



## Animating Our Selves: The ‘Irreducible Multiplicity’ and Humans

Sandy L. Hudock (Colorado State University-Pueblo)\*

### Abstract

*Animal agency on a species level is currently being considered in the social sciences and in society at large, validating Derrida’s claims of ontic multiplicity and its resultant ethical implications. Political scientists and geographers are regarding species as social and economic players and analyzing their roles in the context of biotechnological advances and the human communities that form around them. Case studies illustrate how Derrida’s arguments compiled in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* are becoming tacitly integrated across disciplines.*

Wittgenstein once said, “[I]f a lion could speak we would not understand him” because we don’t share the ‘form of lion-life’” (Crist, 2004, page 36).

I would like to counter him with the following images. On weekends, when the alarm clock is not set, a black cat perches on my bureau, staring me into wakefulness that I might utilize my miraculous opposable thumbs to open her can of food. On the day my father died, I took a break from making the endless, necessary phone calls to get some air outside. My most compliant, meek mustang mare uncharacteristically rolled on her back, working her legs and snorting, making me laugh. Jacques Derrida, upon getting out of his shower, was confronted by his female cat gazing at him, compelling him to question the difference between his and her senses of modesty, self consciousness, and subjectivity. Until recently, when humans addressed animals in formal interdisciplinary discussion, it was done with the fear of being perceived as anthropomorphic or of using a broader, glossed representation of a species. In the second case, the species becomes a caricature with psychological underpinnings and little basis in biological study

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- 2200 Bonforte Blvd., Pueblo, CO 81001-4901 ([sandy.hudock@colostate-pueblo.edu](mailto:sandy.hudock@colostate-pueblo.edu))

or behavioral knowledge. In both cases, animals have been depicted without considering their own ontological or political agency.

Current work being done in political geography, philosophy, and sociology has a unifying theme that at this time in history, we are actively engaging animal existence, taking *them* seriously, as economic and political players, and yes, as friends who share our daily lives, in spite of Martin Heidegger's insistence that animals are "poor in the world and without language merely liv[ing] enshrouded in a disinhibiting ring that renders (them) incapable of both *eksistence* and subjectivity" (Calarco, 2004, page 188).<sup>i</sup> Apparently, Martin's cat was not allowed in the bathroom.

In 1997, Derrida spoke on the subject of animality at a three day conference at Cerisy. His addresses were translated by David Willis, edited by Marie-Louise Mallet, and published in 2008 as *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Derrida speaks to animals as subject, by simultaneously deconstructing the historical place and view of the animal within Western philosophy according to Descartes, Kant, Lacan, Levinas, and Heidegger; and by negating the concept of 'the animal' as singular, arguing that there is no such thing, by invoking:

the infinite space that separates the lizard from the dog, the protozoan from the dolphin, the shark from the lamb, the parrot from the chimpanzee, the camel from the eagle, the squirrel from the tiger or the elephant from the cat, the ant from the silkworm or the hedgehog from the echidna. (402)

Without negating the "abyssal rupture...the limit presumed to separate man in general from the animal in general," Derrida regards using a general singular to refer to the entire animal kingdom as "perhaps one of the greatest and most symptomatic *asinanities* of those who call themselves humans" (40-1). So **compelled** was he to go beyond this gross oversimplification, that he coined the term '*animot*' to signify "an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals"(41). He would have the sheer variety of life forms subvert the dualism promulgated by Western philosophy: by acknowledging the differences/differ<sup>ance</sup> (evoking his work in *Of Grammatology*), the human/animal binary is dissolved and a space for ontological acceptance is created. He urges his listeners to substitute *animot*, with his characteristic playfulness toward language, for the singular, with the intention of positioning this historical misconception of singularity firmly in the realm of ethics and social justice, stating that

There is no Animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single, indivisible limit. We have to envisage the existence of 'living creatures,' whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity. ...there is an immense multiplicity of other living things that cannot in any way be homogenized, except by means of violence and willful ignorance, within the category of what is called the animal....The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animal is not simply a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical

authority, it is also a crime. Not a crime against animality...but a crime of the first order against the animals, against animals. Do we consent to presume that every murder, every transgression of the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill' concerns only man...that...there are crimes only 'against humanity'? (2008, pages 47-8)<sup>ii</sup>

