Adriana Cavarero and Maurizio Ferraris

on

Jacques Derrida’s *The Beast and the Sovereign*¹

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**Derrida’s Beast**

Adriana Cavarero

In his recently published seminar *The Beast and the Sovereign* Derrida warns us that we “should never be content to say, in spite of temptations, something like: the social, the political, and in them the value or exercise of sovereignty are merely disguised manifestations of animal force, or conflicts of pure force, the truth of which is given to us by zoology, that is to say at bottom bestiality or barbarity or inhuman cruelty.”² This warning applies perfectly to Hobbes and his famous formula, originally derived from Plautus, of *homo homini lupus*, or the well-known observation which is notoriously crucial to the way in which the English thinker constructs his theory of the state and his concept of sovereignty. More generally, however, over and beyond the specific conception of the sovereign developed by early modernity, it applies to a certain zoological foundation of discourse regarding the political, already present in antiquity, one that reduces “the original community of human beings to an animal community” whose leader would be represented, as in the case of Plato’s tyrant, as a kind of wolf. There is no doubt that politics conceived as a discourse on the wolf, or politics as lycology, in Derrida’s words, assumes a conspicuous role in this investigation where in “the metaphoric covering-over of the two figures, the beast and the sovereign, one therefore has a presentiment that a profound and essential ontological copula is at work on this couple.”³ One can explain this, at least in part, because although Derrida talks about the sheep in his extensive analysis of La Fontaine’s fable of “The Wolf and the Lamb,” here he ignores Foucault’s reflections on the “pastorate”:⁴ another significant case of a community of human beings reduced to animals, namely sheep, albeit one where the wolf would constitute the threat rather than the head. In accordance with its own natural instinct, the wolf would actually eat them, whereas the shepherd would save

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³ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴ See the recent work by L. Bernini, *Le pecore e il pastore. Critica, politica, etica nel pensiero di Michel Foucault*, Naples: Liguori, 2008.
and protect them. For the rest, Derrida is interested not only in the proverbial voracity of the wolf but also in the cunning of the fox and the tranquil power of the lion, not to mention “the obvious though surprising abundance of animal figures that invade the discourses on the political.” But when we speak of the sovereign and his terrorizing power, it is above all the wolf that represents the beast. What they share, amongst other things, is that both of them are above and outside the law, are precisely *outlaws*. Once again this recalls Hobbes, but in the context of Derrida’s complex investigation it becomes just one of many variants of the combinatorial logic that characterizes, in a structurally equivocal if not contradictory manner, the relationship between the beast and the sovereign more generally. In the narration of the political, the sovereign presents himself in fact both as animality and as champion of the superiority of man with respect to the animal. Thus Derrida asks: “why is political sovereignty, the sovereign or the state or the people, figured sometimes as what rises, through the law of reason, above the beast, above the natural life of the animal, and sometimes (or simultaneously) as the manifestation of bestiality or human animality, i.e. human naturality.” In short, the variations on the theme of the beast and the sovereign are rather more deceptive than the *zoo-anthropological* narratives of the political – whether ancient, modern, or contemporary – would lead us to believe. These variations bring us back to the fundamental, and this time indeed expressly ontological, question of the difference, of the limit – in specifically Derridean terms, of the threshold – between the human and the animal.

For what is at issue is not so much the question of sovereignty as that of humanity. Yet, in the context of Derrida’s argument, this is the same thing: here, as elsewhere, whenever the inquiry touches upon the theme of animality, this and nothing else is the point. It is not the first time that the Algerian-born philosopher has concerned himself with this question. The text of *The Beast and the Sovereign* (a transcription of a series of seminars that Derrida held in the École des hautes études en Sciences sociales in Paris between 2001 to 2002) may even be read as a kind of hypertext, extended to the problem of the political with an abundance of further elaborations and digressions, of an earlier work, *The Animal that therefore I Am* (written in 1997, though published later as a book), in which the question of the difference between the human and the animal is addressed with somewhat greater argumentative clarity. The text from 1997 turns out to be extremely valuable for retracing the theoretical trajectory that permits Derrida, in the seminars of 2001-2002, to lend the term “sovereignty” a meaning that is rather special, yet at the same time extremely generic in relation to the technical-political significance that the doctrines of Hobbes and Schmitt notoriously reserved for the lemma in question. In fact, we read in *The Beast and the Sovereign* that the thought of sovereignty includes that of “its majesty in the figure of present and self-present ipseity, sometimes present to itself in the form of the ego, the living present of the ego, the ‘I’ – that ‘I,’ that power to say ‘I’ that, from Descartes to Kant to Heidegger has always been literally, explicitly reserved to the human being.” Similarly, in *The Animal that
I therefore Am, we read that the various anthropocentric configurations of subjectivity form part of “the relation to the self, the presentation of self of human life, the autobiography of the human species, the whole history of the self that man recounts to himself”9 in terms of his postulated but problematic difference from the animal. For Derrida, then, the “sovereign” is effectively man himself, man in general, insofar as he recounts or narrates himself, or rather is narrated in the philosophical tradition, and especially in modernity, as a free, rational, and responsible subject. Drawing on the work of Benveniste, Derrida points out that this meaning of sovereignty can also be confirmed etymologically insofar as “the sovereign, in the broadest sense of the term, is he who has the right and the strength to be and be recognized as himself, the same, properly the same as himself.”10 The latter appears above all in the masculine figure of the king, the master, the head, the father, the husband: already in ancient times, in effect, “the beast was often the living thing to be subjected, dominated, domesticated, mastered, like, by a not insignificant analogy, the women, the slave, or the child.”11 In accordance with the articulation of what is proper to man, evidently understood here as male, sovereignty is an “essential and structural mainspring of subjectivity, of subjection, of being-subject, of submission or political subjection.”12 Put more simply, man dominates the living beings – in Greek terms, the zooi – from which he differentiates himself by construing himself as sovereign subjectivity or, if we wish, as subjectivity tout court. And precisely here lies the ultimate question of the seminar on the beast and the sovereign, the question that Derrida resumes from his text of 1997: “the immense question of the living being, of the relation between what is proper to the so-called living animal being and the so-called living human being.” As is obvious, the most notable formulation of this question – fatefuly trained upon the experience of language, of the sign, of the word – takes us back to the zoon logon echon and the zoon politikon of Aristotle. Philosophically marked by a congenital sovereignty, man announces his specific difference in zoological terms.

