

Introduction

Phenomenology of Animality: Challenges and Perspectives

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In recent decades, the question concerning the animal has given rise to a complex inquiry, which, under the generic name of Animal Studies, has generated a multifaceted research field, with a wide interdisciplinary openness, crossing a variety of perspectives: from biology, ethology, and psychology to sociology and literary studies, from geography, history and law to anthropology and philosophy. Dominant approaches to this question belong to animal ethics and engage a range of philosophical, moral and juridical issues related to the status, the rights and the protection of animals, as well as the relations of power in which the human being has traditionally placed the animal. These perspectives criticize in various ways the classical model of understanding the animal, namely the traditional way of thinking the interaction between the human and the animal. Thus, a series of directions of thought and action appeared, with an increasing social impact on contemporary practices, in particular on the consumption of food and clothes. The most prominent directions of the Animal Studies are the “animal rights movement” and the “animal liberation movement,” which support the abolition of the “tyranny of human over non-human animals” and call for the enlargement of the idea of “rights” from the human to the animal realm. In their most radical forms, the Critical Animal Studies aim at changing the status of animal being, including it in the “moral community” that is specific to human society. This would require to remove the animal from the category of “property” and convey some species

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the status of “persons,” with all legal rights deriving from it (justice, dignity, protection, value, end in itself, etc.), as, for example, the controversial Great Ape Project claims.

At the core of the Animal Studies lies the anthropological difference, i.e. the constitutive differences between the human and the animal. In particular the questions regarding the conditions of possibility of an animal ethics and the legitimacy of ascribing rights to animals depend on a whole series of layers of meaning, articulating the spheres of experience involved in this subject matter, that need to be previously analysed and described. To be more specific, the different disciplines that study the animal worlds involve assumptions or preconceptions that usually remain unquestioned, yet tacitly guide the research, as they refer to the basic problems concerning the mode of being of the animal, of the human, and the constitutive dimensions that articulate these two spheres. Put it differently, these problems refer not only to the ontological structure of animality, but also to the transcendental conditions of subjectivity, in its comprehensive, affective and communicative levels, which are essential for any explanation of the (potentially intersubjective) relationship between humans and animals.

The question is how can one have access to these implicit assumptions or preconceptions of Animal Studies? It is indeed the privilege of the phenomenological research to focus precisely on what seems self-evident, highlighting the questionable nature of the ideas that support our everyday understanding. In this sense, what is likely to be self-evident in the relationship between humans and animals—especially in the mode of being of the animal—may turn out to be deeply problematic and thus worthy of being (re)examined. The processes by which our understanding transfers, more or less consciously, its own criteria concerning being to animal being attempting, in a state of “naive empathy,” to disclose the subjectivity of the animal “from within” by assigning it specifically human meanings, conceal in fact a multitude of fundamental difficulties that need to be scrutinized in detail.

What is the ontological structure of animal being? Do the animal species constitute the world and the objects within it in the same way as humans do? Is it legitimate to explicate animality starting from the basic structures of the human existence and assign it consciousness, perception and language, ego and self, identity and alterity, spatiality and temporality, memory, emotions and even creativity? Can we avoid anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism in the philosophical approach of animal life? Is there any possibility to escape the specifically *human* point of view that articulates *our* understanding of animals? These and other similar questions animated almost all directions of the phenomenological tradition, from Husserl, Heidegger, Scheler, Straus and Merleau-Ponty to Levinas and Derrida, and involved various approaches: transcendental and ontological, hermeneutical and ethical, descriptive and deconstructive. Thus, we are dealing now with a polymorphic picture of what

the expression “phenomenology of animality” actually means. Indeed, after a whole range of rich and complex analyses, which are not always convergent, we are entitled to ask: what does “the animal” ultimately mean for phenomenology?

It is in relation to these questions that we devote the current issue of *Studia Phænomenologica* to the phenomenology of animality. This area can be examined in at least two different ways: one can start from the fundamental questions of phenomenology and consider the issues related to the animal being; or one can start, on the contrary, from issues related to animal philosophy and explore the explanatory potential of phenomenology in relation to this field. Depending on the approach taken, the topic can therefore be understood either as a “phenomenology of animality” and thus focus on the distinctive methodology of the phenomenological investigation of the animal, or as a “phenomenology of *animality*” and emphasize the specificity of the animal problem within the vast field of phenomenology. Thus, on the one hand, one might ask, what function can have the phenomenon of animal life within the general framework of a phenomenological research program, be this transcendental, ontological, hermeneutical or ethical; or on the other hand, one may scrutinize the role phenomenology as such plays in the context of the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary contemporary debates about the animal. Accordingly, there are two intertwined questions here, and both are equally important: one refers to the significance of the animal being for phenomenology, while the other is related to the significance of phenomenology for the current field of “animal philosophy.”

