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Review Essay

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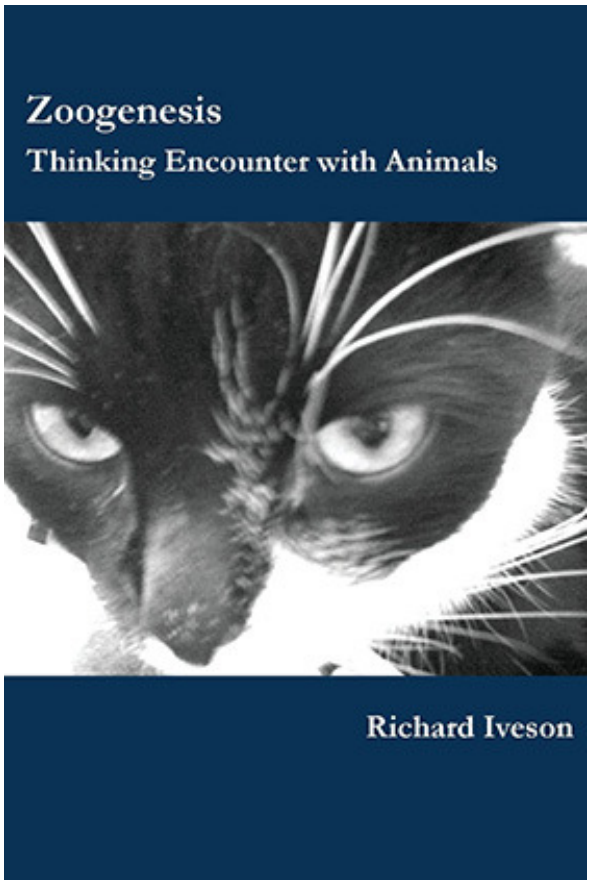
Life and Relation beyond Animalization

Richard Iveson. *Zoogenesis: Thinking Encounter with Animals*. Pavement Book. 346 pp. $31.99 pb.



The growth of animal studies from an emergent field of inquiry into a mature set of discourses and practices over the past several years has been marked by two particularly welcome developments. First, concerns and questions about the status and nature of animals and animality have penetrated ever deeper into the core of disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, and physical sciences. This trend has helped to call into question some of the most stubborn dogmas in these disciplines and to provide

the space for important intellectual and theoretical transformations. Second, extant approaches and frameworks among animal activists have increasingly come to inform the work being done in animal studies, enriching its ethico-political sensibilities and providing practical support for its enrichment and evolution. What has perhaps gotten lost in the rapid growth of animal studies, however, are deeper questions about what is ultimately at stake in the field. Although the multiplication of disciplinary perspectives on animals and animality is no doubt important, we might ask ourselves: Are some frameworks more critically insightful than others in terms of trying to discern violence and disrespect aimed toward animals and animalized others? Similarly, we might also wonder: Which perspectives are most fecund for transforming those relations and ultimately arriving at alternative forms of life?

Richard Iveson's book, *Zoogenesis: Thinking Encounter with Animals*, seeks to frame and address these important questions. With this ambitious, wide-ranging, and erudite book, Iveson hopes to provide nothing less than new critical and affirmative groundings for future work in animal studies. On Iveson's account, unless we understand the deep sources of violence toward animals, we will never arrive at a place from which we might begin to contest those sources and eventually reconstitute more respectful relations with animals. In this review, I will track some of the basic elements of Iveson's fascinating and powerful argument before closing with some questions about some of its possible limitations.

