



The Animal Solitude of Contemporary Man

Jean-Luc Guichet *

ABSTRACT:

The current man-animals relationship is not at all shaped as during past times. Along a countless course of time, man and animals were narrowly linked by bonds sewed by day-by-day common works, common spaces, common experiences, in brief by a more or less common condition. Lodged at the same hotel of a shared world, living and dying the ones beside the others, they were composing a community. Thus, man's world was crowded by animals until the heart of towns. In the same time this proximity did not delete a strong belief in their difference, difference which was shaded by the original sin which the supposed consequence had been to animalize man according Christian religion. Yet, mainly because of the growth of man's power upon nature, the gap between the two beings did not cease to increase from the Middle Ages until the 17th century and the famous Descartes's thesis of animal machine stressing their ontological discontinuity. At this point, we must remark the importance of the Enlightenment which tied again man and animal as never they had been since the antiquity, some authors as Rousseau and Diderot giving an animal basis to the modern definition of man. Henceforth, even if the first half-part of the subsequent century went back to oldest conceptions for a while, the continuity between the two beings did not stop to be enhanced, mostly with the Darwinian revolution, then genetics and more recently ethology and especially primatology for a few decades. Nowadays, continuity tends to be fully recognized but, in the same time, at least in the western world, the ancient community is disappearing, letting the place to a true animal desert and then paradoxically a new discontinuity. Away from eyes, animals are more and more relegated into confined spaces and do not interact with man any more, whatsoever farm animals or wild ones. Of course pets invade families, especially in France for instance,

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but - as oasis in the true desert – they do not really replace this past massive animal presence. Deprived of the animal mirror, human beings are now submerged in an only human world, in a solitude which is not only a metaphysical condition but also an historical stage, the one of our age. For the first time from the very beginning of his so long path, man is alone in front of himself. Then, paradoxically again, the least his world is animal the least it is human, given it seems man needs animals to be fully human. In effect, if what can qualify man is his capacity of opening himself on all what he is not, then he finds in animals in front of him an exact balance between identity and complete otherness. So, the gap between man and animals creates another gap between man and nature. Without animals, human beings cannot anymore stand themselves as such in a human world, so much it is true human and animal fates appear to be linked. In this perspective, animal and environmental ethics can be thought not in opposition but deeply interconnected.

Keywords: Animal-human relationship, animal ethics, environmental ethics, ecology, Rousseau, Diderot, Condillac, Heidegger, Derrida

現代人的動物孤寂

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摘要

人類與動物的關係，古今有著天壤之別。過去漫長的歲月裡，人類與動物棲身在資源共享的環境中，因為生存需要，一起勞動、生活在同一個空間，朝夕相處、生死與共，因著共同經歷，形成了一個臍帶相連的生命共同體。於是，人類周圍，直到市中心，擠滿了動物。儘管如此，人獸有別，雖然基督教的原罪之說，在人類同時具有動物性傾向的導向中，掩蓋了人與動物間存在著差異，然而隨著人類操控大自然的能力日益增強，中古時代開始到 17 世紀，人與動物之間的藩籬就不斷被擴大，期間，笛卡兒 (Descartes) 提出了影響後世甚鉅的動物機械論，強調人獸本體論之非連續性 (ontological discontinuity)。

直到啟蒙時代來臨，起了重要作用，人與動物之間重新接軌，達到前所未有的發

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展，例如哲學家盧梭（Rousseau）、狄德羅（Diderot）即先後以「動物」賦予「人」嶄新的定義；接下來半個世紀，思想界雖一度瀰漫著懷舊氣氛，人與動物之間的連續性卻不斷被強化，尤其隨著達爾文革命（Darwinian revolution）所帶來的衝擊，緊接而來的遺傳學、近數十年動物行為學，尤其靈長類動物學的研究發現，更加證實了兩個生命體的連續性（continuity）。

如今，這項連續性似乎已被充分認知，然而人們也意識到——至少在西方國家——人與動物原有的傳統關係正瀕臨瓦解，取而代之的是動物銷聲匿跡，而人與動物之間反常地出現一種全新、不連續性的關係：動物被隔離於人類視線之外，漸漸遭棄置於密閉空間，而無論是畜牧或野生動物，都不再與人類有親密的互動，儘管寵物「攻佔」了家庭，特別是在法國，但充其量只算得上是沙漠中的一點綠，無法比擬過去動物無所不在的榮景。

