

Identity, Difference, Indistinction

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THE PAST FEW DECADES HAVE GIVEN RISE TO A WIDE VARIETY OF APPROACHES to theoretical and practical discourse concerning animals. In this paper, I focus on three important but rather distinct approaches that have emerged in this period, all of which would have us fundamentally reconsider the ontological, ethical, and political issues surrounding animal life and the human/animal distinction. I seek to take critical account of two of these chief discourses (which I approach under the rubrics of *identity* and *difference*) while also aiming to give some additional form and content to an emerging third approach (which I label *indistinction*). My aim in what follows is neither to eliminate the first two approaches in favor of the third, nor is it to establish a dialectic in which the first two approaches are subsumed in a third, higher form. Rather, I examine all three of these modes of thought and practice with an eye toward their transformative potential for struggles for justice involving animal life and human-animal relations, underscoring their respective promises and limits while at the same time suggesting the need for increased

attention to those discourses and practices examined under the rubric of indistinction.

1. IDENTITY

The most widely discussed approach of the views under consideration here is what I will call the identity-based approach. Philosophers and theorists influenced by this approach seek to establish a relevantly similar moral identity between human beings and animals most often through a rigorous application of Darwinian ontology on the one hand and normative impartiality on the other. The first move is characterized by an unflinching insistence on enduring what Freud called the biological trauma suffered by human narcissism, which is to say, the shock that follows full recognition and acceptance of the Darwinian account of the biological and natural account of the human species and its fundamental relatedness to other animal species.¹ The second move is simply the consequence of taking the Darwinian ontological standpoint seriously in the normative domain. Inasmuch as the principle of impartiality requires the rational moral agent to extend equal moral consideration to all beings who have interests—irrespective of their physical or emotional distance from the agent, and irrespective of any lack of shared characteristics that are morally irrelevant (say differences in cognitive ability, race, or gender)—the rational moral agent has to disavow the species barrier as a persuasive reason for not extending full moral consideration to nonhuman animals. Species differences only mark differences in degree rather than kind when we look at the interests of individuals in certain non-human animal species.

This general theoretical approach of combining a naturalistic ontology with normative impartiality gets fleshed out differently depending upon the normative framework under consideration. In the case of consequentialist accounts of animal liberation, such as one finds in Peter Singer's work (1990), emphasis is placed upon the shared sentience and shared capacity for having preferences that we find among humans and animals. In the deontological approach of philosophers such as Tom Regan (1983), the focus is placed on the shared subjectivity of animals and humans and the manner in which

having such subjectivity entails being granted inherent, noninstrumental value. Variations on this logic of establishing a relevantly similar moral identity between humans and animals can be found in the writings of animal ethicists working in nearly every major ethical tradition in analytic normative theory, including social contract theory, virtue ethics and its variants, and classical and neo-Kantianism.

There is considerable merit to this identity-based discourse and theoretical approach. First, and foremost to its credit, it has directly and indirectly inspired a variety of new practices and forms of resistance aimed at granting basic ethical respect to nonhuman animals. By emphasizing the basic moral identity and equality of human beings and animals, this approach challenges the ethical dogmatic slumber of the status quo and calls for a fundamental rethinking of a whole host of human activities that impact animals in negative and harmful ways. Much as the Marxist critique of capitalism exposes the hidden abode of social production behind the commodity, these approaches to thinking about animals help to expose the hidden harms and consequences that lie behind the speciesist practices and institutions of the dominant society.

In addition to such ethical and practical innovations, there are a number of important intellectual “advances” that have simultaneously emerged within this discourse. The most important among such advances, I would suggest, is the effort to be especially critical and vigilant about any attempts to draw sharp, clean, binary distinctions at the ontological level between the human species and nonhuman animal species. Resulting in large part from the emergence of these discourses and struggles for justice for animals, the reductive and simplistic human/animal binaries that have plagued the Western intellectual and philosophical traditions for much of their existence can no longer be promoted or maintained in good intellectual conscience. Thinking from within this space of critical vigilance teaches us to cast a suspicious glance at any and all efforts to reestablish binary and hierarchical distinctions between human and nonhuman animals, and helps to warn us of the possibly pernicious effects of enacting this kind of ontology.

