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Animalistic rhetoric is often used to discredit and criminalize political activists. While such dehumanization is embedded within a history of racially-motivated oppression and certainly calls for a reassertion of humanity, I ultimately argue that viewing animals as apolitical forecloses rich possibilities for political resistance.

Animal Activists and the Possibility of Response

JENNIFER O. GAMMAGE

When protestors took to the streets of Ferguson, Missouri to demand justice for the shooting of Michael Brown by officer Darren Wilson, actor Kevin Sorbo publicly denied political motivation to activists, claiming that the murder was just “an excuse to be the losers these animals truly are.” Video footage from Ferguson revealed a police officer in military gear screaming “bring it, you fucking animals” at a crowd of young Americans as they stood, lifting homemade signs and chanting, “hands up, don’t shoot.” Across the blogosphere, the sentiment that protestors in Ferguson were acting like animals, not activists, resounded as those who refused to acknowledge the routine killing of black people by police officers dismissed protestors as beasts without reason or voice. Only a few years before, the Occupy Wall Street movement was likened to a zoo by *The New York Post* among others, implying that the activists behind it were nothing but a collection of wild animals on display for public entertainment. Given the history of the use of animalistic rhetoric to dehumanize and marginalize people of colour, women, and criminal defendants, none of this should come as a surprise, but that does not mean it should cease to shock us.

What is at stake when we refer to protestors as animals? Work has and is being done to address the use of animalistic language in racialized and gender-based oppression, and an increasing number of scholars—some of whom will be discussed below—are beginning to question the relationship between speciesism and dehumanization of incarcerated persons. While these are certainly areas deserving of further critique, I here want to pose a different question, one aimed at uncovering presuppositions regarding the animalistic itself rather than oppressive metaphors concerning the humanistic. I thus want to ask: What is “the animal” such that its designation annuls the possibility to engage in political action?

I am not asking how we might grant animals political *rights*; I have no intention here of showing that the animal is more like us than we tend to think, and so should be subject to the same kinds of rights. I follow Kelly Oliver’s inclination that we need to think beyond or beneath the assumptions of human rights to get at the heart of ethical questions. As she rightly points out, rights discourse, “insofar as it leaves intact traditional concepts of man and animal and the traditional values associated with them, [...] cannot transform our ways of thinking about either” (*Animal* 19). Rights discourse and its relationship to identity politics are founded upon a long history of exclusion, and prefaced on ideas of individual liberty that are called into question when we begin to inquire in ways that upset notions of atomistic agency and autonomous action.

Moreover, animals are commonly considered, even within animal rights movements, as creatures devoid of language, sense, history, and consciousness who require the benevolent extension of human rights to flourish. I am in solidarity with Cynthia Willett when she declares: “Our political aim is not ultimately a reform project for securing animals rights based on their protective status [...]. Animals are not vulnerable sites of protection and recipients of human sympathy, but kindred political agents in their own right” (38). Willett goes on to call into question the ability of Jacques Derrida’s ethics of response to address the animal, who, she reads Derrida as saying, remains for him so radically other in her vulnerability that we have no chance of understanding her.

Nevertheless, I think Derrida can offer us a way into our question regarding the possibility of the animal as activist. Derrida takes Lacan to task for denying animals’ capacities for language, social awareness, and intentional response. He paraphrases Lacan thus: “When bees apparently ‘respond’ to a ‘message,’ they are not *responding*, they are *reacting*: they are merely obeying the fixity of a program, whereas the human subject responds to the other, to the question of the other” (165-66). Derrida’s notion of response-ability, as well as his critique of Lacan, is complex, but here it is enough

to note that he has taken a detour from his usual argument that humans refuse to respond to the animal, to highlight that the ability to respond has been denied to animals. Derrida goes on to explain that part of what is at stake in Lacan's refusal of response is the assumption that language is rooted within an inter-subjective system of signs, whose values are determined not by the world they refer to, but by a symbolic system of differential values. The bee, who uses his body to share detailed information about potential sources of food and shelter, is merely repeating, Lacan claims, what is already given rather than undertaking the true task of language, provocation of the other. We might wonder why it is not enough that the bee's dance can provoke an entire hive to traverse hundreds of miles, but for now I ask that we temporarily bracket the question of language, and attend to the other, an other presupposition at work in Lacan's view. What lurks behind this commentary on what linguistic practice may or may not be is the language of reaction and response typically used to distinguish instinctual, drive-bound behaviour, the "fixity of a program," from autonomous, rational behaviour.

