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# Metaphysical or Practical Humanism

## The Specificity of Antispeciesism

by

GAETANO CHIURAZZI (University of Torino)

### 1. The Misadventures of Humanism

The concept of humanism has been criticized in the past century from two points of view, the one metaphysical, and the other ethical. Firstly, humanism appeared, albeit paradoxically, as a concept steeped in metaphysical presuppositions, that is, in an essentialist conception of the human; secondly, and precisely on the basis of this metaphysical claim, humanism was considered as a form of domination, both of the human over other humans and of the humans over other living species. The reference to an essence of human being (for instance: rationality) appeared as a principle of exclusion or of subordination of those entities that do not correspond to the definition of the human: “marginalized” beings such as the primitives, the madmen, the nonhuman animals.

Michel Foucault has well expressed such a diffidence against humanism. To the attempt at finding an essence of the human being he opposed the expectation of emancipation, in terms of a historical ontology of ourselves; to the progress of truth he opposed the history of freedom; to the analytic of truth (understood in a Kantian way as a search for the necessary limits of knowledge) he opposed an ontology of actuality (understood, on the contrary, as a search for the contingent limits of our actual condition and for their possible overcoming).<sup>1</sup> Critique, according to Foucault, is more a practical and contingent act than a universal theory or a doctrine. It must warn against the risks of all universalistic theoretical assumptions. Such anti-metaphysical posture entrusts emancipation to minimal practical ges-

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<sup>1</sup> MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?*, in: *Dits et écrits II*, 1976–1988, Paris 2001.

tures of freedom rather than to revolutionary action or an utopian ideal. In conformity with what Foucault pregnantly calls “micro-physics of power”, we could call these minimal erosions and disarticulations of power a “micro-physics of freedom”: a set of minimal, daily actions, the efficacy of which, exactly as in the case of power, is greater the more hidden and widespread it is. The resources of emancipation, in the epoch of the pervasive diffusion of power and of the ongoing leveling out of human life, lie in this “differential practice of freedom”, as we could also call it. More than a complete dismissal of humanism, we can consider Foucault’s critical position as a “practical turn” in regards to the very concept of humanism: what characterizes the being human is not an alleged eternal essence but an expectation of emancipation and a practice of liberation.

## 2. An Egalitarian Ethics

A challenge against the very idea of humanism is presented nowadays by a movement that, in the name of liberation, has in the last decades even more radically problematized the concept of the “human” and the position of the human being in the world of living beings: this is the so-called movement of “animal liberation.” Promoted by Peter Singer with his *Animal Liberation* (1975; third edition 2002), this movement aims in fact at re-considering the belonging of the human being to the animal world and its relations with different animal species in view of a deletion, or a reduction, of the boundaries among them. This movement is guided by two presuppositions: the first is the claim that no human must be exploited by other humans, an idea which is extended to the entire animal world; the second is Bentham’s claim that what must inspire human action towards other animals is not the question whether or not they are rational but whether they suffer. The former leads to inter-species egalitarianism: all animals are equal, as the title of the first chapter of Singer’s book states. The arguments that allow apportioning fundamental rights to some human minorities, such as South-American Indians, women, blacks, and children, are this way extended to non-human animals. One could certainly argue that there are

obvious ways in which men and women resemble each other closely, while humans and animals differ greatly. So, it may be said, men and women are similar beings and should have similar rights, while humans and nonhumans are different and should not have similar rights.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> PETER SINGER, *Animal Liberation*, New York 2002, p. 2.

Nevertheless, according to Singer, even though we can rightly find several differences between humans and animals, this limitation cannot be “a barrier to the case for extending the basic principle of equality to non human animals”.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond every superficial and individual difference, then, the equality of all living beings represents a presupposition and a feasible project of animalist ethics, whose goal is to affirm the right of all animals to equal respect. In this sense, it is the antidote to every form of speciesism. The word “speciesism” is formed in analogy to other similar words, such as “racism”: it denotes “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favour of interests of members of one’s own species and against those members of other species”.<sup>4</sup> Antispeciesism, therefore, as the position advocating the extension of rights from humans to animals, requires the overcoming of the specific differences that distinguish the human and the animal in favour of their nearest genus, which they can be referred to, and which is of course that of animality itself. Consequently, humans are not entitled to exploit nonhumans.

