

Figure 1
BOS PRIMIGENIUS



Figure 2
CAPRA AEGAGRUS HIRCUS

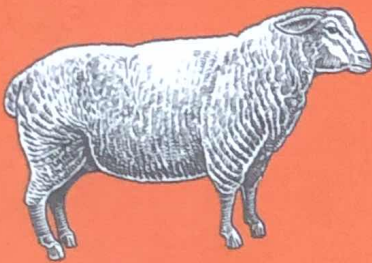


Figure 3
OVIS ARIES

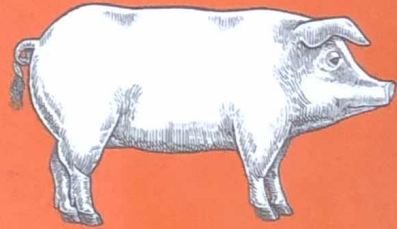


Figure 4
SUS



Figure 5
HOMO SAPIENS PIUS

The Question of the Animal *and* Religion

THEORETICAL STAKES,
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Aaron S. Gross



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Introduction

THE EVENT IN POSTVILLE

Although I did not know it at the time, this book began in 2004 when a bland manila envelope arrived at my home by overnight post, a rectangular bulge revealing its content as a VHS tape.¹ The tape contained footage of cattle slaughter at one of the world's largest religiously identified slaughterhouses, a kosher abattoir oddly located in a historically Lutheran town in rural Iowa. The community of previously urban Hasidic Jews who moved to the town to run the slaughterhouse stood out against the backdrop of an economically struggling farm town like a proud anachronism. Black hats and gabardines amid swaying corn and heartland churches also proved journalistically and cinematographically irresistible, an easy symbol of America's pluralistic promise. Well before the footage I was about to view was taken, Postville had inspired a thoughtful book by Stephen Bloom and an educational Iowa state government film on diversity that portrayed the town as a multicultural success story in progress.² Despite some critical comments in Bloom's book, the town's reputation remained pristine enough that it had even become the subject of a Hallmark channel special, *The Way Home*.³ By the time the slaughter footage arrived, I was anticipating something ugly, but, even as someone who had seen a great deal of undercover footage taken by animal advocates, I found the video unusually disturbing.

Today, extensive reporting in national and international media (the *Forward*, the *Jerusalem Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, *NPR*, the *Washington Post*, and others) has meant that hundreds of thousands, more probably millions, of people have seen a clip or at least read a description of the routine violence revealed by the tiny hidden camera on the investigator planted by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). The Internet-driven proliferation of the slaughter images has become an important part of what happened “in Postville.” In addition to still images depicted in major print and Internet media sources, parts of the video I was about to watch were rapidly made available on PETA’s Web sites and on YouTube. Five years later the clips had been accessed roughly seven hundred thousand times.⁴ When I first saw the footage, however, aside from a few insiders (people employed by AgriProcessors, the USDA inspectors, and the half-dozen Orthodox Jewish kosher oversight agencies), no more than half a dozen eyes had witnessed the practices shown on the tape. The “interior chambers” of American slaughterhouses of all kinds,⁵ and the “kill floor” most of all, are strictly guarded from view and virtually invisible to the general public.

The violence documented on the video included workers systematically cutting and partially removing the esophagi and tracheas of cattle after *shechitah*—the biblical word for slaughter used today to designate the cutting of the animal’s neck required by kosher law—but, in more than one out every five slaughters, before the animals lost consciousness. This is simply the most disturbing of a handful of procedures that were later deemed to be illegal under the one U.S. law that provides some modest legal protection for cows and pigs at the time of slaughter.⁶ Dr. Temple Grandin, the nation’s most influential humane slaughter expert and a meat industry insider who has designed more than half of all cattle slaughter facilities in America, explained, “Removal of the trachea and other internal parts before the animal has become insensible would cause great suffering and pain. Many of the cattle on this tape had this dressing procedure performed when they were still fully sensible. Several cattle were walking around with the trachea and other parts hanging out of them.”⁷

