

We Are Made of Meat

An Interview with Matthew Calarco

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LC: Why do you think is important to employ continental philosophy for the animal question?

MC: I think there are several ways into the animal question, via law, literature, art, film, science, and so on. Philosophy represents another important approach for helping us to think through animals; and, to date, philosophical approaches to animals have been dominated by so-called Anglo-American analytic philosophy (especially the branch of ethical theory that has developed out of that tradition). I don't dispute the importance of the work done by thinkers in this tradition (and here I have in mind everyone from Peter Singer and Tom Regan to Paola Cavalieri and Mark Rowlands), but I think it's important to note that their general approach is but one avenue and path of thought among many.

In addition, it is important to underscore that there are certain intractable lacunas and dilemmas that follow from this body of work in analytic animal ethics, some of which I have examined in my published work. Let me briefly touch on just one of these dilemmas. One of the main problems that arises in the context of analytic approaches to thinking about animals is that these approaches tend to install a certain conception of the human subject at the center of ethical reflection and then extend outward from that center to include nonhuman animals. In other words, within most of these frameworks, animals are included within the scope of ethical consideration inasmuch as they are like 'us' in ethically relevant ways; and animals and other beings who do not resemble us in relevant ways are typically left outside the scope of attention and consideration. Now, such arguments by analogy (e.g., this given group of animals is analogous to paradigm case humans in ethically relevant ways and should be given the same ethical consideration) are undoubtedly important at certain levels and in certain

situations, but they come at a serious cost to all beings who do not resemble 'us' in ethically relevant ways.

One of the major trends within Continental philosophy that I find useful for pushing back against this questionable tendency of analytic approaches is the critical analysis of 'the human' that we find in such thinkers as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze, Irigaray, Braidotti, and others. This approach to philosophy takes as its point of departure the notion that traditional notions of human nature (based on unified subjectivity, full self-presence, sovereign agency, and so forth) are no longer tenable (and they arrive at this position through a long chain of argumentation that I can't reconstruct here). If we follow the line of thought opened up by these philosophers, then we have to rethink in a fundamental way what it means to be human.

And as we undertake this kind of analysis, we can see straight away that all of the traditional marks of human propriety that are now in question have been used repeatedly throughout the history of thought, culture, law, economics, and so on, to differentiate human beings from animals. So, if we can no longer trust in those markers of human propriety to tell us who we are, we can also no longer be sure of who or what animals are and what our relation to them might be (both ontologically and ethically). In short, we also have to rethink in a fundamental way what it means to be *animal*.

Continental philosophy – if pursued in the direction I'm outlining here – would have our thinking about animals begin from a site of aporia, of confusion and tumult, about who humans are and who animals are. This starting point asks us to construct alternative concepts and alternative ways of thinking that no longer trust uncritically the categories and distinctions that have structured the dominant culture's ways of thinking and living up to this point. This is a much more modest approach to thinking about animals, and it is one that proceeds with a keen awareness of the pitfalls of creating clean and distinct ontological and ethical lines between human beings and animals.

LC: In one of your recent papers, you maintain that the best approach to thinking about animals is 'indistinction'. I can understand this position philosophically, but might it not be dangerous from a political point of view?

MC: Yes, there are certain dangers in this approach, and so it has to be spelled out very carefully. Let me try to do that as best as I am able to here. Following the line of thought I just outlined in the previous question, 'indistinction' names the space of aporia in which we find ourselves when

thinking about animals and human beings. If the sharp distinctions that have typically been drawn between humans and animals fall by the wayside, humans and animals fall into a shared space in which they become deeply indistinct from one another. Indistinct does not mean superficial identity – which is to say, it does not mean that they (animals) are now seen to be like us (humans), or vice versa; rather, it means that both what we call human and what we call animals fall into an altogether different zone of profound and deep identity that requires us to use alternative, nontraditional concepts and ideas if we wish to speak about it. In other words, indistinction means that we have ethical and ontological work to do. It throws a question in our faces: how might (what we call) humans and animals relate, ethically and ontologically, otherwise? We know the old answer to the question of how humans and animals should relate (ontologically, humans are separated from animals by an abyss; and ethically, humans have more value than animals do). But if ‘The Human’ is dead, along with ‘The Animal’, then we don’t know who we and they might become, what kinds of affects and relations we and they might encounter, what kinds of worlds we and they might constitute and inhabit. In other words, viewing humans and animals as indistinct entails seeing all of us as caught up in a shared space of ontological and ethical experimentation.

Now, where this line of thought might get politically dangerous is with the suspicion that it seems to undercut many progressive movements for human social justice. Traditionally, many marginalized groups have been denied full standing as human beings on the grounds that they were not fully human, that they were ‘like animals’. Many of these marginalized groups have had to fight for their humanity, that is, for recognition of their full standing as human beings – and here I am, seemingly trying to undercut the concept of the human altogether! But I hope it is clear that I am entirely on the side of these progressive movements for social justice. I am fully and painfully aware of how rhetorics of animality have been used to marginalize human beings the world over, and I am deeply aware of how important being recognized as fully human can often be for such peoples.

