

Overcoming Postmodernity? Reconsidering Animal Life from Heidegger to Derrida

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I would like to approach the question of language as crucial for the difference between human and non-human animals in the scenario cast by contemporary continental philosophy. I would also like to use this and other topics as a chance to take some general considerations on postmodernity into account, the latter intended as the historical condition in which we are supposed to live.

Postmodernity can be defined as the age in which all the so-called “big-picture” narrations, as far as they are grounded in some metaphysical theory, are declared to be finished. The age in which human speech has been set free from any reference to a unitary framework and a metaphysical Truth (with a capital “T”) and thus assigned to pluralism and tolerance. Perspectivism and pluralism in the theory of knowledge has led to a new communicative dimension in which anyone has the right to propose – and eventually submit to a discussion ruled by looser criteria – his version of things. The world opened by postmodernity is intended to be a richer one, a world in which anyone can talk. To attain this condition, the thoughts of postmodernity make explicit reference to contemporary thinkers who have promoted the so-called “destruction” of the metaphysical tradition. By merging instances coming from many different theories and areas of philosophy, those thinkers who endorse the idea of a postmodern approach to the history of philosophy feel legitimate in concluding that the basic concepts of metaphysics have finally ceased to work productively in our cultural background. Despite their claim to express the eternal and fundamental value of knowledge and ethics, concepts such as Truth, Absolute and Transcendence reveal themselves as historically conditioned, as products of some historical framework, and thus lose their ability to give some unitary sense to the bundle of our experiences.

If one should thus mention only one keyword as representative of the postmodern condition, I would say that this could only be the acknowledgment of the idea of historical finiteness as the basic coordinate of any form of thinking and experience. Whether we perceive it as a limiting or tragic condition, explore its possibilities with a feeling of relief, or celebrate it with a sort of narcissistic attitude, there can be no doubt that the acceptance of historical finiteness as a basic and insurmountable condition plays a key role in our existential, theoretical and even scientific approach to life. Precisely this acceptance is the way we can get rid of obsolete presuppositions, authorities and theories. So the acceptance of the finiteness should set speech free. This means: to set speech free from any rule which should be prescribed to language “from the outside” or “from above”. Whereas human language is conceived of as a system of rules that emerge through language itself and can be replaced as topics and players change. It is thus no coincidence that many representatives of this idea prefer to speak about philosophy in terms of a sort of global “conversation”.

So the abandonment of transcendence and the endorsement of finiteness should leave room for speech as a dimension one can enter to claim some rights, to demand his proper place in the global conversation. In the postmodern age, anyone should legitimately be able to take part in the construction of the world as a both a linguistic and historical product. So the possibility of being “someone”, of being free from authority and indisputable presuppositions, seems to be deeply rooted in the ability to take part in speech and conversation. To enter the global conversation means thus to have the ability and the will to talk. This means that something like a human being is defined by its linguistic condition. That the very identity of a human being –be it a single man, a particular

aspect of a single man, or even a group of men or a population – is connected with the ability and the will to make some use of language. This connects the notion of identity with the notion of linguistic responsibility in more than a casual way.

As contemporary philosophy has clearly shown, the Western philosophical tradition has played with this idea and, in the main, come to a sort of ontological bond between personal identity and responsible use of language. One is recognised as a legal person insofar as one can claim to speak and answer “for himself”, insofar as one is “responsible”. In modern philosophy since Descartes, the idea of personal responsibility emerges as a result of the possibility of the I-function (the ego cogito) being ontologically independent and self-grounded. The linguistic ability to say “I” – that is: to be conscious of all experiences that can be unified around an identical pole like a “person” or a “subject” – is thus the condition to be given ontological status and recognition, which means: to be able to claim rights for oneself and respond to one’s own actions.

The range of this idea is so wide that it has determined Western philosophical tradition despite any transition between the ages. Even within those perspectives that aimed at destroying or deconstructing the concept of personal identity as the ontological basis for the foundation of knowledge and ethics, the central role of language for the definition of the human life has never been put into question. And even those thinkers who worked intensively to deconstruct human subjectivity by showing it as structurally exposed to and determined by other forces, maintain language (its possible use) as the crucial feature to be analysed in order to realise this programme.