And yet, despite some of the merits of identity-based approaches to animal issues, they have remained seriously limited by their subtle

pointlectual, antipractical biases. In philosophical circles especially, the dominant trend among animal ethicists has been to move increasingly away from direct struggles for social and political transformation and increasingly inward upon the normative foundations of the respective theories (utilitarian, rights-based, social contract, and so on) to examine their internal rigor, coherence, and consistency. That such discourse has little to offer in the way of transformative or political progress should go without saying; as such, it has rendered much of the more recent work in analytic ethics irrelevant both to social justice struggles for animals as well as to emergent work in critical animal studies.

And even when identity-based approaches to animal ethics are brought to bear more directly on social transformation, because of the atomistic-individualistic underpinnings of contemporary normative theory, questions surrounding animals end up being cast primarily in *moral* terms that revolve around personal responsibility and individual consumer-based market solutions. Thus, rather than seeking to build alternative forms of community with and alongside the nonhuman world through socioeconomic, cognitive, political, and aesthetic transformation, animal liberation and animal rights activists are encouraged by this discourse to look for transformations through the adoption of conscious consumerism and incremental changes in policy and legislation. Given (a) the overwhelming magnitude of the current disasters that run through various animal industries and human-animal interactions (and here I have in mind everything from slaughtering animals and experimentation to loss of biodiversity and animal habitat), and (b) the manifest failures of far more prominent and influential related movements for consumer and legislative change (such as we find with contemporary environmentalism), one can only believe that such an approach is *at best* but one small plank in a program that contains a much broader vision and strategy for transformation.

There are also more subtle problems with identity-based approaches that typically remain hidden from view because of certain biases and dogmas that are inherent in this kind of philosophical and intellectual work. Here I would like to address two such dogmatic limitations, namely, a stubborn form of *logocentrism* and a persistent *anthropocentrism*.

With regard to the first issue, that of logocentrism, or placing the human *logos* (reason, speech, knowledge, self-presence, and so on) at the center of thought and practice, it would be unfair to say that identity-based approaches to animal ethics are naively logocentric. These philosophers have done much to demonstrate that traditional boundaries drawn between human beings and animals based on humans having *logos* and animals lacking it are deeply questionable. However, this partial contestation of logocentrism leaves unexamined a more subtle and seemingly intractable form of logocentrism that places a uniquely human *logos* at the ground of both (a) ethical encounters with animals as well as (b) the development of the philosophies that develop the implications of such encounters. As such, there is an insistence among these theorists and activists that the ground of ethical transformation lies in a certain rational, reflective understanding of ethics, and that the primary motive for fighting for justice on behalf of animals comes down to *reasons*, that is, to the neutral, rational, and consistent extension and application of human-centered norms to nonhuman animals that are relevantly morally similar. This approach moves the ethical encounter with animals themselves out of the realm of bodily or affective relation and into the space of neutral rationality. Although I would not wish to deny that rational argumentation is capable of having transformative ethical force, it would be implausible to believe that the vast majority of activists and theorists who struggle on behalf of animals are moved at bottom by the consideration of reasons, theory, and reflection alone.

The subtle forms of anthropocentrism that pervade identity-based ethics are more difficult to discern but are exceedingly important to note and track in terms of the effects and constraints they place on thought and practice. Related to the point just developed concerning the privilege of logocentrism in ethical discourse, there is a way in which (what are taken to be) quintessentially human traits such as the capacity for *logos* ground considerations of the scope of moral status. What I am referring to here are the ways in which (what are taken to be) quintessentially human traits form the basis on which moral consideration is or is not extended to a given individual being or group of beings. In the context of animal ethics, this kind of anthropocentric extensionism takes the form of granting ethical priority to animals

that resemble human beings in morally relevant ways, while denigrating or giving subordinate status to those animals who do not “properly” resemble human beings. As an illustration of this point, consider that animals who display superior language skills, intelligence, a heightened sense of subjectivity, awareness and maintenance of familial bonds, and so forth are the ones for whom struggles are most often waged for full moral standing, full status as legal subjects, strong habitat protections, and so on.