As a Jew myself, I felt shame well up inside me in an irrational surge that, as the scandal unfolded, was surely repeated inside tens of thousands of Jews—an unwelcome lightning flash of Jewish identity.⁸ I did not feel ashamed only as a Jew, however, but also simply as a person. “How embar-

assing to be human” as Kurt Vonnegut has it.⁹ Competing with the critical voices in my mind that wielded academically honed attentiveness to particularity and context, another part of my imagination melted away such analysis. The specificity of my religious location as a Reform Jew—an identity rather distant from that of Postville’s Hasidic Jews—was forgotten. I was no longer American, or Jewish, or, in a certain way, human. I was a mammal, a body, a creature of evolution whose mind, programmed for empathy as much as the potential for indifference, could not help but wince at the pained animal faces. Something unfathomably old inside me responded. What neurologists call von Economo neurons and mirror neurons fired and danced.¹⁰ As much because of my biology as because of my culture, I could not help but empathize and sympathize with those suffering others.¹¹ I was held hostage to whatever “it” is one wants to name that philosopher Jacques Derrida invokes as the “possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower . . . the anguish of this vulnerability” of being flesh.¹²

The practices depicted on the tape drew swift, strong, and diverse reactions from American Jewish and animal welfare communities, especially where these two communities overlapped in persons like myself. Much of what follows in this study is an attempt to interpret the intensity and meaning of the Jewish responses to the suffering depicted on the video, responses to animals.

These responses are significant not only because of what they reveal about Jewish self-understanding and ethics but because of what they reveal about us Americans and, in the end, all of us who call ourselves human, *humano* (Spanish), *humain* (French), *Mensch* (German), and so on. The events at Postville have a traceable pragmatic influence that lives on in USDA memos, a changed U.S. kosher cattle slaughter industry, and an energized Jewish food movement. But the deeper charge these events carried and that brought them into discussion far beyond the Jewish fold is not about kosher slaughter in particular but about religious slaughter in an age when farms and slaughterhouses have come to be managed like factories. In the end this “religious slaughter” of which I speak is not limited to, as usually thought, what kosher or halal slaughterhouses do, but arguably what happens in American slaughterhouses of all kinds as they help bring billions of animal bodies into three hundred million American bodies as food every year with hardly anyone seeing a single farmed animal die. While I will be primarily concerned with the specificity of the Jewish response to these events, the final implications of

this discussion is about all of us who live in industrial and postindustrial societies where eating animals is commonplace.

The practices that the undercover video depicted were regarded by a small minority of Orthodox Jews as high piety—the “highest standard” and “glory” of kosher slaughter, as AgriProcessors manager Sholom Rubashkin put it.¹³ “This is the way we did it in the Holy Temple all those years. This is basically the exact way that God asked us to do it,” explained the rabbinic supervisor for kosher slaughterhouses for the Chicago Rabbinical Council.¹⁴ To others, like Grandin, a longtime gentle advocate of the potential humaneness of kosher slaughter,¹⁵ they were “an atrocious abomination”¹⁶—a profanation of sorts.¹⁷ For most American Jews, the animal suffering captured on the video was at least worrisome and almost always condemned. More significantly, the video ignited broader conversations about the contemporary meat industry as well as ethics more broadly. *Who are we when we do this to them?*

The video was both exposé and window into a normally hidden “holy of holies” in which animals were supposed by most American Jews to be receiving a “good death”—a contemporary echo of the sacrifices that the ancient Israelites offered in the Temple in Jerusalem. Kosher practice, which includes detailed rules for slaughter but little in the way of explicit rationale, was generally supposed to embody a benign human dominion over a good creation. But the video, which implicated not only this individual slaughterhouse but the entire infrastructure of kosher certification and secular humane slaughter laws, revealed what appeared to most as “grizzly” (the *Washington Post*) and “egregious” (USDA) animal abuse.¹⁸ The events that followed in the years after the video’s release tended to confirm suspicions that the plant, kosher supervision, and U.S. government regulators more generally are no longer able to uphold (or never sufficiently upheld) ethical standards widely agreed upon by most Americans. Two subsequent undercover investigations documented mistreatment of animals by AgriProcessors, and a series of additional investigations also revealed worker abuse steeped in racism toward undocumented (and non-Jewish) immigrant workers. In 2008 a fuller picture of the scope of these human rights abuses came to light when the federal government conducted the largest single-site immigration raid in U.S. history at the plant, arresting 389 people, including 285 Guatemalans. After arrest, workers were held in fairgrounds normally used for cattle until they were processed by immigration. The corruption and violence at AgriProcessors became an even bigger national news story, later inspiring both a play,

