

# BETWEEN THE SPECIES

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Review of Matthew Calarco's

*Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*

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In *Zoographies*, Matthew Calarco offers an insightful analysis of anthropocentric trends in recent Continental philosophers Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Giorgio Agamben, and Jacques Derrida, combined with provocative suggestions for advancing beyond the Western tradition's humanistic dead-end thinking on interspecies ethics.

An introductory essay situates animal questions within Continental philosophy. It grounds Calarco's argument within the lineage of possibilities opened by Heidegger's critique of modern metaphysical humanism and Derrida's deconstructive analysis of an essentialist, reductionist "human-animal" binary, and it presents two main theses: that the Continental tradition is pervasively and detrimentally anthropocentric and that the human-animal distinction can and should be abandoned to clear the way for more genuine encounters with other animal species and promote their more appropriate philosophical and political treatment. He contextualizes his argument with references to prominent pro-animal philosophical trends, distinguishing his approach from that of some types of "identity politics," by which progressive agendas are divided and vitiated, and

from those approaches that rely too heavily on a notion of subjectivity that has problematic blind spots and metaphysical baggage. Unlike Levinas, Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou, who attempt to rethink subjectivity in the wake of Heideggerian and Derridean critiques, Calarco declares his suspicion with ethical and political structures erected on this basis, most of which remain problematically anthropocentric.

The first chapter charts the ways Heidegger distinguishes between human beings and other animal species, from his distinction between animal perishing and human death in *Being and Time* to that between linguistically capable humans and non-linguistic animals in the “Letter on Humanism,” paying particular attention to a 1929-30 lecture course in which Heidegger designates non-human animals as “world-poor” and incapable of recognizing entities “as such.” After clearly presenting the main points of Heidegger’s analyses, Calarco begins to question them, looking at, for example, the reductionistic way Heidegger talks of “the being of the animal” as if “animality” designates a monolithic structure and not a huge diversity of beings with different kinds of experience, some of which seem quite phenomenologically rich in ways to which Heidegger fails to attend. Though he credits Heidegger with undermining traditional human-animal hierarchies and at least *attempting* to understand animals on their own terms, Calarco shows that Heidegger’s priorities remain anthropocentric inasmuch as Heidegger never really engages animal experience as a primary interest, but always as a means of highlighting the uniqueness of human experience and the kinds of worldly relationships of which, allegedly, only humans are capable.

Following the figure of the animal in Heidegger’s later writings, Calarco questions Heidegger’s placement of Nietzsche and Rilke as final thinkers who merely

exhausted the possibilities of metaphysical humanism without transcending the basic framework. He argues, with supporting references to Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy on "becoming-animal," that Nietzsche and Rilke hold much more promise for post-humanist and post-anthropocentric philosophy than Heidegger recognizes.

The chapter provides both an efficient summary of Heidegger's thinking and forceful challenges to it. Calarco describes possible detours around Heideggerian impasses, beginning to explore what it means to consider non-human animal beings without deploying a clean conceptual line between human and animal being, either in traditional metaphysical form or Heideggerian existential reinscriptions.

Subsequent chapters follow suit. The second, dealing with the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, charts two related anthropocentric gestures in Levinas's thinking, the denial that non-human animals can experience themselves as subject to an Other's ethical demand and respond altruistically, and the denial that they can truly provoke this kind of altruistic response in human beings, arguing that the logic of Levinas's account of ethics justifies neither claim.

He begins by recounting Levinas's story about "Bobby," a stray dog who lived for a while near a Nazi prison camp in which Levinas was held, who earned from Levinas the title of "last Kantian in Nazi Germany" for his (sort of) willingness to engage the prisoners as subjects deserving respect while their human captors had debased them to the status of inhuman objects. This is the closest Levinas comes to admitting any kind of non-human ethical agency, and he eventually dismisses Bobby with the conclusion that the dog is not really Kantian because he "lacked the brain needed to universalize

maxims.”<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Calarco embraces the possibility that Bobby embodies some brand of ethical or proto-ethical agency, arguing that whether one explains altruism with a “selfish gene” theory or interprets it at the individual psychological level, Darwinian biological continuism and recent cognitive ethology undermine Levinas’s anthropocentric claims that only humans act altruistically.

Calarco then illustrates Levinas’s claims in *Totality and Infinity* that the Other who imposes ethical demands must be human, before presenting Levinas’s maddening equivocations, when in an interview, he maintains absolute human priority on one hand, while on the other making limited (“One cannot entirely refuse the face of the animal.”) and agnostic (“I cannot say at what moment you have the right to be called a ‘face.’ I don’t know if a snake has a face.”) admissions that could allow an interspecies extension of his ethical framework.