失去了動物陪襯的人類，沉浸在只有「人」的世界中，箇中孤寂不單單是形而上的玄想，更是烙印在這個時代的歷史印記！自有人類以來，人首度赤裸裸面對自我。矛盾的是，愈不屬於動物的世界，也將愈不屬於人類，人似乎需要動物才能享有為「人」的完整價值。如果說「人」之所以為人，端看他能否對外敞開自我，那麼人類

從動物身上找到的，正是自他定位的最佳平衡。事實上，人與動物的距離感造就了人與自然界另一種隔閡，人與動物的命運環環相扣，一旦失去了動物，人類無法再像往常一樣立足於人世。從此一角度省察，動物與環境倫理非但不是相互抗衡，而是相生相連。

關鍵字：動物與人類的關係、動物倫理、環境倫理、生態、盧梭、狄德羅、孔狄亞克、海德格爾、德里達

Usually, when we hear speaking of continental thought about animals, some typical but simplified images immediately pop into the mind as for instance Cartesian animal-machine, La Mettrie's man-machine and so on. We would like not only to suggest a more qualified vision but also to interpret this long philosophical history as expressing, beyond an intellectual plot, deep changes concretely transforming the ancestral human fellowship with animals and, through them, with nature. And, from the past to the present, we intend to show those shifts evolving up to a current solitary condition of man which can be expected to have consequences on what man is.

First of all, it is basically true that men always fed on the animal world, not only for food but also for patterns in order to think themselves and their own lives. Along a countless course of time, man and animals were narrowly linked by bonds sewed by day-by-day common works, common spaces, common experiences, in brief by a more or less common condition. Lodged at the same hotel of a shared world, living and dying the ones beside the others, they were composing a community. Thus, man's world was crowded by animals until the heart of towns. That situation was not contradictory with the strong Christian anthropocentrism but, on the contrary, was included in it. Because of the very important dogma of original sin whose the supposed consequence had been to animalize man, animals were seen as reflecting different figures of what men are or can be. So, animals were filled with symbolism and constantly regarded by men as partly meaning their own origin and destiny, their hopes and fears. And it was true as well from real animals or from fictive animals as unicorns and other fabulous figures. In the same time man was thought as metaphysically different from animals and was constantly linked to them by strong and narrow bounds of concrete proximity and symbolic analogies.

The end of the Middle Ages triggered the shipwreck of this very ancient world. Descartes, as a champion of modern times, is well known for having torn up this complex and subtle frame and destroyed those enchanted links. Since then the new figure of animal machine emerged. But, in fact, things are very more qualified. Descartes did not intend to impose a new truth but, on the contrary, only to propose a bold hypothesis¹. But it remains

¹ The methodological and non-dogmatic status of his approach of animals is opposed by Descartes to his opponents: "Et ce sont plutôt ceux qui assurent que les chiens savent en veillant qu'ils

that, after Descartes's death, his animal machine turned to be the dogmatic statue of the new modern spirit, especially through the hands of the theologian Malebranche. So, during the seventeenth century appeared a theoretical but yet radical separation between man and animals as a modern characteristic and henceforth as a new data for reflection. For the first time, the ancestral share of common world by men and animals was seriously in question. Even if, on the ground of daily life, proximity continued to be the rule.

At this point, we want to insist on the eighteenth century which holds a special place. On the one hand, it pursues the movement initiated by the previous century, building the modernity by focusing everything around man and his powers: reason, science, technology, politics and more and more history. But, on the other hand, the Enlightenment deeply reacts against the seventeenth and inaugurates alternative ways. This is this sort of hesitation, of experiencing diverse possibilities, on the threshold of our modern world, which makes this moment so interesting and fruitful.

Let us now more focus on this century, and especially on three main authors of this time, Rousseau, Condillac and Diderot. Each one, pursuing his own way, contributed to deconstruct the setup of the anthropocentric modernity by blurring the gap between men and animals. For Rousseau, it was firstly by contesting the dogma of original sin, which tied together man and animals only with negative features, and secondly by reevaluating sensitivity, put forward as the relevant moral ground. For Condillac, it was by proposing a new empiricist epistemology which blended reflection and sensitivity at the source of animal and human common minds. For the materialist Diderot, it was by criticizing the notion of soul and by endowing all beings with only material elements whose combinations determine capacities without any *a priori* hierarchy.