Speciesism is generally legitimated on the basis of cognitive differences among living beings, such as intelligence, language, and the ability to reason. Antispeciesism, therefore, can find the principle of egalitarianism only in something common to different animal species. This is the capacity for suffering, as Jeremy Bentham had the merit of stressing: “The question is not, Can they [the animals] *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but Can they *suffer*?” Putting the question this way, Bentham “points to the capacity for suffering as the vital characteristic that gives a being the right to equal consideration”.<sup>5</sup> This capacity – or, more precisely, the capacity for suffering and/or enjoyment or happiness – is assumed as a “prerequisite for having interest at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in a meaningful way”.<sup>6</sup> The feature that collapses all the boundaries among animal species is the capacity for suffering, which states the minimal interest in not suffering: if this feature, on the one hand, unites all the animal species, on the other hand it distinguishes the animal from the stone, which is not able to suffer. The basis of such claim is physiology: in fact, only the being provided with a nervous system can suffer. And although suffering is something completely private, analogical reasoning allows us to say that, in circumstances similar to those in which we suffer, other humans, and other living beings, would also suffer.

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<sup>3</sup> SINGER, *Animal Liberation*, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> SINGER, *Animal Liberation*, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> SINGER, *Animal Liberation*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> SINGER, *Animal Liberation*, p. 7.

Antispeciesist universalism thus has a biological-evolutionary ground which does not provide a clear boundary for the distinction between suffering and non-suffering beings. What is in fact – we might wonder – the evolutionary level that allows distinguishing the capacity and the incapacity for suffering? Does a jellyfish or a mosquito suffer? And if not, should they be allowed to be killed? But what is more puzzling in Singer’s arguments is the fact that respect for other animal species’ suffering ultimately depends on the capacity to extend one’s own feeling to other animal species, and then on an analogical inference: that is, on a rational capacity. This introduces a gap between the *biological ground*, which should be common to all living beings, and the capacity for *understanding* this universality: the animalist ethics is universal in its biological ground but inevitably human in its ethical ground. Thus, antispeciesism, as an ethical perspective, cannot be but a perspective typical of a particular species, that which is able to produce inferences, to universalize, and also to understand the suffering of others.<sup>7</sup>

The “antispeciesist fallacy” consists in this claim of breaking the barriers of animal species, by being forced to admit, however, that this capacity is peculiar only to the human species. One could not otherwise understand the shift from a descriptive to a prescriptive view, evident in the claim that “*the principle of the equality of human beings is not a description of an alleged actual equality among humans: it is a prescription of how we should treat human beings*”.<sup>8</sup> This shift clearly introduces an element – the capacity to obey a prescription, an “ought” – as determinant factor of animalist ethics, which has no natural ground but is eminently ethical, and thus not natural. Or, if it is natural, it is so by virtue of the biological specificity of the human, who, because of its physical make-up – to have a brain able to achieve determinate inferences and analogical reasoning – is also able to have respect for other suffering beings. The imperative of reducing violence, exploitation, and suffering is then precisely an imperative, which as such draws a distinct line within the animal world between beings for which this imperative has a meaning and which are able to respect it as such, and beings which are unable to do this.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. ANTONIO CARIOTI, Ma nessun animale è animalista, in: *Il Corriere della sera* (<http://lettura.corriere.it/debates/ma-nessun-animale-e-animalista/>).

<sup>8</sup> SINGER, *Animal Liberation*, p. 5.



### 3. L'Animot

Against the “biologistic continuism”<sup>9</sup> of Singer’s view, Jacques Derrida considers the question concerning the human-animal relationship from another point of view. The reference to Derrida is important here for two reasons: first, because it represents a clear polemic against the biologistic grounds of antispeciesism; secondly, because, despite, or perhaps just by virtue of some internal fractures, it allows reconsidering the reasons for humanism, not in a metaphysical but in a practical sense, and therefore in a way which meets Foucault’s anti-metaphysical position.