One of the chief reasons for the persistence of this kind of prejudice in mainstream animal ethics and activism is that the problem against which these groups should be fighting and beyond which new modes of thought and practice should be created has been misnamed and misunderstood. Early on, identity-based theorists argued that the problem was *speciesism*, understood as a dogmatic preference in favor of the moral priority of our own species. And inasmuch as animal ethicists were willing to extend moral status beyond the confines of our species to other species, then they could view themselves as being nonspeciesist and hence no longer limited by the old dogmas and limitations that have plagued Western (and not just Western, of course) ethical thought.

But the real problem here, I want to insist, is not speciesism but *anthropocentrism*, understood as the privileging of that class of beings who best fulfill a conception of what is considered to be quintessentially human over and against all nonhuman others. In the historical development of Western culture and its chief legal, social, ethical, and economic institutions and discourses, it is clear that the space of privilege secured for “the human” has *never* coincided with the boundary of the human species (which is to say, we’ve never really been speciesists). Rather, our discourses and institutions—even those deemed to be the most progressive and inclusive—have been consistent with and even grounded in the exclusion of vast numbers of beings who would today be considered “paradigm” members of the human species. Western culture has consistently rotated around a space and a center that was reserved for “the human” and that was always intended selectively to bring within its orbit only those beings who fit a relatively narrow set of criteria for inclusion in the circle of humanity proper (standard among such criteria being subjectivity, higher-order rationality and intelligence, moral agency, and so on). Thus, when

animal ethicists seek to extend ethics to animals based on one or another of these traits that are deemed to be quintessentially human (but that turn out upon closer examination often to exist among certain animals), they are in fact *extending this same logic and practice of anthropocentrism*. And whereas animal ethicists may in fact be contesting a certain kind of speciesism, the fundamental logic and structure of the problem they are battling is operating in an altogether different, anthropocentric register that they not only fail to notice but actually reinforce and expand.²

When identity-based approaches to animal ethics are viewed from this angle, it becomes immediately clear why struggles for justice for animals based on this approach have been alienated from other radical struggles that contest anthropocentrism, such as militant forms of environmentalism and other minoritarian struggles. In the case of deep and militant forms of environmentalism, we find attempts to extend direct ethical consideration not only to human and animal beings but to various life forms, ecosystems, and species—even to the “mere” instruments, objects, and things that populate our shared and unshared worlds. If ethics is thought solely on the basis of extending morally relevant human traits to animals, there can be only limited overlap with this kind of environmentalist thinking and practice that starts from a much broader conception of ethics and what is at stake in life as such, being-with-others, happiness, flourishing, and so forth. The same problem arises in relation to minoritarian struggles for justice and the efforts at creating alternative worlds that we find—for example, but perhaps most especially—among radical queers, various indigenous groups, radical feminists, and revolutionary anti-imperialist and decolonization struggles. What these minoritarian struggles have in common, both despite and because of their singularity, is the fact they have never been accepted as fully human by dominant anthropocentric institutional and cultural standards. What is more, the forms of life that many of the people associated with these revolutionary struggles seek to create do not aim at being human in the sense granted this term by the dominant anthropocentric tradition. They seek a radical exit from—rather than an extension of—the violent and denigrating logic of anthropocentrism and its associated metaphysics, institutions, economy, and discourses.

Those of us who fight on behalf of justice for animals, and for the creation of alternative ways of being with animals and their being with each other, should note that it is *these* militant movements for environmental justice and defense, and *these* minoritarian struggles and insurgent groups that have correctly identified the problem and logic against which we are struggling. At stake in these struggles are protecting, developing, and sustaining modes of life that have never been considered “properly” human by the dominant culture and that have no desire to become so now. Struggling in alliance with these groups and collectives means learning to construct ontologies, epistemologies, and practices that are befitting a world that seeks to take leave of the exclusionary logic of anthropocentrism and that has no nostalgia for its reformation or expansion.