Building upon the idea of agnosticism, Calarco suggests that one might remain faithful to the basic Levinasian structure in which ethics involves having one’s ego displaced by an encounter that moves one to responsibility, while remaining open to the possibility that such an encounter might occur in ways other than those that serve as Levinas’s main examples; one might, for example, be moved by qualities other than the Other’s destitution, respond in ways other than giving “with both hands,” and be provoked by something non-human. Calarco proposes a quasi-Levinasian ethical agnosticism that refuses final answers to the question of who or what can impose ethical demands and provides an alternative to the recent – and mistaken – philosophical obsession with delimiting the criteria of ethical considerability, an activity that, even

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<sup>1</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Sean Hand (London: The Althone Press, 1990), 153.

when pursued by those sympathetic to animal concerns, is philosophically and politically dubious.

Calarco closes the chapter by smartly defending his decision to write a book about *animal* ethics at all, responding to the possible objection that the agnosticism he defends calls for casting a wider net and not limiting the discussion to animals. His impassioned plea stresses that addressing specific questions about non-human animals is required to disrupt the tradition's entrenched and harmful metaphysical anthropocentrism and to stop the horrors of the modern meat and research machines, and he suggests that his approach might help resolve certain disciplinary skirmishes between pro-animal thinkers, environmentalists, ecofeminists, etc.

In the third chapter, Calarco maps the question of the animal through the writings of Giorgio Agamben. It begins with this author's early contentions that the Western philosophical tradition, including Heidegger, remains bound by thinking about the specificity of human experience and the human-animal relationship only in negative terms, as when it locates the key moments in the transition from non-linguistic, non-political animals to linguistic and political human beings in a mystical, ineffable Voice that transcends animality but has not or can not be linguistically articulated.

Calarco then delineates Agamben's attempts to think of these moments and of this transition in more positive terms. He explores the difference between the modern solipsistic and pre-social view of the self and Agamben's picture of the self as a linguistic construct. He also considers the contrast between the traditional idea that humans "have language" while non-human animals do not and Agamben's view that non-human animals are fundamentally and totally immersed in language, while humans are

fundamentally deprived of language, beginning in a pre-linguistic state of infancy, marked by openness to the specifically human forms of history, culture, and politics that language eventually confers. Thus, Calarco shows that while Agamben attempts to think differently about the roots and implications of the essential distinction between specifically human modes of being and modes shared with non-human animals, his early work is part of a tradition for which the general need to delineate and separate is unquestioned. As with Heidegger and Levinas, Calarco suggests that empirical ethology undermines Agamben's neat lines of demarcation, and he questions Agamben's apparent assumptions that only humans are linguistic and political creatures and that the political realm only includes humans.

The remainder of the chapter focuses on Agamben's more recent work to illustrate Agamben's increasing attention to problems that accompany attempts to cleanly distinguish the human from the animal. Here, Agamben contends that such delineations lie at the root of many interhuman political problems insofar as exclusion and oppression proceed on the back of a human / animal distinction, where certain qualities are identified as "animal" and then attributed to the marginalized human group to justify their subordination. Building on this, Calarco draws on Agamben's idea of the "anthropological machine" to indicate the structures that must be dismantled on the way to a more relational ontology and a more inclusive political order.

The final chapter begins with an outline of the importance of animal questions for Jacques Derrida, starting with a lucid and succinct presentation of how deconstruction works with the human-animal distinction—a point to which Derrida returned repeatedly—illuminating how the human-animal binary opposition obscures differences,

pretending to recognize two cleanly and simply differentiated homogenous groups in what is actually a plethora of different types of being.

Following this presentation of Derrida's deconstructive critique, Calarco explores Derrida's more positive (but not fully articulated or developed) ethical and political strategies. Inspired by Derrida's discussion of scientific and horticultural abuses, a powerful section explores the value of comparing the mind-boggling amounts of violence practiced in factory farming with the Holocaust, arguing that to deny *a priori* any possibility that the two situations should be compared on the grounds that humans deserve special standing simply by virtue of species membership is to commit an anthropocentric fallacy that withstands neither scientific nor ethical critique.

