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Animality in Contemporary Italian Philosophy

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Animality Between Italian Theory and Posthumanism

Giovanni Leghissa

1 ANIMALITY AND POSTHUMANISM

The reason why animality is an important philosophical issue is twofold. First, there is an ontological commitment regarding the position of human beings within the realm of existing things. Long after the establishment of Darwinism within the sciences of the living being, the idea that human beings are endowed with properties that make them different from other living beings still continued to persist within philosophy. The reasons for resisting against the naturalization of the ontological frame within which the philosophical discourse takes into consideration the human might have been various and of different provenance. Equally various have been both the motives and the strategic moves that led, in the recent decades, to a shift from an ontological perspective that had the function to underpin the unicity of human beings within the set of the things existing on earth toward an ontology that allows for describing human beings as living beings among other living beings, whereas the belonging to the

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animal realm is the only relevant ontological trait that the former have in common with the latter. What matters is the fact that, at present, a heavy burden of proof rests on the shoulders of those who want to single out those peculiarities of the human that are supposed to disclose an ontological difference between humans and other living beings.¹

Second, there is an ethical commitment toward animal life, not in the sense that the life of the living being must be preserved at any rate, but in the sense that the articulation of any ethical stance must begin with observing how emerges and works the system of differences among living beings.² It is this glance cast on hierarchies that allows for the critical distance needed to evaluate the degree of violence that imbues a given social formation. In other words, the perception of how animals belonging to other species are bashed about or ill-treated is supposed to open the way to a more refined and acute perception of how various forms of violence among humans—including the symbolic violence Bourdieu made us attentive to—are exerted across different social contexts and historical periods. In this sense, the exclusion of the animal other not only foreruns the exclusion of the feminine, the enemy, the stranger—just to evoke the most striking figures of the excluded other—but constitutes the anthropological frame within which the self-affirmation of any strong identity structure takes place.

That said, there could be some objections to the supposed primacy of the question of animality with regard to how hierarchical structures arise and unfold whenever a subject defines its own identity in opposition to this or that instantiation of otherness; one could say, for example, that the perception of this primacy became the starting point of a fruitful critical inquiry only after the widespread reception of a philosophical discourse centered on the concept of difference within the Humanities. It is true, in fact, that precisely the theoretical devices made available by authors like Derrida, Deleuze, or Foucault, for whom the notion of difference plays a fundamental role, could make room for the awareness that the exclusion of the animal other is strictly intertwined both with the subordination of the feminine to the masculine order and with the exclusion of the stranger, or the foreigner.³ Nevertheless, as Cary Wolfe has persuasively pointed out,⁴ the posthumanist project is not to be considered as the mere continuation of postmodernist philosophies with other means.⁵ Surely, posthumanist thought is interested in the issue of embodiment, namely in the idea that the humanist way of considering the subject as disembodied must be deconstructed and put in question for its philosophical as well as

political consequences. But it is further interested both in recasting the concept of humanity within the broader epistemic frame offered by evolutionary theory and in laying bare how the prosthetic character of *Homo sapiens* is not the result of a process of hybridization that began in the era of the cyborg, but constitutes its hallmark since the emergence of our species. Thus, what makes the posture of posthumanism so peculiar is to be seen in the claim that the emphasis put on the question of difference, which provides, on its part, the starting point for undertaking a radical critique of violence, is alone insufficient to result in a paradigm change; the posthumanist project aims at recasting the epistemological and ontological frameworks—as well as the relationship between the two—that allow for articulating the relation of the human with its own animality, the relation of the human with other living beings, and, finally, the entanglement between humans and the artifacts they create.⁶ The human disappears as a privileged object of investigation, whereas the chain of relations in which the human is involved acquires visibility. The shift is toward an observation of the different networks within which human beings can be defined as human. What makes “human” a human being is not a property that can be isolated once forever—a property, thus, that would be equal to the essence of the human in the traditional sense of the term (i.e., “that what does not change across time”). It is rather a set of cognitive and behavioral patterns that the observer identifies time after time by looking carefully at the embeddedness of human beings into networks that include living beings, objects that can be recognized as belonging to natural kinds, and artifacts (from the Acheulean hand axe to Google’s Quantum Computer).

