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Beyond the Anthropocene: Becoming-Animal and *A Thousand Plateaus*

The strong delineation between humans and animals into a binary is core to much of classical western animal ontology. Perhaps tracing back to Aristotle's belief that only Man has the rational soul, much of western philosophy has reinforced a focus on the human subject as the point of focus in philosophy. In their 1987 book *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (whom I will sometimes abbreviate to D&G), counteract this human-animal binary in their tenth plateau "1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible..." as a part of a larger project of pursuing a post-modern and fluid philosophy that works to upend traditional western philosophy. Central to this plateau is the Bergson-inspired idea of "becoming," especially the becoming-animal. Such a conceptualization of nonhuman subjectivities is crucial to our current ecological crisis and human-defined era: The Anthropocene. In this paper, I will briefly recount a history of western animal philosophy before moving to how Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming-animal work against these notions, replacing the human-animal binary with a dynamic process of definition and redefinition characterized by proximity and relationality. This rejection of a human-animal binary comes with it a rejection of a purely human subjectivity that seems to logically lead to the underpinnings and concerns of the modern posthuman movement despite legitimate critiques of the becoming-animal by modern scholars. Finally, I will attempt to integrate D&G's philosophy in *A Thousand Plateaus* in considering the modern discourse on

animal rights, ultimately joining other scholars in arguing that the posthuman implies a post-rights society, a conclusion that has the potential to radically reconfigure western society.

The artificial notions of a strict human-animal binary and purely human subjectivity permeating traditional western animal ontology, the notions Deleuze and Guattari ultimately seek to reject, can perhaps be originally traced to the philosophy of Aristotle. Aristotle famously posited a theory of three souls (*anima*): nutritive (living), sensitive (sensing and perceiving), and rational. Each logically implies a binary—whether something has a given soul or not—which leads to a hierarchy: plants are at the “lowest level” in that they possess only the nutritive soul, animals are above plants in that they also have the sensitive soul, and humans are above animals in that “they alone manifest the rational soul” (Wee 615). It is exactly Aristotle’s emphasis on rationality as a defining trait that not only helps constructs the human-animal binary but implies an emphasis on human subjectivity: if humans are the only organism to exhibit rationality, which Aristotle believes is a key trait, then the “human” experience is far more important than those of animals.

These constructed ideas—the emphasis on rationality, the human-animal binary, and a focus on human subjectivity—would continue to manifest themselves in the ideas of other significant traditional western philosophers. René Descartes is perhaps notorious in this respect due to his views of Cartesian Dualism—the complete separation of a material, unthinking body and an immaterial, thinking mind—and the following idea of *bête-machine* or animal machine. The animal machine is traditionally described as follows: “[s]ince animals do not have minds, they wholly belong to the realm of *res extensa*, and are no more than ‘clockwork’ machinery” (Wee 612). While scholars such as Baker and Morris would argue that such a portrayal is reductive, the underlying human-animal binary is clearly present in that humans are

fundamentally different in kind to animals due to rationality, and—as Cecilia Wee points out—such a view has difficulty ascribing sentience to animals in a way that implies an inherent bias towards a human subjectivity (Wee 626).

Similar ideas are also be seen in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, often perceived as the quintessential Enlightenment philosopher, further showing the extent to which the artificially constructed human-animal binary has permeated traditional western philosophy. Derek Ryan, in expounding more contemporary animal ontology, begins with Kant’s perpetuation of the view that “the human is seen as the *highest* kind of animal...because of what the human *adds* to the base animal being,” the capacity for reason (50). Kant perpetuates the human-animal binary by concurring with Descartes and Aristotle that “the human is ‘an animal endowed with reason,’” and enforces a focus on solely human subjectivities in stating that “any moral concern we have for animals is *indirect*, and is primarily a concern with not weakening ‘morality *in one’s relation with other men*’” (my emphasis; Ryan, 50). In other words, Kant joins much of traditional western philosophy in not only separating the human and animal but then also disregarding their subjectivity in favor of that of the human: for Kant and Descartes, it seems to me, a consideration of animals is only important insofar as it affects the human experience.

