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Review "Anthropocentrism and the Continental Tradition: Calarco's Zoographies"

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Anthropocentrism and the Continental Tradition: Calarco's *Zoographies*

Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. 169 pages.

Zoographies is primarily a critical book: one of its main claims is that Continental philosophy has been (and is) anthropocentric. Even though well-known thinkers such as Heidegger do ask the question of the animal (i.e., what constitutes the being of the animal, or what is animality?), Calarco argues that their question is always preceded by the unquestioned priority of the human being. The main argument of *Zoographies* is that we should “*simply let the human-animal distinction go*, or, at the very least, not insist on maintaining it” (p. 149). Calarco finds hope in Heidegger, Levinas, Agamben, and Derrida, yet all these philosophers can be accused of anthropocentrism and thus of reinforcing boundaries.

For me, one of the most interesting parts of the book is the introduction. Here Calarco clearly explains the aim of his project by contrasting it with the writings of, among others, Tom Regan, whose “work is not a case for animal rights but for rights for subjects, the classical example of which is human beings” (p. 8). Calarco instead wants to move beyond the anthropomorphism of the universal (such as a shared subjectivity that always leads to exclusion) and develop an ethics that moves beyond the perspective of the human being. He reads Heidegger et al. within the context of this idea. While he shows that the philosophers he discusses may be anthropocentric, he traces certain routes to overcoming that anthropocentrism in the works of Heidegger, Levinas, Agamben, and Derrida—albeit in quite different ways for each thinker.

The first chapter discusses Heidegger. The textual analysis is thorough (as is true throughout the book) and starts with a brief discussion of *Being and Time*. Calarco guides the reader (including the reader who is unfamiliar with Heidegger's work), while simultaneously setting up the context of Heidegger's anthropomorphism. The latter is found particularly in Heidegger's 1929/1930 lecture course, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*. Calarco here exposes a theme that will recur throughout the book: philosophers (Heidegger, Agamben, and Derrida) attempt to overcome anthropocentrism, yet ultimately fail to do so. Ironically, Heidegger asks the question of the animal—i.e., he attempts to discuss the animal in nonanthropocentric terms—but he merely shifts to a new anthropocentric discourse. When Heidegger describes the animal as “poor in world,” he may have found a new way to describe the animal world, but this new description is anthropocentric nonetheless: the animal is “poor” in comparison to us.

The second chapter discusses Levinas, whose work is, as the book points out, often plagued by “idiosyncratic anthropocentric dogmatism” (p. 14). Despite this dogmatism, Levinas's thought has the potential to open up a radicalized animal ethics. Thus Calarco finds an interesting contradiction at the heart of Levinas's philosophy: it is dogmatically anthropocentric, while “the underlying logic of his thought permits no such anthropocentrism” (p. 55).

Agamben is the third philosopher discussed in the book. Agamben's work seems promising for Calarco's project since he wants to abandon the human-animal distinction at the political and the ontological level. Starting from the category of bare life, a new form of the political emerges that should include the animal. In this new political life, Agamben tries to “jam” the anthropological machine, the mechanism that determines the current human-animal distinction in philosophical discourses. Yet, as with Heidegger (and Derrida), his

attempt to overcome anthropocentrism is ultimately a failure: Agamben “jams” the anthropological machine from the standpoint of the human being without ever asking what the impact is on animal life.

In his last chapter, Calarco discusses Derrida and his attempt to overcome and move beyond boundaries in general and the human-animal distinction in particular. Calarco explains the aim of deconstruction as reworking boundaries “so as to overcome them and think through and beyond them” (p. 132). For the question of the animal this is particularly important since it would move us beyond the ethical theories of Singer and Regan, which simply move the existing boundaries; in those theories, ethical communities are extended to sentient beings, or to subjects-of-a-life. While Singer and Regan have done important work, Calarco shows the limitations of their ideas and argues, using Derrida, that we should move beyond boundaries. This last chapter argues how, on the one hand, deconstruction for Derrida implies vegetarianism and how, in the end, Derrida falls back in the anthropocentric tradition by describing an abyss between the human and the animal.

One of the main achievements of *Zoographies* is to explain in clear language philosophers such as Derrida—whose language is often regarded as an impediment—thereby making them more accessible to readers who are not schooled in their thought or in Continental philosophy.

Calarco takes up the double task of criticizing and evaluating the value of the four thinkers for rethinking the question of the animal. Yet each chapter criticizes the anthropocentrism of each of these philosophers. While I am very sympathetic to the overall project, after reading this book it remains unclear to me precisely what Calarco’s move beyond boundaries means. It is even doubtful whether Heidegger and the other philosophers discussed are even helpful in this project, considering the book’s severe criticism of them. I would have liked Calarco to return to the ideas presented in the introduction, where he hints that he wants to move beyond universality (such as the notion of a subject). Those interesting and provocative ideas are to some degree lost in the critical readings of the four thinkers.

Related to this criticism are my reservations about the selection of these four philosophers. I am not convinced, for example, that the chapter on Heidegger is essential to the main argument. Other important Continental philosophers are missing or are found only in the margins. Deleuze, for instance, is identified in the introduction as a very important figure for the project, yet in the remainder of the text his name is hardly mentioned. I would have liked to read more about his importance.

Criticisms aside, I found this an interesting work that I enjoyed reading. *Zoographies* is a thorough study of some of the main figures of contemporary Continental philosophy, yet it is also accessible to readers who are less familiar with this tradition.

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