Also in Derrida’s case, the relation between human and animal takes a relevant meaning since it touches the question of the definition of the human. But to Derrida’s eyes the way this question is treated in the antispeciesist theory cannot be but a re-proposal of the principal polemical target of deconstruction: the question of identity. Actually, antispeciesism, with its claim about a substantial homogeneity between human and animal, does nothing but extend the field of identity on which it tries to found its egalitarian ethics. On the contrary, according to Derrida, what every consideration of the animal has until now failed to account for is the deployment of differences which characterize the field denoted by the word “animal”. This field ends up being nothing more than a word. In order to highlight this nominalistic issue, Derrida introduces the neologism “*animot*”, which sounds like the French plural “*animaux*”, written substituting the final suffix of the plural with the term “*mot*”, “word”: what we designate by the general word “*animaux*” is only a name for a field where an irreducible plurality is in force, a field of differences of which it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a common substrate. Yet what can unite the great variety of the living, from the amoeba to the human?<sup>10</sup>

If, on the one hand, the word “*animot*” appears as a reaction against the oblivion of difference – to quote the Heideggerian formula, which is not without relation with what I will say later on –, on the other hand, the way Derrida addresses the question of the human-animal relation seems, in its

<sup>9</sup> JACQUES DERRIDA, *The Animal that therefore I Am*, translated by David Wills, New York 2008, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> We can charge traditional humanism with logocentrism only if we understand logocentrism in a narrow meaning as indicating the primacy of reason. But if logocentrism in general means the primacy of identity over difference, any project that aims at reducing differences is logocentric. Therefore, it is antispeciesist naturalism that is logocentric, since instead of affirming the differences, it tends to efface them, as well as all those conceptions that, according to Derrida, from Descartes to Kant, from Heidegger to Levinas and Lacan, have never taken “into account the essential or structural differences among animal species” (DERRIDA, *The Animal that therefore I Am*, p. 89).

turn, to efface the difference. This impression arises from a certain “phenomenological primitivism”, which presents this relation as a relation of gazes, as a question of seeing, of seeing each other, of seeing oneself naked and of the gaze that sees nakedness, without the consciousness of nakedness. The nakedness is the common, pre-conscious and undifferentiated condition of the human and of the animal.

The theme of nakedness in fact plays a very fundamental role in Derrida’s book *The Animal that therefore I am*. It seems to function as a reference to a condition where human and animal are on the same level, where the human literally sheds all that distinguishes him from the animal and makes him similar to the animal: his rationality, his consciousness, his ethics, his mental and real habits. In a word: his world. I will discuss then this theme of nakedness considering it as a point of convergence – or, as we could also say, of divergence – between humans and animals. This discussion especially involves three moments:

- 1) The appearance of consciousness, as a passage from animality to humanity;
- 2) The concept of the world, as a passage from the naked to the dressed condition;
- 3) The problem of the  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\rho\epsilon\tilde{\nu}$  in its relation to experience, that is of the “as such”, as a passage from what I call the “phenomenological primitivism” to the “hermeneutical pre-positivism”.

#### 4. Hominization as Increasing of Differences

Derrida describes the experience of nakedness as a play of gazes in which the gaze of the animal cannot be reduced to that of the human. Or, in other words, the animal’s gaze is the gaze of the absolutely other, that precedes me, and which I follow.

The animal is there before me, there next to me, there in front of me – I who am (following) after it. And also, therefore, since it is before me, it is behind me. It surrounds me. And from the vantage point of this being-there-before-me it can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also – something that perhaps philosophy forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself – it can look at me. The point of view of the absolute other [...].<sup>11</sup>

This relation of gazes, unlike the speculative reflection of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic – to which it appears too easily assimilable –, as the early moment of humanity that arises from the unconscious bottom of life, remains a dissymmetrical play: the animal regards me and sees me naked

<sup>11</sup> DERRIDA, *The Animal that therefore I Am*, p. 11.

but never the same way I see it naked and see myself naked. The animal's gaze represents that primitive phenomenological gaze that I can only grasp by 'undressing myself,' even my own consciousness of being naked, since consciousness represents the passage from animality to humanity:

As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called "animal" offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the border crossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself.<sup>12</sup>

The possibility of calling himself is the possibility of consciousness, of saying "I".

This passage is represented by the attainment of the upright position: "My hypothesis is that the criterion in force, the distinctive trait, is inseparable from the experience of holding oneself upright, of uprightness [*droiture*] as erection in general in the process of hominization".<sup>13</sup> It is a movement of elevation that symbolically describes the entrance into culture, which, as Gadamer says by quoting Herder, is just an "elevation to humanity"; more precisely, elevation is the proper feature of humanization, so that the locutions "elevation to humanity" and "humanity as elevation" become equivalent.