Lacan is not the first to contrast animals with humans by claiming that the former are bound to react based on drives rather than reason, though we might wonder why the psychoanalyst, of all people, would make this mistake. Even before Hobbes, the realm of the animal was envisioned as a state of brute nature in which animals, driven by passions and appetites, and without regard for standards of moral decency or law, ran wild. We might recall Plato's horses, who rely upon the charioteer's *logos* to wrangle in their desires. Indeed, the use of animalistic rhetoric to criminalize protestors has been affective precisely because of assumptions that contrast reason and agency with emotive and biological drives.

A study conducted this year by a team of psychologists found that when animalistic language was used to describe the behaviour of a defendant, jurors tended to suggest longer sentencing and find the defendant guilty more frequently than when animalistic descriptors were absent from testimony. Researchers found that "people [...] view those who commit animalistic crimes as unable to control their drives and emotions, and as more difficult to rehabilitate" (Vasquez et al. 340). Jurors expressed concern that those driven by instinctual, animal motives posed a higher risk for recidivism, and should be considered as inherently criminal.¹ The history of the ways in which a downgrading of affect and embodiment have been integral in race and gender oppression, and the ways in which Foucault has traced the intertwining of ascriptions of madness and the panoptic normalizing processes of the criminal justice system, should already have us questioning the legitimacy of the justification for punishment seen above. And, *especially* in cases of activism and political protest, though

arguably in many forms of “criminal” behaviour, conflicts arise precisely when the notion of the law is contested, disavowed as not *my* law, or when application of the law is disputed, as in recent police violence that calls attention to the ubiquitous presence of racial profiling. As such, I want to hold open the possibility that criminality can arise as an appropriate response, and interrogate, instead, the presupposition that affect and drives work counter to purposive, political action.

Psychoanalysis has worked to unmask the myth of the fully transparent human actor, and calls us to acknowledge the role that drives, regarded as biological, affective, and social, play in human behaviour. Whether based upon childhood sexuality, drives for life and death, the drive for recognition, the drive to repress, or the drive to please a superior, humans can be seen to act on the basis of culturally and biologically constructed drives most, if not all, of the time. Does this mean that humans cannot be political? If we say yes, it seems we are subscribing to the idea that politics requires pure, unabashed free will, devoid of personal and communal histories, emotive states, and/or biological impulses, which not only seems incredibly naïve, but would seem to render the question of activism, which we are attempting to see as a response rather than a goal descending *ex nihilo* from the skies of reason, moot as well. As such, I ask that we set aside the question of free will lurking in the background here, and question, rather, why it is that instinctual drives are assumed to prohibit responsive, political action.

The Enlightenment ideals of the human as rational animal tend to chart the evolution of the human species along a vertical axis, wherein transcendent reason and the nurturing of culture work alongside biological impulse to raise the species, while the animal kingdom is seen to evolve along a horizontal axis that breeds through drives and brute biological processes. However, there are no such neatly demarcated natural categories that entail vast evolutionary differences between humans and other animals. Humans share an evolutionary history with all animal and plant species; if a chain of ancestry were reconstructed, we would find ourselves standing between gorillas and chimpanzees, not at the apex of a gradually rising pyramid (Dawkins 84). Stephen Clark challenges the notion of humanity as a privileged natural kind by reminding us that “We cannot assume that all ‘human’ communities should be explained one way, and all ‘non-human’ communities another, as if chimpanzees and whales were more like worms or amoebae than they were like humans” (32). Evolution, Clark points out, tells us nothing more than how communities breed, and rather than uphold a differential axis between human and animal communities, it illustrates that both human and animal communities evolve in the same way, through social processes and gene flow.²

Considering evolution, it seems difficult to assume that humans are less influenced by biological factors than animals, or that consideration of communities, and thus the *polis*, should be limited to human sociality. Moreover, Jared Diamond reminds us that we cannot assume genetic differences map onto behavioural differences; he writes, “behavioural differences among individual humans are obviously subject to enormous environmental influences, and what role genes play in such individual differences is a controversial question” (96). If anything, he urges, evolution should ask us to see that biological, and presumably emotional, drives for all animals, humans included, evolve within and through networks that call for a response to unique and specific environmental and social factors. Evolution itself is a responsive process, in and through which affective, biological drives have developed to respond to socio-biological need.

If this is not the kind of response we are looking for in the activist, then it seems that what we want is a way to say that drives are subservient to reasoned consideration in the political actor. We can find evidence for self-sacrificing, compassionate behaviour in humans and other animals, but we cannot conclude from this that drives were sharply suspended, that these actions sprung *ex nihilo* from the springs of untarnished reason. The legitimacy of reasons rests on value judgments about what is and is not a worthy justification for action, but this is exactly what is up for dispute in cases of activism. I propose, then, that we set sovereign “reason” aside, and cede, instead, the less controversial and baggage-laden claim that political response appears to require some kind of conscious, intentional behaviour, without assuming that that behaviour need necessarily disavow, or act counter to, biological and affective drives.

