

# Introduction

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Inquiries into the relation between humans and nonhuman animals, and of the uncertain borders of those relations, draw together many of the great questions of our time: the essence and the future of humanity in the era of the Anthropocene, the legitimacy and effectiveness of human and animal rights, the ethical and political standing of humanism and posthumanism, the uncertain and at times dangerous exceptionalism of the human condition, and our entanglement with the otherness represented by animality. From modern evolutionary theory to the Holocaust's narratives of dehumanisation, from Kafka's *Red Peter* to contemporary cinema, our fellow sentient beings have always enjoined us to question the 'animals that therefore we are'.<sup>i</sup> As Joanna Bourke writes in *What it Means to Be Human*, humanity has long sought to "demarcate the territory of the human from that of the animal – to tie a knot in that Möbius strip in order to declare "*here!* is the fully-human. *There!* are the others, the animals, the women, the subaltern". For the British historian, this obsessive desire "is both the greatest driving force of history and also the inspiration for systemic violence".<sup>ii</sup> Biotechnologies such as xenotransplantation and research on stem cells, but also ongoing environmental disasters raise serious questions about the structure of our shared identity and about the impact of human agency on our shared planet.

The relevance of these issues accounts for the increasing interest in long-standing debates over the human-animal relation. For at least the past two decades these debates have expanded their scope and influence through the development of animal studies, posthumanism and ecocriticism, as well as through a more general concern with anthropogenic climate change and its ecological and social consequences. Interdisciplinary inquiry into the past, present and future relations between species, places the question of the animal at its centre, not to invert the humanistic hierarchy which understands 'humanity' as a privileged point of reference, but to expose and contest the limits of human-centred ontologies, histories or politics. To dispute the concept of 'the animal' as a shared essence or set of characteristics binding all animals together, Jacques Derrida drew attention to the singularity of the animal, which takes on an ethical dimension: the face of the other which calls on us and obligates us in unanticipated ways cannot be delimited to the realm of the human.<sup>iii</sup> Derrida's 'question of the animal', in fact, opens a larger debate about whether we know how to think about animals *at all*, appealing for a radical critique of all existing discourses on the matter. The philosopher's reflections are of foundational importance in many recent studies of dehumanization (Kalpana Rahita Seshardi), biopower (Cary Wolfe), animal subjectivity (Steve Baker), self-reflexive embodiment (Ron Broglio, Anat Pick) and interspecies ethics (Cynthia Willett), to name but a few.

Contemporary developments in human-animal studies aspire towards greater conceptual complexity and, thanks to their interdisciplinary nature and their revolutionary approach to questions of identity, rationality, language, violence and ethics, are having a significant impact on a variety of disciplines. Yet, many contributions to critical animal studies and posthumanist theory appear clustered around a new set of ‘dogmas’: the uncritical endorsement of post-anthropocentrism; the tendency to oversimplify the Enlightenment and humanist tradition; the risk of transforming – by collapsing any distinction between humans and animals – the field of living creatures into a night in which all cows are black, an undifferentiated mass beyond understanding (Hegel).

The essays in this volume, which combine discussion of literature, philosophy/theory and history, suggest the need for a more historically nuanced, transnational and intercultural approach to humanity and animality. Contributors engage with the work of important thinkers and writers (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Martin Heidegger, Primo Levi, Tommaso Landolfi, Stefano D’Arrigo, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Roberto Esposito, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Cary Wolfe, François Laruelle, Giorgio Agamben, Isabelle Stengers, Bernard Stiegler) to build on and expand a growing body of philosophical, literary or historical work devoted to the human-animal relation. We explore how the question of the animal can prompt a rethinking of ontologies, politics, ethics, the world, the Anthropocene in ways that acknowledge rather than deny, redraw rather than reinforce, the limits of humanity. We investigate the shortcomings of the current post-anthropocentric consensus, by emphasising the central role of *homo sapiens* in shaping the life of our planet, at least in terms of environmental impact, but also by highlighting the significance of technology, morality, and the human capacity for creating myths and collective fictions.<sup>iv</sup> We argue that our thinking can never fully escape the human subject as a ‘minimal’ or ‘strategic’ point of reference, for, as Elizabeth de Fontenay has written, ‘we cannot entirely purge ourselves of anthropocentrism except by taking ourselves for the God of Leibniz who is capable of seeing from all possible perspectives. This egoist, or even speciesist point of view (if one accepts the term) [...] is the effect of our finitude before being the mark of our power’.<sup>v</sup> The question is, rather, how different determinations of the human are radically called into question by the ‘nonhuman demand’ (Ian James). The seven essays in this volume explore different facets and incarnations of this question, offering refreshing and undogmatic perspectives that challenge the theoretical underpinning of today’s animal turn and interrogate the ways in which literary authors and historical events problematize the human-animal divide, prompting us to rethink the creaturely world around us.