The evolutionary process of elevation ushers in the parting from naturalness, when the human animal becomes self-conscious and able to say "I". Kant, according to Derrida, has expressed this relation in his *Anthropology from the Pragmatic Point of View*. This power of saying "I"

erects, it raises (*erhebt*) man infinitely (*unendlich*) above all the other beings living on earth (*unendlich über alle andere auf Erden lebende Wesen*). This infinite elevation identifies a subject in the strict sense, for immediately after Kant emphasizes the fact that "I" signifies the unity of a consciousness that remains the same throughout all its modifications.<sup>14</sup>

The physical elevation of the human is a symbol of his transcendental elevation above the mere field of sensibility. Interpreting this elevation as a domination, Adorno ends up saying that every idealism is in its ground a fascism: "for an idealist system, he says, animals virtually play the same role as Jews did for a fascist system. Animals would be the Jews of idealists, who would be thus nothing as virtual fascists".<sup>15</sup>

In any case, even supposing that transcendentalism is intrinsically domination, we can wonder what the counterproposal would be in order to avoid such an alleged domination. Some recent forms of realism – especially the

<sup>12</sup> DERRIDA, *The Animal that therefore I Am*, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> DERRIDA, *The Animal that therefore I Am*, p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> DERRIDA, *The Animal that therefore I Am*, p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> DERRIDA, *The Animal that therefore I Am*, p. 109.

so-called “new realism” – that argue explicitly against transcendentalism on behalf of a return to sensible experience, pretend to propose the same return to a naturalistic egalitarianism against which we could voice the same objections Plato directed to Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*. Protagoras’ thesis “knowledge is sensation (*aisthesis*)” is quite analogous to the thesis affirming that humans are nothing but animals. But this, as Plato ironically objects to Protagoras, does not explain how it is that Protagoras requests payments on the reason that he is more sapient than the pig or the tadpole. The overcoming of this naturalistic sensism already leads in Plato to the elaboration of a new anthropology which is sketched in the *excursus* about the “styles of life”. Scholars from the analytic tradition have considered this *excursus* as a deviation from the main epistemological problem of the dialogue,<sup>16</sup> or even as a digression completely “irrelevant to the topic of the dialogue”,<sup>17</sup> a mere “footnote or appendix.”<sup>18</sup> I claim, on the contrary, that the digression about the two alternative *bioi*, which occupies the central part of the dialogue, is fundamental to the subsequent development of the argumentation. The reason is not, as Burnyeat writes, that “we may be jolted into reflecting for a moment that the question ‘what is knowledge?’ is important because there are certain things it is important to know”<sup>19</sup>, but rather because the digression outlines a completely different anthropology from the Protagorean one. If the human being is defined only by sensation, he can then be compared to the pig, the baboon, or even the tadpole, so that Plato can conclude that, “while we were admiring him [Protagoras] for a wisdom (*εἰς φρόνησιν*) more than mortal, he was in fact no wiser than a tadpole, to say nothing of any other human being”.<sup>20</sup> Plato thereby aims at showing that the human cannot be reduced to the unique dimension of sensation, since he is able to transcend the immediacy of the *hic et nunc*, thanks to a different power, *dianoia*. Thought, which characterizes the philosopher’s life, “takes wing, as Pindar says, ‘beyond the sky, beneath the earth’, searching the heavens and measuring the plains”<sup>21</sup>. This ‘idealistic claim’, far from being a way to level the real, or even worse, to dominate the human, is a way to free him, since it increases the differences, and so doing, opens new dimensions, new possibilities: the human being does not dominate but forms a world.

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<sup>16</sup> Burnyeat speaks of an “abortive discussion” or a “strange intrusion” (MYLES BURNYEAT, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, with a translation of Plato’s *Theaetetus* of M.J. Levett, Indianapolis 1990, p. 34).

<sup>17</sup> GILBERT RYLE, *Plato’s Progress*, Cambridge 1966, p. 278.

<sup>18</sup> JOHN McDOWELL, *Plato: Theaetetus*, translated with notes, Oxford 1973, p. 174.

<sup>19</sup> BURNYEAT, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> PLATO, *Theaetetus*, 161 c–d.

<sup>21</sup> PLATO, *Theaetetus*, 173 e–174 a.