Matthew Calarco, who writes on ethics and animality, describes Derrida's **premise** as "nothing less than a contestation of the primacy of human beings with respect to the ethical" (175). The current *zeitgeist* reflects this concern for ethical treatment of animals on both the public and personal levels thirteen years after Derrida gave his addresses. From animal science professor Temple Grandin's work to minimize the terror cattle experience in their final moments before slaughter, (granted, not a full acknowledgment of their ontic worth according to Derrida, or they would not be slaughtered in the first place), or pending legislation in California that requires convicted felon animal abusers to be registered similarly to sex offenders, there is a conscious movement toward valuing the agency of animals.<sup>iii</sup> This movement inherently reflects Derrida's rejection of the animal as singular and his insistence that such a limited understanding precipitates human violence against animals. In his later years, Derrida claimed that 'the question of the animal' was the pressing ethical question for society to address.

In making his argument for extending ethical consideration, he goes so far as to implicate Kantian morality as war-based on the principles of practical reason and directed against animals themselves, inverting its dialectical nature with his premise that

such a bellicose hatred in the name of human rights, far from rescuing man from the animality that he claims to rise above, confirms the waging of a kind of species war and confirms that the man of practical reason remains bestial in his defensive and repressive aggressivity, in his exploiting the animal to death. (101)

In making his own 'abysmal rupture' with the Western canon regarding the human /animal relationship, Derrida deconstructs key canonical philosophers' definitions of the animal, if they bother to address their existence at all. Nick Bingham, in his examination of the geographies of biotechnologies, cites this deconstruction while characterizing the Western philosophical tradition's construct of animality as follows, and I have taken the liberty of inserting the names of the philosophers whose thought is examined. The heritage of Western thought is one

according to which other things than the human (even other living things) are always defined by their lack in comparison with 'us'. Lack of language, (*Lacan*) lack of consciousness, (*Descartes, and Lacan, who would here include specularly and self-consciousness*) lack of reason, (*Kant, Levinas, Descartes*) lack of authenticity (*Heidegger*); the hegemonic (if never homogeneous) treatment of the nonhuman has always been more about shoring up the human—convincing ourselves that we are masters of all things—than about granting the nonhuman any positive existence. (490-1)

Derrida reinforces this ontology of negation by listing all the powers and activities we deny animals, and enlarges the discussion by raising a crucial question:

It is *not just* a matter of asking whether one has the right to refuse the animal such and such a power (speech, reason, experience of death, mourning, culture, institutions, technics, clothing, lying, pretense of pretense, covering of tracks, gift, laughter, crying, respect, etc.—the list is necessarily without limit, and the most powerful philosophical tradition in which we live has refused the ‘animal’ *all of that*). It *also* means asking whether what calls itself human has the right rigorously to attribute to man, which means therefore to attribute to himself, what he refuses the animal... (135)

One of the few attributes Western philosophers *have* granted animals is the ability to suffer; a capability, or vulnerability to which most would accede in answer to Jeremy Bentham’s famous question, ‘Can they suffer?’ It is with this capacity that the discussion becomes firmly fixed in the realm of ethics. And as with ethics directed toward humans, technology has leapfrogged ahead of legal and philosophical responses to situations it creates.

While technological developments have exacerbated habitat destruction for countless species, in some cases, they have provided the means to improve conditions and the context for expanded avenues of discourse, even contact zones, among and between animals and humans.<sup>iv</sup> With the pervasive expansion of biotechnology comes the opportunity for an ontological reckoning that considers agency, subjectivity, and power of these ultimate ‘others.’ I would like to look at two recent cases that reflect the changing roles of animals in social and political discourse, and how technology creates situations that require this expansion. The cases involve groups of people dedicated to the welfare of a specific species, echoing Derrida’s premise of *animot*, and reflecting that species’ inherent capacity for as a subject of political agency.