2. DIFFERENCE

The second style of approach to animal issues that I wish to examine here, the difference-based approach, tends to derive from a more Continental style of philosophical orientation and is characterized primarily by an exploration of the nonanthropocentric dimensions of post- or antihumanism. Whereas identity-based theorists seek to extend ethical and political consideration based on shared traits among human beings and animals, difference-based theorists and activists seek to locate the site for rethinking animal issues in the potential interruptions, crossings, and transformations created by radicalized notions of difference. Although there are critical-theoretical, systems-theoretical, neo-Levinasian, and feminist versions of this approach, the particular version that has dominated animal studies and animal philosophy in recent years has been the deconstructive approach associated with Jacques Derrida.³

Derrida’s work has pursued a deconstructive strategy for rethinking animal issues along multiple lines and across several registers, including everything from ethics and politics to ontology and epistemology. The chief starting point for Derrida has been a deepening of the complication of humanist subjectivity begun by post- and antihumanist thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Althusser. Building on Heidegger’s

critical delimitation of the history of metaphysics as grounded on the values of objective presence and self-present subjectivity, Derrida pushes this Heideggerian critique deeper into the neglected foundations of metaphysics. Whereas Heidegger seeks to show that any metaphysics based on presence and humanist subjectivity is forced to overlook the inhuman site that opens human relations with other beings, Derrida insists that Heidegger himself overlooks something even more basic, even “older”—namely, the play of *différance* out of which all singularities and relations (both human and nonhuman) emerge.

The parenthetical supplement I just mentioned is important here. Derrida has emphasized from his earliest works onward that “quasi-infrastructural” and “ultra-transcendental” conceptual creations such as *différance* and the trace were intended to apply not only to human beings but to “life” as such, which is to say, to beings and relations that extend well beyond the human. This particular move has been especially difficult to appreciate for many neo-Heideggerian readers of Derrida, who tend to believe that a thoroughgoing complication of presence and humanism signals the definitive delimitation and exhaustion of Western metaphysics. For Derrida, though, the “ground” of metaphysics emerges out of a forgetting not only of presence or the relational structure that precedes the human subject; it emerges also out of a forgetting and exclusion of the *nonhuman* as such and *animals* in particular. Consequently, for Derrida metaphysics is characterized not simply by its predilection toward presence and humanist subjectivity (agency, self-presence, logocentrism), but also and perhaps more fundamentally by its *anthropocentrism* and by the exclusion and denigration of all others deemed nonhuman (including many “groups” of human beings deemed not fully human along with animals, nature, machines, and so on). This fundamental difference in critical orientation leads Derrida away from orthodox Heideggerian and other neophenomenological philosophical approaches and toward the development of a nonanthropocentric conception of life and thought that seeks to problematize classical versions of the human/nonhuman and human/animal distinction.

The deconstructive, difference-based analysis of classical human/animal distinctions is, as is the case with identity-based approaches, fiercely critical

of the simplistic binary and hierarchical nature of such distinctions. However, the strategies for demonstrating and overcoming the problems with the binary and hierarchical nature of the distinctions differ considerably between the two approaches. Identity-based theorists and activists aim, as we have seen, to establish a common identity and homogeneity among human beings and animals based on shared, morally relevant characteristics. Because of the fundamental ethical similarities that exist among human beings and animals at the level of moral patiency, any attempt to demarcate insuperable differences in ontological and ethical kind (at least at the level of moral patiency) between human beings and animals is ruled out. Derrida's deconstructive approach, by contrast, tries to avoid the homogenizing effects of identity-based approaches. Rather than collapsing human beings and animals into a single category, Derrida insists that differences between human beings and animals do exist and should be maintained. But his insistence upon maintaining these differences is not aimed at reinforcing the classical distinctions that have guided the Western metaphysical tradition. Instead, the deconstructive attempt at maintaining differences is, paradoxically, aimed at *undercutting* classical binary and hierarchical human/animal distinctions.

The chief problem with classical human/animal distinctions according to Derrida is that they make a simple, single cut among human beings and animals. This kind of cutting leads to the homogenization of both human beings and animals, and annuls the myriad differences and variations we find on both sides of the binary. When we think of The Human as being a unified, fixed ontological kind, we tend to flatten out the differences among human beings. We do not see that among human beings there is considerable variation at numerous levels; similarly, we fail to see that each singular human being is not a simple instantiation of the kind "The Human," but is in fact an emergent being who is constituted in and through a wide range of forces, relations, responses, and so forth. The same kind of reductionism concerning differences holds true, of course, with animals when we view all individual animals and animal species as belonging to the kind "The Animal." We tend to overlook the fact that there is (a) no simple, shared essence that binds together the incomprehensibly vast number of animal species that populate

the world, (b) considerable variation among individual animals that belong even to the same species, and (c) significant mutual influence and innumerable thoroughgoing relationships between and among individual animals as well as between and among different animal species. What is more, when we view the world in terms of classical human/animal distinctions, we fail to see the complicated lines of mutual affect and relation that traverse human-animal interactions. Traces of animal lives, individuals, species, and other affects are found throughout those many arenas of human life that are thought to be exclusively human; and the reverse is also true in the case of the many animal species that human beings have affected. In effect, in arguing for the maintaining of differences, Derrida is seeking to *complicate* classical human/animal distinctions, allowing differences among and between both humans and animals to multiply, without those differences being frozen into place or fused into a new homogeneity or identity.