The question then becomes how we can know what the animal intends and considers a motive for action, which leads us back to the problem of animal language posed by Derrida and Lacan at the outset of this essay. As Sue Savage-Rumbaugh writes: “The essence of the difference between the human and the animal mind is often claimed to be that man can reflect upon his actions while animals, lacking words, cannot. Crucial to this view is the underlying and unspoken premise that language is the only possible means of reflection. Without language how can we ask what the animal is thinking? And without language how can it tell us? And if it cannot tell us, how can we legitimately assume it?” (258) Savage-Rumbaugh laments the breakdown in direct access to animal minds, and gives us a way to think the importance of language in animal ethology. Of course Lacan was not alone in denying language to the animal; language has long been considered a sacred conspecific that distinguishes humans from animals. But are these claims warranted?

René Descartes proposed two kinds of tests that could show animals have the capacity for language: either animals can be seen to use human language, or animals can show that they have their own natural communication system, which functions like human language. Descartes will, not surprisingly, go on to say that animals show neither, but merely display behaviours guided by passions, *as if we have ever had a language without passion*. Sadly, however, most ethological research on animal language has continued to follow one or the other of the avenues suggested by him.

Research that takes the first approach has attempted to prove that animals can reliably relate signifiers to external objects and states of affairs, join signs with syntax, and even create new combinations of signs, all of which are commonly considered unique to human linguistic ability. Koko the gorilla used more than one thousand ASL signs to make requests and express emotions, and understood more than two thousand English words. Koko used ASL to request food and even pets, and to express sadness and happiness, but critics claimed that Koko was simply repeating memorized sequences to earn rewards from her handler, *as if the human speaks without memory or incentive*. Washoe, a chimpanzee, learned to employ at least 350 ASL signs herself, and responded to even more. Washoe could join together signs she knew to describe new objects; a thermos, for example, became a “metal, cup, drink.” Still, Herbert S. Terrace protested: Creating a combination of signs to describe an unknown object remains a far cry from actually inventing new words, *as if we communicate through neologisms* (Sapolsky). Alex, the African grey parrot, had a one hundred word vocabulary, could categorize objects based on number, shape, colour, and material, and used syntax to combine words into new phrases. Was Alex using human language? Many critics give a resounding “no!” Alex was just repeating what he had been taught, and was, like Clever Hans, merely responding to human cues, *as if language were not a response after all*. When we ask if animals can use human language, the requirements tend to grow as the research does. The question presupposes its own conclusion; human language is, after all, for humans, not animals. At the end of the day it becomes difficult to determine what the criteria must be, and whether or not most humans would be able to satisfy them.

Research that takes the second approach suggested by Descartes might sound more promising, but here, too, the ability of the animal to communicate is predicated on the assumption that language is, essentially, *human* language. Vervet monkeys warn their community when eagles, snakes, or leopards approach by using unique alarm calls that tell community members where to take shelter. For example, if the call for an eagle is sounded, everyone scrambles into the bushes. Are these monkeys talking? Ethologists Robert Seyfarth and Dorothy Cheney claim that although vervet monkeys display use of symbolic utterances, they do not illustrate aspects of what we

would want to call “language.” Seyfarth and Cheney connect language with the ability to detect unreliable communication, whereas vervet community members respond in the same way even when notoriously unreliable signalers sound the call, *as if we were never wrong*. Studies that examine the capacity of animals to use human language not only make specious determinations about what language is and is not, and fail to address the possibility of animal language as such, but they also fail, in most cases, to properly attend to language as essentially communicative.

Communication presupposes one communicator is telling the other *about* something else. In all of the case studies mentioned above, animals are being asked questions about the empirical world, and researchers attempt to infer linguistic prowess based upon the animals’ attempts to provide correct answers. In these studies, not only are animals being cited for failing to provide creative responses to repetitive questions, but animals are only considered likely to “have” language when their responses meet veridicality conditions. John Searle, however, reminds us that such epistemological questions are both extra-linguistic and *extra-intentional*; when we communicate intention, it is rarely the case that we are stating static facts about states of affairs (212). And, as Savage-Rumbaugh has led us to notice, the question of animal language, at least insofar as it can be seen to have any bearing on the question of conscientious response, is intimately bound up with questions about intentionality. Indeed, if we want to show that the animal is capable of response rather than reaction, it seems that intention, rather than rote linguistic repetition, is exactly what is at stake.