La Historia de Nuestras Vidas, and a documentary, *AbUsed: The Postville Raid*.¹⁹ Even then Senator Barack Obama commented on the event: “When you read about a meatpacking plant hiring 13-year-olds, 14-year-olds—that is some of the most dangerous, difficult work there is. . . . They have kids in there wielding buzz saws and cleavers? It’s ridiculous.”²⁰ The plant went bankrupt in the face of this scandal and is now under new ownership and called, curiously, Agri Star.²¹ Apparently the plant no longer works in processing but dwells in the majesty of the night sky; its work is not about bloody earth but the light of heaven.

SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY

Even before it became well known that the plant was not only mistreating animals but also its own workforce, the American Jewish community responded to the 2004 video by debating the meaning of humane slaughter and, ultimately, the meaning of humanity. The release of this video was surely not the first time the pleading faces of animals—and tales about them—had gripped people and become an entry point for wider discussions. The Talmud relates that no less a giant of the rabbinic world than Judah ha-Nasi, the editor and redactor of the Mishnah, Judaism’s most sacred text after the Bible, was once confronted by a calf being led to slaughter.²² The calf broke away from the person leading him, buried his head in the folds of the Rabbi’s garments, and wept. Judah ha-Nasi’s response to this unusual plea from a bovine, which I will return to in the final chapter of this study, shaped his life for thirteen years, the Talmud reports. Of the many things this Talmudic story might mean, the most basic is this: an animal resisting slaughter is both a powerful sight and a site of meaning. Our responses to such an animal matter. •

As Jewish responses to AgriProcessors accumulated, an extraordinary charge became evident in them that connected these events with older streams of thought and practice. As this charge grew I put down my petitions, put on my scholar’s cap, and realized that I had found an event that not only called forth energetic responses but also called for scholarly analysis. The events at AgriProcessors originally demanded my attention as a Jew and as an animal protection advocate, as they still do, but soon my response to the event demanded less engagement and more *epoché*—the suspension of judgment in order to understand—the labor, in short, of a historian of religions.

As a historian of religions I had already been working on the question of the animal and religion and I saw that the theoretical work I was doing could help interpret the AgriProcessors “events,” by which I mean both the abuses that took place there and the responses to them.²³ At the same time, the event offered a powerful opportunity to clarify the significance of animals and the category “animal” for our understanding of religion. This is so not only because of the unique drama of the AgriProcessors events but because food animals constitute 98 percent of the animals contemporary Western people interact with over the course of their lives (mostly by eating them).²⁴ Any theorization of animals and religion that wants to have a meaningful relation to the particular historical moment in which we find ourselves must give considerable attention to the question of the *food* animal.

Theorizing animals and religion, on the one hand, and understanding the animal abuse scandal at AgriProcessors, on the other, are the two tasks of this book. To engage them will require that we carefully consider the broader meaning of animals and the category animal. It will necessitate probing not only the meaning of animals in Jewish traditions but also in the study of religion. In the end, interpreting the events at AgriProcessors in this broader context will mean exploring something fundamental about how modernity has altered our relationship with animals in that “dimension of depth” we name religion.²⁵

RELIGION, THE STUDY OF RELIGION, AND ANIMALS

Many religious traditions, as well as the study of religion itself, share a presupposition so basic that it often goes unnoticed: the existence of essential distinctions between humans and all other animals. Although the imagination of animals and the human/animal border are fundamental to a surprising number of religious traditions and to the academic study of religion generally, this significance has been largely ignored.²⁶ Only in recent years, following increased political consideration of animals’ welfare, has the discourse coming to be known as “animal studies” (a category that some will further divide into “human-animal studies” and “critical animal studies,” the latter being more explicitly political) begun to expose the importance of animals.²⁷ This critical turn toward animals is now evident in numerous scholarly disciplines within the social sciences and human sciences, including anthropology, classics, comparative literature, critical theory, gender

studies, geography, history, media studies, philosophy, psychology, sociology, religious studies, and women’s studies. Still, at the time of writing, no monograph has taken up the task of theorizing the study of animals and religion as such. While this book begins with and analyzes a particular incident, its larger task is to both expose the absent presence of animals in the history of the study of religion and clear a space for their future—inside and outside the academy.

