect them. Ethics, in this respect, is not a concern for “the good.” We can no longer say with certainty what the good is. Nor does ethics refer only to a Foucaultian ethos or care of the self, although a mastery of the animal self or body is relevant. Rather, the ethical turn that has followed in the wake of deconstruction is an attempt to recognize and extend care to others while acknowledging that we may not know what the best form of care is for an other we cannot presume to know. It is a concern with and for alterity, especially insofar as alterity brings us to the limits of our own self-certainty and certainty about the world. This is an area that has brought animal and trauma studies together: we can recognize the serious harms rendered to victims of horrific acts, but we cannot count on those victims to tell us their stories or what to do about them.

Deconstruction has revealed the unstable foundations and false oppositions to “the animal” on which notions of the human have been built. But it has also made it difficult, if not impossible, to proceed from acts of representation to acts of engagement with others who are or have been oppressed in some way. Recent efforts to speak about that which is supposedly outside language and outside the discursive systems that determine experience as much as they may reflect it show that animal studies has turned away from deconstruction’s insistence that there is no *hors texte*. Some writers in the field, furthermore, would claim that this effort to attend to the ineffable is itself an ethical act. The dilemma is a

familiar one to feminist theorists who, faced with their own pronouncements that language is not only unstable but also patriarchal (and thus foreign to the expression of women's desires), nevertheless encouraged forms of writing that would point toward or imagine an "elsewhere" outside of language. Such a practice was associated with a practice of hearing otherwise and with a nonmastery of knowledge that was understood to be expressly ethical.⁹ Similarly, for some theorists of trauma, the opacity of traumatic events to representation is regarded as engendering new forms of testimonial, or in Cathy Caruth's terms, the "imperative of a speaking that awakens others" (108). Kelly Oliver writes of the act of witnessing as foundational to the experience of subjectivity as "the sense of agency and response-ability that are constituted in the infinite encounter with otherness, which is fundamentally ethical" (17).

More recently, attempts to articulate a posthuman (or posthumanist) ethics—ethics toward an unknowable or "incalculable" other—have made it imperative that we look beyond the Kantian foundations of the ethical in a human subject. The term *posthuman* first appeared in relation to the realm of informatics, where the "thinking life" is shared by humans and machines alike. As Katherine Hayles uses the term in her book, *How We Became Posthuman*, *posthuman* is a conglomerate of independent agents of information that can flow easily between human and machine. The very notion of artificial intelligence thus challenged the enlightenment view of the human as sole proprietor of consciousness and agency. Such dismantling of the enlightenment "human," furthermore, offered a new path for feminists like Haraway, who invoked the "cyborg" as a means of creating alliances between feminism and technology and of contesting entrenched dualisms of nature and culture that had been obstacles to imagining new, postmodernist, if not posthumanist, identities.

But what was also explicit, if underemphasized, in Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs" was the simultaneous critique of the boundary between human and animal and hence of the belief in human exceptionalism that it maintained. As Haraway moved her focus from cyborgs to dogs, so animal studies more generally has brought attention to a notion of the posthuman that acknowledges human animals as having coevolved with innumerable species without whom we would not be who we are and with whom we share our environments and its resources. As Barbara Herrnstein-Smith writes,

As “posthumanists,” we have begun to chart the costs and limits of the classic effort to maintain an essential species barrier and have sought to diminish those costs and to press against those limits in our own conceptual and other practices. The telos—aim or endpoint—of these developments is conceived here, however, not as the universal recognition of a single, comprehensive order of Nature or Being but, rather, as an increasingly rich and operative appreciation of our irreducibly multiple and variable, complexly valenced, infinitely reconfigurable relations with other animals, including each other. (15–16)

Animals, of course, have long been a focus of Haraway’s work, but it is only recently that she has turned from examining how the language of otherness has structured scientific research on animals to questioning what we can learn from our actual engagements *with* them. “Dogs are not surrogates for theory,” Haraway insists, “they are not here just to think with. They are here to live with” (*Companion* 5). And it is through both research on their evolutionary complexity and deep attention to their embodied capacities that Haraway seeks a model for relating to “significant otherness.”¹⁰ Such “ethical relating,” as she calls it, once again is said to demand a relation to what cannot be known or at least known in advance—their needs and capacities are not ours, even as they respond to ours.