Before examining some of the problems that attend this deconstructive strategy, it will be useful to see how the complication and multiplication of human/animal differences relates positively to strategies for ethical and political transformation in regard to (what “we” call) animals. One of the promising aspects of a deconstructive analysis of the ethical issues surrounding animals is that it is able to avoid both the logocentrism and anthropocentrism that limit identity-based analyses. For Derrida, ethical relationships with animals (or humans or any other kind of being) do not find their ultimate “ground” in the human *logos* or considerations of rationality. Instead, he locates the (proto-)ethical encounter in various precognitive, preintellectual (where cognitive and intellectual are understood as modes of experience that are fully present for a mind) relations in and through which one affects and is affected by others. In placing ethics on a ground other than reason, Derrida’s work can be fruitfully aligned with several of the related trends and groupings I mentioned above (namely, critical theory, neo-Levinasian ethics, feminist ethics, and so forth).

At the same time, by placing ethics in a space that precedes and outstrips cognition and one’s ability to predict what will have an ethical effect, Derrida in essence opens up the scope of ethics beyond any ultimately determinable limit. This gesture allows him to avoid many of the extensionist and

anthropocentric dogmas of identity-based approaches to animal ethics, for there is no need for or even a possibility of determining with finality what kinds of beings, things, or events might have ethical force in this space of affect. And this is precisely why Derrida refers to that which might affect one, that which might arrive to interrupt one's mode of existence and have a transformative effect, as an *arrivant*, an absolute newcomer. The *arrivant* might be someone or something that I am entirely familiar with but that, for whatever reason, strikes me with unanticipated ethical force on a given occasion; or it might be a kind of being or experience with which I am entirely unfamiliar. And inasmuch as relations of affect and one's affirmation of them do not necessarily obey the dictates of the classical human *logos*, there is no guarantee that ethics can be limited to human beings, fellow moral agents, or even sentient beings that resemble human beings in morally relevant ways. In analytic ethical terms, deconstruction leaves us in a space of fundamental nonknowledge when it comes both to determining the ultimate scope of ethical consideration and to determining any final or fixed decision procedure.

Given that the relation between ethics and politics in Derrida is irreducibly aporetic, there is no simple way to draw a straight line from his proto-ethical considerations to concrete political strategies. This does not mean, however, that Derrida has nothing to say about a nonanthropocentric politics or that his work might not be brought to bear on political issues involving animals. He has stated his explicit sympathy for the aims and spirit of people working for animal rights (despite reservations about some of the underpinnings and implications of rights-based discourses and strategies); and he suggests that a pluralist approach to social transformation—involving both institutional and larger-scale cultural forms of change—would be required to do more justice to animals (Derrida and Roudinesco 2004). But even on the most charitable reading of Derrida's work, it is difficult to reconstruct anything like a robust account of strategies for developing a more nonanthropocentric politics. Derrida is nearly always willing to speak of alliances with and sympathy for many of the progressive and militant movements he is aligned with, but he is also quick to note that he is himself not a militant participating in most of these movements. This is especially true in the case of struggles for justice for animals, in which—at least to my knowledge—Derrida was

never seriously engaged. As such, it makes little sense to look to his work for suggestions concerning policy, strategy, or radical alternatives to the status quo regarding human interactions with animals. If his work has critical value for those of us who are concerned with these matters, it will likely be found in its uncovering of lingering forms of anthropocentrism, logocentrism, and phallogocentrism in proanimal discourse and practice.