The fundamental thesis of this seminar, organized in a typically Derridean fashion with innumerable digressions, is that any humanism whatever, understood as a discourse regarding what is proper to man, must inevitably engage with that fateful zoological torsion involved in the Aristotelian picture, or as Heidegger puts it, with its substantial biologism. In effect, the reading of Aristotle’s Politics which Heidegger provides is expounded by Derrida with particular care, and constitutes a constant point of reference in the sometimes less than perspicuous development of Derrida’s seminar. A scarcely veiled and somewhat unattractive polemic against Agamben’s attempt to distinguish between zoe and bios (for philosophs philosopo lupus, it has to be said!) is pursued against the background of the influential contemporary discourse of “biopolitics,” and thus of Foucault. As we have already indicated, however, Foucault does not figure amongst the contemporary authors that Derrida privileges here, just as he played no role in the text of 1997 which was by contrast specifically concerned, like the seminar

10 Derrida, The Beast, p. 66.
11 Ibid., p. 66.
12 Ibid., p. 39.
The Beast and the Sovereign, with re-reading Lacan and Lévinas, as well as Heidegger. In different degrees, and with all due distinctions, these thinkers are all effectively charged with remaining within a humanistic zo-ology in which the dimension of the logos, and thus a fateful logocentrism, not only prevails over the dimension of the zoe, but also, by elevating itself into a sovereign over life and sacrificing it, develops itself at the expense of life, or, in the final analysis, at the expense of what is animal. In short, it is the animal and what this signifies, or better, what this might signify, that is wronged. In fact it becomes quite clear that, far from contesting the Aristotelian heritage for its apparent effect of mortifying man by reducing the human to a zoon, Derrida reproves the insincerity, if not the perversion, of such a glimpsed proximity with the animal. The problem, in other words, is not that of completely and finally humanizing man by liberating him from animality, or, if one wishes to put it this way, by ensuring that the animal rationale emancipate himself from his substantive character and thus, so to speak, de-biologize himself: that man leave the zoo, the flock, the herd, the biopolitical. On the contrary, the problem is that of questioning the threshold that claims, in the name of rationality, to separate the rational animal from all those living beings which – in being declared non-human, irrational, alogoi, irresponsible – are all located in the generic and undifferentiated category of beasts. We should not emphasize the derogatory tone that, in relation to the animal, the word “beast” would commonly bear in the context of ordinary language. Whatever the name we choose, for Derrida, in our Western lexicon it primarily indicates the non-human beings that stand beyond this threshold. The immense question of the living being is thus, in Derridean terms, nothing but the interminable questioning of this threshold. In a discourse that does not scorn animalistic impulses and derides any taxonomy of a more or less Darwinistic kind, this question does not, in effect, reach any conclusion in the course of the seminar. But it acquires new facets through the tenacious deconstructive work of analysing the figures in which the problem is sedimented. Between the sovereign and the beast, in the multiple and necessarily human forms of sovereignty and of the subject that not only the fable of the political describes in terms of beasts, the threshold in question continues, again and again, to flourish. Negated or exalted, it unfailingly signals the logocentric bias of a humanistic zoo-anthropology.