In its focus on values of love or respect or achievement, Haraway’s language of training, like Hearne’s, has been criticized as overly anthropomorphic and anything but posthuman. But the turn to ethics in animal studies has brought a new focus on the notion of anthropomorphism, regarded not only as a problem but also as a potentially productive critical tool that has similarities to empathy within recent historical research. That anthropomorphism may have its place for rethinking human difference is the motivating idea in Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman’s collection of essays, *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*. “Before either animal individuality or subjectivity can be imagined, an animal must be singled out as a promising prospect for anthropomorphism,” Daston and Mitman write in their introduction (11). He or she must be seen as capable of pain and pleasure, as having his or her own affects and capacities.¹¹ On the one hand, as a process of identification, the urge to anthropomorphize the experience of another, like the urge to empathize with that experience, risks becoming a form of narcissistic projection that erases boundaries of difference. On the

other hand, as a feat of attention to another and of imagination regarding his or her perspective, it is what brings many of us to act on behalf of the perceived needs and desires of an other/animal.¹² Elizabeth Costello, the animal-defending title character of Coetzee's novel, calls it sympathy, but she means the same thing: it is the faculty that some poets have that "allows us to share at times the being of another" (79).

The term *critical empathy* that has arisen in trauma theory (and especially trauma related to the Holocaust) is relevant here. In her book *Empathic Vision*, Jill Bennett distinguishes critical empathy from the "crude" empathy that Brecht critiqued as overidentification. Critical empathy is a "conjunction of affect and critical awareness [that] may be understood to constitute the basis of an empathy grounded not in affinity (*feeling for* another insofar as we can imagine *being* that other) but on a *feeling for* another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible" (10). With this in mind, we might then want to call an ethical relating to animals (whether in theory or in art) "critical anthropomorphism" in the sense that we open ourselves to touch and be touched by others as fellow subjects and may imagine their pain, pleasure, and need in anthropomorphic terms but must stop short of believing that we can know their experience. In addition, critical anthropomorphism must begin with the acknowledgment that the irreducible difference that animals may represent for us is one that is also within us and within the term *human*. But which human are we allegedly projecting onto animals?¹⁵ When is anthropomorphism another form for zoomorphism?

The dangers of essentializing notions of the animal, and "the human" through those notions, is most emphatically addressed in the last essays of Jacques Derrida before his death. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, he denounces the phrase "the animal" as a "catch-all concept" used to "designate every living thing that is held not to be human" (31). Animals have been homogenized into a singular concept, he argues, through blindness to the differences that exist among animals as among humans. The question of "the animal" is a blind spot in philosophy, an unquestioned foundation upon which the notion of the human has been constructed. Writing against this tradition, Derrida writes of both the shame and the vulnerability he feels when looked at naked by his cat. "It has its point of view regarding me," he writes. "The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will have given me more food for thinking through this absolute alterity of the neighbor or of the next (-door) than the moments when I see myself naked under the gaze of a cat" (11). Derrida thus suggests

that the struggle for recognition, which from Hegel through Sartre is described as a struggle between men, might find its ultimate expression between a human and an (other) animal. Describing the other with the Levinassian term of *neighbor*, moreover, he qualifies that confrontation less as an adversarial struggle than an ethical one—an attempt to relate across unknowable distance. Thinking itself, Derrida says, begins in such moments when we see an animal look at us, see ourselves placed in the context of an other world, where living, speaking, dying, being mean otherwise.

“The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking, perhaps, begins there,” Derrida writes (29). Thinking begins in the space between the animal I am and am not—a space that is also at the foundation of thinking the ethical. Our very notion of ethical relating has been grounded in a humanism that gives permission to act unethically toward animals—sacrificing them as food, clothing, medicine. This is the ethical founded in an (often unacknowledged) notion of the human defined by its capacities: thought, reason, agency. And yet the notion of “what is proper to man”—whether it be language or consciousness or agency—has been and will continue to be shown as an illusory exclusivity, either because shared by some animals or not possessed by some humans. That is why Derrida shifts his attention from our capacities, whether in a Cartesian sense as language and reason or in a Deleuzean sense as affects and intensities, to focus on our shared vulnerabilities, our inabilities (*impouvoirs*). For a posthumanist ethics, Derrida returns to Jeremy Bentham’s question: “[I]t is not whether they can reason, but whether they suffer.” From this vantage point, the “industrial, scientific and technical violence” that is wrought upon nonhuman animals must change. “The relations between humans and animals *must* change” (Derrida and Roudinesco, *For What* 64).