2 CALVINO BETWEEN LITERATURE AND CYBERNETICS

In 1967—long before the term “posthumanism” became established—Italo Calvino wrote an essay about literature meant as a combinatory process. In his essay he pointed out how deep has been the break that the shift from an ontology of the continuous to an ontology of the discrete caused within both the realm of physics and the realm of biology.⁷ By referring to the pathbreaking works of authors like Shannon, Wiener, and von Neumann, whose role as forerunners of the posthuman stance has been meanwhile widely recognized,⁸ Calvino caught with precision to which extent the cybernetic revolution succeeded in impinging upon the idea that a specific set of traits possessed by humans—above all the capability to

speak and articulate complex chains of thought through language—were sufficient to vest them with a privileged position in the realm of being. If the research program of cybernetics holds, then language reveals to be a combinatorial game. It is a game that can be played in various forms and can have different outcomes—myths, novels, and poems, among others. Seen in this way, the use of language in all its heterogeneous expressions is nothing but the result of the evolutionary history of our species, and a long chain of narrative products connects the mythical storytelling of our ancestors during the Paleolithic and the most sophisticated works of contemporary literature.⁹ As Calvino does not fail to understand, such a way of looking at the function of language starting from the perspective disclosed by cybernetics affects the very idea of subjectivity. The subject is no more the external observer of a given set of rules that can be managed at will in order to achieve an *opus* closed in itself and meant as the result of a conscious effort. It is true that Calvino addresses the act of writing, but his way of considering the latter has a far broader relevance. The experience of writing, in which the author is dissolved, instantiates what the subject in general goes through whenever it is affected by language. To be a subject, thus, does no longer mean to make the experience of a complete self-possession, which is supposed to be the presupposition for the conscious management of each act of sensemaking. It means, rather, to occupy a site within the chain of signifiers, whereas this positioning can never be unmovable and permanent.

Calvino's attempt to recast the concept of subjectivity in accordance with the epistemic revolution ushered by the scientific program of cybernetics was not the outcome of a solitary intellectual undertaking. In the same period (i.e., the second half of the 1960s) an author like Silvio Ceccato, for example, contributed as well to acclimatize the discourse of cybernetics to the Italian cultural landscape. However, the resistance against such an effort, whose unrelatedness to the humanistic attitude that has always deeply marked the tradition of Italian philosophy could not go unperceived, has been very strong since the beginning. Notwithstanding the bulk of translations into Italian of the main works that contributed to the spread of the cybernetic thought, Italian philosophers, generally speaking, have always preferred to stick to the traditional frame of mind imbued with idea that human subjectivity is to be conceptualized as a matter separated both from animality and from the realm of the mechanical. When the long wave of Marxism faded, it became possible to take advantage of the decentralization of the subject that French authors like Derrida or

Foucault have successfully carried out in their work. Nevertheless, if observed retrospectively, the Italian reception of both Foucauldian genealogy and Derridean deconstruction seems to have been strongly biased by the heritage of Italian historicism, in the sense that the critical work philosophy is called to carry on in order to reshape the concept of subject has been put in service of a political project the scope of which still remained the fight against capitalism. In this way, the real change of mind that the decentralization of the subject implies risks to get lost. The history along which subjectivity can be explored by identifying its different features and deployments is a “deep history,”¹⁰ namely a history that goes far back before the rise of modern capitalism. If subjectivity becomes a relevant issue only when the modern subject is at stake, that is, only when the philosophical gaze is directed to how the world order issued from modernity—by looking at the whole gamut of its cultural and even meta-physical implications—shaped a specific set of subjective self-positionings, then what has been achieved by introducing the concept of difference falls apart completely. On the contrary, the identity of the Self arises from an unstable and precarious making and re-making of systems of differences between living and non-living entities, whereas the culturally coded character of these systems can never conceal its own rootedness in those processes of self-differentiation along which living beings unfold.¹¹

The present picture would be incomplete—it must be added—if one overlooked the fact that an effective rupture with the past tradition of Italian philosophy took place when issues, authors, and conceptual frameworks coming from analytical philosophy began to be incorporated in the Italian philosophical landscape. Analytical philosophers are used to work together with both neuroscientists and those scientists that contribute to realize the scientific program of AI—a program which in many respects issues from cybernetics.¹² Yet, even if the whole stuff of concepts concerning the human and its relations to the world it inhabits—including the “internal world” of its mind—receives a completely new definition thanks to this strict intertwinement between philosophy and the natural sciences, the research program of analytic philosophy is, generally speaking, not interested in focusing on the anthropological changes that occur when the human is posited between animality and the mechanical. This lack of interest is responsible for the fact that analytic philosophy cannot provide any sort of critical observation upon those power relations which, on the contrary, the philosophical project of posthumanism is willing to focus on. In other words, it is not enough to naturalize the question of subjectivity

and, consequently, to recast or even to abandon the bulk of concepts that served to define the specificity of the human (consciousness, intentionality, and the like) in favor of a conceptual map that upholds the representation of those positions that a possible subject—not necessarily a human one—may occupy from time to time.