The next section analyzes the "proto-ethical" demand that precedes moral assessments and political policies, presenting the way Derrida reads Jeremy Bentham's famous question, "Can they suffer?" to highlight not shared capacity among human and non-human animals, per the traditional interpretation, but, in line with a Levinasian dynamic, a shared incapacity and experience of susceptibility to suffering affliction. This is followed by an analysis of Derrida's ruminations on an encounter during which his cat saw him naked to show that the kinds of self-reflection and responsibility that proto-ethical encounters command is provoked not only by exposure to the other animal's suffering, but by revelations of other qualities as well, such as inscrutability or cognizance.

In contrast with thinkers such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan, who advocate extending established humanistic ethical systems to include non-human animals, Calarco opens the next section by affirming Derrida's suspicion as to the efficacy of existing

moral and political frameworks for handling and promoting the kinds of ethical imperatives at stake in inter-species relationships—these frameworks being tainted by problematic notions of subjectivity, dubious value hierarchies, and a compulsion for exclusionary line-drawing. Drawing on Derrida’s idea of “carnophallologocentrism,” Calarco construes these modern humanist juridical and exclusionary elements as “quasi-invisible constraints” that preclude the kinds of ontological and ethical considerations that interspecies relationships require, marking a failure of imagination that mistakenly attempts to extend a system that should be cast aside.

With reference to Derrida’s article “Eating Well,” this section includes a penetrating analysis of the status of vegetarianism with reference to deconstruction. Here, Calarco problematizes any good conscience one might hope to achieve by adopting vegetarianism, emphasizing both the stricter demands of veganism and the fact that any currently possible human diet in modern industrial society will involve harm to animal life—a situation requiring not a simple decision that allows complacency, but a continually vigilant striving for an ideal, the full realization of which is ruled out from the start.

In the final section of the chapter, Calarco notes that even after Derrida, the tentacles of anthropocentrism reach broadly through numerous disciplines and institutions, requiring extensive historical and genealogical analysis. He argues that while Derrida’s work is helpful for showing that the limit between humanity and animality is not as sharp or simply drawn as the tradition would like to think, it is limited by its retention of line drawing (albeit more tentative and complex) and ultimately fails to decisively challenge the metaphysical anthropocentrism of the Western tradition, offering

nothing to replace the reductive binary human-animal opposition that Derrida so thoroughly problematizes. In the forceful closing pages, Calarco outlines an alternative ontological vision, inspired by Nietzschean and Deleuzean materialism, to rival the traditional human / animal distinction that Derrida frustratingly refuses to abandon, driving home the central thesis that the human-animal distinction should be surrendered for the benefit of other animals.

Calarco's book has much to offer a broad range of readers. The author has a gift for explaining complex ideas clearly, so that readers unschooled in these thinkers but sympathetic to their broader phenomenological, cultural, and ethical trends can follow the argument; he also explains things concisely, so as not to be tedious for readers who are more familiar with the material. With unwavering focus, he illuminates the many ways that anthropocentrism runs, sometimes subtly, through recent Continental philosophy, and he offers insightful and creative suggestions for modes of thought and practice that exceed these anthropocentric limitations. Throughout the work, Calarco skillfully bridges the gaps between Continental and analytic philosophy, situating his points with reference to prominent lines of utilitarian and rights-based Anglo-American pro-animal approaches, and between philosophy and other disciplines, supporting his arguments with biology, cognitive ethology, and the kinds of scientific empirical references that are sometimes missing in philosophical speculation.

On a critical note, though part of the book's success is its succinctness, certain arguments might have been strengthened had Calarco analyzed a few additional texts, such as certain of Heideggerian lecture courses before *Being and Time*, where he describes animal worlds, including that of the snail, in ways that might have further

illuminated Calarco's observance that Heidegger's work becomes increasingly severe in positing abyssal ruptures between human and non-human animal being. He might also have considered some of Levinas's (especially later) work dealing with theology, given the role of such concerns in fueling Levinas's humanism. In a related point, while Calarco's summaries of basic ideas and terminology in the authors he investigates are clear and informative, occasionally a term is introduced that might have been well served with additional explanation and contextualization; for example, "onto-theology" and the figure of the "event" are introduced in a way that seems to assume an audience familiar with how these ideas function in the thinkers who use them, but many readers might need more information to fully absorb the strong points Calarco makes along these lines.

These minor considerations do not undermine the general success of Calarco's impressive work but perhaps suggest additional valuable paths to pursue, by which his compelling arguments might be extended and deepened. In any event, the clearly and passionately argued *Zoographies* is a definitive exposition of the anthropocentrism in the philosophers it discusses. An important addition to the vigorous discussion of animality taking place in contemporary Continental philosophy, it suggests implications for a range of disciplines involved in the burgeoning fields that constitute current animal studies.