In his 2006 article, “Bees, Butterflies and Bacteria: Biotechnology and the Politics of Nonhuman Friendship,” Nick Bingham addresses the issue of genetically modified (GM) crops and its unanticipated effects on the honey bee, the Monarch butterfly, and the human communities which ‘befriend’ them, including bee keepers, organic farmers, and lay observers of the Monarchs’ migrations. Organic farmers were some of the plaintiffs in the 1997 case brought by Greenpeace and the US Center for Food Safety against the EPA, which approved the planting of crops containing a gene sequence for the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt). Bt is expressed through the plants’ leaves and is toxic to various species of crop pests, but plaintiffs claimed that the targeted insects would develop resistance to it. At that time, non-GM Bt in spray form was the only pest control allowed to be used by certified organic farmers, limiting their options for pest control.

The Monarch became the poster *Lepidoptera* for GM crops due to a study of debatable scientific rigor which concluded that Monarchs that fed on milkweed plants placed on the perimeters of cornfields treated with Bt had a higher larval mortality rate than those not similarly exposed.<sup>v</sup> The study was widely and some contend, overly, publicized and

gained media momentum such that it led to the Monarch becoming “the symbol of the anti-GMO movement” (Shelton 487). Of particular impact was an article published as a “Scientific Correspondence” in *Nature*, which “garnered the attention of the public...and ‘knocked the biotech industry on its derriere’” (Shelton 484).

Beekeepers became involved after research determined that bees pollinate over longer distances than originally thought, and this increased the potential for cross contamination. In the UK in 2000, GM pollen was found in beehives and commercially sold honey, prompting concern and public pressure about the commercial viability to market honey as GM free, and about the consequent health of the bees. The final community impacted was comprised of citizen science groups which monitored the Monarchs’ migration, and were reacting to the article in *Nature*. In 2001, new Bt corn varieties were granted registration after research determined that there was little significant mortality involved, except by one variety on the market, and that was subsequently phased out.

Bingham casts the aforementioned social groups as flying low on the larger cultural radar and wonders whether this is because

members of such collectives are significantly defined not by the social bond as usually conceived (that is, interpersonal), but through their arrangement around...or at least their significant relationship with...particular nonhuman entities[?] (486)

Bingham examines the space of science and that of society— depicting the space of science as that which produces radically new things, and society as that which is impacted by them. He characterizes social scientists as “guilty of assuming that new technologies fall from the sky into an empty world,” asserting that the public and academics are enticed to regard biotechnology as a panacea for problems such as feeding the overpopulated world, and thereby fall prey to technological determinism (484). He cites Serres’ and Latour’s work in valuing the relationship between human and nonhuman, invoking the ‘society of friends,’ after the literary critic Miguel Tamen, and urging his readers to “conceptualize ‘forms of life’...as specific assemblages of human and nonhumans that are constituted through particular practices of articulating with others” (487).<sup>vi</sup> These spaces of scientific and social intersection can possess the potential for a form of transculturation by giving rise to the varied social communities or “communities of practice” that operate based upon their allegiance to nonhuman species (Pratt 36).<sup>vii</sup>

These communities inherently view the specie(s) with which they are aligned as subjects and agents in the world. They grant ‘their’ unique specie ontic value as they pursue its study and husbandry, a view that falls into line with Derrida’s argument for *animot* over the singularity of ‘the animal.’ Even biologists, professionally sworn to objectivity, are becoming comfortable acknowledging their kinship with their research subjects. De Waal writes of scientists “for whom the frogs, budgerigars, cichlid fish, bats, or whatever animals they specialize in hold a deep attraction,” characterizing those who erect

artificial boundaries between themselves and ‘their’ animal as lacking in humility, as well as being negligent observers. (B4).

In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Donna Haraway makes a point of including plant life and bacteria in her definition of ‘companion species,’ and raises the question of the possibility of friendship between human and nonhuman, leading Bingham to wonder whether “friendship might be better characterized not (as has traditionally been the case) by the sorts of entities it links but, rather, by a certain quality of being open to and with others” (489). In so doing, we can become articulate to them and allow them to affect us. This possibility can offer different ways of being-with-others, perhaps deactivating Heidegger’s obtuse ‘disinhibiting ring.’ As a consequence of biotechnology, having members of these specific communities testify about the effects of GM brought their aspects of the world, their expert and intimate knowing of these life forms, into public view and the realms of economic and political discourse. Here the human members wielded their political power as proxies for the species they represented, with the goal of influencing policy and commerce to limit the perceived risks associated with GM crops.