Whatever philosophical project aimed at decentralizing the subject must, in fact, comply with the following condition in order to acquire—as in the case of posthumanism—both a theoretical and a political relevance: the action oriented toward a goal is to be seen with regard to the environmental context within which it takes place, and it is at this level of analysis that questions concerning the political—in its broadest sense—can arise. When the observer looks at how human beings interact with each other, other living beings, and artifacts, what emerges is the system of differences that codes and socially embedded scripts convey in order to underpin or simply make obvious and unquestionable specific power arrangements at organizational level. When the observer looks at how the cognitive system of the actor performs any possible goal-oriented course of action, an inquiry of such kind has to lay bare to which extent what philosophy used to call “subjectivity” is but a multilayered structure of occurrences that can be described both as mental events (this happens when the observer tends to ascribe whatsoever form of intentionality to an agent) and as conducts (meant as the supposed effects of the intention to undertake a certain course of actions). The point to be made here is that a comprehensive explanatory theory of mental causation (which is still lacking, despite the efforts that both analytic philosophy and the cognitive sciences make together in this direction) is as important as a critical theory that allows for understanding how performative are those rules and norms that shape institutions and organizations. According to a posthumanist perspective, even the latter have to be seen as tools, as artifacts, namely as objects that did not come to earth because rational agents want them to exist in order to achieve some goals, but because they help agents to adapt to their environment.

3 THE IDENTIFICATION WITH THE ANIMAL OTHER

Thus, it is not surprising that, in Italy, a first complete assessment of what is really at stake with regard to the posthuman stance could take place only within the work of Roberto Marchesini,¹³ who is not a philosopher. This elucidation is given surely not to diminish the significance of his

theoretical contribution, but rather to highlight the fact that the Italian philosophical community, which is still inclined to show a deaf but steadfast opposition toward the issues raised by posthumanism, could be affected by the latter only thanks to contributions coming from other disciplinary fields. Marchesini is an ethologist, and his scientific provenance guarantees for the scientific accuracy that characterizes his way of recasting the difference between the human and its animal other. Starting from an ethological perspective, in fact, it becomes quite impossible to overlook the bulk of commonalities that tie together humans and animals.¹⁴ The consequences that must be derived from these commonalities are important, first of all, for understanding those animal traits of the human that the posthuman perspective is willing to underscore. But not less important is the ethical commitment that arises when humans look at themselves as a part of the animal realm. According to Marchesini, this commitment should not arise only from the acknowledgment of the fact that the human species is an animal species among others; much more important is the empathy that humans can feel for the animal other. The interaction between *Homo sapiens* and other animals cannot be reduced, in fact, to the utilitarian gains that could be achieved by holding some “useful” species among the human group.

The point is twofold. On the one hand, with regard to the practice of hunting, the idea that humans have exploited other species just for the benefits deriving from a diet rich in meat does not hold.¹⁵ On the other, it is no less controversial to represent even the friendship with animals as a form of advantage contributing to human wellness: if animals like our pets are cozy, charming, and funny companions, the personal affection that fills the relation with them goes far beyond the desire to make up for one’s own feelings of loneliness and/or sense of despair. According to Marchesini, the animal other is the only possible mirror of the human—a mirror that the latter needs in order to achieve its own identity. In this sense, the presence of animals among human beings, which dates back to the beginning of our evolutionary history, rests on an anthropologically grounded necessity. The presence of the animal other is not only the epiphany of alterity, but it is as well the epiphany of a constitutive element of human identity itself. And it would be no objection to this statement to observe that humans, within their relationship with animals, simply project upon them some traits or behaviors that can be actually only human. What appears to be, *prima facie*, a sort of naïve projection aimed at “humanizing” animals expresses an ontological commonality, whose signs

can be at best found in those widespread myths and narratives that talk about how animals and humans have been living together since the origin of the world.¹⁶ Levinas' face of the other was a human face—and it would have been impossible, for Levinas, to represent the face of the other in a way that differs from the human one, as Derrida convincingly pointed out in his analysis of the humanistic and even theological presuppositions of Levinas' thought.¹⁷ In Marchesini's posthumanism, on the contrary, the other in whom the human subject reflects itself assumes precisely the features of the animal's face—a face which is perceived as such not in force of a projection, but in force of an ontological necessity.