2. Heidegger’s Destruction

Heidegger’s philosophical project in the years around his masterpiece, *Being and Time*, is aimed at destructing human subjectivity in the traditional sense. In Heidegger’s jargon, “destruction” (Abbau, Destruktion) means something very specific, i.e. to bring back human subjectivity as it expresses itself in theoretical and epistemic attitude, to the living forces that determine it originally. The first step of this enterprise is to define the concept of “factual life” (Faktizität) as presupposed to any theoretical level by taking inspiration from the continuity of the life-forms described by Aristotle in many passages of his corpus.

Heidegger’s appropriation of Aristotle’s treatment of life takes place most intensively in the years 1921 to 1926 and culminates in the 1924 course, *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*¹. In this course, Heidegger tries to establish a strong connection between high epistemic functions such as speech and intellect and the basic forms of animal life. The result is that concepts and logical forms seem to be deeply rooted in the way an animal embodies the original dynamic of “life”. Emotions, desires, passions and affects are the ground upon which every animal makes its life significant. The affects – says Heidegger – are not mental states, but refer to the disposition of the living in his world, how he stands towards something, how he lets something affect or concern him. This ability to be emotionally situated towards something in the world (in German: *Befindlichkeit*) is presented as a fundamental structure of living beings themselves and seems to belong to any being endowed with perception. It refers to the fact that a living being always finds itself pleasantly or unpleasantly disposed toward what it perceives in the world. Desire, perception and appetite belong thus to the most primitive animals, as well as some kinds of representations of pleasure and pain.

So, it is life in general which is characterised as the movement of desire, or, in Heidegger’s language, the movement of care: an emotionally oriented intentionality which specifies every form of life. But, as Aristotle had already shown, there are animals that specify this basic level via interaction with other members of the species and because of the necessity of elaborating common strategies in order to survive and to reproduce. According to this logic: to communicate the content

1 Heidegger (2002).

of some emotion, to attract other members toward something pleasant or to warn them from something unpleasant or dangerous. This gives birth to language as we know it, i.e. as a social phenomenon which is possible only on the basis of associated life. So the basic level of language as a feature of animal life is the level of communication in terms of a social disposition. “Meaning” emerges thus as the basic structure of animal life as determined by language before any possible development of it in terms of statements, categories, concepts or logical forms. This gives birth to the primary emerging of a “world” before its establishing in a “notion” or a “concept”². As Heidegger says: “Life” refers to a mode of being, indeed a mode of being-in-a-world. A living thing is not simply at hand, but is in a world in that it has its world. An animal is not simply moving down the road, pushed by some mechanism. It is in the world in the sense of having it. So, the analysis of animal life shows how much the structure of life as determined by meaning and intentionality is that of an “association”, a community. Language does not emerge as a means of communication among isolated subjects, but as a structure grounded upon the necessity to take orientation towards something which appears as originally framed in the mutual representation of the environment. This ability to share meaning and representations is what we call life in terms of being-in-the-world. Out of this basic level, the difference between the primitive form of language and the human one also emerges:

Enticing means to bring another animal into the same disposition; warning is the repelling from this same disposition. Enticing and warning as repelling and bringing, in themselves, have in their ground being-with-one-another. Enticing and warning already show that animals are with one another. Being-with-one-another becomes manifest precisely in the specific being-character of animals as $\phi\omega\nu\acute{\eta}$. It is neither exhibited nor manifested that something as such is there. Animals do not subsequently come along to ascertain that something is at hand; they only indicate it within the orbit of their animalistic having-to-do. Since animals indicate the threatening, or alarming, and so on, they signal, in this indicating of the being-there of the world, their being in the world. The world is indicated as $\acute{\eta}\delta\acute{\upsilon}$ and, at the same time, it is a signaling of being, being threatened, having-found, and so on³.