Echoing Derrida, Wolfe writes, “[T]here can be no science of ethics [. . .] no ‘calculation’ of the subject whose ethical conduct is determined in a linear way by scientific discoveries about animals (or anything else)” (*Animal Rites* 190). Wolfe critiques the scientific but essentially humanist underpinnings of certain animal rights philosophy (such as the Great Ape Project) that would recognize the moral status of certain animals “not because of their wonder and uniqueness, not because of their difference, but because they are inferior versions of ourselves” (192). Posthumanist ethical relations, for Wolfe as for Derrida, cannot be grounded on rational principles or scientific measures of brain activity or capacity for language. In the domain of ethics, such normative rules, if not

incompatible with alterity, end up by privileging the alterity of the human and the human defined in ways that exclude some humans. As Wolfe deftly points out the stubborn humanism at the base of most efforts to extend ethical concepts to animals, he also senses a necessary double bind: the need to advocate certain principles of rights or protection with the knowledge of that faulty foundation. The only way to move beyond what could be called this “strategic ethics” (recalling feminism’s strategic essentialism) is not through any form of “becoming animal,” however, but on the contrary through an engagement with others through theory. Theory may reveal ethics as an essentially human duty, but only by constantly challenging our understanding of what it is to be human. “[M]y premise has been that maintaining a commitment to distinctly posthumanist ways of theorizing the questions at hand [. . .] will enhance our understanding of the embeddedness and entanglement of the ‘human’ in all that it is not, in all that used to be thought of as its opposites or its others” (*Animal Rites* 195).

This entanglement of human and nonhuman is what Derrida exposes in looking at his cat. It is not a denial of difference, by any means, but rather an attention to the construction of difference at the very foundation of the ethical. And this is true for the ethical difference itself. The ethical, like the animal, is a category of the human. Indeed, it is in the name of the human as an ethical animal and because of what the violence done to “the animal” does to the image of humanity that, Derrida says, change will come. Ethics, for Derrida, as for Kant and Levinas—perhaps the thinker most important for Derrida’s ethical thinking—is and remains one of the dividing lines between humans and animals. An animal *can* address us. But until a sense of disinterested obligation can be witnessed in and by animals, Derrida is not ready to relinquish an ethical decision as a human duty or to shift the ethical difference to the animal realm, for such would be to run the risks of the worst forms of biologism. “What I am saying is that we must not invoke the violence among animals, in the jungle or elsewhere, as a pretext for giving ourselves over to the worst forms of violence” (*For What* 73). The ethical imperative, then, for Derrida as for Haraway and Wolfe, is analysis of the very construction of the ethical, especially as ethics is used to configure the human as well as its animal other. We must always be vigilant of the ways our promotion of ethical treatment of animals can and has been used to discriminate among groups of humans, as well as how ethical treatment of humans is often performed at the expense of animals. But there can be no law of ethics. What is ethical depends upon situated contexts and knowledge. To

be ethical is to weigh incompatible needs and inevitable sufferings and come to a “least bad solution” (*For What* 76). Indeed, for Derrida, to be ethical is to take the risk of deciding the undecidable: “The difficulty of ethical responsibility is that the response cannot be formulated as a ‘yes or no’; that would be too simple. It is necessary to give a singular response, within a given context, and to take the risk of a decision by enduring the undecidable. In every case, there are two contradictory imperatives.”

Why animal studies now? It has become clear that the idea of “the animal”—instinctive beings with presumably no access to language, texts, or abstract thinking—has functioned as an unexamined foundation on which the idea of the human and hence the humanities have been built. It has also become clear, primarily through advances in a range of scientific studies of animal language, culture, and morality, that this exclusion has taken place on false grounds. As our improved understanding of animal lives and cultures changes, so must we change our view of the nature of the human and of the humanities. Thought, consciousness, and language are not the exclusive property of humans. Indeed, there is no shared consensus on what these properties consist in. From the perspective of theory, animal studies may have emerged only in time for its existence to be outdated. Much like the “women” in women’s studies, the “animal” in animal studies must be placed under erasure.¹⁴

And yet, even as the humanities may, as Wolfe suggests, be struggling to catch up with this “radical revaluation of nonhuman animals” (*Zoontologies* xi), recent theoretical reflections on the question of the animal suggest that scientific research cannot offer sufficient grounds on which to construct a postwomen, postanimal, or posthuman ethics. Perhaps in contrast to the sciences, much of contemporary theory gives value precisely to the ways animals resist our tools of analysis even as they succumb to our invasive and dominating need to know. “The animal question” has thus replaced the “woman question” (indeed, it is easier for many to contemplate animals as significant others rather than women) in coming to stand for what is incalculable—it points to an aporia in our reason and our knowledge—but also unavoidable in and for our lives.