Deleuze and Guattari, as a part of their wider project in rejecting the arborescent thinking that perpetuates western philosophy, seek to reject this view of a strict, fundamental human-animal binary with the idea of the becoming-animal. While not the first philosophers to do so—Ryan correctly places Nietzsche’s philosophy as a precursor to and influence on the becoming-animal—their Bergson-inspired idea of becoming provides a significant perspective in reconsidering our relationship with animals (Ryan 50). It is significant that Deleuze and Guattari, before giving a definition of what becomings are, work to define the becomings as different in

kind from previous notions of western hierarchical thinking (which they classify in terms of ordered lists—series—or metaphor-esque structures): “A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification...To become is not to progress or regress along a series”(237-8). Rather, they consider a relationship in which one enters into an ever-shifting middle ground between the human multiplicity and animal packs (multiplicities), where becomings-animal are the processes by which humans (or other groups) are swept up into assemblages with some animals, essentially becoming part of their pack. Deleuze and Guattari posit that such a process can be either physical or mental, thus blurring the distinction between body and mind created by cartesian dualism. This can be seen in their examples: they state that one can become dog by “endowing parts of my body with relations of speed and slowness that will make it become dog” and that one can become-rat by considering the death throes of a rat in its final moments such that “it makes the rat become a thought, a feverish thought in the man, at the same time as the man becomes a rat gnashing its teeth in its death throes” (258). In the process, the human enters into an intermediate zone in which they are no longer truly human nor animal. This means that the definitions of human and animal are no longer static: they change not only between people who enter into different becomings but also over time as groups of people enter into becomings-animal and redefine the human in terms of their new proximity with the animal.

To some extent, I would argue that the Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming-animal presupposes nonhuman subjectivities, thus further destabilizing traditional western animal ontology in rejecting a purely human subjectivity. The existence of a becoming-animal, for me, implies that there exists a separate mode of existence and living found within animals because, if such a subjectivity does not exist, the becoming-animal becomes solely an anthropomorphic projection

onto the animal that reduces the becoming to an imitation or identification (which D&G emphatically argue is not the case). Additionally, as D&G argue that “there is a reality specific to becoming” and that it “lacks a subject distinct from itself,” it seems that becoming is itself a nonhuman subjectivity (273; 238).

However, for Deleuze and Guattari, the becoming-animal seems to be more principally geared towards destabilizing and dynamizing the categories of humans and animals in general rather than affirming specific nonhuman subjectivities, which is itself a fundamental rejection of a static conceptualization of the human and animal that underlies traditional western animal thought. As Ryan points out, D&G seem far less interested in arguing for the subjectivities of animals than they are with “uprooting the very notion of stable and fixed subjects” (61). Indeed, while they are relatively scant about the experiences of individual animals, Deleuze and Guattari quite heavily emphasize that the becoming-animal is a shifting space ontologically somewhere between the human and the animal (emphasis added):

A line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination....A line of becoming has only a *middle*.... A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is *the in-between*, the border block or line of flight or descent *running perpendicular to both*. If a becoming is a block (a line-block) it is because it *constitutes a zone of proximity and indiscernibility*, a no-man’s land, a non localizable region *sweeping up* the two distinct or contiguous points, *carrying* one into the proximity of the other.... (293)

Deleuze and Guattari’s emphasis on “sweeping up” and “carrying” into other proximities demonstrates the dynamism of becoming-animal: the human and the animal are no longer relegated to the static categories of traditional cartesian dualisms but instead are part of a

constant process of being pulled towards each other by forces not always in their control before their borders are once again redefined by reterritorialization. Their continued emphasis on motion and movement shows that a purely human subjectivity cannot exist because of the human's constantly changing relationship with the animal.

In that sense, I think that the Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming-animal and posthumanism share important connections and goals in working to understand the complicated relationship between humans and animals to ultimately expand philosophy and society beyond the limits of anthropocentrism and binary thinking. The posthuman movement, as described by prominent thinker Cary Wolfe, is “not a rejection of humanism, and it's not a transcendence of humanism, and it's not the cooler, smarter thing that comes after humanism,” but rather an attempt to acknowledge that the limitations of humanism's philosophy and methodology stem from its failures to consider and respect nonhuman subjectivities, ultimately to consider new territory and deal with wider societal and ontological issues (Wolfe, 2012). It is exactly this respect for nonhuman subjectivities that I think makes posthumanism a logical next step from the work of philosophers like Deleuze and Guattari. D&G emphasize the limitations of humanism through the dynamic process of becoming-animal, doing the work of helping to destabilize a single, unchanging definition of the human (which humanism posits) in favor of an ever-changing relationship and unending process of redefining humans and animals. To me, the posthuman seems to pick up on that underlying notion of considering the human in relation to the animal to consider not only its implications on our understanding of human/animal ontology but also its implications on our politics and culture.