Ian James’ ‘The Non-Human Demand’ opens the volume by examining the fundamental challenge that animality poses to thought in general. Can animality be conceived on its own terms, that is without being opposed to the human or, moreover, without shoring up some ideal of humanity? That question, he argues, drawing on the work of Laruelle and Nancy, cannot be adequately addressed by posthumanism. In its attempt to provide an alternative paradigm of human subjectivity as self-critical, fluid and accountable, posthumanism ends up reproducing an idealised image of the human which remains too wedded to the humanism which it sets out to critique. Rather than attempting to redefine the human to elucidate the

question of the animal, James asserts, we need to be attentive to the demands made by the non-human on thought and rethink the animal-human relation on more equal terms. Both James and Martin Crowley identify Nancy's work as responding to that demand. Crowley's 'The Many Worlds of Jean-Luc Nancy' makes the case for the significance of the French philosopher for an ecological and ontological pluralism. That significance paradoxically lies with what Crowley calls a minimal anthropocentrism. Human language provides the privileged site in which the non-totalisable plurality of singular beings gets exposed. Human exceptionalism therefore coincides with exposure to human finitude. Without a degree of anthropocentrism, we would never sense the incommensurability and at times incompatibility of the many overlapping and yet separate worlds of beings of all sorts; we could never situate ourselves in relation to the non-human.

The question of finitude is further explored in the essays by Kevin Inston and Stefano Bellin. Human limits separate man from animal but also connect them. Rousseau's questioning of the human-animal hierarchy in the *Discourse on Inequality*, Inston argues, challenges his predecessors' attempt to found human superiority on the basis of specific properties such as language and reason by exposing the impropriety (the absence of any property) which defines humanity. Impropriety means that we are never self-sufficient and thus always in relation; it externalises us. As Rousseau's reflections on compassion show, human difference, paradoxically, enables us to identify with the physical vulnerability and mortality we share with all animals, to identify with the equality of the living which disturbs man-made hierarchies. The hierarchical strategies which elevate human to the status of person and demote animal to the status of thing are analysed and deconstructed in Bellin's reading of Primo Levi through the philosophy of Esposito. For Esposito, the *dispositif* of the person creates a split in the human between a higher moral-rational dimension and a lowly nonpersonal animal/biological dimension. This split gets examined in Levi's complex discussion of man, which favours a personalist conception when seeking to denounce the depersonalisation of death camps and an impersonal (that is, non-dualistic) one when representing his relation to other animals, nature and technology. For Rousseau and Levi, human indeterminacy refuses any clear separation from animality.

Damiano Benvegnù addresses the question of finitude through literature and suggests that cultural representations of death are inextricably linked to notions of humanness and animality. He explores these connections through the works of Italian writers Tommaso Landolfi and Stefano D'Arrigo. For both authors, Benvegnù contends, the death of nonhuman animals marks a moment of acute ontological recognition, across species, and therefore acts as a radical challenge to exceptionalist thought systems. Joanna Bourke's article turns our attention to sexuality, which, like death, has often been seen as radically resistant to the order of representation. Non-human animals, as Bourke shows, are central to the sexual imaginary of humans, but this phenomenon has been relatively neglected as a focus of interest in human-animal studies, which have tended instead to focus, less controversially, on notions of companionship. Bourke's article transcends this paradigmatic orientation in secondary literature and clarifies and broadens our understanding of sexuality by tracing the modern history of bestiality from the nineteenth century to the present. She also examines changing

ideas about the “wrongness” of bestiality, and explores their significance in relation to established concepts of gender, sexuality, violence and consent.

In the article that closes this special issue, Florian Mussgnug responds to James’ critique of posthumanism by calling for a reconceptualization of the relation between humans and nonhuman nature. Elaborating on Derrida’s claim that the cultural force of the animal stems from a productive tension between the abstract singular (“the animal”) and the unique specificity of each particular nonhuman other, Mussgnug rejects the ontological singularity of the human, either as a biological species (*homo*) or as a planetary super-agent (Anthropos). In the context of Anthropocene studies, he suggests, the perspective of animal philosophy may serve to counter a growing tendency to generalise and address the human species at large, in the singular. Like non-human animality, the concept of humanity must be understood, against the vertiginous backdrop of geological time, as a process of becoming: a complex set of material and semiotic practices that shapes open-ended, transformative trajectories.

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<sup>i</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, ed. by Marie Louise Mallet and trans. by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009; 1<sup>st</sup> edn 2006).

<sup>ii</sup> Joanna Bourke, *What it Means to be Human. Reflections from 1791 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2011), p. 378.

<sup>iii</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, ed. by Marie Louise Mallet and trans. by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009; 1<sup>st</sup> edn 2006); and Id., *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vols. 1-2, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009-2011).

<sup>iv</sup> See Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Vintage, 2011).

<sup>v</sup> Cited in Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 150.