But then, what does the *specificity* of the phenomenological approach to the animal consist in? How can be identified the dimensions that distinguish and individualize the phenomenological approach in contrast to other forms of animal philosophy? By virtue of what exactly is an approach to the animal a *phenomenological* one? Given the aforementioned fact that the history of phenomenology reveals multifarious approaches to the animal, and thus we are not dealing with *one* phenomenology of animality, but rather with a plurality of phenomenologies, it is worth attempting to isolate a common core or at least central factors that give coherence and unity to this field. If the phenomenological approach must by definition be carried out in the first person and focus in a strictly descriptive way on what is given and shows itself, if, furthermore, its paramount task is that of uncovering both the structure of subjective experience and the constitutive structures of the described phenomena, then the same requirements have to be applied to the question of the animal and the diverse experiences we have with animals. Thus, first, the phenomenological reduction would require a preliminary bracketing of all scientific and philosophical theories about animals in general; in other words, phenomenology should endeavor to disregard from the beginning any traditional understanding of the animal that may divert or “blur” the phenomenological insight.

Secondly, as an essentially methodological approach, phenomenology raises the question regarding the conditions of access to the being of the animal or to the animal world(s); from this perspective, it highlights the limits of empathy and critically draws the attention to the risks of transferring meaning from the human into the animal sphere. Thirdly, phenomenology starts from the everyday experience of and with animals, and investigates the concrete ways these are given to us (and, respectively, give themselves to us) in our world of factual life; this means that it avoids as much as possible artificial environments such as laboratory settings. Finally, in virtue of its originally eidetic character, phenomenology focuses on the question regarding the essence of the animal, the problem of animality, and the basic structures of animal experience, including their analogies and differences to the spheres of human experience.

Given the rich history of phenomenology and its multifaceted traditions, the aforementioned schema concerning the smallest common denominator of phenomenological approaches to animal life is meant as a guide rather than as a normative framework for evaluating the conformity of philosophical interpretations of animality to phenomenology. For example, as necessary as the bracketing of any previous understanding of animal life provided by science or philosophy may be in order to retrieve an alleged immediate relation to animal in daily life, the phenomenologists who have dealt with the anthropological difference have been well acquainted to contemporary biological and psychological theories. This is certainly the case; otherwise it would not have been possible to Heidegger and Straus, among others, to refute these theories or to point out to what extent life sciences are tributary to a philosophical pre-understanding.

Regarding its methodology, the typical phenomenological first-person approach has to face the objection that it is inadequate to capture non-human life forms. First person descriptions of our encounters with animals would either project the structures of human subjectivity on animals (and thus backhandedly humanize them) or would have to acknowledge the limits of interspecies empathy and, as a result, be tempted to abandon the subject in question as ungraspable. The very phenomenological presupposition of reaching, in experience, only the correlate of my/our human self would either mislead the philosophical inquiry to less-than-humans quasi-subjects or be confronted to the undecipherable alterity of animals and turn away from these (with corresponding negative consequences for any animal ethics), as Derrida pointed out. How is then finally possible to encounter the animal *on its own terms* without giving up the first-person approach or surrender to the objectifying methods of life science? The special status of phenomenology among philosophical approaches to the animal also explains its contradictory evaluations in contemporary animal philosophy, which concern, on the one hand, its plainly ignoring this philosophy's contributions to the subject matter and,

on the other, praising these as pioneer studies that makes it possible to assign subjectivity and agency to animals.

Also, at the time when phenomenology was founded more than a century ago, one could still clearly discern between the “natural” experience of everyday life and experiences that are confined to specific lifeworlds, such as science. The worldwide explosion of technology, urban cultures and new media, that occurred since then, let alone the development of industrial farming, compel us to raise the question: which is nowadays the “natural” and immediate encounter with animals? Recent surveys sound the alarm about the spreading out of the so-called nature deficit disorder among children, who cannot tell apart the species that can be found in their own region and the exotic ones. Related to this, we may suspect that the primary encounter with animals of an increasing number of human subjects occurs precisely in artificial settings (like zoos) or are mediated by cultural constructs (cartoons, documentaries, etc.). One does not even have to go so far, but just ask whether the environments construed by industrial farming for the most common animals can be regarded as natural *Umwelten*. And what about the pets? Under such conditions, the fundamental questions phenomenology is expected to answer regarding the animals involve an array of more specific questions, such as the following: can phenomenology make space for the *response* of the animal or even to the initiative it takes in its relation to the human, by legitimating the concept of a non-human agent? Does the weakening of intentionality with regard to the human subject in recent phenomenology have implications for engaging us in *another kind of relation* to the animal(s)? Does the initial primacy of perception in phenomenology, regarded as a paradigm of experience, allows for a rapprochement between the explanation of the human and the animal life? Is there any relation between the first-person perspective of phenomenology and what the Animal Studies call “speciesism”? Can the rejection of (traditional) humanism on behalf of phenomenology and its strive to renew the philosophical terminology open up the perspective of a more “animal-friendly” post-humanism? Last, but not least, are we entitled to hope that the phenomenology of animality would relaunch the quest for a phenomenology of nature or environment, a topic which for a long time was avoided in order to preserve the distinction between phenomenology and naturalistic explanations?