Kersty Hobson, **a human geographer**, would further the agency of a species, the Chinese moon bear, while questioning the malleability of the bears’ ontic nature. She asks how animals might be argued as political subjects, considering how and by whom the political is constituted, specifically examining how political ecology frames non-humans in a limited manner, and how post-structuralist theory can create a space to view them as political subjects by using a case study of moon bear bile farming in China. Concomitant with political and theoretical frameworks, she speaks for the inclusion of the ethical and ontological arguments which ground both rights-based organizations and moral compulsion as reasons for inclusivity, stating that animals should be considered “affective political subjects.” Instead of construing nature as a “set of static resources,” political geographers are beginning to use “an ontological politics based on the inseparability of non-humans from the constitution of sociality” (251). This approach affirms Derrida’s comprehensive deconstruction of the animal-human binary, and his claim that the question of ‘the animal’ is grounded in ethics.

There are both hybrid and animal geographers, who look at how animals and animality

are represented and co-constitutive of political spatialities. Both these bodies of work argue that ontological and ethical considerations are inseparable...That is, received ontological status of animals as ‘other’ or ‘less-than-human’ allows us ‘to simply look away and to ignore their fates.’ (251)

And

[W]riters of ‘animal geographies’ have employed such ontologies to significant effect. By paying attention to the constant redrawing of the boundaries between human and non-human, researchers have explored the processes and institutions that constitute the (often grim) fate of animals, to uncover the diverse modalities of power at play. (257)

Hobson notes that most often, we relate to animals as commodities, whose net worth is set by the market—Interpol put the black market trade in animal smuggling as the fastest growing and second largest in the world, at an estimated six billion dollars a year.

In much current work, when animals do become visible on political geographers' horizons it is as objects of resource struggles, mostly within political ecology frameworks....[R]esearch which conceptualizes animals as part of, not incidental to, specific political configurations—that is, as subjects, not objects—enables a broader conceptualization of how the 'political' is constituted.<sup>viii</sup> (251)

The non-governmental organization (NGO) Hong Kong based Animals Asia Foundation (AAF) frees Asiatic black bears, commonly known as moon bears, from their captivity in bile farms in mainland China and Vietnam. The bears spend their lives in small cages with catheters surgically implanted in their gall bladders to drain their bile for use in traditional Chinese medicine. Economically, their value is lucrative to the "farmers," producing 2 kilograms of bile a year, with one kilogram selling for up to \$9,000 USD. Around 7,000 moon bears are being kept in captivity, while in the wild they number some 20,000 and lessening due to poaching for their paws and gall bladders. The active ingredient in the bile, ursodeoxycholic acid, can now be synthetically created. The AAF had political inroads to make, as it was founded by a British expatriate, and signified a Western concern in a country where, Hobson writes, "[M]embers of the AAF have been told that, before the until the mid-1990s, there was no conceptual or linguistic equivalent to 'animal welfare' in Chinese, whereas now it is gradually entering popular vocabulary" (259).

In 2006, the EU passed a resolution asking China to ban bear bile farming, and to expedite the closure of the farms, a resolution which met with opposition from the Chinese Department of Wildlife Conservation. Yet there has been growth in Chinese animal welfare groups, and the media now covers incidents of abuse. Global virtual networking has enhanced the knowledge of, and reactions to bear bile farming. Hobson cites how the work of the AAF manifested globally, by bringing the bears' plight into the international spotlight in the early 1990s, actions which enabled fundraising and led to the establishment of volunteer support groups in Australia, Germany, the UK, New Zealand, and the USA. Cultural representations of the bears contributed to human willingness to support the work of the AAF; because of their cuddliness factor, they constitute an easy species to embrace. Similarly, Hobson asks how if H5N1, bird flu, were carried by dogs, for example, "no doubt very different political communities of preparedness and intervention would be emerging" (264).