How does the scholarly, cultural reconsideration of animals—this critical turn toward animals—bear upon the study of religion? How does it impact the study of different traditions differently? How can critical attention to animals help us better understand religion as a scholarly category and advance theory and method in its study? How can the lens of religious studies help us better understand cultural events that involve animals—the animals we eat, the ones we keep as pets, and the animals we conjure to tell ourselves who we are? How can religious studies play a role in clarifying the nature and significance of animals by analyzing their religious “charge”—their sacrality and their intimate interwovenness with religious practice? These questions, unintelligible not long ago, now command considerable attention.

What is needed, and what chapters 3 through 5 of this study seek to provide, is a theorization of “the animal” as an abstract category in the study of religion that *at the same time* attends to the animal individuals in its view—a conceptual engagement with animals that avoids, in Levinasian terms, becoming a totality: a calculated dogma rather than an always incomplete movement.²⁸ We require a way of speaking about the depth dimension we share with animate life that does not overconfidently think we can simply make animals fully present by coming into physical proximity with them. Ethology, the study of animal behavior, can help us in this confrontation with animals, but is inadequate to the questions of meaning that face us. Our failure to think animals and religion is a failure of imagination, not a lack of information. Looking the horse in the mouth will not be enough. Yet, *at the same time*, we need a way of speaking that remains responsive to the immediacy of the animal lives bound to us, for example, the fact that I must now pause in my writing to take my dog, a named and beloved companion, out for a walk.

We would do well to bring together, on the one hand, a theorization of religion that does not homogenize the diversity of, for example, the religions of the contemporary Cree of Northern Canada and fourth-century Christians

in Rome, and, on the other hand, a theorization of the animal that no longer levels the profligate heterogeneity of nonhuman beings as diverse as the gorilla and the snake. We need a discourse that is grounded in awareness of its own historical unfolding in human minds and, at the same time, is grounded in the present ecological-political moment. We need to move within the tension and curiosity of this at-the-same-time, on-the-one-hand-and-on-the-other-hand movement of thought and let it clear “space for the event of what we call animals.”²⁹ We need to allow animals to be seen, to see them, and, as Jacques Derrida puts it, allow ourselves to “be seen seen” by them.³⁰

If this feels a bit dizzying, there is good reason. The question of the animal and religion is a question not only about the foundation of the study of religion but the foundation of the human sciences, even the foundation of thought itself. There are many ways one might conceptualize the line between the human sciences and the life sciences, but, however one imagines it, the distinction of the human sciences is its employment of methods that apply to—and only to—the human. Ecosystems, “brute” physical phenomena, the human (animal) body, and animals themselves (which are viewed as all body) are left, at least to a large extent, to the life sciences. At a structural level, the binary human sciences/life sciences *is* the human/animal binary. The isolation of the human in the human sciences is predicated upon various arguments for human uniqueness that are not intelligible without animal others. Frits Staal provides a helpful summary of this dominant view, which he here attributes to Wilhelm Dilthey: “In some of Dilthey’s work . . . the uniqueness of the humanities is related to the unicity of man, which is, in turn, related to a tradition of discussions on ‘subjectivity’ in modern philosophy. The argument runs, briefly, as follows. ‘Man’ is so different from stars, rocks, molecules and even other animals that he cannot be studied by the same methods by which these other things are studied. He is, after all, not a thing: he is the unique studying subject himself.”³¹