And this holds for Lévinas too, who in fact, in the seminar The Beast and the Sovereign, in marked contrast to The Animal that I therefore Am, is only mentioned in a few brief passages. However, the brevity of these references does not prevent from recognizing Lévinas, even here, as an important author for Derrida’s critique of the logocentric prejudices of humanism. The face of the Other – the fundamental category of Lévinasian ethics – in fact speaks, and therefore seems unable to renounce language (even if, in my own view, the word here, consisting in “a silent and imperative language”13 that enjoins us “not to murder,” should be distinguished from the generic capacity of the logos that the tradition assigns to man as the mark of his special character and difference from other beings.) The principal defect of the humanism espoused by Lévinas, according to Derrida, is that it fails to include “at least one instance of the

animal, of the animal-other, of the other as animal, of the other-living-mortal, of the nonfellow in any case, the nonbrother.”14 Since the other must possess a level of interhuman recognizability, the Lévinasian discourse still remains caught up in the logo-centric vice of the zoo-anthropological threshold defined by Aristotle. In fact Derrida expresses his conviction as follows: “The ‘unrecognizable,’ I shall say in a somewhat elliptical way, is the beginning of ethics [...] So long as there is recognizability and fellow, ethics is dormant. It is sleeping a dogmatic slumber. So long as it remains, among men, ethics remains dogmatic, narcissistic, and not yet thinking.”15 In the context of Derrida’s polemic with Lévinas, it is thus a certain un-recognizability that must be proposed, here, as the founding category of the ethical. As a synonym of the monstrously other, or of the dissimilar understood in an absolute sense, this un-recognizability would finally shatter the humanistic presupposition of the threshold.

Although it is never clearly formulated, in The Beast and the Sovereign there is a thesis, albeit a fugitive one by virtue of its own paradoxical character, that may be worth addressing more closely. It tends to suggest that the immense question of the living being, if it were finally freed from the traditional modes of approach, might encourage an auspicious proliferation of the threshold, or rather of the thresholds, between one living being and another, between every living being, between every animal, including man: the latter would thereby learn how to go on calling himself such, while nonetheless renouncing the demand to set himself above what he has hitherto always defined as the threshold. All living beings would therefore have a face: faces unlike one another, articulated perhaps in a series of forms that we could call, according to the case, human, or serpentine, or lupine forms, yet these are already dangerously problematic in suggesting a grid of recognizability that would already transgress, in principle, the Derridean beginning of ethics. We are talking, it is only right to point out, about a principle that would assume the burden of ethical and political issues, not just ontological ones, of great relevance and tragic significance in the context of contemporary debate. That the category of the human, of man recognizable as such on the basis of a certain paradigm of the subject, easily reverts to the sphere of the non-human – of the inhuman, of the-less-than-human, of the inhumane, of the killable, of the exploitable, or, if we wish, of the beast: all that fails to figure in such a paradigm – is a problem that is quite familiar to the philosophy of the last few decades. A range of significant studies has by now alerted us to the fact that what defines the human is a highly risky threshold: risky for human beings even before it is risky for animals. Derrida’s appeal to the unrecognizable in the name of the perilousness of this threshold and, even more, in the name of the living being as living being, appears nonetheless to represent a hazardous theoretical venture that, however armed with good intentions, presents some alarming aspects of its own. The risk, in this case, is in fact that of reducing the living being to the reasons of life, to the undifferentiated phenomenon, though always incarnated in a singular way, of an organism that is temporarily alive: a life that would thus become recognizable in the ideal un-recognizability of the living being that is its singular and

14 Derrida, The Beast, p. 126
15 Ibid., p. 108.
contingent expression. We should also add, on the level of expressly philosophical perplexities, that the emphasis on the unrecognizable and the diverse or the unlike – a privileged angle for any attack upon a more or less sovereign hypostasis of an *ipse* that thinks itself as *one* – already inhabited the figure of “the many without the one” in Plato’s dialogue *Parmenides* (165 e), and therefore quickly re-emerges as soon as the older and more recent critics who would overturn all Platonism set to work. The post-human as an opening to the absolutely unlike or – if we wish to paraphrase the dialogue *The Statesman* (273 d) – to the sea (a living, a zoological, or a biological sea?) of diversity and unlikeness can surely already rely upon a long history. While he here contributes an intense and suggestive chapter to this history, Derrida, in this sense, simply inscribes yet another note in the margins of the philosophy of Plato.