Certainly, the most important of these three thinkers is Rousseau thanks not only to his major influence but firstly to the way he linked the problem with the one of sensitivity in general, what entails heavy moral consequences. Challenging religious traditions, Rousseau basically sanctifies our primordial nature. We are not condemned by any obscure

courent, et même en dormant qu'ils aboient, et qui en parlent comme s'ils étaient d'intelligence avec eux, et qu'ils vissent tout ce qui se passe dans leurs cœurs, lesquels ne prouvent rien de ce qu'ils disent." Descartes, *Sixièmes réponses aux objections*, *Œuvres philosophiques*, t. II (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1963-1973), p. 866.

primitive fault; we can trust our spontaneous trends, if not corrupted of course. To say it in a nutshell, Rousseau deleted the gap Christianity had put between nature and God. More precisely, a special lot must be done for pity for which Rousseau proposes a crucial and extended theory. According to him, sensitivity does not only involve the selfish instinct of self-preservation. On the contrary, sensitivity includes a capacity to expanding and projecting from the self to other living beings. And this is precisely this capacity of sensitivity and not only reason which founds morals despite a strong rationalist moral tradition since Aristotle. And, as sensitivity is natural, this means animals are endowed too with pity. Nevertheless, it does not mean a strict identity between men and animals but only common grounds. As a matter of fact, pity as all human capacities is able to evolve since, according to Rousseau, human being is defined by what he calls perfectibility. And, given that there is no true moral where there is no awareness, reflection and choice, this is only this second stage of pity which is properly moral. And, as this stage belongs to man, Rousseau's conception both ties narrowly man and animals and distinguishes them. Difference as well as continuity is guaranteed.

Condillac operates in a very similar way. On the one hand, founding all the knowledge upon only a sensitive basis, he involves animals as well as men in a common process. Each of them has to make its own way in one unique corridor, searching solutions to fix problems only at the light of his sensorial equipment. So Condillac builds a general theory of mind, not specifically regarding man but every sensitive being. But, on the other hand, man is endowed with special capacities due to the strength, in his case, of the sense of touch. Indeed, human hand is organized in such a way that it is a strong support to develop reflection potentially present in sensitivity. Moreover, according to Condillac, man possesses more needs than animals, and especially social ones. All this conjunction drives man to go further than animals. So, with Condillac as with Rousseau, man and animals are firstly thought on the same basis of equality and even identity but, after a while, bifurcate in different trails and fates.

Now let us consider Diderot who, incontestably, goes further than Rousseau and Condillac in this rapprochement of man and animals. In his view, everything is material and so there is no basic reason to distinguish man from animals. Yes but, as the previous authors, he ends admitting a difference, on the double basis of the brain and of the senses.

Firstly, he fully understands the role of the brain, what is not at all the case of everybody in his time. Secondly, according to him, senses in man are in such a balance, contrarily to other animals, that this special situation releases human mind from excessive pressure from each sense and then let it freely think as, Diderot says, a judge can do in order to correctly evaluate a case. It is not at all the same with animals which are always more or less dominated by one specific sense as smell for dogs, the eyesight for eagles, hearing for moles and so on². Under this domination animals are not free to think and to develop their mind. So they do not get an elaborate language, the one which precisely enables men to make politics and laws and to interact in order to agree on common values. So we see how Diderot, as Rousseau and Condillac, basically considers animals at the same rank than men, and, in a second time, puts them aside, out of the compound of decision and building of a common world. Then, it is not amazing that this type of intellectual consideration rarely gets the way of moral applications. As a matter of fact, mainly Rousseau - and it is an additional reason to grant a special historical importance to him – draws conclusions in moral terms from his theoretical speculations and proposes to take in account animals' sensitivity in what we do with them. But, even in this case, man is clearly put forward as the one who decides for every other creature, on the basis of a qualified but strong anthropological difference.

We could think that this ambiguity is only due to the fact the Enlightenment is at the beginning of a new history which goes forward and that the subsequent centuries are more and more strengthening this continuity. The next step would be the Darwinian theory

² “Pourquoi l’homme est-il perfectible et pourquoi l’animal ne l’est-il pas ? L’animal ne l’est pas parce que sa raison, s’il en a une, est dominée par un sens despote qui la subjugué. Toute l’âme du chien est au bout de son nez, et il va toujours flairant. Toute l’âme de l’aigle est dans son œil, et l’aigle va toujours regardant. Toute l’âme de la taupe est dans son oreille, et elle va toujours écoutant. Mais il n’en est pas ainsi de l’homme. Il est entre ses sens une telle harmonie, qu’aucun ne prédomine assez sur les autres pour donner la loi à son entendement; c’est son entendement au contraire, ou l’organe de sa raison qui est le plus fort. C’est un juge qui n’est ni corrompu ni subjugué par aucun des témoins. Il conserve toute son autorité, et il en use pour se perfectionner. Il combine toutes sortes d’idées ou de sensations, parce qu’il ne sent rien fortement.” Diderot, *Réfutation d’Helvétius, Œuvres*, t. I (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1994), pp. 814-815.

followed by the development of ethology and especially primatology. According to us, it is only partly true and our times are not at all so opened to closeness to animals.

