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Derrida's Theological Approach to the Question of the Animal

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I. Introduction

In this short article we attempt to clarify Derrida's approach to the philosophical problem of the human–animal relationship. This problem appears in many places in his later works and is approached from different angles, which makes it difficult to summarize it as a single approach or strategy. Because of this, it is no surprise that Derrida's work came to play a central role in human–animal studies (Calarco 2008, 2), but the relative lack of attention to the link between the problems of the animal and that of theology or religiosity in Derrida's writings is an odd omission therein. In the following, we will explain why this link is essential for a better understanding of Derrida's approach to the problem of the animal.

II. “tout autre” and animal

An important reference to the animal in Derrida's work can be found in the famous dialogue with Roudinesco, “Violence against animals” (Derrida 2004). In this interview, Derrida expresses his dissatisfaction with the notion of a boundary between human and animal (Derrida 2004, 66). Of course, he did not intend to identify humans as animal, but rather he argued “that there

are many limits” among creatures. There are so many differences and possible boundaries between humans, between animals, and between humans and animals, that is difficult to conceive of a clear, single human–animal boundary.

The fact that Derrida considers these many differences between creatures important suggests that his mention of the animal is just one of his examples of such differences. In support of this interpretation, Derrida does not just recognize the alterity of other human beings, but also of non-human beings. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida takes animals into account in his argument that “tout autre est tout autre.” This phrase can be translated as “every other is completely other,” but this translation does not fully express Derrida’s intention. Derrida mentions others as “singularities”: “These singularities represent others, a wholly other form of alterity one other or some other persons, but also places, animals, languages” (Derrida 1995, 71). Hence, Derrida’s concept of “the other” does not just refer to human beings we encounter, but also to non-human beings, such as animals or places.

III. The problem of religion in Derrida

Derrida mentions the animal as one of the examples of “tout autre,” the radically other, but if we further explore this notion of otherness, then a difficult problem arises: “tout autre” cannot be determined or defined because it is *completely* other, beyond any categorization or classification. Nevertheless, to some extent the concept can, and must be circumscribed, as Caputo¹ observed, given that Derrida himself elucidated it as a “totally, absolutely, radically, infinitely other” (Derrida 1995, 82). However, this elucidation seems to be incompatible with the aforementioned examples of other persons, places, animals, and languages. Furthermore, Derrida refers to God in his explanation of “tout autre”: “In one case God is defined as infinitely other, as wholly other, every bit other. In the other case it is declared that

¹ “Everything about deconstruction requires that we let the tout autre tremble in undecidability, in an endless, open-ended, indeterminable, undecidable translatability, or substitutability, or exemplarity, where we are at a loss to say what is an example of what, what is a translation of what.” (Caputo 1997, 25)

every other one, each of the other, is God inasmuch as he or she is, like God, wholly other" (Derrida 1995, 87). In our opinion, the incompatibility with Derrida's explanation is only apparent, however, because the examples given still have an irreducible alterity even after categorization or classification.

When Derrida explains "tout autre" as an irreducible alterity, his argument has religious implications. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida interprets Abraham's experience. This apparent religious aspect of Derrida's later writings led to some controversy among interpreters. For example, according to Caputo, Derrida's methodology of deconstruction is similar to the religious experience: "Deconstruction repeats the structure of religious, i.e., of a specifically biblical, covenantal, Abrahamic experience" (Caputo 1997, xxi). We should consider the meaning of "religion" and religiosity in this context, however. Caputo's interpretation is partly based on Derrida's text. He writes: "By religion I mean a pact with the impossible, a covenant with the unrepresentable, a promise made by the tout autre with its people" (Caputo 1997, xx).

After publication of Caputo's book, Derrida provided some explanation about his notion of "religion" in *Faith and Knowledge*. In this book, Derrida focuses on the root of the word "religion," "religio," and on the difficulty of translating that root. While in European languages, the word "religion" seems to have the same meaning, the identity of this word is based on a hypothetical possibility. "We met, thus, at Capri, we Europeans, assigned to languages (Italian, Spanish, German, French) in which the same word, religion, should mean, or so we thought, the same thing (Derrida 2001, 70)". Although Derrida is hesitant to claim that "religion" has a single meaning, he suggests a correspondence between "religion" and the act of promising.

And what if *religio* remained untranslatable? No *religio* without *sacramentum*, without alliance and promise of testifying truthfully to the truth, which is to say, to speak the truth: that is to say, to begin with, no religion without the promise of keeping one's promise to tell the truth--and to have already told it!--in the very act of promising. To have already told it, *veritas*, in Latin, and thus to consider it told. The event to come has already taken place. The promise promises *itself*, it is *already* promised, that is the sworn faith, the given word, and hence the response. *Religio*

would begin there (Derrida 2001, 67).

