

BOOK REVIEWS

The Current State of the “Question of the Animal”

Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal

By Cary Wolfe (Ed.)

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Review by Fareed Awan

Deleuze and Guattari understood that to find the deepest assumptions and aporia, one must begin with today's mundane; this method inspires Cary Wolfe in his edited collection, *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*. Wolfe is the author of *Critical Environments* and *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* and Professor of English at Rice University. The fundamental flaw upon which Wolfe is most focused is the deeply rooted speciesism which infects modernity from Descartes on forward, from philosophy to linguistics. Furthermore, Wolfe believes that “[Animal rights] philosophical frame remains an essentially humanist one in its most important philosophers (utilitarianism in Peter Singer, neo-Kantianism in Tom Regan), thus effacing the very difference from the animal other that animal rights sought to respect in the first place.” (Wolfe 2003, xii) The humanist liberal tradition has nothing to offer but the same old conflicts about subject-object, line drawing and moral calculus. Wolfe finds posthumanism to be the way around this trammel.

Animals and animality are certainly one of the most obvious starting points for understanding the posthuman. The connection between the animal and the Other has come to a head in postmodern theory, especially in the final works of Jacques Derrida. And in light of the growing influence of the animal rights movement, “the question of the animal” becomes increasingly pressing for both political and philosophical reasons.

Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal ought to be seen as a supplementary work to Wolfe's *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), which contains the bulk of Wolfe's theoretical work in defining “the question of the animal” and identifying speciesism in the philosophical tradition. What

Zoontologies is meant to be an initial venture into a multidisciplinary experiment with the “question of the animal.” Apart from Wolfe’s contribution (a reprint of the central chapter in *Animal Rites*) and a newly appearing translation of Jacques Derrida’s “And Say the Animal Responded?”, major theoretical work is lacking. *Zoontologies* itself is certainly an early work in a movement just coming into focus.

Wolfe begins *Zoontologies* with a solid criticism of Wittgenstein, Cavell, Lyotard and Levinas. At the root of the work, however, are Freud and Kant. Both are constitutive of the contemporary method of approaching ethics, in that the vocabulary especially separates human and animal and blinds us to the ontological and ethical being of animals. Levinas is an interesting case in that he does address animals directly and seems to struggle with an answer. Inexplicably in *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas dismisses animals as “too stupid” and unable to universalize, but does not explain why they do not have a face. It is the face that calls out to the other for Levinas, not rationality. Wolfe makes his point about speciesism and his criticism is well founded and neatly argued, but nothing new.

The second piece of the book is a contribution from Ursula Heise. She analyzes film and literary works from Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* to *Jurassic Park*. Much of the work examines the portrayal of natural and technological life, but Heise argues, though briefly, for an interpretation of life, along the lines of Donna Haraway, which would radically change the importance of species. Paul Patton expertly explains the truly complex power dynamics of horse training with an obvious relation to human socialization and dominance. Patton makes a strong case that horse training should be thought of not as exploitation, but as “government” in Foucault’s sense. Judith Roof adds a more technical exposition of Freud’s relation to the protist specifically and Lewontin’s relation to the whole economy of human-animal relations. “And Say the Animal Responded?” is Jacques Derrida’s addition, a new translation from a 1997 lecture where Derrida clears up earlier ambiguities about the concept of “trace” and allusions to Lacan in earlier works. Steve Baker provides a wonderful survey of artists and their creative responses to both animals and animality. This is something of a departure from the earlier texts in the collection, and one that segues cleanly into Alphonso Lingis’ vividly and poetically written account of the face, gesture and animality. The collection concludes with Charlie LeDuff’s chilling account of race relations in a slaughterhouse, where hierarchy of species, though not explicitly stated, provides a profound framework.

Zoontologies is an excellent reflection of the current state of “the question of the animal,” and the selection of articles certainly provides a broad representation of subjects and methodologies. Paul Patton’s well crafted exposition of training qua socialization stands out as the best example of a genuinely profound animal-human dynamic and something more than a critique. Alphonso Lingis’ article “Animal Body: Inhuman Face” runs against the grain of most of the book, where analysis of the roles that animals play and the assumptions behind these relationships inform the (post)human. Lingis finds that animals themselves have a face, and that animality which is critical to human experience is all but ignored. This portrayal of the human as misleading, and Lingis’s evocation to focus on all faces, not just human ones, is one of the most significant moments in the book.

While Wolfe’s foray into this fertile ground is interesting for some novel works, there is nothing groundbreaking. Wolfe’s stated task was to provide a series of starting points for answering “the question of the animal” and on this he does deliver. But the project itself is fairly conservative in scope. In fairness, the area is underdeveloped and Wolfe’s scholarship is quite respectable, but the scant amount of literary work seems to weaken Wolfe’s case. While Heise’s chapter is informative, it is a missed opportunity. The collection would have been better served by the inclusion of more dense works. Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* goes beyond the human in presenting animality, the experience of the animal and deconstructing humanity in ways that Haraway and Dick do not address. Changing the fundamental experience of animals and animality seems a better route to the posthuman than reflecting upon current understanding. In *Zoontologies*, this area is left, quite surprisingly in my opinion, unexplored.

The essays do fulfill Wolfe’s stated project of providing a broad sketch of “the question of the animal” from which the posthuman may be better understood. For those interested in examining the philosophical ambivalence towards animals and animality this volume is an excellent starting point. Wolfe has an obvious understanding of the material and (an infrequently exercised) skill in making the case for posthumanism deeply and deftly. And the work of the contributors ranges from profound to solid (if unremarkable). But this work provides few answers to its own question. And for the idea of the post-human to mean anything, serious philosophical work remains. In the end, Wolfe’s *Zoontologies* rests too comfortably on such unstable intellectual ground.