This leaves us with the question of the larger, strategic implications of the difference-based, deconstructive treatment of the human/animal distinction. Whereas one can only agree with Derrida's efforts to underscore the manner in which simple binary distinctions reduce the differences one finds among the groups of beings we call "human" and "animal," his insistence that the human/animal distinction is ultimately indispensable and worth maintaining is far more problematic. To be sure, Derrida has little interest in maintaining classic versions of the human/animal distinction; his aim, as I have sought to explain here, is to complicate such distinctions both to unlock the differences on both sides of the distinction as well as to complicate the differences and relays of affect that one finds between these two "groups." As is the case with other concepts and distinctions that Derrida believes are indispensable and worth maintaining in some form (for example, the speech/writing distinction, or the concept of and certain institutions surrounding national sovereignty), his decision to maintain them is provisional and based on strategic concerns (usually grounded in the inherent perfectibility of a certain concept or institution). Unfortunately, though, precious little can be found in his work that explains or defends this strategy in the case of maintaining the human/animal distinction. So, we are led then to ask: How would a complication of the human/animal distinction feed into, deepen, and radicalize existing struggles on behalf of animals? Or, conversely, how might such an approach end up actually reinforcing the very frameworks and socioeconomic institutions against which animal theorists and activists are struggling? What are the potential strengths of a deconstructive approach to animal issues and politics?

I want to suggest that Derrida's work on animal issues runs up against serious limitations at this level. The human/animal distinction is one of the most saturated and exhausted distinctions in the Western metaphysical

tradition. Likewise, the privileged term of the distinction, the human, carries such considerable conceptual and political baggage as to render it suspect even for the most fervent humanists and apologists for anthropocentrism. Consequently, I doubt that further complication of the human/animal distinction or further refinement of the perfectable aspects of the concept of the human carry much promise today in the way of disruptive or transformative force. Perhaps instead of extending the difference-based approach to animal issues, we could ask: Is it not possible to invent other concepts, groupings, and frameworks that create the conditions for more promising forms of resistance and alternative practices in this domain?

3. INDISTINCTION

One could certainly make the case that much of the more interesting, fecund, and provocative work that is being done among animal activists and theorists stakes itself on this very wager, namely, that is possible to invent new modes of thought and practice beyond the human/animal distinction. Such theorists and activists have little truck with either identity-based or difference-based approaches to animal issues. The chief task of such work is neither to extend moral consideration to animals based on the sharing of classical human capacities and abilities nor to underscore endlessly the reductionism of traditional discourse on the difference between humans and animals. Instead, this alternative approach proceeds from a space in which supposedly insuperable distinctions between human beings and animals fall into a radical *indistinction* and where the human/animal distinction (in both its classical and more complicated deconstructive form) no longer serves as a guardrail for thought and practice. This space should not be understood as the gathering place for a dialectical synthesis that overcomes the limitations of identity-based and difference-based approaches to animal issues. It marks instead an effort to render inoperative any nostalgia for extending human traits to animals or for complicating the differences between human beings and animals. Thought and practice that originates from within a space of indistinction aims to reorient us along lines that enable alternative modes of living, relating, and being with others of all sorts (human and nonhuman).

Efforts aimed at trying to think and live from within sites of indistinction should in no way be taken as suggesting that traditional ideas about the human or the human/animal distinction will somehow vanish overnight or be done away with by a wave of the hand. Nor should taking such an approach be understood as implying that any discourse or strategy that might still employ a concept of the human or the human/animal distinction is forever and fundamentally at odds with a thought and practice of indistinction. No one who is seriously engaged with the ethico-political and practical struggles surrounding the nonhuman world could labor under such illusions; and creating new antagonisms here among radical struggles for social justice is certainly not the point. Rather, the move toward an approach based on indistinction most often derives from a positive desire to find some much needed elbow room for political, ethical, and ontological innovation. The other approaches are left behind, or rather are placed temporarily to the side, in order to find out what *else* might be done in terms of establishing forms of resistance and living differently. Without trying to homogenize this emerging theoretical and practical approach to animal issues, I should like in this final section to give some minimal form to its primary gestures and also to speak briefly to some of its established and potential promise.