As Derrida himself would readily concede, it is indeed no easy matter to avoid adding more notes in the margins of the Platonic texts. Symptomatically, amongst those who have attempted with greater or lesser success to do so, the name of Lévinas stands out in particular, so it seems to me: an author that Derrida always critically, and also with considerable affection, likes to remember and acknowledge, though perhaps without grasping the full theoretical import of this contribution which, eluding the snares of all the old Platonic moves, helps to preserve us from repeating the latter. Lévinas teaches us, in fact, not only that the question of the Other cannot be reduced to the proto-Platonic logic of the One and the Many – or of the specular and reciprocal absolutization of the relation between identity and alterity, between the utterly Same and the utterly Diverse or Unlike – but above all that this Other is a human being who, in the encounter of the face-to-face, questions us with regard to his or her humanity and our own. If this were not human, if it did not humanly address us through the human vulnerability of a face expressing the impossibility of murder, there would not, in Lévinas’s sense, be any Other at all. Or, perhaps, there would be, but only as a creature in a parallel universe where the wolves and the lambs dream of telling stories to the creatures born of woman. The etymology of the Latin word *homicidium*, in this sense, is telling: *homicide* points to the killing of *homo* that is perpetrated by *homo*, and not to killing in general. It is man himself who kills man, or one like himself, one who, according to Lévinas, is singularly other precisely by sharing this likeness: this is what announces the act as homicide and manifests the injunction against the act in question. It may perhaps be worth emphasizing that while for Aristotle and his followers the likeness lies in possessing the *logos* and belonging to the *polis*, for Lévinas it lies in something quite different: in the injunction that commands us “not to kill” and, therefore, in the homicide that the command presupposes. And this, if the traditional zoo-anthropological framework indicated by Derrida is to be maintained, implies that the specific difference between the human and the animal or, if we prefer, the threshold that separates them, must be articulated, precisely, in terms of the occurrence of killing within the species, rather than in the possession or the lack of the faculty of language.

We are speaking here, in effect, of a different perspective that, with respect to the zoo-anthropological context indicated by Derrida, would have significant implications.

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16 For an original elaboration of this argument that seems to me to be quite crucial, see D. Tarizzo, *La vita, un’invenzione recente*, Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2010.
Reformulated in basic terms, the decisive question, in fact, would now consist in asking not whether the animal can be said in some way to speak, to communicate, to possess language, but rather, and much more simply, whether the animal too can be said to kill its fellows, other beings of its own species. In short, does the wolf kill the wolf; the lion the lion, the monkey the monkey? It is now not only the specialists who know that they do so. Scientifically speaking, there is no doubt that killing within the same species—including infanticide and cannibalism—is practised amongst certain primates, even amongst fish and other previously unexpected species. If the criterion of difference is supposed to be homicide, then it seems that the threshold in question collapses.

In *The Beast and the Sovereign* it is clear that Derrida is particularly irked by theories that, being convinced that the animal kills “prey” belonging to other species but spares those like itself or its fellows, declare that animals are innocent because they are confined to the blameless and natural circuit of instinct. He is irritated in particular by the idea that the response of the animal, since it is regarded as automatic and unfree—or not sovereign in character—is for that reason non-responsible. The distinction “between the so-called animal order and the so-called human order, between the supposed reaction and the supposedly responsible response” is, according to Derrida, one of the most obvious symptoms of the logocentric bias itself. Moreover, his critique of Lévinasian ethics is based on this very premise: since Lévinas denies to the animal the face that enjoins us not to kill, he also denies to the animal any response. Nor is the result substantially any different, as Derrida emphasizes, if we consider the role assigned to the unconscious in psychoanalysis, or, more generally, the observations offered by the social sciences or the neurosciences: it is the prevailing conviction, in the case of man, that the reactive, automatic, and unconscious response here does not affect or impair the paradigm of the so-called responsible response. In other words, the notion of the threshold between the animal and the human continues to insist upon the difference between natural reactivity and free responsibility: more or less unaffected by the natural character of urges and impulses, the response continues to be a prerogative of the human animal.

It is evident that all of this directly interferes precisely with the Lévinasian theme of the injunction “not to kill”—from which Derrida would like to detach the humanity of the face. The obstacle that holds man within the parameters of the responsible response is in fact the one that ultimately expels him from the natural/animal realm of innocence. In other words: if we lower the threshold of responsibility in the name of reactivity, we run the well known risk of naturalizing homicide. Nor can we simply appeal to Derrida’s otherwise perfectly justified warnings with regard to the opposition between nature and culture, understood as the emblematic, simplified, false, dangerous, and impudently logocentric figure of the threshold. In the realm of the zooi, or at last in a considerable part of this realm, the killing of those like themselves, their fellow beings, is a well established fact. Obviously it remains to be decided, with Lévinas, whether for man this assumes any special significance. Or it is still be decided whether, in the special case of homicide, it is imperative to invoke the human face that, in turning to the fellow being and commanding the latter “not to kill,” *speaks*. But then as always, the word would, once again, be the threshold. And then, crucially, the Derridean critique of

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Lévinas would strike home. It is difficult, it seems, to liberate oneself from the intimate connection between humanism and the *logos* that Derrida denounces.

