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Reconsidering Animals: Derrida and Haraway

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1. Introduction

In everyday life we usually distinguish animals from human beings, but how are they different? Animal studies show us that there are important similarities between animals and humans. Focusing just on sociality or the ability to communicate, for example, it seems impossible to determine the difference between them. How should we conceive the difference — by means of some kind of taxonomical classification, or by means of sympathetic observation?

In this short article, I try to find a better way to argue a question of animals by comparing different approaches. As a philosophical investigation I choose the later works of Derrida, because he discussed the problem about animals from a metaphysical point of view. In his thought, even classifying a creature as a human or an animal would be problematic, since it is difficult to say that we surely know what it is to be a human or an animal. Another approach I want to discuss here is Haraway's work, because she criticized him from a scientist's point of view. Both showed attractive discussions, however, we have to reconsider their way of treating animals because of the difficulty of arguing the problem about animals¹.

2. Haraway's critique of Derrida

In her book *When species meet* (WSM), Haraway suggests the perspective of the shared worldly existence of humans and animals – human and non-human beings affect each other, and reproduce their mutual relationship repeatedly. In her argument she mentions Derrida's "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)"² (AT) as a key text in her inquiry. We can summarize her critical remarks in the following two major points.

2.1. The experience of shame

Derrida described his experience of encountering his cat in his room. Exposed to his cat's gaze, wearing no clothes, he felt ashamed³. He noticed that animals "wouldn't be naked because they are naked" (AT 373); and to that he added: "no animal has ever thought to dress itself." According to Haraway, Derrida's experience and its description are anthropocentric and do not take the perspective of "animal behavioral scientists" (WSM 21) into account; and therefore, "he was sidetracked by his textual canon of Western philosophy and literature and by his own linked worries about being naked in front of his cat" (WSM 20).

2.2. The Otherness of animals

An element in Derrida's approach that Haraway approved of is his recognition of animals as "Others" or of the "absolute alterity"⁴ of animals: "Unlike Emmanuel Lévinas, Derrida, to his credit, recognized in his small cat 'the absolute alterity of the neighbor'" (WSM 23). Nevertheless, she concluded

¹. Nowadays we can consult for important studies about animals. One of the major works is Élisabeth de Fontenay's famous book, *Le Silence des bêtes. La philosophie à l'épreuve de l'animalité*. Though these studies help us to think about this problem, human-animal relationship seems to remain unsolved.

². This article was firstly delivered as a lecture at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1997, and after his death, published as a book from Galilée in 2006.

³. "I often ask myself, just to see, who I am-and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment."(AT 372)

⁴. "The animal is there before me, there close to me, there in front of me-I who am (following) after it. And also, therefore, since it is before me, it is behind me. It

that Derrida failed to notice the meaning of his experience. Derrida was not interested in “delving into the developing knowledges of both cat–cat and cat–human behavioral semiotics when species meet” (WSM 22). According to her, he could have learned about animal behavior from his experience, if he wanted to know about “what this cat on this morning cared about” (ibid.). Instead of paying attention to this scientific approach, “he concentrated on his shame in being naked before this cat”, and consequently, Derrida missed the chance of gaining another perspective: “Incurious, he missed a possible invitation, a possible introduction to other-worlding” (WSM 20).

2.3. The background of Haraway’s critique

When Haraway thinks about animals, she thinks about them as one of our “companion species.” With this term she expresses their status as partners of human beings. She thinks humans and animals are able to communicate in some limited way through gestures or oral signals: “We have had forbidden conversation; we have had oral intercourse; we are bound in telling story on story with nothing but the facts. We are training each other in acts of communication we barely understand. We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh” (WSM 16).

3. Examining Derrida’s argument about animals

Haraway summarized Derrida’s writing very clearly, but this simple view becomes insufficient if we try to consider the philosophical context. In the enlightening article “How does the deconstruction start bio-politics” , Yusuke Miyazaki⁵ pointed out the importance of the dialogue between Derrida

surrounds me. And from the vantage of this being-there-before-me it can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also-something that philosophy perhaps forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself-it can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbor than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat.”(AT 380)

⁵ in: *Gendai-Shiso* (『現代思想』), Vol. 37, No. 8, pp. 142-155 (2009), Seido-sha. (宮崎裕助「脱構築はいかにして生政治を開始するか」)

and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow (FWT)*, in which he expressed his views on the philosophy of the animal. Additionally, to understand Derrida's aims, we have to investigate the neologism "animot" he uses in his argument about animals.