But it has to be noted that there have also been radical movements for change throughout the years that have sought change on other grounds and through other avenues. Many different queer struggles, feminist groups, indigenous peoples, anti-racism and decolonization struggles, alter-globalization activists, radical environmentalists, and so on, have argued that radical movements for social justice should not be about who is human and who isn’t human, about who should be granted access to the status quo economy/law/culture associated with ‘man’ and who shouldn’t. Their goal has been to push back against and ultimately leave behind that all-

too-human world and construct a world in which *many worlds are possible* and *for beings of all sorts*. Rather than playing the old game of determining human propriety and then stretching it to include or exclude this being or that being, these groups are asking us to push back against that game and eventually exit it altogether. I place my work within, alongside, and in support of those struggles. So, my work is not aimed at undercutting the humanist progressive struggles for social justice that I mentioned above; instead, it is aimed at deepening and radicalizing them in the name of those who continue to be marginalized by the established anthropocentric order.

LC: Besides being a philosopher, you call yourself an activist? Have you become vegan? Do you think it is important to become vegan, despite all the problems with it?

MC: I have been involved with animal activism of various sorts and at various levels for many years. And, yes, veganism is to my mind one important aspect of pushing back against the established anthropocentric order. Veganism is not for me an attempt at being pure and making sure that I consume no animals or animal products or that I cause animals no harm. Given the world we live in (which is deeply caught up in violence toward animals at every conceivable level), and given the more general logic of consumption (which is inherently violent), pure veganism is impossible to attain – and I know that, despite my best efforts (I am a strict vegan by most people’s standards), I indirectly consume animals and cause them harm in innumerable ways. But that doesn’t mean one simply gives up and eats just anything one feels like. Instead the question becomes: How can I, or better, how can *we* consume (and be consumed, because consumption runs both ways!) as respectfully as possible? Veganism is the name I give to that practice of respectful eating when it is undertaken in view of animals. For me, veganism is one of the ways of putting the notion of indistinction into practice. Animals and human beings are deeply and profoundly indistinct in the fact that we are, all of us, potentially meat. This is one of the most important lessons of artists like Francis Bacon (a point that is made well by Deleuze in his reading of Bacon), feminist theorists like Val Plumwood, as well as several indigenous peoples and traditions that have influenced my work. Counter to some animal ethicists who view animals and humans as being fundamentally inedible and who build their veganism on a kind of absolute prohibition of consumption, this alternative way of seeing humans and animals as sharing a zone of indistinct, meaty, consumable embodiment gives rise to another kind of veganism. Vegans of this sort, among which I would count myself, avoid eating meat as much

as possible not because animals should not be seen as meat. Animals are potentially meat; they (and we!) can be eaten, are eaten, and will be eaten. But what we know – we fellow meaty, embodied beings who practice this sort of veganism – what we know is that animal bodies can be much more than ‘mere’ meat.

Modern factory farms and animal industries try to reduce animals to ‘mere’ meat (the scare quotation marks are there because nothing is ‘mere’ to my mind, not even processed meat), to make us think that their bodies are capable of nothing more than ending up as beef, pork, or various byproducts on our plates or on our bodies. So, yes, animals are potentially meat to be eaten – but they are potentially more than that as well. Veganism is an attempt to release animals into these additional potentials, into these other possibilities. It is an effort to release them from a world and an established order that has blocked them from constituting their own worlds, their own relations, their own becomings, joys, and passions. As such, veganism of this sort is not a hatred or disgust of meat or of embodiment, but a profound identification with and passion for meaty bodies and their wide range of potentials. Moreover, veganism of this sort is also an effort to release *ourselves* into other possibilities, potentials, and passions. Who knows what we might become when we try eating more thoughtfully, more respectfully? Who knows what we might become when rethink who we are and who animals are?

I should also stress that this is why veganism cannot be limited to an individual ethical stance if it is to be seriously pursued. The established order that seeks to reduce animals to ‘mere’ meat is extraordinarily powerful and is constituted by a series of economic, legal, ontological, and other innumerable systems and institutions that cannot be taken down (or even seriously reformed) through individual or collective acts of vegan eating.

Veganism of the sort I am talking about here needs to go well beyond a change in eating habits and must extend to a reflection on and radical transformation of everything from transportation (think of the massive death, suffering, and habitat fragmentation associated with roadkill, railkill, and airkill), to energy usage (every step of the process of extraction, processing, and end use of fossil fuels and even ‘renewables’ is fraught with harm to animal lives and habitats, not to mention the innumerable harms caused to animals through climate change), to architecture (our cities, towns, and general infrastructures for living are built with very little to no consideration of animal well being) to waste, to our collective use of and impact on water, soil, air, and other aspects of the material world that compose animals’ environments. It is enormously challenging to think through animal issues on this kind of complicated terrain, but there are

numerous and promising possibilities here as well for forming important linkages with other movements for radical change (including, of course, all of the groups I mentioned above who seek to build a world in which many worlds are possible for all sorts of beings). The wager of my work is that serious transformation of the established order will come, if it comes at all, through these kinds of alliances and solidarities.