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Metaphysical Separatism and its Discontents

Kelly Oliver. *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 376 pp. \$29.50 pb

In *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human*, Kelly Oliver critiques a fundamental precept in the history of philosophy called “metaphysical separatism,” the view that humans and animals are fundamentally different types of beings (9). Rather than accept this view, Oliver examines key philosophical texts in the Western tradition to show how their writers utilized animals to forward projects aimed at defining humanity. According to Oliver, such projects were pursued at the expense of animals (8). In these works animals have been tamed, dissected, devalued, and/or maimed. They have been conceptualized as so radically “other” that they are not even recognized as “other.” Oliver examines how these animals break free of or defy the philosophical arguments made at their expense. For her, these escaped animals break down the dichotomy and force us to rethink our conceptions of autonomy, kinship, humanity, and animality.

Oliver argues that many of our most important contemporary ethical questions are connected to the separatist project. Atrocities such as genocide and torture are often justified by comparing, and thus reducing, the worth of the victims to that of animals: “without interrogating the man/animal opposition on the symbolic and imaginary levels, we can only scratch the surface in understanding the exploitation and genocide of people and animals” (19). The main project of *Animal Lessons* is thus to challenge the presumptions of humanism and to interrogate the human/animal dualism. It is a project that Oliver sees as essential for fully addressing numerous other contemporary ethical questions.

Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human is in six parts: “What’s Wrong with Animal Rights?,” “Animal Pedagogy,” “Difference ‘Worthy of Its Name’,” “It’s Our Fault,” “Estranged Kinship,” and “Psychoanalysis and the Science of Kinship.” Each one largely consists of chapters devoted to critiquing the work of thinkers such as Rousseau, Heidegger, Kristeva, Beauvoir, Herder, Derrida, Lacan, Levinas, Freud, and Merleau-Ponty. As stated above, her critique is focused on how animals were used by these philosophers and on teasing out how animals have failed to be contained by their arguments.

Readers of *Humanimalia* will certainly be interested in all chapters, of which I will discuss two distinctive ones below. I have chosen these two because they highlight the basic structure of the other chapters, and because they illustrate the overarching strengths and weaknesses of the book. Specifically, the first chapter that I discuss, on Rousseau, displays a key weakness, and the second, on Simone de Beauvoir, illustrates a strength.

In “You Are What You Eat: *Rousseau’s Cat*,” Oliver explores three distinctive readings of Rousseau, by Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and Jean Starobinski. She begins by briefly outlining how Rousseau utilizes animals in his work. For Rousseau, how human beings treat animals directly correlates to different social organizations and personal identities, and that social organizations correspond to humans’ relation to animals. There is the “savage hunter,” the “barbaric herdsman,” and the “civilized farmer.” To become civilized, one must move away from killing and eating animals and towards cultivating one’s food (51). Thus, within this view, we humans are basically what we eat. “Savages” are wild because they eat wild animals, herdsman eat domestic animals and thus are domestic, and civilized, or cultivated, people eat cultivated crops (52).

Rousseau also argues that our advantage over animals was originally secured through appropriating their knowledge (such as the knowledge that chestnuts are good to eat). In the same way, language, or the very thing that we use to distinguish ourselves from animals, is also an “assimilation of animal sounds” (62). For Rousseau, humans assimilate animals in three ways: we assimilate their knowledge, their bodies, and their calls, and then bury or separate ourselves from this assimilation. Thus, according to Oliver’s reading of Rousseau, both human society and language can be seen as responses to animals (66).

Oliver next critiques two well known readings of Rousseau by Derrida and de Man that contribute to metaphysical separatism. Here she argues that the interpretations offered by Derrida and de Man involve human language “erupting” out of and as separate from nature, in contrast to Rousseau’s conception of language as evolving from and replying to nature. For Oliver, these two readings reinforce a conception of humans and animals (and indeed the rest of nature) as fundamentally different beings. She feels, however, that Rousseau can offer an alternative way of conceiving animals and humans that does not involve conceptualizing them in this dualistic fashion. To elaborate this view, Oliver turns to a third reading of Rousseau, by Jean Starobinski (68).