Rejecting the Institutionalized Genocide of Animals. Iveson's overall project begins from the premise that animals matter for themselves — which is to say, in and of themselves — and not simply in view of how they might shed light on certain questions concerning human nature or human sociality. That the study of animals and animality might illuminate certain aspects of how power circulates among human beings is, to be sure, something worthy of our attention for Iveson; but his primary emphasis is placed on ensuring that animals are seen as beings who have value beyond their instrumental usefulness to human beings. As he writes in the introduction, to accept the chief premise animating his work is

> to accept that humans do not have the right to do whatever they like with other animals. It is to accept that our given state of affairs is unacceptable and must be radically transformed. Put simply, it is to no longer accept the economy of genocide into which we have all been thrown. (25)

The overarching aim of his project, then, is to find ways to allow animal lives to matter, that is, to count and become salient in those disciplines, institutions, and practices that

have traditionally excluded animals from the circle of concern. Given Iveson's philosophical background, the natural place to look for allies for such a project is the analytic philosophical tradition, populated by luminaries such as Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and Paola Cavalieri. The standard gesture in this discourse is to extend ethical consideration to animals by way of analogical reasoning, demonstrating that animals are sufficiently similar to human beings as moral patients so as to warrant similar moral standing and consideration. Iveson, though, takes a critical stance toward this tradition, as it tends to gloss over the radical singularity and alterity of animals and to neutralize human-animal differences by way of conceptual and practical schemas. In so doing, he joins philosophers and theorists in the pro-animal feminist care tradition, who seek to ground animal ethics in caring relations between and among human beings and animals. And yet, despite Iveson's proximity to this tradition, his deeper philosophical commitments derive from the Continental tradition, with Jacques Derrida and Friedrich Nietzsche being among the primary sources of inspiration. From Nietzsche and Derrida, Iveson borrows the notion that the denial of animal finitude and singularity lies at the very heart of the current crisis in human-animal relations. As such, the task of *Zoogenesis* can perhaps best be read as a meditation on the sources of that denial as well as what it would take to acknowledge and affirm animal finitude and singularity. The latter, affirmative task would not be so much a matter of granting animals their uniqueness and relation to death but of discovering and encountering it in various ways in the shared spaces in which human-animal relations emerge and are sustained. I will track the main thread of this critical and affirmative analysis in Iveson's work by examining some of the key themes in each of the five main parts of the work.

From Animalization to Zoogenesis. The bulk of Iveson's book provides a condensed but rigorous reading of the history of philosophy and theory in view of animals and animality. In Part One, he argues that the guiding thread linking together thinkers as diverse as Plato, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Blanchot is a denigration of animality (both human and nonhuman forms) and a denial of death to animals themselves. In a close reading of Plato's *Meno*, Iveson shows how Platonic dualism (the reigning metaphysical system in much of intellectual and Western culture for over two millennia) teaches us to seek the highest truth, beauty, and the Good by leaving behind the sensible world and preparing for a disembodied life beyond death. Although this non-finite mode of human existence is disavowed by post-metaphysical thinkers such as Blanchot and Heidegger, both of whom return the human to its irreducibly mortal mode of existence, such mortality is not understood to be shared between and among human beings and other animals. Instead, mortality and the "capacity" for dying one's own death come to be seen as something proper only to human beings. As such, Iveson

notes, the post-metaphysical decentering of the human subject that throws the subject outside of itself and toward its singular being-toward-death is insufficient to displace the anthropocentrism at the heart of the philosophical tradition. In order to accomplish this latter goal and to continue the post-metaphysical task of thought require giving finitude back to animals, or rather catching sight of the shared mortality at the heart of all human and animal life.

Failure to recognize the finitude and singularity of all living beings creates the conditions for what Iveson calls animalization. Lives that are animalized are lives that do not matter; such lives are reduced to deathless objects to be annihilated and consumed with impunity. In view of this reduction, Iveson argues that it is

> imperative to disclose another way to give death, and to the giving of dying, to animals. To give death to other animals: the gift of and the giving that is the shared finitude of living beings. Only then will the monstrous hubris of an unthinking utilization and consumption of fetishized corpses itself become unthinkable. (94)