Firstly, there is a consideration which is very important: time. On the one hand, Darwinism highlighted phylogenetic continuity between humans and animals. But, on the other hand, this proximity was possible only through huge time durations in such a way that it can appear as a principle of distance as well. So this continuity is not a proximity. On the contrary, thinkers of the eighteenth century – reasoning within short scales of time – think the continuity between men and animals as immediate. In Diderot's thought for instance, animality is jointed to humanity, as the back of a sheet of paper, as another possibility which never can be absolutely remoted³.

But there is another and concrete reason for which our time is not at all the one of the reconciliation of men with animals: the withdrawal of animals from common spaces which resulted in a new solitude of man, separated from other living beings. Comparatively with old times, we are exactly in the opposite situation: we admit a very strong continuity but without proximity instead the ancient world refused continuity but was immersed into a constant proximity.

According to us, two continental philosophers express this new situation very clearly through their work: Heidegger and Derrida.

For the first one, there is an undetected problem in our usual way to set the definition of man. As Aristotle did, we always define man firstly on the ground of his supposed animality in order, in a second time, to endow him with his human specificity. But, according to Heidegger, the fundamental fact is that man is entirely a man, even in his

³ For instance, Diderot regards the human face as a certain combination which can be easily shifted by imagination into an animal face, as the doctor of the Sorbonne he describes as possibly converted in a dog and vice-versa : “Quelle différence mettez-vous entre l'homme et la brute ? – L'organisation. – En sorte que si vous allongez les oreilles d'un docteur de Sorbonne, que vous le couvriez de poils et que vous tapissiez sa narine d'une grande membrane pituitaire, au lieu d'éventer un hérétique, il poursuivra un lièvre, ce sera un chien. – Un chien ! – Oui, un chien. Et que si vous raccourcissez le nez du chien... - J'entends le reste, assurément, ce sera un docteur de Sorbonne, laissant là le lièvre et la perdrix, et chassant à voix l'hérétique.” Diderot, *Réfutation de l'ouvrage d'Helvétius intitulé L'homme, id.*, p. 823.

supposed animal part. The specificity of man at first is metaphysical: it consists in a certain way to face the world and all things, to be opened to them. On the contrary, animals live in the world and among all things but they regard them not as existing in themselves and for themselves but to be captured and reduced to their own needs. So man is absolutely unique in the style he assumes to be in front of the world and no comparison can be drawn with animals, even if we take in account animal features present in man, because even these ones are grasped in the particular way of human being.

Strongly inspired by Heidegger, Derrida is yet different. By two main points: at first, contrarily to Heidegger, Derrida does not pretend to determine the internal being of animals, because we cannot enter their mysterious being; secondly, he exposes himself to animals in a sort of experience: the curious one of being absolutely naked under an animal's eyes, casually the one of his cat, as described in his book – *L'animal que donc je suis*⁴. The result of such an experience is the crisis of all certainties about what man believes to be. In this sense, this experience is the opposite of the Cartesian cogito: remoted from himself by the strength of another being, namely an animal, the human thinker cannot define himself by himself in the close compound of his interiority. But, even with Derrida, we see that man cannot really communicate with animals and is deeply separated from them. He is very clear on this point, going as far as to speak of an abyssal gap between human beings and animals.

Of course, there are other continental authors as for instance Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Agamben who maybe are more close to animals even if it is not always so obvious. But, in any case, Heidegger and Derrida's major thoughts appear deeply expressive of the new condition of contemporary men with regard to animals. Breaking with an ageless common world, man, for the first time of his so long history, is beginning to experiment a new type of world in which the increase of pets cannot compensate the withdrawal of wild and farm animals away from human sight and life. Precisely in regard to the Heidegger's and Derrida's definition of the human being by the capacity of opening on what he is not,

⁴ *L'animal que donc je suis*, Jacques Derrida (Paris: Galilée, 2006). For more development, see J.-L. Guichet, "Ruses et distorsions animales du cogito - *L'animal que donc je suis* de Jacques Derrida", in *L'animalité – six interprétations humaines*, dir. Jan-Ivar Linden (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011), pp. 47-59.

precisely if it is true – as according to the most part of Enlightenment philosophers - that men cannot define themselves by themselves but only by comparison with other beings, then the contemporary man – in a world saturated by the human identity up to schizophrenia – can more and more feel deep difficulties to be what he is supposed to be: a human being constantly building himself as human through what he is basically attracted by - animals and nature.