We have become increasingly familiar, perhaps even comfortable, with the idea of animals and human beings as being indistinguishable in certain senses. There is no shortage of ways in which animals have been shown in recent years to possess some trait that has traditionally been considered the exclusive province of the human species, or in which human beings have been recalled in Darwinian fashion to their essentially biological and animal roots. And yet, despite such complications and destabilizations of traditional ideas about human beings and animals, the lives of animals and other beings deemed nonhuman have in many cases become progressively worse. The mere contamination and complication of traditional modes of thinking have not, it would seem, had the force to fundamentally transform individual or collective ways of living. We have learned to absorb and cope with these attacks on human propriety, either by assimilating them to a different narrative that allows us to reestablish human exceptionalism or by disavowing the implications of such attacks for the institutions and practices that protect

and promote human propriety and privilege (for example, ethics, politics, and law).

The space of indistinction that I am referring to here follows a fundamentally different kind of logic and stems from a fundamentally different perspective and set of desires. Rather than trying to bring animals “up” to the level of human superiority (e.g., by granting them classical human capacities) or trying to show how human beings belong “properly” to an animal biological classificatory schema, thinking from within the space of indistinction proceeds from what Val Plumwood calls a “shocking reduction” downward from the magisterial heights of human superiority and outward toward an essentially nonhuman and inhuman zone (2000, 61). In such reductions, one—if speaking in terms of simple, individual beings makes any sense here—catches a sideways glance of a vast nonhuman world that has been denigrated by the concepts, institutions, and practices associated with “the human.” It becomes possible to view the world, however partial and fleeting such perspectives might be, with and alongside that which is most abject for “the human” (Kristeva 1982; Oliver 2009). To endeavor to reestablish human specificity in such instances would mean closing oneself off from the passions, perspectives, and potentialities for relation that one encounters in zones of indistinction. When Donna Haraway (1991) refers to many people who no longer feel the need to separate themselves from animals and other nonhuman beings who are considered abject, she is no doubt referring to the desire to inhabit the world from perspectives other than those of the classically human subject and to explore the passions and potentials that are found in such spaces of encounter.

As an illustration of a thought and practice that develops this kind of alternative perspective, consider Gilles Deleuze’s analysis of Francis Bacon’s meat paintings. Deleuze suggests that Bacon’s meat paintings should be understood as emerging from out of and reenacting a zone of indistinction between human beings and animals, particularly in terms of the ontological indistinction between human and animal *flesh* (2003). Bacon’s paintings, according to Deleuze, create a zone within which we become more fully able to feel pity for the animals whose flesh hangs in our storefronts—and more fully able to feel pity for *all* flesh (which is to say, all exposed, vulnerable

bodies), whether human or nonhuman. In this kind of zone of indistinction or indiscernibility, we begin to catch sight of another “side” of flesh, another reality that status quo attitudes about animals and flesh and other meaty bodies have hidden from view. For not only do Bacon’s paintings allow us to see the vulnerability of animal bodies; they also allow us to glimpse, however obliquely once again, that human bodies too are fundamentally and essentially meat. Whatever degradations and sufferings our bodies might undergo, it is clear that most of us are not fundamentally prepared to accept that we might possibly be meat for others.⁴ We can perhaps be led to accept the fact of human *embodiment*, but we are loathe to accept the fact that our embodied existence relegates us to a zone of indistinction wherein our bodies *can* potentially be reduced to “mere” flesh or “mere” meat for others—others who might be human or nonhuman. By placing viewers within a zone of indistinction, Bacon encourages us to learn to see human bodies as edible. More importantly, he also allows us to catch a glimpse of the existence of those animal—and sometimes human—bodies that have been relegated by the established order to the status of being nothing more than edible, nothing more than mere meat.

Of course, what is often considered to be “mere” meat or “mere” flesh can always be understood as—and become—more than the minimizing qualifier allows. Even “mere” meat that emerges from the slaughterhouse is never just meat for human consumption. That meat was attached at one time to a body caught up in a different set of desires, passions, relations, and forces; a body that formed a unique locus of facticity and potentiality formed by a unique set of modes of capture and shaping; a body that might have developed along different lines altogether were it not restricted to living within a CAFO (concentrated animal feeding operation) and then sent to slaughter. That singular meaty body might have even fiercely resisted its reductive treatment, an occurrence that is far more common in slaughterhouses and other spaces of cruelty and confinement than we are led to believe. And even when that body is reduced to and appears as “mere” meat on our plates, it still offers resistance to assimilation in its own way. As Bacon and multiple other artists have shown, there is both tremendous beauty and tremendous horror in meat. It is capable of inciting an incredibly wide range of affects and

emotions—all of which are lost if we hold that zone of indistinction among meaty bodies at arm's length.

