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Tracking the Animal in Derrida

Jacques Derrida. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. 176 pp. $60.00 hb, $20 pb.

Derrida first delivered the written text of *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (cited hereafter as *AIA*) at a conference in Cerisy, France in 1997. Thirty years prior, in 1967, he published his first three major works: *Writing and Difference*, *Speech and Phenomena*, and *Of Grammatology*. During the three decades between the publication of these works — a period of time in which Derrida gained first national and eventually international prominence — he insisted repeatedly on the seriousness and importance of the "the question of the animal." And yet, despite this insistence, he never devoted an entire book or article to the issue of animals in those years. He did not, however, remain entirely silent on the issue. In the mid-to-late 1980s, he began working through the question of the animal in some depth in relation to Martin Heidegger's thought, most notably in his essay "Heidegger's Ear: (*Geschlecht* II)" and in the sixth chapter of *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*. This more sustained engagement with the question of the animal continued in his 1989 interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject," and in his 1993 book *Aporias: Dying—Awaiting (One Another at) the Limits of Truth*. For readers who were interested in the kinds of questions that animate animal studies, it was clear from these and other scattered texts published at the time that Derrida had remarkably important and provocative things to say about animals. But readers would have to wait until *AIA* to get a fuller sense of how the question of the animal fit into his overall work.

Although Derrida presented a complete version of *AIA* at Cerisy, he avoided publishing that text in its entirety while he was alive. It is clear from reading the original manuscript in his archives that Derrida was not entirely pleased with the Cerisy version of the text, as there are numerous marginal notes and crossed out passages and pages that indicate the need for thoroughgoing revisions before publication. Indeed, Derrida himself published only two portions of the full text before he died: "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" (which appeared in 1999 and constitutes Chapter 1 of *AIA*) and "And Say the Animal Responded?" (which appeared in 2003 in English and 2004 in French and constitutes Chapter 3 of *AIA*). When I spoke to Derrida in 2002 about the possible publication of the entire text of *AIA* he underscored to me how unhappy he was with the initial draft and how much, by contrast, he admired Elisabeth

de Fontenay's massive work on the question of the animal, *Le Silence des bêtes.* Consequently, readers should bear in mind that the book they have before them in AIA does not represent a polished draft, but a work in progress that Derrida would no doubt have wished to expand and rework in several ways. It is perhaps best to read the book as a preliminary and ongoing set of reflections on the question of the animal that can be fruitfully placed alongside Derrida's earlier writings on animals mentioned above, as well as one of the final seminars he taught that also focused on animals, *The Beast and the Sovereign* (which will appear in English translation in 2009).

With this publishing history in mind, allow me to turn directly to the content of the book. The opening chapter, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," is no doubt already well known to many readers of this journal. The chapter first appeared in English translation in *Critical Inquiry* in 2001 and has been the object of careful analysis by many authors working in animal studies. It is here that we find the much-discussed nude encounter that Derrida has with a cat, an encounter that calls into question both his humanity-animality and subjectivity. Also in these initial pages, Derrida offers his two hypotheses (in contrast to Heidegger's "theses" on the world formation of human, animal, and stone) concerning animals. The first hypothesis concerns the rising tension over the past two centuries between, on the one hand, violence toward animals and, on the other hand, ethico-political efforts to limit animal suffering. Here, Derrida links the latter struggle against violence toward animals with Jeremy Bentham's remarks on animal suffering, and also attempts to bring his own thinking on radical passivity into dialogue with this utilitarian approach. The second hypothesis revolves around what we might call "ontological" issues, namely, the questions of how the human-animal distinction is drawn, whether it can be maintained, and in what form. Following these two hypotheses, Derrida takes the reader on a brief tour through his older writings in support of his claim made early on in the book that questions concerning life, living beings, and animals have always been for him the most pressing questions. The chapter closes with an analysis of the term "*animot*," a term that Derrida hopes his reader will substitute for the metaphysically-laden concept "animal." By replacing "animal" with "*animot*," Derrida hopes to remind the reader of the multiplicity of animal beings, their complicated relationship to human beings, as well as the ways in which animal multiplicity radically complicates traditional human-animal distinctions.

With this general theoretical framework and set of concepts in place, Derrida turns in Chapter 2 to a reading of various figures in the history of philosophy with an eye toward challenging their portrayal of animals and the human-animal distinction. Among the major figures discussed are René Descartes (with his contentious but

influential discussion in the *Discourse on Method* of the distinction between humans on one side, and animals and machines on the other), Immanuel Kant (who develops an account of human subjectivity over and against animals in the *Anthropology* and elsewhere), and Emmanuel Levinas (who sought to develop a notion of ethics built on a conception of a uniquely human ethical subjectivity and ethical alterity). Derrida offers useful, although not particularly original or insightful, readings of each of these figures. Perhaps the most disappointing portion of this chapter is his reading of Levinas, a reading that is based heavily on John Llewelyn's more insightful and original analysis in *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience*. One cannot help but get the impression that it is this second chapter, and the reading of Levinas in particular, that Derrida would have most needed to rework and supplement, should he have decided to bring the full text to publication.

By contrast, the third chapter, "And Say the Animal Responded?" constitutes a genuinely insightful and groundbreaking reading of Jacques Lacan's remarks on the human-animal distinction, and Lacan's insistence (which follows in lockstep with dominant trends in the writings of Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, and Levinas) that animals are unable to "respond" to others of various sorts, and can only "react" to external stimuli. Given the widespread influence of Lacanian-influenced theorists such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek in contemporary critical theory, it would be fruitful to bring Derrida's critical analysis of Lacan into dialogue with Žižek's and Badiou's respective recoveries of Lacan's concept of the subject. This kind of *Auseinandersetzung* would be extremely helpful for highlighting the lingering and often dogmatic anthropocentrism typically found in these and other neo-Lacanian theorists.

The final chapter was not part of the original written manuscript, but is rather than transcript of a recording of largely improvised oral remarks that focus on Heidegger's 1929-30 seminar *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. While this discussion will be of interest to readers new to Derrida, it does not offer much that goes beyond the earlier published work on Heidegger mentioned above. Although he breaks no new ground in this final chapter, it should be noted that Derrida's overall critical reading of Heidegger on the question of the animal is without question some of the most interesting work he has ever done, and these closing pages would serve as a fine introduction to the larger questions concerning animals Derrida seeks to pose with regard to Heidegger's thought.

There is, of course, no question of engaging in a full critical response to Derrida's *AIA* in the space of a book review. His work is far too rich and the questions he raises are far

too complicated to attempt such a response here. Elsewhere I have attempted an initial critical response, and I refer the reader to that text should she be interested in this kind of analysis.[1] In closing, I wish to add that despite the book's somewhat unfinished form, and despite certain reservations I have with Derrida's ontology, ethics, and politics, I recommend this book strongly to all readers interested in animal studies. The ideas one finds in these pages are certain to become central and unavoidable reference points for animal studies theorists and activists who are interested in rethinking the human-animal distinction, the ethical an ontological status of animals in the history of philosophy, and the relationship between critical thought and political practice.

Note

1. Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), especially Chapter 4.