This difference implies that every “animal” world stay in some kind of connection with each other, but only insofar as they are significant according to the pleasure-pain dynamics of each environment. Human language, however, seems to have other specifications. So the way in which non-human animals are in the world may be called existential insofar as the main basic structures of factual life are at work in that meaningful having-to-do with an environment⁴. This means: exactly like in Aristotle, that the highest forms of life seem to emerge as particular specifications of the very same basic structure. Animal life as generally described by Heidegger in 1924 is the basis out of which a genuine existence – to speak in the language of Being and Time - can develop itself. This also means – and what concerns Heidegger most of all - that what we call “conceptuality” (Begrifflichkeit) is neither autonomous nor original, rather it is deeply grounded upon (and also rooted in) the basic forms of animal life in general. A deep continuity specifies animal life as a meaningful oriented existence, as something determined by sense, language, intentionality and representation even at its lowest levels. Very far from that kind of biologism and mechanicism Heidegger intended to oppose in those years.

On the other hand, the relationship an animal has to his world changes according to the different capabilities that emerge out of the ones shared by every species. So the peculiarity of animal life as embodied by human beings is a result of the particular capabilities that specify human beings. The main and most important is that form of social communication out of which analysis we can

2 See on this: McNeill (1999).

3 Heidegger (2002; eng. trans. p. 39).

4 The rooting of Heidegger’s “Existentials” into animal life “in general” or “as such” was pointed out by Bailey (2011).

discover the other forms as something not entirely developed: logos. The peculiarity of this kind of communicative (and social) form of language is to allow the formation of meanings that are not necessarily connected with a strategy or an operative behavior. The most important feature of human logos is to make something meaningful by representing in abstracto the totality of its features (essence) and of the possible connections that can link it to other sources of stimulus. Logos makes something meaningful by putting a perceived thing in connection (symploke) with something else. In human logos we experience the world by representing something as something else, or better: by interpreting (hermeneuein) something as (als) something else. We can interpret a flat stone as a surface upon which one can sit, stand, eat or cut because of the fact that we frame that connection into a net of possible connections ruled by our social experience of the world according to a need we have to fulfill. Something appears as meaningful, i.e., useful for an operation, only within a totality of plausible possibilities of connection which lies in the background. Things we perceive and whose representations we elaborate are always perceived and elaborated out of a totality of possible meanings (the totality of language) which we have simply inherited, not created. This totality precedes us and determines us as speaking animals in a way that is irreducible to other forms of life. This is the reason we can also frame and interpret the other forms of life as something related to ours not only according to the pain-pleasure dynamic. We have – says Heidegger – uniquely as animals, the possibilities of letting something “be”, of considering something in a pure relationship with itself. We are the only animals upon the earth capable of objectivity, ontology and metaphysics.

It so seems indisputable that in Heidegger men only have the possibility of reading other forms of animal life as part of a totality that includes everything, whereas the encirclements of meaning in which other species live can get in touch only according to the primitive dynamic of pain-pleasure. Animal worlds (or environments) are not liable to touch each other ontologically, i.e.: to recognise each other in terms of letting something else simply “be”. According to Heidegger, animals simply do not see (i.e. do not confer any meaning to) things in their world that are, according to the pain-pleasure dynamic, simply indifferent, that do not play any role (either positive or negative) in their strategy of survival. Whereas “objectivity” means to see something as determined and meaningful only by its features, and not by the use we can make of it. Animals do not need to go through the totality of things to experience something; neither do they need to address something in respect of features that are not useful (or dangerous) for their life. They are – according to Aristotle – incapable of theorein, of simply looking-at, of a look not led by instrumentality.

But this opinion also places Heidegger’s perspective in a strange and twofold situation. If only men are capable of existence in an ontological sense, i.e. by addressing something in itself, in its being, this also means that, due to the continuity of life-forms, human beings do live in the highest conceivable form, so being at the top of an existential scala naturae. Only human beings do technically exist because they experience life in the completeness of its coordinates, including death. This is precisely one of the most controversial points of the discussion Heidegger carries out in the 1929/30 course, *The fundamental concepts of metaphysics: World, Finiteness, Solitude*⁵. Technically speaking, only human beings die. All the other animals simply cease to live. But “to die” means something radically different.