The ethical commitment that imbues Marchesini's thought seems, thus, to rest on premises that have a philosophical consistency which is not always to be found within the discourse on animality that characterizes the claims of the antispecist movement.¹⁸ The latter aims at giving voice to the feelings of uncomfortableness, indignation, or even disgust that arise—or should arise—as soon as one considers the dreadful and excruciating way of treating those animals that belong to the species humans consider obvious to exploit for their own purposes reducing them to food or using them as test subjects. It is worth pointing out, however, that the project of posthuman philosophy can well include among its presuppositions the desire to give voice to the silent cry of sufferance that comes from the animals killed in a lab or in a slaughterhouse. The question about how to ground philosophically the ethical commitment toward the animal other only by considering the pity we as humans can feel for the physical and emotional pain they suffer is controversial. If it is undisputed to acknowledge that animals can suffer, less self-evident is the set of criteria needed to shore up those actions that can buttress both the public discourse and the concrete tools—including the legal ones—that are necessary to hinder the violence against the animal other.¹⁹ Nevertheless, if one assumes that feelings and emotions play a fundamental role within the process that culminates in the formulation of moral judgments,²⁰ then it is not at all out of place to hold that feelings like empathy for the animal suffering caused by humans can sustain the burden of being the starting point for arguments against violence to animals.²¹

4 AGAMBEN AND THE POLITICS OF THE LIVING

Among those Italian authors that work within the disciplinary field of philosophy the only one who devoted a specific attention to the question of animality is Giorgio Agamben. The question of life meant as a target of political interventions has been playing a pivotal role since the beginning of his philosophical career.²² In this sense, he shares with other authors who are now well known in the United States under the label “Italian Theory”²³ an acute interest toward the Foucauldian legacy. Yet, while Foucault specifies very clearly the extension—both at the conceptual and at the historical level—that the concept of biopolitics can cover, Agamben tends to use the latter in order to describe the telos that has been animating the whole of the political project of Western civilization since its ancient beginning. This twisting from the original sense of the term is of course not worth of disapproval for philological reasons. The point is that it is rather questionable to say that each and every form of power targets the body of the individual. Foucault had in mind a specific series of events and specific historical changes that occurred in the fading of classical liberalism as he introduced the term biopolitics.²⁴ Agamben, on the contrary, is inclined to term as biopolitical not specific instantiations of governmental interventions on individuals and their social setting, but the general form that all possible manifestations of power and control have in common. The outcome of Agamben’s conception of power is a truism: of course the scope of those agents that govern institutions and organizations (no matter whether they are human beings or algorithms) is to manage the relation between the necessity to keep alive the basic structure of institutions and organizations and individual needs, desires, skills, levels of aspiration, and capability to make conscious choices. What needs explaining is, rather, the specific and historically determined forms that take the various attempts to combine together what constitutes the life of an individual and what constitutes the “life” of an organization or an institution. It would be out of place to expose with more details why Agamben’s theory of the (bio)political results to be rather unsatisfactory, but it is necessary to keep in mind the major traits of it in order to better understand his way of dealing with the question of animality.

The latter finds its place in *The Open*, a book originally published in Italian in 2002.²⁵ Here Agamben investigates how philosophers (Aristotle and Heidegger), theologians (Thomas Aquinas), and natural scientists (Linnaeus and von Uexküll) have articulated the difference between the

human and the animal in order to extract from their discourse—a discourse whose coherence and persistence along time Agamben correctly underscores—the hidden essence of those biopolitical traits that characterizes the government of the living within the Western tradition. There can be no doubt that it is worth inquiring how and to which extent the difference between the human and the animal sheds light on the sources of the discourse that has the function to underpin the power of the sovereign.²⁶ And Agamben is surely right in saying that the understanding of how works any possible biopolitical dispositive presupposes the understanding of how works what he calls the “anthropological machine,” that is, the discourse that allows for the production of what is not human *within* the human in order to produce the human as something radically different from the animal (Agamben 2004: 37–38). He is right in showing, in other words, what a tremendous effort has been undertaken in order to arrange a political space whose internal hierarchies among humans are based on specific power mechanisms that are responsible for including some living beings and excluding others—to the point that some humans are excluded (and even murdered) precisely because they are not to be differentiated from animals.