It is the task of thought that proceeds from within a zone of indistinction to bring such possibilities into view, to show that the classic human/animal distinction serves to block access to seeing the world from the perspective of nonhuman others and seeks to limit in advance the potentiality of the animal and entire nonhuman world. As such, activists and theorists who take indistinction as their point of departure are not primarily concerned with extending traditionally anthropocentric ethical and legal consideration to animals or with the deconstructive refinement and complication of the differences between human beings and animals. Instead, activists and theorists of indistinction aim to have us notice and attend to the fact that what our culture takes to be “mere” animals are capable of entering into modes of relation and ways of life that can never be fully anticipated.

Beyond identity and difference, a thought of indistinction opens us onto a zone of beings and relations that fall well outside the concerns and range of the largely anthropocentric and social-anthropological ontologies that have dominated recent theory. But prior to restarting the ontological project anew to address these limits—that is, prior to determining where and how to carve this different “world” at its joints—it is essential not to vacate too quickly the proto-ontological plane in which these limits are encountered. For it is here that thought gains a fuller view of the various mechanisms of shaping and capture that structure and maintain the established order, in addition to glimpsing more completely the uneven and differential historical effects of these mechanisms.

In considering the case of animals and other nonhuman beings and systems of various sorts from this proto-ontological space, one can see clearly the need not only for alternative ontologies but also for critical-materialist analyses of the established order; for there can be no doubt that both the human and nonhuman worlds are increasingly becoming determined and shaped (and in some cases re-determined and re-shaped many times over) by socioeconomic mechanisms of capture. One can also glimpse from within this proto-ontological zone the radical inadequacy of existing materialist and biopolitical analyses, almost all of which are narrowly and dogmatically

anthropocentric.⁵ The task from here forward, I would suggest, is less a matter of supplementing such recent anticapitalist and biopolitical work with critical animal and environmental perspectives and more a matter of reorienting critical thought and practice along entirely new and radically non-anthropocentric material, practical, conceptual, and ontological lines. The recent turn toward nonanthropocentric ontologies⁶ could potentially be of significant importance here, especially if this ontological turn is undertaken and developed as a crucial part of a task of transforming the established order and resisting its mechanisms of capture (and not merely as an attempt to transfer quintessentially human epistemological and phenomenological perspectives onto the whole of the nonhuman world at an ontological level). It is at this site that ontology and practical philosophy might be rejoined, and where the ontological task of trying to do justice to the vast world that exists beyond the scope and range of “the human” would open the way toward a series of practices—both resistant and transformative—that aim to do justice to the beings, relations, and potentialities that are encountered therein.



NOTES

I dedicate this essay to Paul K. and James G. for sharing their passions and invaluable insights.

1. Rachels (1991) offers a thorough and accessible account of the impact of Darwin for ethics in general and animal issues in particular.
2. Indeed, most versions of identity-based animal ethics cannot in good faith claim even to include all members of the biological species *Homo sapiens* within their scope of moral consideration, inasmuch as there are always “nonparadigm” members of the species who lack sentience, subjectivity, moral agency, and so on. So the notion that identity-based animal ethics begins with a normative theory that is inclusive of all members of the human species and then extends outward to include animals is deeply misleading. The dominant identity-based approaches to animal ethics are without exception grounded in a notion of moral status that excludes from direct moral consideration (1) certain human beings, (2) huge numbers of individual animals and animal species, and (3) the entire nonanimal world. That such exclusions can be given subsequent “rational” justification should not surprise us, given the logocentric and anthropocentric assumptions that undergird this approach.

3. The literature on Derrida's work on animals is currently expanding at a rapid rate. For a recent sampling of some of this work, see Neil Badmington (2007).
4. Compare Bacon's surprise at that fact the he himself is *not* hanging alongside the slabs of meat in butcher shops: "Of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher shop, I always think it's surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal" (Sylvester 1987, 46).
5. The latter point has been made insightfully and forcefully by Nicole Shukin (2009).
6. I am referring here primarily to the recent work of Manuel De Landa, Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, Iain Hamilton Grant, Jane Bennett, and others who seek to displace the human mind-world correlate from the center of ontological consideration.

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