Derrida's explanation reveals a flaw in Caputo's interpretation. Derrida connects religion with the act of promising, and we can understand the act of promising, and let it play its part in our lives, without any reference to a "biblical" or "Abrahamic experience." Even though we can say that deconstruction is related to Derrida's notion of "religion", it is not related to religion in a "biblical" (Caputo 1997, xxi) sense.

There is, moreover, another interpretation of Derrida's notion of "religion" that focuses less on the role of religion in deconstruction. In *Radical Atheism*, Häglund raises an objection against Caputo's interpretation: "My refutation of religious readings of Derrida will focus mainly on Caputo, not only because of his influence but also because he goes as far as possible in attempting to make deconstruction compatible with religion" (Häglund 2008, 116).² Häglund argues that a religious reading of Derrida is untenable because Derrida considers religion to be a universal structure of experience, which he rejects (Häglund 2008, 135). Given that Derrida takes faith to be universal, this argument seems to correspond with his ideas indeed. The universality of faith was explained by Derrida in a conference organized by Caputo.

What are you doing when you attest to something? You address the other and ask, "believe me." Even if you are lying, even in a perjury, you are addressing the other and asking the other to trust you. This "trust me, I am speaking to you" is of the order of faith, a faith that cannot be reduced to a theoretical statement, to a determinative judgment; it is the opening of the address to the other. So this faith is not religious, strictly speaking; at least it cannot be totally determined by a given religion. That is why this faith is absolutely universal (Caputo 1997 [2], 22).

² Häglund's "radical atheism" is based on mortality: "As Derrida strikingly puts it, one cannot love without the experience of finitude. This is the premise from which radical atheism necessarily follows. If one cannot love anything except the mortal, it follows that one cannot love God, since God does not exhibit the mortality that makes something desirable. The absolute being of God is not only unattainable but undesirable, since it would annul the mortality that is integral to whatever one desires." (Häglund 2008, 111)

It should be noticed that according to this quote, not only a “given religion” can determine the character of faith, and therefore, that the concept of religiosity itself is not rejected here. Because of that, in so far that Häglund stresses the universality of faith in deconstruction, we can agree with his argument, but if he attempts to completely remove the religious aspect from Derrida’s thought, we have to disagree.

IV. Conclusion

Through an examination of the debate between Caputo and Häglund, we can get a better understanding of the religious aspect of Derrida’s writings. The concept of “religion” therein cannot be reduced to “a given religion.” Rather, Derrida suggests that religious experience plays a role in our lives apart from organized, given religion. He called this kind of experience “sacrifice.”

By preferring my work, simply by giving it my time and attention, by preferring my activity as a citizen or as a professional and professional philosopher, writing and speaking here in a public language, French in my case, I am perhaps fulfilling my duty. But I am sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligations: my obligations to the other others whom I know or don’t know, the billions of my fellows (without mentioning the animals that are even more other others than my fellows), my fellows who are dying of starvation or sickness (Derrida 1995, 69).

Even a preference for a single language for any occasion can indicate an exclusion of other languages: to select one language means to abandon using other languages. At any time we are subject to the experience of “sacrifice” by preferring and selecting something rather than something other, with or without any influence of some “given religion”. We cannot respond to a request from some other “without sacrificing the other other” (Derrida 1995, 68). Because only the consideration of others causes self-awareness about the sacrificing of others, and because Derrida calls the other “God” (1995, 87), his approach to otherness can be understood as a religious or theological approach (in Derrida’s sense of “religion”). Even if the concept of “sac-

rice” is derived from “given religion”, the scope of the concept extends beyond that.

In Derrida’s writings, animals are treated as an example of “tout autre.” At any time we sacrifice others: other persons, other languages, other animals. Derrida’s exposition of the structure of “sacrifice” helps us to understand the ubiquity of sacrifice. This is not an anthropocentric view because we could respect animals more than other people. Derrida gives the example of his cat as involving unjustifiable sacrifices, but really all sacrifices are unjustifiable: “How would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every morning for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant? Not to mention other people?” (Derrida 1995, 71) This quote does not imply an animal-centered view either: there is no hierarchy of creatures involved in Derrida’s description of the structure of “sacrifice.”

The investigation of “tout autre” suggests that there are many kinds of otherness or alterity: God, other persons, other languages, animals. Although these examples are not identical, combining some of them, Derrida coined a new term “divinamilitality” (Derrida 2008, 132) from “divine” and “animality,” which reaffirms the link between theology and the problem of the animal in his work.

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