Ethologists Colin Allen and Marc Bekoff, in *Species of Mind*, ask that we set aside our obsessions with propositional language as the sole conveyor of intentionality and attend to the ways that animal behaviour and communication can and do show intention. Bekoff draws upon examples of canid play to show how body language expresses not just first person awareness, but third order intentionality (87-113). To signal play, dogs and wolves use a bow; this bow allows their interlocutors to see that they have agreed to suspend hierarchical pack rank to engage in play, which utilizes the same actions as aggressive and sexual behaviours without carrying the same consequences or intentions. The bower is not merely signaling her own wish to play, but is asking for her partner to respond in kind, both through bowing in agreement and in allowing her to perform otherwise contentious actions without repercussion; the bower thus shows she is aware of her own intention *and* the ways that her intention will be received by others. As Willett rightly observes, this example itself gives us grounds to claim that animal communities, too, partake in political behaviour (62). And yet, these observations did not require that ethologists teach canids syntax; canids, like most humans, communicate and respond to one another through body language.

When a friend offers me another drink and I raise my hand in protest, I do not doubt that my intention to refrain has been heard. If that same friend asks me how I am doing and my posture falls inward, my brow crumples, and my mouth turns down at the corners, she instantly knows, or at least approximates, how I feel. Our bodies communicate not just instead of, but *beyond*, our words. David Abram, in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work to remind us that language developed from a more primary "sensuous, evocative dimension of human discourse," and that the dance of the bee or the song of the raven takes place on the same register as human bodily expression (79). This should not lead us to the same mistake Lacan makes in relegating these expressions to the brute level of "immediacy of instinct and bodily urge," but should, rather, remind us that the body plays an important role in communicating "direct, affective meaning" (79).

Perhaps someone would insist that body language only works because my friend and I have a shared communicative background, in which bodily expressions have been predetermined to map onto specific mental states, but it seems to me that I am able to communicate through facial expression not only with speakers within my own linguistic community, but with those from diverse backgrounds as well. If we extend this to animals, can we not begin to notice myriad methods of communication that allow for common understanding to unfold across species boundaries? Sure, we might need to learn how to decipher others, just as my dog and I have had to learn to read one another's subtle postures to cohabitate, but it is not the case that a species barrier prevents us from doing so. Allen and Bekoff spent time with canid packs, and learned to interpret their bodily cues. While neoliberal humanism has cultivated a deep-seated fear of anthropocentrism that we see reflected in Savage-Rumbaugh's hesitance, the logic that refuses to acknowledge I can know anything about the other's experience without silencing the other not only remains mired in the solipsistic problem of other minds, but assumes that any gestures towards mutual understanding and empathy are oppressive. We do not need to assume we have authority to speak *for* the other in order *to* claim that we can listen to the other, and thus foster understanding across linguistic and cultural barriers.

Perhaps, Allen and Bekoff suggest, we could even learn to see biological processes as expressing responsive, propositional states (43). Michael Marder, in his work on vegetal life, does just this when he sketches a notion of vegetal intentionality, which while different from unidirectional, object-oriented, subjective intentionality, is nevertheless a way of thinking material life as inherently *about* relationships with external others, which constitute the life of the plant through biological processes (158-59). The movement of the sunflower, on this view, is *about*, and *responds to* the sun.

Intentionality and response unfold across multifarious registers, and the human who claims that animals do not respond takes on the burden of proof to show why or how they cannot. If we want to know *if* animals can respond, we have to be willing to take the time to observe and learn *how* they respond. Otherwise, we simply reinforce a dominant model of social and linguistic practice that assumes there is only one valid language, and only one legitimate response, and thus forecloses any possibility of new political responses through resistance and activism. Jacques Rancière helps us think this danger when he states that the *polis*, the police, is “an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying,” in which any message of political resistance that does not fit within the narrowly inscribed framework of what is acceptable is reduced to, or even heard only *as*, noise and babble (29). The Occupy movement was chastised for refusing to voice a list of demands, but what if we simply could not understand wishes that lay beyond the authority of acceptable discourse? What if our language, the language of capitalism, simply had no words for the radically other ways of being and doing protesters called for? What if they were not silent animals in a zoo, but political actors attempting to give voice to an other way of living?