Nevertheless, it would be necessary, at one point or another, to ask what the true motivation of this coveted liberation is, or, in this case, to ask whether it is indeed the animal that decrees the urgency of this question. In fact, retracing the innumerable diversions and digressions of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, one receives the impression that Derrida’s discourse is sustained by the ancient impulse of human envy for the animal, already familiar to Sophocles, insofar as the animal is at home in being precisely because it is unaware of its own death. Moreover, the author himself admits to being tempted, if not irresistibly attracted, by the very common idea, shared amongst others by Heidegger, that the “animal does not die” because it is “a living being that is only living, an ‘immortal’ living being, as it were.”

Certainly, here and there, in this text one suddenly glimpses the risk that the immense question of the living being coincides with the immense question of the dying one. Far from new, then, and even expressly metaphysical, the fundamental register of the argument concerns, precisely, death. And homicide can thus become a specific voice of this death, referring to an act of cruelty as logocentrically human as the condition of knowing ourselves mortal is human. And this, crucially, is a condition that possibly the animals do not share: this “perhaps” is the heart of the entire question, or, to put it more simply, is already an exercise of thought that evokes conscience, the word, or, fateful, the threshold. With a certain coherence, derived as it is from an inveterate metaphysical habit of looking at from the perspective of death, the living being that knows he dies would like to deny, or at least forget, this death.

Would then the animal have a face because every living being, however absolutely unlike – and therefore, as a rigorous ethic would insist, however absolutely unrecognizable – is nonetheless like itself (and us) in relation to death? Would it then be this sharing of the mortal condition, after all, that nourishes the various figures that represent the ontological affinity between the sovereign and the beast?

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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**And What If the Animal Should Testify?**
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1. For reasons of editorial convenience (since we are talking about texts that were already composed on the computer and were thus practically ready for publication), the decision to begin publishing Derrida’s seminars with the ones that were given last permits us access to his final thoughts and writings, and thus allows us to engage directly

18 Ibid., p. 123.
with open questions and unresolved problems. From the stylistic perspective, the texts in question closely resemble the books Derrida published during the last twenty years of his life in the sense that the style is open and colloquial, and this only serves again to undermine the myth, profoundly unjust as it is, of Derrida's intrinsic obscurity. The themes in question are treated very freely, and this is typical of the seminars that Derrida held between 1983 and 2003, namely those that belong to the period when he had left the École Normale Supérieure for the École des hautes études en Sciences Sociales, and was no longer shackled by the obligation to present seminars on the classic texts of philosophy as a way of preparing the students of the École Normale for the agrégation.

Over the last twenty years of his teaching activity Derrida was thus able to concentrate on themes rather than on authors (although the discussions are constantly sustained by reference to specific authors and commentary on their respective texts, in accordance with the general style of Derrida's research). The themes in question include nationality and nationalism, the gift, forgiveness, grace, friendship, witness, and hospitality. These are all themes that stand at the crossroads between ethics and politics, and Derrida's approach to them manifest a stronger constructive impulse than is evident in his writings of the 1970s. In short, it would appear as if Derrida were responding to Putnam's observation in Renewing Philosophy that might even furnish an appropriate exergue for the characteristic preoccupations of Derrida's later works: “Derrida [...] is not an extremist. His political pronouncements are, in my view, generally admirable. But the philosophical irresponsibility of one decade can become the real-world political tragedy of a few decades later. And deconstruction without reconstruction is irresponsibility.”

The constructive tone of these writings is also accompanied by what we might call a tone of retrospective summing up, naturally dictated by the passing of time, that finds expression in the commemorations of friends and colleagues who passed away during the period in which the seminar in question was held (Desanti, and above all Bourdieu). Thus the youngest philosopher of his generation – the Benjamin, as it were, the twelfth son of Jacob – is now himself the Patriarch, the one who has survived. Hence the idiosyncrasies and antipathies, the readings and the disputes that engage with friend-enemies of his earlier life: with Lacan, with Deleuze, and, above all and as always, with Foucault. From the stylistic point of view, we also observe an often sharp and ironical tone in these confrontations, and this prompts further reflections and considerations on our part. It is true that these seminars, as I have just pointed out, in their more colloquial style closely resemble the books of his final period, but in fact the books – as we can see precisely by reading the transcriptions of these seminars – are elaborated in greater detail and, above all, manifest a less polemical tone in general.

The seminar is also the diary of a difficult year, when Derrida knows or senses that what is animal in him, that what is mortal, is now making itself increasingly felt. His preoccupation with matters of health was well known, and it will have been during the second year of the seminar The Beast and the Sovereign, between 2002 and 2003, that Derrida specifically learnt, in the spring, of the pancreatic tumour that would rob him of life within a little more than a year. These pages are therefore amongst the last he ever wrote, composed in the apprehension of death, though without the certainty of its imminence that would indeed mark the texts of the very last period, and in particular the interview with Jean Birnbaum for Le Monde in August 2004, that appeared
only two months before his death (and was published in 2005 by Galileé under the title *Apprendre à vivre enfin*).