However, I would be mistaken to portray this connection as completely straightforward and clear-cut: in fact, this can sometimes be a perhaps uncomfortable alliance at times because

some modern thinkers have taken reasonable issues with the Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming-animal. Such criticisms come perhaps most famously from highly influential and well-regarded feminist and postmodern scholar Donna Haraway in her 2008 work *When Species Meet*. Ryan, in considering critiques of “becoming-animal,” state that “[e]ven the most faithful of Deleuzo-Guattarian theorists” acknowledge that D&G lack a deep consideration of the experiences of individual animals, instead primarily focusing on a romantic conception of the animal pack (62). Haraway seems to take particular issue with this approach to animals in her criticisms of the Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming-animal. Where Ryan characterizes this dispute as a misunderstanding of D&G contempt for pets as merely Oedipal stand-ins (63), I find that Linda Williams’ commentary on *When Species Meet* provides a more nuanced discussion of Haraway’s disagreement with Deleuze and Guattari. According to Williams, the fundamental schism between the two stems from Deleuze and Guattari’s explicit disdain for pets as domestic animals that resemble base anthropomorphized domestic relations (thus inhibiting becomings), which Haraway takes great offence by (48-49). Haraway seems to believe that companion species represents “a subject that communicates quite regularly with non-human alterity, if only in daily conversations with the family pet,” giving many people the opportunity to enter into becomings-animal. She also detects nuances of misogyny in D&G’s emphasis on the extraordinary and mythical and disdain for the ordinary and domestic (Williams, 49-50).

Nevertheless, these criticisms do not significantly hinder the becoming-animal from playing a significant role in contemporary discussion of the posthuman, finding a perhaps uneasy coexistence with its criticisms. Susan Ruddick, for example, uses the Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming-animal’s capacity to break out of human-animal binaries in the context of Spinoza to help reconsider the ontology of humans and animals in the context of our current ecological

crisis (Ruddick 119; Stark 151). Additionally, despite emphatically expressing her distaste for the becoming-animal, Haraway's philosophy seems to work towards the same objectives as D&G through different means. Ryan describes that the Harawayian "becoming-with"—Haraway's push towards the inclusion and consideration of companion species as an important form of becomings—is not wholly dissimilar to the Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming: "it would be unhelpful to view this concept in opposition to Deleuzian 'becoming'" (30). Williams elaborates on that this connection is fundamentally that of a shared rejection of a purely human subjectivity: while both sets of scholars focus on different means of relating to and integrating non-human subjectivities, the work they do in pushing for a broader redefinition of humans and animals is ultimately in the same vein (52). This is, of course, exactly the kind of work that, to me, seems to be the basis of the posthuman, thus affirming the place of both D&G's becoming-animal and the criticisms of scholars like Haraway in said discourse.

This connection between the becoming-animal and the posthuman provides an interesting and direct path into considering the implications of D&G's philosophy into the current discourse on ecology. Especially given that the current geological age—The Anthropocene—is defined by human impact, Ruddick's comments on why the posthuman need to be a part of the ecological discussion seem especially important: "The ecological crisis is also an ontological crisis. It raises questions about our ethical response-ability to this world, calling for a rethink of the human-nature divide" (119). It seems to me that traditional western philosophy's narrow focus on human subjectivity has led to an apathy or ignorance of the implications of human exploitation of the environment and animals, allowing for the Anthropocene to come into fruition. Kant's philosophy, as an example, argued that animals, and thus to some extent the environment, were ultimately subservient to the moral concerns of humans. This can very easily turn into a

justification for western society to place human concerns first without factoring in the cost of such actions on animals and their environment. This is how current ecological crises are also fundamentally ontological, as Ruddick states: the focus on a purely human subjectivity and consciousness allows for the animal to be reduced to mere bodies to be thrown to the cause of human desires, as in cartesian dualism, rather than having their own internalities and modes of existence. This is perhaps why Deleuze and Guattari's work is so critical in our current contexts: despite coming from a time "when the ecological crisis was less widely understood," their becoming-animal helped develop the tools required for such a consideration of a connection with animals that transcends both body and mind, which the modern posthuman and animal-studies movements pick up on.