## 5. World-Forming

This is the thesis Heidegger presents in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. By commenting on this thesis, Derrida claims, rightly, that the problem of the difference between the human and the animal boils down, eventually, to the problem of saying what the world is. But this question boils down, in turn, to the question of the ‘as such’. Both questions have to do with the problem of nakedness, and of the animal seeing my nakedness. It is indeed this *difference* in the *way* of seeing that determines the difference between human and animal. It is neither a biological nor a metaphysical difference: both naturally naked, they are different by the fact that man, in contrast to the animal, covers his nakedness with clothes, habits, that is, with behaviours, feelings, and *ways of being*. They are ethical, since ethics concerns ways of life, ways of being-in-the-world, all that which, as Derrida writes

is meant by living, speaking, dying, being, and world as being-in-the-world or being-within-the-world, or being-with, being-before, being-behind, being-after, being and following, being followed or being following, there where *I am*, in one way or another, but unimpeachably, *near* what they call the animal.<sup>22</sup>

All these relations, which I call “pre-positive” because of their grammatical and ontological nature, concern the behaviour of the human, namely what he has to take off when he tries to be similar to the animal, that is, when he tries to be naked. The condition of the animal, its point of view, requires this “giving up”, as an *epoché*, the human world. I think that in other contexts (for instance, in the *Speech and Phenomena*), Derrida would have put into question the theme itself of nakedness, in the name, precisely, of what now seems to be put in brackets, the world. The gaze of the animal and the whole scene in which the human is seen naked is a sort of phenomenological reduction that implies the *epoché* of the world. This is precisely what for Heidegger was impossible to achieve, inasmuch as *Dasein is*, constitutively, in the world.

As is well known, Heidegger calls this inescapable relation between *Dasein* and world *habitare* (to dwell). The use of this verb, a frequentative of *habere*, refers to the practical horizon, which provides a backdrop for the existential analytics. Franco Volpi has shown that the conceptuality of this analytics is a translation of main concepts of the Aristotelian practical philosophy: the *Zuhandenheit* corresponds to *ποίησις*, the *Vorhandenheit* to

<sup>22</sup> DERRIDA, *The Animal that therefore I Am*, p. 11.

θεορία, the care to ὄρεξις, the existence to προᾶξις.<sup>23</sup> All this contributes to outline the parallelism, which Gadamer also stressed,<sup>24</sup> between understanding and φρόνησις, i.e. the emotional intelligence that governs προᾶξις or human action. But this practical dimension is still evident in the word Heidegger uses to designate the relation of Dasein to the world, “having”:

Man also stands over against the world. This standing-over-against is a “having” of world as that in which man moves, with which he engages, which he both masters and serves, and to which he is exposed. Thus man is, first, a part of the world, and second, as this part he is at once both master and servant of the world [*zugleich Herr und Knecht der Welt*].<sup>25</sup>

We cannot overlook the reference to the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave. This dialectic, however, is here articulated not as a confrontation between self-consciousnesses but as a confrontation between the human being and its world, in the face of which the human is at the same time master and slave. The result of this relation is culture (*Bildung*), the world that the human forms (*bildet*) just by existing towards it both as master and as servant.<sup>26</sup> “To have” a world means that the relation with it is an *ethical* relation, made of ἔξεισις, to use the Aristotelian word derived, like its Latin translation *habitus*, from ἔχειν, and which we translate as “behaviours”. The human relates to the world according to specific behaviours as modes of the “being-in”: being-with, being-for, being-before, being-behind, being-after, all the relations I defined above as “pre-positive”, thereby hinting at their relational, connective, syntactical feature. These relations are not objects of vision: we cannot see them, they are not positive like the table, the book, or the sun, but are relations, syncategorems, which we can only understand and which *precede* every positivity, every being this or that “as such”. To have a world, then, does not mean to see this and that, but to understand the possible relations between this and that. The human is world-forming because it works out these relations inside its vital environment, certainly more than the animal.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. FRANCO VOLPI, *L'esistenza come praxis. Le radici aristoteliche della terminologia di Essere e tempo*, in: Gianni Vattimo (ed.), *Filosofia '91*, Roma-Bari 1992, pp. 215–252.

<sup>24</sup> In his translation of the Book VI of the Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Frankfurt am Main 1998), Gadamer translates φρόνησις with “*praktische Vernünftigkeit*”, “practical good sense”. This way he distances himself consciously from the normal German translation, *Klugheit*, closer to the Latin word *prudentia* introduced by Cicero rather than to the Greek, and puts it close to the concept of *Verstehen*, understanding, as described in the § 31 of *Being and Time*.