This desire to rein responsibility in, to allocate who is and is not speaking, and who can and cannot act based upon political intention by judging the legitimacy of a response against a dominant discourse, is not uncommon. Vicki Hearne makes this mistake when she takes ethical responsibility to be inextricably tied to respect for The Language, where “The Language” equals “human language.” To communicate, Hearne assumes we must both speak the same language, and respect that language and the moral codes inscribed within it; teaching someone to speak is coextensive with teaching him or her to follow moral rules, to be responsible (18-41). Hearne allows that her dog understands and respects language because she can trust him not to bite visitors, but she finds herself unable to come to terms with the fact that Washoe, the signing chimpanzee, uses the same language to communicate because Washoe could quite plausibly kill her. While we cannot give Hearne’s seemingly problematic claims fair consideration here, her work is provocative because it unearths a common assumption underlying our entire investigation: to respond, to be response-able, is simply to obey.

As Derrida endlessly begs that we see, response-ability and obedience are radically opposed. Derrida asks us to consider an ethics of response-ability as an ethics of the undecidable and the singular. To be capable of response is precisely to be able to respond without, or despite, conventional moors that prescribe behaviour within normative limits. That animals, as well as humans, might turn on us, bite us, even kill us is insufficient to deny them the ability to respond; if anything, it would seem to be

proof that they can. As Oliver writes, “we could [...] say that if everything were predictable, then ethics would be impossible. There would be no response, only reaction. And, all living beings, ourselves included, would all be nothing more than answering machines” (“Love” 192). It is this ability to respond out of habit that I want to stress as the determining element when we question the animal as activist, or the human as animal as activist.

If we began by asking why the animal cannot be an activist, I hope we have come to see that arguments that animals are incapable of language, sense, and intentionality because they are bounded by affective and biological drives fail. And they fail both because language cannot be withheld from the animal without trading the capacity for affective bodily expression for an exclusionary and arbitrary model of language as rule-bound discourse and because intentional behaviour is never entirely divorced from drives. What I think we are left with is the call to have a conversation, to respond to the response of the animal, the activist, the actor with intentions that point beyond the regime of discourse hemmed in by boundaries of law and standard practice. Once we do so, I think we can see animal resistance and activism all around us. The body as a site of resistance needs no common language to speak loud and clear.

Sarah Brosnan and Frans deWaal’s study on animal fairness shows that capuchin monkeys react to unfair pay by throwing the less desired food, and shaking on cage doors in frustration. Tatiana the tiger lived at the San Francisco Zoo until 2007, when she leapt the fence on her enclosure and carefully made her way through a large crowd of visitors to find and attack three teenaged boys who had been observed taunting and throwing things at her an hour before. Tatiana had shown warning signs, cowering in corners when visitors yelled at her, and even biting her keeper’s arm when he chastised her, but no one heard her. Jumbo the elephant was tortured repeatedly, fed metal bolts, and housed in a small, metal cage between long work shifts in a series of travelling circuses. Jumbo tried to escape; he was chained into submission. Jumbo tried to lie down, refusing to go to work; he was prodded with a spear until he rose. One night, he found freedom at last and ran head first into an oncoming train.

Alex, the African grey parrot, used the English language to plead with testers to return him to his cage. “Wanna go back,” Alex proclaimed over and over again, to human ears that refused to respond, but asked him, instead, to count more blocks so more lab results could be produced, so researchers could finally prove that Alex could communicate. Unheard, Alex began to pluck out his feathers one by one, which, as anyone who speaks even a bit of bird knows, is a sign of distress. “Wanna go back [to his cage from the lab].” “I know, Alex. How many green blocks?” Irene Pepperberg replies (“Alex”). Alex died of a heart attack; no one knows why.

As I write this, human bodies sit hunched on the ground at a gas station in St. Louis whispering, “hands up don’t shoot” while their arms encircle one another to form a human barricade. Police scream at them to speak, to move, to obey, to act like *people*, but they remain interlocked and still, some with tears streaming silently down their faces. Some are kicked, peeled and pried away from their friends, and arrested. Some, unable to bear the torture of pepper spray fumes and violence, break away from the group and fly, red-faced, shaking, and screaming towards police officers and guard members. “Can you hear me now?” they yell. The police claim they are animals rioting with no cause; can’t you see they are speaking gibberish?

“A riot is the language of the unheard.”

Martin Luther King, 1968

NOTES

1/ “One effect of animalistic descriptions may be that they portray the perpetrator as especially violent and dangerous. People may view those who commit animalistic crimes as unable to control their drives and emotions, as more difficult to rehabilitate” (Vasuez et al. 340).

2/ We might go even further than Clark and follow recent work on co-evolution to consider that humans and animals have evolved side-by-side, as a community mutually defined by a shared ecological home.

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