“I am not appealing for any man’s verdict,” Red Peter says at the end of Kafka’s story. “I am only imparting knowledge, I am only making a report” (204). Speaking from a place of uncertainty, from a place that is neither wholly animal nor wholly human, Red Peter figures the space of theoretical investigation today. It is a space of productive inquiry but offers

no clear standard of how to measure progress. “Do not tell me that it was not worth the trouble,” Red Peter insists, realizing that the fate he escaped still claims the lives of others. He admits that he “cannot bear to see” the half-trained female chimpanzee who is brought to him for “comfort” in the evening, “for she has the insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal in her eye.” Looking at her, he sees the distance he has traveled, but he also recognizes her suffering—something “no one else sees.” Red Peter cannot deny the existence of animal suffering, but neither has he gained clear criteria for doing something about it. More critically, it would appear that his professional success, like his virility and, indeed, his humanity, depend on not acting upon that recognition and thus refusing kinship with the chimpanzee.¹⁵

In the wake of poststructuralist and postmodern decenterings that have displaced the human as a standard for knowledge, theory finds itself in a similar predicament. It cannot avoid seeing the animal suffering around us, but has contradictory foundations on which to judge the good or the right thing to do about it. Responding to an urgent call for concern, those of us working on “the animal question” may only be able, like Red Peter, to make a report, but hopefully such reports will enable us to make decisions (for that is our human prerogative and responsibility) that will, to the best of our imperfect and partial knowledge, enhance the lives of all animals, ourselves included.

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Notes

- 1 In her discussion of the concept of women’s rights, Wendy Brown writes that rights are founded on notions of individuality that “are predicated upon a humanism that routinely conceals its gendered, racial and sexual norms” (238).
- 2 On the problems of speech in relation to trauma, see Bernard-Donals and Glejzer; and LaCapra, *History* 59–89.
- 3 Costello’s identification with Red Peter is not, she says, to be taken ironically. Rather, the reader can assume that it comes from a common woundedness (as human and animal), one that makes it impossible for each to deliver the paper they were invited to give (Coetzee).
- 4 See my discussion of this point in Lacan in *Androgyny* 5–9.
- 5 On language acquisition in apes, see Gardner et al. and Savage-Rumbaugh.
- 6 *Reaction* and *response* are the terms that Lacan uses to oppose

- the language capabilities of animal and human, an opposition that Derrida begins to deconstruct. See esp. “And Say.”
- 7 For some, consciousness should be added to this list, especially if consciousness is understood to be coterminous or dependent upon conceptual or linguistic capacities—a belief much research on animals (as also on infants) would disprove.
- 8 For an excellent discussion of a counter or “postlinguistic” turn in literary studies and its relation to sublime/traumatic experience, see James Berger.
- 9 This is especially the case in the notion of *écriture* put forth by French feminists. See my discussion in “French Feminism.”
- 10 Like Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing*, Haraway’s ethics plays with the notion of response that is integral to ethical responsibility. Because animals have been denied the capacity to respond (rather than merely react), however, Haraway goes further to invoke Derrida’s questioning of whether we really
- know what it means to respond. See Haraway, *When*; and Derrida, “And Say.”
- 11 I use gendered pronouns to acknowledge that animals also have sexes and sexualities, if not genders.
- 12 Lorraine Daston’s research would appear to counter Samuel Moyn’s argument that empathy is grounded on humanism and necessarily takes humanity as its object. See Moyn.
- 13 Thanks to Ellen Rooney for helping me think through some of these issues.
- 14 For an alternative discussion regarding the value of how animal studies may productively inform women’s studies in the classroom, see Gruen and Weil.
- 15 What we search for, as Herrnstein-Smith writes, is an “ethical taxonomy” that would help sort out the claims of kinship, along with other categories of sameness and difference, for establishing our responsibilities to others. See Herrnstein-Smith 2.

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