<sup>25</sup> MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics. World Finitude Solitude*, translated by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1995, p. 177.

<sup>26</sup> This point should be taken into account, above all against the charges of “anti-realism” levelled to Heidegger and to philosophical hermeneutics.

## 6. Animal Phenomenology

In the previous considerations, I tried to sketch out the difference, in regards to the question of the animal, between the phenomenological primitivism of Derrida and the hermeneutical pre-positivism of Heidegger. This distinction also deals with the problem of *θεορία* and the concept of experience. Derrida describes the gaze of the animal that sees me naked as that primitive phenomenological experience that philosophy has never addressed, or rather has always denied. Speaking about the way Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Levinas, and Lacan have always spoken about the animal, Derrida writes that all seem like

they themselves had never been looked at, and especially not naked, by an animal that addressed them. At least everything goes on as though this troubling experience had not been theoretically registered, supposing that it had been experienced at all, at the precise moment when they made of the animal a *theorem*, something seen and not seeing. The experience of the seeing animal, of the animal that looks at them, has not been taken into account in the philosophical or theoretical architecture of their discourse. In sum they have denied it as much as misunderstood it.<sup>27</sup>

Philosophy, as Derrida claims, has never had the experience of the animal seeing me naked. I think that, beyond the question whether or not this is true, Derrida's claim implicitly poses some questions about the condition of the theory itself, as well as its relation to experience, which revolve around the question of the "as such" as it is presented in Heidegger's *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. For Heidegger, the animal is "poor in world" (*weltarm*) because it is not able to accede to the being "as such": whereas the stone has no relation to other beings, the lizard has a relation to the stone which appears to it, as well as to the sun, but not as *such*, as a stone or as a sun as such.<sup>28</sup>

Derrida understands the "as such", which Heidegger speaks of in these pages, as a manifestation of being *independent* from every interested relation of Dasein: the being considered "as such" is the being left to be what it is. This sounds somewhat paradoxical, especially in comparison with the ontological presuppositions of the existential analytics in *Being and Time* and with the notion of the world that was worked out there: the world is in fact a web of relations, of senses which structure the care of Dasein and his behaviours towards intra-worldly being. In this context, the "as such" of the being cannot be but its sense *for* Dasein. On the contrary, in the 1929–30 course, the "as such" would appear as the negation of those kinds of relations which, with its needs and interests, distinguish the animal. Without

<sup>27</sup> DERRIDA, *The Animal that therefore I am*, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> HEIDEGGER, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, § 47.

relation to Dasein, the “as such” would furthermore be, as Derrida writes, the modality of objectivity, opened by the possibility of my not being, that is, of my death: to let the being be

is the relation to the being as such, that is to say, the relation to what is inasmuch as one lets it be what it is, that is to say, that one doesn't approach it or apprehend it from our own perspective, from our own design. In order to have a relation to the sun as it is, it is necessary that, in a certain way, I relate to the sun such as it is in my absence, and it is in effect like that that objectivity is constituted, starting from death.<sup>29</sup>

Understood this way, the “as such” is rather an “in itself”: the being considered *without relation* to Dasein. It seems therefore closer to the way the stone, which has no relation to other things and is therefore without world, relates to being: the ontology of objectivity, understood as Derrida describes it, is the ontology of the stone. This means that, in order for the “as such” to appear, there has to be no Dasein, and thus no world! It is therefore questionable whether the “as such” should be understood in this way.

In order to clarify this question, we must pay attention to the fact that, for Heidegger, the possibility of the “as such”, what we can define as the positive manifestation of something as what it is (the sun as sun, the stone as stone, and so on), lies in the possibility of the manifestation of a being as being. He writes thus:

Only where beings are manifest *as beings as such*, do we find the possibility of experiencing this or that particular being as determined in this or that particular way – experiencing in the broader sense which goes beyond mere acquaintance with something, in the sense of having experiences with something. Finally, only where there is the manifestness of beings as beings, do we find that the relation to these beings necessarily possesses the character of *attending to ...* whatever is encountered in the sense of *letting it be* or *not letting it be*. Only where there is such letting be do we find at the same time the possibility of not letting be.<sup>30</sup>

Here it is clear that the manifestation of a being as such implies the manifestation of being as being, which does not exclude, but implies in its turn the relation to Dasein. This conclusion is nothing but the consequence of the most fundamental theorem of *Being and Time*, that is, that the sense of