Researchers are studying the rescued bears to gain insights into their behavior, and how it has changed due to the circumstances of their rehabilitation. In nature, the moon bear is a solitary animal, but the bears at the rescue center have become extensively socialized and sociable in their new venue. This raises the question of how they may be becoming changed; human conceptions of a healthy moon bear viewed in this situation is counter to their natural behavior, perhaps their 'truest' ontological state. Hobson poses the idea that "what it means to be 'Moon Bear'" is being reconstituted through the work of the AAF:

To make *a priori* assumptions that we know what the bears mean in this context—what they do; how they are related to and how they relate back—is to deny how the bears are brought into, and are part of, the networks of care and politics that have grown up around them. (262)

AAF staff are now considered the worldwide authorities on moon bears.

Bingham and Hobson raise pertinent questions regarding human-animal relationships and the influence, whether by proxy in the cases of the contact zones created by communities of practice, or by the behavioral changes of rescued moon bears. That political geographers are taking into account animal species as subjects in their own right indicates an implied acceptance of their ontic value, and the recognition of that unique life form, a nod toward Derrida's *animot*. Various disciplines are expanding their conceptions of what animals mean apart from a subordinate relationship to humans. The study of animality is growing, as is research on the effects of human-animal relationships on human physical and psychological outcomes in widespread milieus from cancer treatment to criminal violence. The opportunities to enlarge a human conception of the value of the 'irreducible multiplicity' could be as limitless as the multiplicity itself, even as individual species become extinct. At the conclusion of his address, Derrida envisions the possibility of a frightening and forlorn world,

a world from which animality, at first present to man, would have one day disappeared: destroyed or annihilated by man...or by means of a devitalizing or *disanimalizing* treatment, what others would call the denaturing of animality, the production of figures of animality that are so new that they appear monstrous enough to call for a change of name. This science fiction is more and more credible, having begun with taming and domestication, dressage, neutering, and acculturation, and is being pursued with medico-industrial exploitation, overwhelming interventions upon animal milieus and reproduction, genetic transplants, cloning, etc. (80)

Assuming the trend toward valuing individual species and the acceptance Derrida's *animot*, replete with ontic value, continues in society, such a dire prediction may be avoided. The *zeitgeist* of popular culture and Derrida's postmodern insistence of human responsibility for the ethical acceptance of and treatment of the various living species have begun to converge and manifest across academic disciplines. The suspicion that our relationships with those varied 'others' go beyond anthropocentric emotionalism is being validated. We are at the point in history where we are beginning to examine and engage questions surrounding our co-existence with other species. How can we reconsider the "irreducible living multiplicity" with the regard they require ethically? How do we respond to the gaze of 'our' cats?



## Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> From *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* Heidegger, p. 253
- <sup>ii</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy offers a parallel observation: 'The profusions of nature and the profusions of technology contribute to the same sort of abundance, an abundance that isn't at an end,' to which Bingham poses the question, "What...might a geographical imagination bring to the study of the new lifeforms and new forms of life that are emerging all around us, and the new biopolitical questions that they bring with them?" (Bingham 48)
- <sup>iii</sup> California Senate Bill 1277
- <sup>iv</sup> Mary Louise Pratt defines a contact zone as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today." Although the contact zone has become a widely accepted concept in the linguistic and theoretical communities, and is posited on verbal and written interactions, I would like to suggest that it is applicable to the area of animal ethics.
- <sup>v</sup> The 1998 study by Hansen and Obrycki was presented as a poster session at a branch meeting of the American Entomological Society. It was not peer reviewed. **Shelton and Sears provide a treatment of its consequences and the role and responsibilities of the media in reporting science, addressing what has subsequently come to be termed 'junk science'.**
- <sup>vi</sup> *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time* Univ of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor: 1995.
- <sup>vii</sup> Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s defined transculturation as a process "whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture," I would offer that Bingham's communities of practice, apart from the inherent power construct that exists between human and nonhuman, are reversing this process by gaining social identification as observers and agents in those biologically-defined milieus. For example, see Frans De Waal's "The Pitfalls of Not Knowing the Whole Animal," for a scientist's ruminations on the relationships between biologists and their chosen animals of study.
- <sup>viii</sup> Citing S. Hinchliffe, M.B.Kearnes, M. Degen, and S. Whatmore. (2005). *Urban Wild Things: A Cosmopolitical Experiment*. *Environment and Planning D*, 23, 643-658.

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