If we are to acknowledge the death of animals, Iveson suggests we must begin with the recognition that all singular animal life (whether human and nonhuman) emerges in a process he names *zoogenesis*. Zoogenetic relations emerge from a shared, ex-propriated site of encounter. In Part Two, Iveson tracks such animal encounters in literary form with Kafka ("Investigations of a Dog"), in ethico-poetic form with Derrida (in his much-discussed naked encounter with a cat in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*), and in ontological form with Nietzsche (with the theme of a form of life beyond nihilism). The key to Iveson's notion of encounter is that it does not ultimately stem from an act of ethical will (which is to say, conscious responsibility for another animal) or a desire for spiritual perfection (understood as seeking out animal encounters as a way of improving oneself and expanding one's consciousness). Rather, on Iveson's reading, these thinkers and writers all point toward animal encounters as *events*, that is, as something that one undergoes — beyond full understanding, presence, and mastery. Thus, animal encounters testify to the ways in which animals are more than a given subject can think. Animal encounters are ways of naming the manner in which animals announce themselves in their singularity and finitude, beyond the strictures of traditional philosophical and theoretical discourses that would seek to strip them of their radical alterity. For Iveson, such unpredictable and astonishing encounters speak to a way of life beyond the nihilism of life-denying transcendence and the incomplete nihilism of the "last man," a relational encounter with a world that Nietzsche describes

in *The Gay Science* as "over-rich" in all that is "beautiful, strange, questionable, terrible, and divine."

In Part Three, Iveson explores how such encounters cannot be delimited either to the realm of the inter-human or to one's preferred forms of animality and nonhuman otherness. As for the former delimitation, he argues that this sort of restriction of the ethics of encounter is at work in Judith Butler's writings on the recognition and mattering of vulnerability. As with Heidegger and Blanchot, Iveson suggests that Butler's post-humanist ethics fails to go far enough to displace anthropocentrism. Conversely, he argues that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of becoming-animal, while radically non-anthropocentric, re-establishes its own zoogenetic limit in the manner in which it configures the outside of the human as populated only by pack-like, feral, and untamed animals and forms of life. In configuring the outside of the human in this manner, Deleuze and Guattari run the risk of missing precisely the kinds of encounters with animal singularities that Kafka and Derrida track and ending up in a kind of undifferentiated, deep ecological holism. While Iveson's reading of Deleuze and Guattari will be somewhat contentious for some readers, there is certainly merit to this concern with their work and with the manner in which their notion of becoming-animal has sometimes been put to work in pro-animal and ecological discourses.

In Part Four, Iveson tracks this same failure to think zoogenetically at the level of the socius, a restriction that has led to an anthropocentric delimitation of the boundaries of community and the political. Through an analysis of a host of political thinkers, Iveson convincingly demonstrates that no politics based on humanism — no matter how widely or generously the concept of the human is defined — will suffice to constitute a genuinely post-anthropocentric sense of community. Rather than being a neutral designation, on this analysis "the human" nearly always functions in the dominant culture of the West in a performative manner to circumscribe a group of beings considered to be properly human and properly part of the society over and against those who are sub- or non-human. Commenting on this anthropocentric logic in the humanism of Susan Buck-Morss, Iveson explains:

> Buck-Morss misunderstands that humanism is only insofar as it sets up a limit between the human and the animal. Such is the demand for line-drawing which humanism can never avoid, and which ever again founds that animalization of the other which is the very condition for those political collectives she imagines her humanism will overcome. (244)

For Iveson, it is only with the more radical Nietzschean and Derridean affirmation of more-than-human life that we can arrive at a conception of community and being-with that overcomes this humanist closure and violence. To say yes to life (and to the finitude at the heart of life) is to affirm that one is always already encountered by singularities that are shared in and with others, that communities and relations pre-exist our encounters, and that community with animals only happens in the midst of these ongoing relations. In Iveson's words, a community beyond the human is a

> "community without limit" ... an infinite commonality of singularities which shares and in which is shared all finite living beings. (258)