One common response that shares some compatibility with this aim in working towards fixing the ecological crisis and accepting these nonhuman subjectivities seems to be endowing animals with legal rights. Such legal rights would allow for animals to have legal standing in court systems and thus receive basic protections. This approach of endowing rights upon individual animals has been suggested by scholars such as Peter Singer (often characterized as humanist). To some extent, such a shift is already taking place. In 2008, for example, The Environmental Committee of the Spanish Parliament granted some basic rights to Great Apes (Wolfe 8). Similarly, as Boehrer points out, "Hindu culture has long been more respectful of animal rights than has the Judaeo-Christian tradition," due to the human's relationship with non-human rebirth states. Such an approach could perhaps be seen as consistent with the overall objectives of the posthuman in that they respect the various modes of existence that animals have—in this case, those of Great Apes—by incorporating the protection of these subjectivities into the legal system. It may also seem to be the logical consequence of accepting nonhuman

subjectivities through becoming-animal, as recognizing that humans and animals are in truth intermingled, complex subjects could be seen as implying that animals deserve the same kinds of rights as humans.

However, it seems to me that the posthuman movement would take issue with this perspective in its anthropocentrism and inability to appreciate a complex, relational notion of subjectivity. The rights themselves are not a point of contention here: posthuman scholar Ruddick states that “the attribution of ‘rights’ to nonhuman others—even rivers—are to be valued” (135). Instead, posthuman scholars take issue with animal rights in their perpetuation of a “rights-based politics of recognition” (Stark 155) in which a lingering human subjectivity still determines what animals get rights and inappropriately imposes said anthropocentric schema onto animals (Wolfe 9, 2010). Put differently, the problem is that the animal rights approach is still anthropocentric because granting human rights presupposes the superiority of a human subjectivity (in this case, a legal system) that both grants those rights and forces the animal to comply with it.

In my view, it seems that Deleuze and Guattari would share such a disagreement given their conception of faciality and how it relates to the becoming-animal. Deleuze and Guattari, in their seventh plateau, lay out a theory of faciality in which the majoritarian group (typically European male human) establishes a kind of shared face that “propagates waves of sameness” such that “there are only people [faces] who should be like us and whose crime it is not to be” (178). Animal rights are a kind of manifestation of faciality in that they either recognize an animal as fitting the face of a human and thus deserving rights or recognizing that an animal does not fit the face of a human and are thus not deserving of rights. However, Deleuze and Guattari’s becomings, such as their becoming-animal, is an explicit rejection of such a faciality in that they

are minoritarian, always a deterritorialization that “imply two separate movements, one by which a term (the subject) is withdrawn from the majority, and another by which a term (the medium or agent) rises up from the minority” (291). To put it simply, Deleuze and Guattari would likely be against the extension of rights to nonhuman actors not because of the rights themselves but in how they reduce the relationship between human and animal as analogous to each other (animals imitating or being akin to humans) or not related enough to matter. As Ruddick puts it, animal rights have the potential to lead to “an expanded list of ‘subjects,’ replicating rather than altering alienating modes of subjection” (135).

Where, then, do Deleuze and Guattari, the becoming-animal, and the postmodern lead us? Clearly, they lead us beyond traditional conceptions of the human-animal binary and beyond even our conventional way of recognizing subjectivities through rights. Such a shift, as Wolfe describes, is both “absolutely minimal” and already radical (23). As I have hoped to detail earlier in brief, there is a sense in which the human-animal binary has resonated throughout history to come to define many of the ecological, ontological, and ethical problems of our present era, The Anthropocene. Entire legal systems such as those of the United States are theoretically built upon conceptions of human rights, as declared in numerous amendments to the U.S. Constitution and as seen by countless movements pushing to extend rights to various human minorities. Going beyond both is—in a very real sense—a push beyond what is known by western society: a step into the unknown, a post-human and a post-rights world. And yet, such a step will be necessary if we are to deal with the ever-shifting problems of the ecological age. We must allow ourselves to enter into the proximity of the animals we inhabit the world with and enter into our own becomings-animal.

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