It requires some imagination to remember that there is nothing inevitable about the creation of special disciplines that deal exclusively with the human. In an alternate history, we might have had an academy that was structured around a “primate sciences”/life sciences or “mammal sciences”/life sciences binary, viewing all primates or all mammals as requiring unique methods of study and the isolation of the human as unjustified. The question of the animal is so fundamental in Western thought (though not only Western thought) that it functions as a question about what it means to ask

a question, draw lines, and create categories—a question about what thinking itself means. Thinking itself, or so the dominant Western logic has gone, begins with humanity breaking from animality. Could we, instead, “think thinking” as beginning in the liminal space that connects and at the same time separates sentient life? Are, for example, the Paleolithic cave paintings that are, nearly without exception, dominated by animals and hybrid creatures—the most ancient surviving human artistic expression—evidence of the *uniquely human* mind or *merely humans* joining the conversation of the sentient in a new way? Is the world a “collection of objects” thought only and exclusively by the human subject or what Thomas Berry, speaking as much as a historian of religions as a Catholic priest, calls a “communion of subjects”?³²

Rigorous attention to animals disrupts, without displacing, the very categories and terms that religious practitioners and scholars of religion have developed over generations. At the same time, as has long been noted in scholarship on this topic, the question of the animal evokes strong emotional currents and is tied to ethical questions that face virtually everyone everyday.³³ To raise the question of the animal is often to enter the vertigo-inducing realm of what Sigmund Freud theorized as *Das Unheimliche*, the uncanny. As we will see, the shadowy, forgotten animal haunts the very categories that are used to organize the study of religion, including this study.³⁴

The categories we use to study religion, starting with “religion” itself, are made intelligible against the background of (and on the backs of) animals. The primary burden of chapter 3 is to illustrate this insinuation of animals in the nontheological study of religion. This will be accomplished by considering how animals figure in the theorization of religion by a handful of foundational theorists—Ernst Cassirer, Émile Durkheim, and Mircea Eliade—and a contemporary historian of religions, Jonathan Z. Smith, and also by considering how the category “myth” is bound to animals.

Attending to this insinuation has an inherent value in illuminating a usually unnoticed feature of religion scholarship. In the case of the present study, it also has a propaedeutic function: understanding how animals have constituted the study of religion is a basic precondition for the project of theorizing animals in the study of religion, a task to which the present study aims to contribute. Finally, it is also a precondition for the analysis of the 2004 AgriProcessors scandal that grounds and stands watch over this theorizing.

To interpret the significance of the events at the AgriProcessors abattoir and their ongoing aftermath, I will first explain the details of the event in the context of the American kosher industry (chapters 1 and 2), review the “absent presence” of animals in the history of the study of religion (chapter 3), and provide critical, theoretical purchase on the category “animal” through an engagement with the insights of contemporary anthropology as discussed by Tim Ingold (chapter 4) and the insights into Western thought brought to us by Derrida (chapter 5). We will then be in a position to proceed to a deeper consideration of the AgriProcessors event (chapter 6) and, in the epilogue, the broader implications of this entire study.

Christian theology has approached religion by privileging questions about the divine. The nontheological study of religion, religious studies, approaches religion by privileging questions about the human. The present work proposes a study of religion that, by becoming critically aware of the excluded, forgotten, or disavowed “animal,” simultaneously gains a critical vantage on previous approaches to religion and offers a third way: approaching religion by way of the animal, the creature, the sentient—by way of our forgotten ancestors.

FORGOTTEN ANCESTORS

It will be helpful to ask precisely what or who are these animals that I propose to attend to in this study. We will consider three “species” of animals: “actual” animals, the category of the animal as a root other or antitype of the human, and symbolic animals. First, my study is concerned with “actual” biological animals, including not only animals literally running about in the world but “actual” animals that are represented in texts and oral traditions (as opposed to imaginary animals such as frogs as large as cities). As my use of quotations suggests, there are times when the meaning of this apparently common sense term breaks down. As our understanding of the category animal shifts, so does our understanding of what we mean to do when we insist on talking about actual animals. In any case, these actual animals stand in contrast to the second species of animals that I consider: the category of “the animal,” which configures animals as the root other of the human. For example, it is more the animal than actual animals that Saint Augustine speaks about when he says that in the afterlife “there will be no animal body to ‘weigh down the soul’ in its process of corruption; there will be a spiritual