It is important to note that community and relation, if they are understood in terms of Derridean *différance* and Nietzschean will to power (as Iveson's account is), will not issue in a hands-off, rights-based, non-interference ethics and politics but will instead entail considerable transformation among and between those beings called animal and human. Such transformations might even involve a fundamental transformation in the species heritages of human and animal beings, whether through biotechnological transformation or other similar kinds of interventions. In the final section of the book, Iveson explores the question of how his ethics, politics, and ontology both feed into and challenge certain animal biotechnological research. Here, in a complex reading of Bernard Stiegler and related thinkers, Iveson acknowledges that animals and relations can and will change over time and that biotechnological interventions cannot be ruled out a priori; the question is rather one of *which* relations and transformations to undertake. Iveson suggests that the key limitation with the transhumanist technological project is that it is based on an attempt to master animal life and finitude more generally, seeking to guide zoogenetic becomings along a single dimension or axis (largely structured by the demands of capital). By contrast, Iveson outlines a notion of technicity that is open to becomings that unfold in a variety of un-master-able and unpredictable directions.

On the Scope and Limits of Zoogenesis. The potted overview I have offered here of Iveson's book fails to do justice to the complexity and intricacy of his arguments as well as the charitable and thoughtful engagement he offers with each of the major figures he analyzes. His book is to be highly recommended for any reader who hopes to gain a deeper understanding of how a critical animal studies perspective might thread its way through the hegemonic history of the West as well as the contemporary theoretical scene. In this closing section of the review, I want simply to pose a couple of questions in view of Iveson's project for those of us who might take up portions of it in various ways.

Given Iveson's attempt to think relation and singularity zoogenetically, one wonders about the broader scope of his project. How does the path of thought outlined in the book help to negotiate relations and singularities with *non*-living beings, systems, and so on? Here the question is not so much one of how mortality and finitude figure in the constitution of living human-animal singularities, but rather one of whether ethics and politics might be extended beyond this particular set of relations. In other words, how should we read Iveson's call for a "community without limit"? The only example of an ethic of non-animal others discussed in Iveson's work is deep ecological holism, which is rejected precisely because of its tendency to override singularity in favor of relational wholes. But what if one sought to construct an ethic that recognizes a wider range of *singularities*, both living and non-living? In other words, how might Iveson's zoocentrism either be supplemented by or be in opposition to phytocentric, biocentric, or multi-centric environmental ethics? Likewise, how might his project be situated in view of an ethics of the more-than-human world that aims to displace any and all centers in favor of a form of life lived in view of "all our relations"? With Iveson's close relation to both Derrida and Nietzsche in mind, one can see how such questions and possible tensions might arise. Derrida does not rule out the possibility of thinking through the ethics and politics of such a broad set of relations, but his overwhelming focus is on how *différance* constitutes the matrix through which *living* singularities emerge and maintain some semblance of sameness. Nietzsche's thinking, by contrast, casts a much wider ontological and relational net. He thinks will to power as properly cosmic, insists that the Apollonian and Dionysian *agon* emerges primordially from nonhuman nature itself, and teaches us to be wary of thinking that life is anything but an exception in the planetary and cosmic order of things.

Such questions arise not simply because of the zoocentric nature of Iveson's project; this delimitation is entirely understandable given the need to work carefully through the human-animal boundary in particular and the unique forms of violence and becoming that occur along this axis. Rather, what prompts one to consider the scope of Iveson's framework is his tendency to present zoogenesis as the intractable, sole ("only" is a frequent word deployed by Iveson when considering the necessity of a zoogenetic thinking) site from which to contest the established anthropocentric order and constitute an alternative *socius*. Were zoogenesis understood as a partial but important aspect of a form of life beyond animalization, there would be no need to pit zoogenesis against ecological or planetary holism. Rather, the latter ethical and political frameworks might come to be seen as supplementary forms of normative consideration, which would themselves be nested inside a host of micro- and macro- singularities and

relations that exceed the economy of the living. Of course, to do justice to such a wide variety of singularities and relations, one would have to do away with the desire to privilege any single ontological or normative framework and allow thought to enter into a realm in which plural ontologies (which are rather different from a single pluralist ontology) proliferate in view of doing justice to all our relations. Such questions hover on the edges of Iveson's project, and it will be of considerable interest to see how Iveson's forthcoming work on posthumanism and the path of thought he has opened up for his readers will unfold in view of these additional ontological and normative considerations.