2. The confrontation with life and death is, it seems to me, an important aspect (if not simply the principal one) of Derrida’s concern with animality: the first occurrence of the theme of animality, at the beginning of the 1980s, is specifically to be found in a text where he discusses and censures the passage from *What Is Called Thinking?* in which Heidegger claims that the animal does not die, but simply ends.\(^{19}\) In effect, if we consider that the animal dimension is that which is mortal in us, it seems rather strange to argue that the animal does not die. And to claim that the animal does die not because it does not know what it is to die also involves a particular inference regarding animals, although we actually know nothing about the possible anxieties of the latter, and suggests a problematic certainty regarding human beings, who in their own heart believe they will never die. This gives rise to a line of argument and a certain apologia regarding the animal that will be developed throughout Derrida’s reflections during the last twenty years of his life, and unfolded, not accidentally, in conjunction with his critique of the concept of “spirit” (a critique that Derrida briefly recapitulates on page 15 of the seminar).

And this is because animality is generally understood principally in contrast and opposition to spirituality. The animal is a lowly or humble form of being, is close to the earth (this is what *humilis* originally signifies), is a merely living being, as distinct from the spirit that soars aloft, with not always welcome consequences, as with Heidegger’s adherence to Nazism in the name of “spirit,” a question that lies at the heart of Derrida’s *De l’esprit.*\(^{20}\) And in turn, humanism and associated appeals to spirit are regularly accompanied by a derogatory attitude to the animal. If we look more closely, this humanism is a species of nationalism or expanded racism: in *Benjamin’s Dream*, delivered in Frankfurt on 20 September 2001, shortly before he began the seminar under discussion here, Derrida had recalled and endorsed Adorno’s thought that cruelty in relation to animals represented a proto-form of antisemitism. And since the beginning – in the conjunction of being-toward-death and the acknowledgement of his own Judaic heritage – Derrida has identified with this mortal animal, something that would also leave a trace in a brief and enigmatic text from the end of the 1980s (“What is Poetry?”, *Poesia* 1, 1988) where he suggests a kind of identification with a hedgehog run over in the street.

Far from being, unlike man, incapable of dying, as Heidegger claims, the animal is the mortality of man. And this explains why Derrida’s concern with the animal emerges at the beginning of the 1980s, or, more precisely, in 1983, the year of the Paul de Man, the scholar of comparative literature who had welcomed Derrida at Yale, and to whom Derrida would dedicate his *Memoires for Paul de Man*, a text that marks the beginning of his explicit reflections on mourning. Obviously, Derrida would say that this is too

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simple, or at least that it is not so simple, and would have done so precisely by referring
to this particular seminar on *The Beast and the Sovereign*, where in effect the question
concerning the animal is developed in terms of at least three basic lines of thought.

The first of these is closely connected with what I have already mentioned, and is
also evident in Derrida’s other reflections on animality. Derrida’s entire effort is dedi-
cated to demonstrating how much the animal shares with the human, and how very
much, on the other hand, the human shares with the animal. This is a typical decon-
structive move: the opposition animal/human being re-enters that chain of oppositions
(nature/culture, nature/technology, *physis/nomos*) which deconstruction teaches us to
question. In this case, the animal is invoked to reveal how much nature there is within
our cultural character (the human in man is also animal, and characteristics such as
altruism and care for the young derive from our animal inheritance), and on the other
hand how much of what we call culture can be found in the realm of animality. In
effect, Heidegger maintains that the animal is “poor in world,” and that man alone can
properly to said to have a world, without considering how poor this world of man can
be, poor even in important aspects of humanity that Heidegger may have overlooked
on account of his own characteristic blindness in relation to social questions.

The second line of thought, on the other hand, moves in a very different direction.
The beast – as Derrida emphasizes – is not simply the animal: it also represents *la bêtise*,
the dullness or stupidity apostrophized by Flaubert and despised by Valéry. Perhaps the
beast in this sense, Derrida suggests, is precisely what is proper to the human being, or
at least to certain human beings, and in particular to those, like Valéry, who say that
“It is not my forte,” or to those, like Heidegger, who reduce their adherence to
Nazism to a *Dummheit*, to an act of idiocy or foolishness, that is, to a *bêtise*. This is a
secondary and parallel line of thought that unfolds throughout the course of the entire
seminar – and here I remember that when Derrida presented in his seminar Valéry’s
remark that “It is not my forte,” he also added: “He who says this, classifies him-
self as unique” – but it does not really appear to take us much further. For to claim that
la bêtise is proper to man, that only a human being can do such a stupid thing, is on
the one hand entirely obvious (it would be strange to say that a cat has committed une
bêtise), and on the other seems to reflect the appropriative and anthropocentric logic that
Derrida otherwise contests, in particular when he denies (against Lacan) that animals
do not know how to feign or pretend, or that they can never be cruel.