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<sup>29</sup> The more the “as such” assumes phenomenological accents, the more Heidegger distances himself from Nietzsche. Nietzsche, actually, would have answered “no” to the question of whether it is possible, for the human, to accede to the “as such” (understood as “let the being be as it is”, in the absence of every kind of design). For him, Derrida notes, “everything is in a perspective; the relation to a being, even the ‘truest’, the most ‘objective’, that which respects most the essence of it is such as it is, is caught in a movement that we’ll call here that of the living, of life, and from this point of view, whatever the difference between animals, it remains an ‘animal’ relation” (DERRIDA, *The Animal that therefore I Am*, 160). Do we then not admit this “animal relation” also in the case of the human?

<sup>30</sup> HEIDEGGER, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, p. 274 [modified].



being lies in understanding. We can call then this primary manifestation of being (quite analogous to the ἀλήθεια) hermeneutical “as such”, since it involves the understanding of Being, and then the ontological difference. The hermeneutical “as such” is relational and differential. The diversity is then the main feature of the “as such”: beings are not

merely uniformly presented to us on the world-stage as a confused manifold of juxtaposed items. On the contrary, within beings there are certain *fundamentally diverse* “kinds” of beings, which prescribe certain contexts in respect of which we take up a *fundamentally different position*, even if we do not become conscious of this diversity as a matter of course.<sup>31</sup>

But beings can also fall into undifferentiatedness: “On the contrary, at first and for the most part in the *everydayness* of our Dasein we let beings come toward us and present themselves before us in a remarkable undifferentiatedness.”<sup>32</sup>

Can we relate this undifferentiatedness to the gaze of the animal, inasmuch as it, like the gaze of the everydayness, does not accede to the differentiation of the “as such”? The answer to this question is not simple, since, on the one hand, it is true that the gaze of the animal is not able to differentiate its and my nakedness (and therefore does not understand the nakedness as such), but, on the other hand, the undifferentiatedness of the everydayness is, for Heidegger, a possibility of Dasein, and not of the animal. However that may be, it seems to me clear that the whole of Derrida’s strategy aims at finding the point of contact between human and animal, consisting in that primitive phenomenological view, in which the human and the animal appear in their undifferentiatedness, both naked, an experience which precedes every theory, or, in other words, a form of theory – of gaze – before every differentiatedness. On the contrary, Heidegger sees in differentiation the very beginning of the experience and of the theory, as “letting be the thing what it is,” a standpoint which is not biological nor metaphysical, but practical, in the sense that it shows what humans and animals do, or cannot do, their way to move or to live, or, in other words, their way to exist in the world.

## 6. Ethics and Heterobiography

I suggest then that the biologicistic continuism of Peter Singer and the phenomenological primitivism of Jacques Derrida have in common the search for a certain point of undifferentiatedness between the human and the animal: this is found in the common nervous system, on the one hand, and in

<sup>31</sup> HEIDEGGER, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, p. 275.

<sup>32</sup> HEIDEGGER, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, p. 275.

the basic naked view, on the other hand. In the hermeneutical perspective, the relation between human and animal is on the contrary a differential relation which lies in  $\pi\rho\tilde{\alpha}\xi\iota\varsigma$ , in their concrete capacities that *make* the difference between them. Without this difference, or any difference at all, no ethics would be possible. Antispeciesism sees every reference to the difference between the human and the animal as an act of mastery, of domination, and founds the ethical relation in the common capacity for suffering: the question that guides this ethics is “can animals suffer?” But precisely this approach reveals the problem at stake here, which we can resume in the possibility of heterobiography.

Derrida rightly remarks that auto-affection cannot be denied to animals:<sup>33</sup> even they are capable of awareness, but the very question, then, is whether they are capable of understanding the other, namely, to relate not only to themselves, but also to the others, and ask therefore “Can they suffer?” The question, then, is not whether animals suffer or are able to be conscious, but whether they understand alterity. If ethics still has a meaning, this involves the capacity for creating a distance from one’s own autobiographical closeness, from what Heidegger calls *Benommenheit*, thereby enabling an opening to the other.