The studies included in this volume illustrate the multifarious preoccupations with animality within phenomenological research, and argue for the rich potential phenomenology has for the field of contemporary animal philosophy. Against the clichés that sharply separate the phenomenological from the scientific approach, **Maxine Sheets-Johnstone** argues that Husserl’s philosophy and Darwin’s evolutionary biology are complementary with respect to the agentic abilities of humans and, respectively, animals; both non-human and

human animals act as mindful bodies that are engaged in processes of movement and learning.

In particular Heidegger's influential interpretation of the animal's poorness in world in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* has inspired several authors of the present volume. **Andreas Beinsteiner** refutes the criticisms that Calarco, Agamben and Derrida raised against Heidegger's understanding of the animal, and considers that his anthropocentrism may well provide a methodological basis for conceptualizing "a specific historical response-ability of the human" which would have consequences for animal ethics. By contrast, the same Heideggerian description of the animal as "poor in world" stimulates **Tommy Andersson** to introduce the concept of "otherworldly worlds" for the higher species and to suggest setting forth, in the wake Heidegger's, the fertile dialogue between philosophy and life sciences. **Frank Schalow** shifts the focus on ethics and endorses with new arguments the view that Heidegger's ontology and philosophy of dwelling can promote environmental ethics, namely on the basis of the claim of the common embodiment of humans and animals. Another experience shared by humans as well as animals is death, as **Christian Sternad** argues; in his article, he challenges Heidegger's contentious claim that humans die whereas animals can only perish.

The hermeneutical horizon is broadened in **Simona Bertolini's** account of prominent explanations of human animality in the history of phenomenology. Bertolini identifies two lines of reflection concerned with the anthropological difference. Both acknowledge the qualitative difference between the human and the animal, but the first model continues the Aristotelian paradigm of a specific human difference and admits the existence of a basic animal layer in humans, like Husserl, Scheler and Edith Stein do, while the second model, represented by Heidegger and Fink, tend to plainly contest any animal dimension in human beings. Even more controversial than the human animality is the issue regarding the animal subjectivity. According to **Lucia Zaietta**, subjectivity implies an entanglement of activity and passivity, and the pathic dimension (i.e. sensitivity) opens the way for linking the humans with the animals and for making place for the concept of subject in biology. Zaietta argues that the relevance of a dialogue between phenomenology and biology is demonstrated by certain affinities between Merleau-Ponty and Weizsäcker that she identifies in her article. The interwar philosophical anthropology was still "placing" the humans between the animal life and the divine, between natural immanence and spiritual transcendence. In several religions, however, animals are frequently considered symbols of the sacred; this remark makes **James Mensch** inquire how we can link the alterity of the animal and that of the divine. His answer relates this double alterity to the unconscious and puts forward the hypothesis that humans develop a stable self-image only by 'intertwining' (in Merleau-Ponty's sense of the term) the different impulses directed to the animal and the divine.

The contribution of phenomenology to contemporary animal philosophy includes methodological aspects. **Corry Shores** raises the question as to how it is possible to describe the animal experience in the first-person perspective. “Translational” strategies resort to the human’s subjective empathy with other species; “transpositional” strategies such as, for example, that proposed by Uexküll, attempt to reconstruct with objective methods the animal experience in specific *Umwelten*. Both methods have specific limitations, which leads the author to a third, “transformational” strategy, inspired by Deleuze’s and Guattari’s “becoming-animal.”

In addition to the methodological challenge posed by non-human animals, the animal philosophy in general has to overcome terminological difficulties, especially regarding the use of traditional concepts like subject, agent, self or ego. **Jean-François Perrier**’s article endorses Derrida’s claim that it is necessary to abandon these concepts and to deconstruct the theory of subjectivity in order to shed light on the animal life and to overcome the ethics of speciesism. Furthermore, Perrier reconstructs Derrida’s ethics with the aim of deriving from it an ethics of hospitality and responsibility that would include animals. Derrida—and more specifically, his deconstruction of the concept of sovereignty in *The Beast and the Sovereign*—also accompanies **Orietta Ombrosi**’s article on the political implications of animal philosophy. The wolf, as both a real and symbolic animal, serves here for an exercise of deconstruction and for emphasizing Derrida’s own limits in thinking animality.

The last paper of the section dedicated to animal phenomenology takes up another traditional definition of the human in its difference to the animal, namely as *homo faber*. **Galit Wellner** tackles the currently widely discussed issue whether animals have technologies; this question received different answers in the three (human) ages of tools, machines and, respectively, digital technologies. The contemporary tendency to assign the invention and use of tools to some animal species cannot, however, avoid the question regarding the similarities and differences between humans and animals with respect to their specific “technologies.”