Because of their attitude to objectivity, i.e. to the ability to represent something as determined by itself and not by an individual look or perspective, human beings can die. Only human beings can represent their death, i.e. represent their own life without themselves, represent life as something which continues without that single human being. According to Heidegger, “to die” in an existential sense means: to be able to carry out one’s own life by representing death as its extreme possibility, by including the surviving of life in general in one’s own existential project. This is what Heidegger calls “being finite”. To be determined by a closure, by the impossibility of experiencing one’s own

5 Heidegger (1983).

death and by the awareness of this fact as the crucial one which rules and determines our existential projects. All other animals do have limits, but are not finite. So, exactly as man's life holds a different rank in the universal continuity of life, even man's death can be something more than a return to the world of bare matter. Only human animals can face death as the extreme possibility of life, i.e. as the possibility which determines all the others that constitute the human world. This also explains why nonhuman animals are declared incapable of experiencing a sense of otherness, and, consequently, of being-with-another in general. But this also connects human ability of logos with the capability to become political. In short terms: to experience life not only as a meaningful structure (zoe), but also as ontologically exposed life (bios). An associated life-form which operates on the basis of the inclusion of personal death into its own limits and rules.

But if only human beings can die (so being both metaphysical and political), this also means that, as it probably happens even in our usual perception, only a human being can technically be "killed". Exactly as well as only a human animal can be charged (for the time being, at least) to have killed another (human) animal. This also explains why, in the ordinary feeling, a dead human body deserves more respect than a simple animal carcass, being capable to be honored by a funeral, a burial, or some other kind of ritual preservation. At closer look, this happens because in the screaming of a dying man echoes the possibility of logos, or better: the possibility of its violent privation as something nonhuman and unjustifiable. Whereas in the screaming of a dying animal resounds only another signal: a mere note of pain and warning addressed to the other members of its limited world.

3. The current debate

Heidegger's ambiguous attitude towards animal life, as expressed in the 1924 and 1929 courses, has been the starting point of many discussions from Jacques Derrida⁶ to Giorgio Agamben⁷ and more⁸. Heidegger's view was the chance for Jacques Derrida to trace back a common line of thinking which connects the most influential philosophers of the Western tradition, including those we've analysed above:

In spite of the immense differences and contradictions that separate them, which I would be the last to want to minimize [...] Heidegger, Levinas, and Lacan share, vis-à-vis what they call "the animal", a considerable number of what I'll call "beliefs," which, if you prefer, you might name axioms, prejudices, presumptions, or presuppositions. In any case I would like to show that they, like Descartes, think that in contrast to us humans – a difference that is determined by this fact – the animal neither speaks nor responds, that its capacity to produce signs is foreign to language and limited or fixed by a program. Not one of them has ever taken into account the essential or structural differences among animal species. Not one of them has taken into account, in a serious and determinate manner, the fact that we hunt, kill, exterminate, eat, and sacrifice animals, use them, make them work or submit them to experiments that are forbidden to be carried out on humans. Apart from Lacan – but this, however, in no way changes the traditional axiomatics of his work – not one of them takes into account animal sexuality. Not one of them really integrates progress in ethological or primatological knowledge into his work⁹.

But most of all, the interpretations we've focused upon operate within a strange paradox: they claim to ground the destruction of traditional subjectivity and to remove the sovereignty of the human