The third line of thought is the principal one, and provides the title for the seminar
itself: the animal here is not only the subordinate figure, but also furnishes the figure of
the sovereign – with all of the consequences that this involves. From the beginning the
idea of sovereignty has been bound up with a certain beast-like character, or bestial-
ity, above all with the force or power of the mythological beasts which have served to
represent the State, or of the sovereign as military head (and specifically with reference
Bush’s behaviour in the immediate aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers, an event
that effectively defines the atmosphere of the entire seminar). But this bestiality is also
the character of “exceptionality,” of the idea of emergency that, in a Schmittian sense,
accompanies that of sovereignty: God, the sovereign, the animal, all three are outside
the law, are found above or below the law, and what is more, the sovereign arrogates to
himself the power of placing other sovereigns or states outside the law, by defining the
relevant offender as a “rogue” leader or state, as a *canaille* (the word derives from the Latin
canis: dog). Here bestiality no longer denotes the humble or lowly character of nature, or the stupidity that belongs to culture, but rather the omnipotence of the sovereign.

3. What the does this identification of sovereignty with bestiality ultimately imply? Just as in his text on *The Force of Law* (1994) Derrida had revealed a radical dissociation of law and justice, here we are presented with an equally radical dissociation of politics and ethics. Politics is the pure will to power, the reason of the stronger is always the best reason, and of this – as Derrida never ceases to remind us – we have innumerable demonstrations, or rather we have nothing but the continual demonstration of this, as the masters of political realism who take to the field in Derrida’s seminar, as Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Schmitt, readily show. The force in question manifests itself as a way of exercising control over life, but Derrida, while recognizing the concept of biopolitics, claims that we are dealing here with a phenomenon that derives from more fundamental sources, in particular from the technologies of inscription and registration, so that biopolitics is secondary with respect to the tele-political domain.

Force therefore manifest itself pre-eminently, in a way reminiscent of Ernst Jünger (to refer to an author that Derrida has never cited and for whom he would probably have evinced no sympathy), precisely as technology, as bureaucracy (in accordance with the analyses of Schmitt), and then as a kind of media-cracy, a technology that constructs and multiplies an event through its very registration and repetition, as specifically in the case of the Twin Towers. A power of registration, of the archive, and thus also of selection and illusion. We know how interested Derrida was in the populist power exercised by the media, and in the manifestation of this power in Italy, in which he saw an anticipation of tendencies that would increasingly make themselves felt in the rest of the world precisely because it defines sovereign power through its capacity to illude or deceive. But to deceive whom? Obviously, to deceive the bovine populace. For there is a fourth line of thought with regard to animality, one which Derrida does not seem to acknowledge, or rather, to speak more precisely, that he deletes through ideological choice, as for a long time I have also done myself, something that I only realize as I come to write these words. And we are talking about a gravely obvious matter, of something that is at once the premise of every politics (that systematically begins from this presupposition) and something almost unnameable in every intellectual discourse. However bête Valery might have been to claim that *la bêtise* was not his forte, however great Heidegger’s *bêtise* in supporting Nazism may have been, they are not so great, quantitatively speaking, as the *bêtise* of the bovine populace that apparently accepts every lion-like king, and even hyenas, jackals, monkeys, an entire bestiary. These are reflections that Derrida does not pursue, through a respect and a hope, I believe, for people in general that, considering the various totalitarianisms that have often enjoyed unconditioned popular support, have in my view radically collapsed with the experience of media-governed populism. It is as if, while asking ourselves “And what if the animal were to reply?,” we do not seem to ask ourselves what it would reply. Perhaps because the reply is already clear, and Derrida (and to tell the truth no one else) would not care to hear it: if the animal, or rather, if the animals (for Derrida rightly insists on the plural character of animality), could speak, it would utter *bêtises*.

And what if the animal were to rebel? Would this be better than the beast-sovereign simply because it has previously been oppressed? This is not what is claimed. Here it is
worth underlining a difference between mastery/servitude in Hegel and the question of the animal in Derrida. The slave enjoys superiority with regard to the master not because he is oppressed (to suffer oppression does not constitute an advantage for anyone), but because he dominates the earth – because he has a relationship with the real, with the domain of ontology, that the master lacks. The priority of the oppressed is thus an ontological priority, and to seek out an ethical priority here would be highly problematic. And we could say that the extreme irrelevance of the stupefied masses in our contemporary world lies in the fact that with the increasing diffusion of media power – the very diffusion that the enthusiasts of the postmodern once greeted as a form of democracy and liberation – they have no relationship with the real, just like the master. The latter, however, also has certain ways and means of producing the imaginary.