The limit that affects Agamben’s reconstruction, however, is given by his willingness to offer a tetragon and allover reconstruction of how arose the political space. Such a reconstruction may be convincing, at least to some extent, as far as some moments of the history of Western civilization are concerned, but its internal differentiation needs being articulated with much more precision. First, Agamben is not inclined to underline the gap that separates Christianity and modernity—a philosophical gesture that characterizes the whole of his philosophy.²⁷ Second, Agamben does not seem aware of the fact that the process of anthropogenesis, meant as a chain of events occurred along with the evolutionary history of *Homo sapiens*, cannot simply coincide with the history of mankind. Truly, a bulk of ethnographic data shows that it is an anthropological invariant to produce a difference between the human and the animal in order to define the proper of the human. But Agamben’s reconstruction seems to confer a universal character to some categories and narratives that are typically Western in their provenance and origin.

What seems to be rather persuasive within the perspective disclosed by *The Open* is, nonetheless, the idea that a sort of suspension of the difference between humanity and animality can inaugurate a new way of articulating the political space, that is the power relations among humans. As if

the inactivity of the animal, which does not want to do anything to eschew the *ennui* that arises when the living being abandons itself to the sheer fact of being alive, could per se anticipate the utopia of a world without violence and exclusion (Agamben 2004, 87–92). The hint at this utopic dimension is surely an important element of Agamben’s argument, but I wonder whether it were more fruitful to spend more theoretical energy in pursuing the project of melting philosophy with other disciplines in order not only to suspend the difference between the human and the animal but to ground the impossibility to hold on this difference.²⁸ The result of this effort would be, perhaps, that the question of how it is like to be a bat can be translated into a much more radical version, namely how it is like to be an octopus.²⁹

NOTES

1. de Fontenay (1998) gives the most complete account of how the Western philosophical tradition has since its inception upheld the idea that animals are inferior to humans—and it is needless to say that the philosophical discourse on animality is only a strand among others within the whole history of how animals have been placed in a subordinated position with respect to humans.
2. Haraway (1991) still remains a pathbreaking work on this matter.
3. An exception that is worth mentioning is Adams (2010), whose first edition dates back to 1990, that is, to a period when the main attention was devoted to discussing issues related mainly to the question of gender and race.
4. See especially Wolfe (2010).
5. In this sense, Braidotti (2013) is far from convincing in her attempt to build a bridge between the critical discourse issued from postmodernism and the posthumanist stance.
6. On this point, see in particular Hodder (2012).
7. “Cybernetics and Ghosts,” in Calvino (1986).
8. On this, see Hayles (1999: 50–112).
9. For a recent and exhaustive account of the anthropological significance of human storytelling—and, consequently, of the anthropological significance of literature as such—see Cometa (2017).
10. The notion of “deep history” is taken from Smail (2008).
11. Vitale (2018) provides a fine analysis of the relationship between Derrida’s reflection upon life and death and the most recent conceptions of the living issued from biology by showing that in both cases what is at stake is the metastable state of the identity of the living.

12. On this, see Dupuy (2009).
13. Marchesini (2001), (2009), (2014), (2016a), and (2016b).
14. On this, see also de Waal (2006) and (2009).
15. The literature on this issue is wide; for a good assessment, see Speth (2010).
16. Daston (2005) makes acute and convincing considerations on this point.
17. See Derrida (2008).
18. As elsewhere, in Italy as well the movement has its supporters. See, among others, Rivera (2010), Caffo (2011), Filippi and Trasatti (2015), and Filippi (2017).
19. The literature on the topic is huge, and some works have reached a relevance that goes far beyond the realm in which they arose as, for example, in the case of Rollin (1981), Regan (1983), and Singer (1984). On the current debate about the opportunity to confer equal rights to animals, see Zuolo (2017) and (2019).
20. See, among many others, Nussbaum (2001)—in the present context, it is worth remembering that Nussbaum (2006) deals specifically also with the question of animality.
21. Wolfe (2012) brings about more detailed arguments on this topic by showing how the attempt to confer some rights to some animals is only a part of the problem.
22. See Agamben (1998), which is perhaps the book that contributed at most to the establishment of the author's fame in Italy and abroad.
23. See Hardt and Virno (1997), Chiesa and Toscano (2009), Gentili (2012), and Gentili et al. (2018).
24. See Foucault (2008).
25. See Agamben (2004).
26. Derrida (2009–2011) offers the most complete and accurate reconstruction of this issue.
27. It seems to me highly problematic to adhere to the paradigm of secularization, as Agamben does, after Blumenberg (1985). But this is not an issue to be discussed here. What is to be noticed, rather, is that Derrida (2009–2011) seems more correct in showing that modernity introduced a new way in making the difference between the animal and the human productive in order to define the function of the sovereign power.
28. In this direction, see, for example, Vallortigara (2005).
29. See Godfrey-Smith (2016).

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