6 Derrida (2006). This text is the collection of conferences held in 1997.

7 Agamben (2002).

8 Calarco (2008).

9 Derrida (2006; eng. trans. p. 89).

being upon a new evaluation of dimensions like Otherness (Lacan, Levinas) and Difference (Heidegger). But, rather, they let this dimension play only into the finite horizon of man's relationship with the elements of his environments, with his world. This brings Derrida to the striking conclusions that even what we may call a positive or tolerant attitude of human beings towards "animals" (so improperly called) is the expression of the same anthropomorphism. The will to recognise animals as "persons" or even "legal persons" is grounded upon the idea that only human beings have the right to concede rights to other forms of life and only insofar as the latter seem to bear human or quasi-human features like emotions, the capacity to suffer, cognitive abilities and so on. The sovereign ability of human language is so wide that we are able to let other forms of life "speak", i.e. to give word to silent things, to speak "for" whoever is not capable of speaking for himself. So it's the same logic which moves us to concede rights to partially speaking people such as children, disabled people, outsiders and – why not? – animals. It only depends on the range we assign to our language ability. What Derrida denounces is that the notions of difference and otherness that rule over our approach to the animal world are not radical enough. As long as they are intended from an anthropomorphic perspective, they are still dependent on the identity of a subject that bears the trait of the divided psyche (Lacan), the ethical subject (Lacan) or the being-there [Dasein] (Heidegger). In affirming its supremacy over other forms of life, this new kind of subject does not destroy the traditional idea of subjectivity but only replaces it.

What Derrida unfortunately left only as a hint towards a positive approach to the question was more recently developed by a series of studies whose programme is to make an explicit difference between such problematics as the question of "Animal Rights" and "Animal Studies" in general and a radically new approach which should be possible towards the question of animality in general¹⁰. In these perspectives

"animality" means a life that extends itself beyond the taxonomic boundaries Biology or Geology have fixed. Therefore, an animality event can be something which is not living. There is animality each time a life in this wider sense appears which is not forced into the limits of our classifications; a life which runs away from all sides; a life which is not worried by our ontological concerns¹¹.

The most interesting point in this perspective is that it gains its consistence from the idea that animality is something that should not be overcome but, rather, genuinely appropriated again:

"Animality" means a life that completely and radically coincides with itself. On the contrary, since actual human life is completely detached from the immediacy of the body, there is no animality in human life. Human life is a zoological life without animality. Homo sapiens is human only because s/he does not know her/his own animality¹².

And so apt to extended to every forms of "life" in the broadest sense:

And it is also something that can and should be extended to other forms of subsistence, insofar as these are grounded upon a bodily constitution. Animality is a life that simply lives the life it is

10 Among the various (and constantly increasing in number) tendencies that could be briefly quoted as paradigmatic of the current scenario: *Animality Studies*: an emerging interdisciplinary academic field focused on the cultural study of animals and animality. It can be distinguished from animal studies and critical animal studies by its resistance to animal rights or animal welfare as an explicit justification for work in this field (Lundblaud, 2002); *Zoography*: a perspective developed by Matthew Calarco (Calarco, 2008) who is opposed to Heidegger and Derrida's notion of difference: the idea of a radical *indistinction* which rules over any form of animal life, insofar as what specifies life in general is bodily and fleshy constitution; *Philosophy of animality*: a perspective recently developed by the Italian philosopher of language and psychologist, Felice Cimatti (Cimatti, 2013).

11 Cimatti (2015, p. 42).

12 Ebd., p. 50.

actually living. From this point of view, animality is not restricted to animals or plants; a stone either stays where it happens to stay. Animality does not look for something else; it already is. Animality is not motionless, because it favours the intrinsic movement of life. In this sense, animality coincides with immanence¹³.

All these new tendencies thus place themselves in explicit or implicit opposition to the postmodernist focus on the key role played by human language and human finiteness. This culminates in Giorgio Agamben's opinion, according to which philosophers like Heidegger "strove to separate man from the living being" so re-establishing the very same "anthropogenic machine" that specified modernity¹⁴.

4. Conclusion

Under this respect, the very notion of postmodernity seems to be a paradox, because – despite any contrary announcement – the modern age did not simply cease to be but has, rather, settled again, although in a renewed version. So, it can be argued that such a cultural framework, like the overcoming of modernity, has ever been effectively at work. And one can conclude by saying that what still needs to be overcome is the idea of a man who refuses to let go of his sovereign role, even in that narcissistically deconstructed version which has determined his image over the past century.

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13 Ebd., p. 52.

14 Agamben (2002; eng. trans. p. 39).