3.1 On the limit between animals and humans

When Derrida hesitates to form a single boundary between animals and humans, that does not mean that he wants to identify animals with humans, but rather, he hopes to reconsider the many differences between all living beings:

If I am unsatisfied with the notion of a border between two homogeneous species, man on one side and the animal on the other, it is not in order to claim, stupidly, that there is no limit between "animals" and "man"; it is because I maintain that there is more than one limit, that there are many limits. (FWT 66)

This point of view does not seem to contradict with Haraway's. She similarly points out that there are "mundane differences" instead of "Great Divides" (WSM 15) between human and non-human beings. Derrida rejects the homogeneity of living beings and Haraway rejects "The Great Divides" between them.

3.2 Three meanings of Derrida's key word "animot"

In order to understand Derrida's argument, we need to understand why he introduces a new word "animot". This neologism, he maintains, contains "three heterogeneous elements."

(1) "Animot" captures a complex entity in a single word. The word "animot" is pronounced the same as "animaux", the plural of "animal" in French. Therefore, despite its grammatical singularity, the word "animot" also expresses the plurality of what it refers to. Derrida suggests that we should understand life as being complex and that this is expressed in the word in this way. "I would like to have the plural of animals heard in the singular. There is no animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single indivisible limit. We have to envisage the existence of 'living creatures' whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an

animality that is simply opposed to humanity” (AT 415).

(2) The neologism “animot” is explicitly a “word” (the French noun “mot” means “word”). Like any other word, “animot” attempts to refer to an entity which is limited by some boundaries. “The suffix mot in l’animot should bring us back to the word, namely, to the word named a noun [*nommé nom*]. It opens onto the referential experience of the thing as such, as what it is in its being, and therefore to the reference point by means of which one has always sought to draw the limit” (AT 416). If we have no words for heterogeneous living beings expressing their many differences, we have no way to discuss their different existences. Derrida’s point, however, is not the homogeneity of species, which he rejects, but the relativization of their differences and of the boundaries drawn between species by words.

(3) Furthermore, we have no adequate name for such entities, and Derrida’s neologism seems to be provisional. “It would not be a matter of ‘giving speech back’ to animals but perhaps of acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, as something other than a privation” (ibid.).

3.3 The question of the animal itself

It was already shown above that Derrida hesitates to draw a boundary between animals and humans. Consequently, we can not know with certainty what it means to be human, or to be animal: “The animal in general, what is it? What does that mean? Who is it? To what does that ‘it’ correspond? To whom? Who responds to whom? Who responds in and to the common, general and singular name of what they thus blithely call the ‘animal?’” (AT 418).

4. Conclusion

In her depiction of human and animal life as being mutually entangled, Haraway’s point of view seems to resemble Derrida’s. Derrida stresses the many differences among living beings. Haraway writes: “Figures are not representations or didactic illustrations, but rather material–semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another. For me, figures have always been where the biological and literary or artistic come

together with all of the force of lived reality. My body itself is just such a figure, literally” (WSM 4).

However, there is a point of disagreement between their views. While Derrida emphasizes the shame engendered by a face-to-face relation, Haraway prefers the attitude of “scientists”: “Good scientists were those who, learning to be invisible themselves, could see the scene of nature close up, as if through a peephole. The scientists could query but not be queried” (WSM 24). In this way of approaching the issue, Haraway seems to have made use of the distinction between the observer and the observed, but neglects to question her own presuppositions. Although she admits that animals are the “companion species” of human beings, she depends on classifications made by natural history. Are these classifications justifiable in a discussion on the relation between humans and animals? It seems that her method and argument depend on a prior acceptance of the definition of boundaries between species.

If we want to consider the relation between human and animals, it is important to approach the issue philosophically. Derrida showed an attractive, but difficult way of questioning what it is to be human or animal. Perhaps his experience of shame is too private, but his method of investigation is not restricted to the personal or private sphere. In the perplexity he felt in nakedly encountering his cat, he became aware not just of the uncertainty of the boundary between humans and animals, but also of the characterization of being human or animal itself. His neologism “animot” suggests that we should consider the relation between humans and animals in a new way.

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