The human being – the “animal which dresses” –, is able to understand the alterity of the animal, as the being that does not dress, and is not ashamed of its nakedness. The animal can see me naked but, unlike the human, it does not grasp the difference between itself and me, as the difference between being naked and being dressed. The primitive phenomenological homologation of nakedness, just like the biologicistic continuism, is not sufficient for founding the ethical relation, which *supposes* and does not delete the difference with the other, and then the understanding. This is the same as saying that, if there is an ethical reason for antispeciesism, it cannot but lie in the human specificity to understand the other, the specificity of the other, his difference. Far from leading us to antecedent evolutionary grades, to that aspect that we share with other living beings (to a biological primitivism), or to pre-cultural forms of living (to a phenomenological primitivism), antispeciesism – when taken as meaning the ethical choice of not privileging one’s own species – leads us to the most advanced moments of human evolution, those in which the human becomes a cultural, educated (*gebildet*) being. Antispeciesism is the perspective peculiar to that particular “species” which is human: the species that, more than others, is not a species, since it

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<sup>33</sup> DERRIDA, *The Animal that therefore I Am*, p. 94.

is not something “naturally” defined, the species that makes of the “second nature” (his dress) his very nature, or which is naturally cultural.<sup>34</sup>

The overcoming of metaphysical humanism cannot be but hermeneutical, which also means practical, since hermeneutics is rooted in the practical life of the human being: only hermeneutics, contrary to what some of its critics claim,<sup>35</sup> is structurally able to understand difference, to understand the other. Its λόγος is what Plato defined, at the end of the *Theaetetus*, as σῆς διαφορότητος ἐρμηνεία, “understanding your difference,”<sup>36</sup> which is the best way to explain what “as such” means. The possibility to say “I”, that is, consciousness, implies the possibility to distinguish I from Thou, of “understanding your difference”, which is also the very beginning of the ethical relation. The notion of “ontological difference”, it has to be reasserted, is at the very end the main constitutive concept of philosophical hermeneutics, the concept itself of understanding as always implying a difference.

## Summary

A criticism of the metaphysics of humanism does not necessarily involve the dismissal of humanism itself, as it can be rehabilitated from a practical standpoint. In this article two positions are discussed: that of Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* and the position of Jacques Derrida. Despite their difference, they are united by the search for an egalitarian ground: a *biologistic continuism* in the former case, and a *phenomenological primitivism* in the latter. Both put in brackets the difference between the human being and the animal due to their different practical capabilities, the fact, namely, that the human being, as Heidegger puts it, is “world-forming”. This is a discriminating capacity, it entails the understanding of the other and its suffering. An *antispeciesist ethics* is thus possible only on the basis of this *specificity* of the human being.

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. JOHN MCDOWELL, *Mind and World*, Cambridge 1996. The difference between this position and other specisist’s claims that refer to an essence of the human being lies in the fact that, in my position, the alleged essence consists in not having an essence, or, in other words, in having an extremely malleable, flexible, open one.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. for instance BERNHARD WALDENFELS, *Vielstimmigkeit der Rede. Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden*, vol. IV, Frankfurt 1999, p. 67. Against this claim cf. DONATELLA DI CESARE, *Verità e metodo – cinquant’anni dopo. La filosofia contemporanea fra il comprendere e l’altro*, in: *Tropos*, n. 2 (2000), pp. 55–73.

<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 209 a.

## Zusammenfassung

Die Kritik der humanistischen Metaphysik führt nicht notwendigerweise zur Preisgabe des Humanismus, da dieser von einem praktischen Standpunkt her rehabilitiert werden kann. In diesem Text werden zwei Positionen in Betracht gezogen: diejenige Peter Singers in *Animal Liberation* und diejenige Jacques Derridas. Trotz einer Reihe an Unterschieden sind beide Ansätze durch die Suche nach einem egalitären Grund verbunden, die im ersten Fall zu einem „biologistischen Kontinuum“, und im zweiten zu einem „phänomenologischen Primitivismus“ führt. Beide klammern den Unterschied zwischen Menschen und Tieren ein, einen Unterschied, der von praktischen Fähigkeiten abhängig ist, beziehungsweise dem Umstand, dass der Mensch, wie Heidegger es ausdrückt, „weltbildend“ ist. Dazu gehört die Fähigkeit der Differenzierung, die das Verstehen des Anderen und auch das Verstehen seines Leidens ermöglicht. Eine *antispeziesistische Ethik* ist daher nur aufgrund dieses *Spezifikums* des Menschen möglich.