Starobinski's interpretation points to a conception of humanity as a species with the capacity for both listening and responding. This brings with it ethical obligations to all other forms of life (68). For Oliver, Starobinski's reading offers a dynamic alternative to Derrida's and de Man's readings of Rousseau because, in his view, we are defined not by our ability to speak but by our ability to listen and respond. We respond to nature because we are a part of it, and we respond to animals because we *are* animals. This ability to respond "begets a responsibility or moral obligation" (72). For Starobinski, "ethical obligation begins in the conversation between man and nature" (73). Starobinski's interpretation of Rousseau points to an ambiguity that opens up a space for thinking about responsibility and listening in ethical, rather than metaphysical, terms (71). It also dissolves the metaphysical separatism that is foundational in Derrida's and de Man's readings. Oliver ends the chapter with a look at the later Derrida, where he questions the use of the general term "animal," and by postulating her own questions dealing with human blindness to our animal kinship or pedagogy (78).

Oliver begins the chapter "The Beaver's Struggle with Species-Being: De Beauvoir and the Preying Mantis" with a critique of Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (155). For Oliver, Beauvoir's argument for the equality of the sexes rests upon the essential inequality of both women and animals. Beauvoir claims that while both men and women have an animal nature, it is not this animal nature that reduces women to the status of "a second sex." Rather, women are reduced to this status because of their connection to their reproductive role. Beauvoir claims that females are seen as inferior to males in all species and not just within human society (156). Thus the category "second sex" applies to all animals that are female. In addition, women have more reason to hide their animality than do men because their equality rests on transcending their "natural" reproductive role.

Men, for Beauvoir, transcend their animality because of their ability to project themselves into the future; women must also separate themselves from animality if they want to be equal with men (162). Oliver argues that this claim is based upon metaphysical separatism or assumed hierarchies between men and women and humans and animals. For Beauvoir, while other female animals have a fixed identity that is determined by biology (because female animals are caged by their ability to reproduce), only human females, as human beings, have the capacity to transcend evolution and rise above their "biological destiny."

In sum, Oliver argues that for Beauvoir women are worse off than other female animals because their childbirth is more painful, and because their reflective nature makes knowable the limiting nature of their reproductive role (173). Indeed, while Beauvoir claims to be trying to undermine patriarchal stereotypes, her argument is ultimately built upon the claims that man is fundamentally different from other animals, and that women can only become equal with men if they acquire traditionally masculine traits and make the animal radically "other." Thus, Beauvoir values production over reproduction, and does not question how her conception of "life" is value laden. Oliver concludes by observing that Beauvoir's conception of "man" as a superior being able to conquer animals and dominate the earth does not seem as romantic as it was during Beauvoir's time, because we now live with the knowledge of global warming and the depletion of resources (174). For Oliver, this conception of what it means to be human and the metaphysical separatism at its foundation can destroy humanity's future.

I have discussed these two chapters in order to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human*. I believe the book has two main flaws. First, while Oliver does lay out her thesis in the first chapter of the book, it is often difficult to find her specific voice in the individual chapters. The chapter on Rousseau is a good example of this tendency. While reading it, one first works through the arguments of Rousseau, and then of Derrida, de Man, and Starobinski, but it is difficult to pick out Oliver's *own* line of thought. In several sections I found myself puzzling over whether a particular argument presented was Oliver's, one of the other philosopher's, or a particular reading of that philosopher by Oliver. This makes reading the chapters arduous and confusing, especially for readers not familiar with the fields of animal metaphysics or animal ethics.

In addition, most of chapters in *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human* focus on continental philosophers. While this provides a strong grounding in animal metaphysics within this particular tradition, it ignores the work done within the analytic and American philosophical traditions, such as Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and Donna Haraway.

This focus on the continental tradition is also a strength; *Animal Lessons* is an excellent introduction to animal metaphysics from this perspective. I would not hesitate to recommend it to someone desiring background knowledge in the field. It would also be excellent to use in the classroom. A second strength is that Oliver provides illuminating critiques of and insights into these historically difficult texts. There are a handful of

chapters where her voice is strongly heard, and I feel that these, such as the one on Simone de Beauvoir, are the best in the book.

Animal Lessons is a valuable and much needed addition to the relatively new field of animal metaphysics. It is particularly useful for teaching, as it outlines and critiques a rich assortment of texts dealing with how we conceptualize both animals and humans. In addition, Kelly Oliver's critique of metaphysical separatism within the philosophical tradition and her connection of this concept to important contemporary ethical questions, such as genocide and torture, are interesting in and of themselves.