“And thus, being unable to ensure that what is just was strong, one ensured that what is strong was just,” as Pascal wrote, with words that are equally valid for us, here and now. It seems that, ultimately, this is the fundamental problem with which Derrida is concerned. The subtle analyses that he provides, the series of wrongs and counter-wrongs that he exposes, and the phenomenology that he pursues, are characterized by a very strong moral intensity, and one could even say that this is one of those rare occasions when “moral intensity” is not an inappropriate or purely rhetorical expression. And yet these analyses seem to conclude with the principle of La Fontaine with which the seminar began: the reason of the stronger is always the best. What is more surprising, and more important to emphasize here, is that we do not come to this conclusion through inaccurate or superficial analyses, or through any moral indifference, but quite the reserve, namely through an extremely sophisticated analysis and an exercise of absolute moral scruples.

4. How is this possible? I do not believe that this situation can be ascribed to merely stylistic or personal characteristic of the author, as people have often attempted to do. It derives rather from that absolute primacy of ethics with respect to ontology that lies, in spite of everything, at the centre of Derrida’s reflections. In comparison with the other French writers of his generation, and especially in comparison with Deleuze and Foucault, Derrida never attempted to move beyond good and evil. On the contrary, good and evil have always been his principal preoccupation. It has been rightly observed that his history of metaphysics is that of a struggle between good and evil, and the dissociation of ethics and politics in Derrida represents a case that must ultimately be described as unique rather than merely rare, that of a critical theoretician of political autonomy who opposes the political precisely in the name of ethics. Must we then opt for the alternative position: for the specific autonomy of the political, for Hobbes or Schmitt? I do not remotely believe that the alternatives can be reduced to a choice between politics and ethics, and from this point of view I should like to clarify the character of Derrida’s fundamental problem, one which clearly and explicitly emerges precisely in the course of this his last impassioned seminar.

Perhaps I may be permitted a few autobiographical remarks in this connection. In the early 1990s, and doubtless prompted by Derrida’s observations regarding animals, I too had begun to investigate the question of animality. The result of these investigations was a long essay, entitled Analogon Rationis, which appeared in 1994, and then the analyses of animality that I presented in Estetica razionale (1997). I had
long thought that there was a convergence with Derrida’s work here, and I spoke with him about this on a number of occasions. And it was in this conviction that, in a special monographic section of the *Rivista di Estetica* (28, 1998) specifically dedicated to the philosophical question of animality, I published Giuseppe Motta’s fine translation “L’animale che, dunque, sono,” namely the first part of Derrida’s text that would be published posthumously in 2006 under the title *L’animal que, donc, je suis.* On reading Derrida’s last seminar I realize that the convergence in question was actually very limited.

For me the animal, briefly put, involved aesthetics, and a realist ontology, in the sense that my own investigations started specifically from Baumgarten’s definition of aesthetics as the science of sensuous cognition and the “art of the analogy of reason,” or of that quasi-rational perception that human beings share with the animals. It seemed to me, in short, that recourse to the animal should be able to reveal the common ground that is indifferent to our forms of knowledge and cognition, to indicate an ontology of the world as the ark that receives human beings and animals alike. Reading his seminar now I am convinced that this aspect was quite marginal for Derrida, and that his own preoccupation was principally ethical-political in character, or something along these lines: until we have found justice for animals, we shall not find justice for those animals that human beings are. Ontology has little role to play, and indeed we must say that this ethics is constructed in antithesis to ontology.

The idea of an ethics without ontology goes back a long way, and derives, in my view, from the Lévinas of *Totality and Infinity* (that Derrida had discussed at length in his 1964 essay “Violence and Metaphysics”). Here Lévinas makes the fact that there is something, and that this something is an object, depend upon the possession of language and the categories: “The sensed is not posterior to the “seen,” to the “sensible” – that for themselves are insignificant, and that our thought could mix and modify in a certain way on the basis of *a priori* categories.” This is a passage, and a general claim, that I find problematic to say the least. On the one hand, it is difficult to find anything more authoritarian (one might almost call it “fascistic”) than this claim to bestow sense in advance of the sensible, than this disqualification of sensibility, defined here as “insignificant.” On the other hand, one really cannot avoid asking how Levinas could fail to consider that we can readily move from this passage to the murderous claim that “there are no facts, there are only interpretations,” a proposition that would justify all kinds of injustice if it were introduced into a criminal court in place of the proposition that “the law is the same for all.”

Now the basic idea of Derrida, one that is evident throughout the entire course of his later reflections, is precisely that justice itself is un-deconstructible. I do not believe that this is the case. Justice is based upon something that is still more fundamental, and this is ontology, that which is, beyond all amendment. Let us ask once again: what if the animal should respond or reply? Or even, more precisely, what if it should testify? Let us consider Pascoli’s text, *Cavallina storna*. The reader may recollect that Pascoli’s

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mother utters the name of the presumed murderer of her husband, and the horse testifies by its neighing (“My mother raised a finger and, in the great silence, pronounced the name ... The neighing rang out.”) Where is the ethics here? Not in the horse. Pascoli’s mother may well say that it is a good horse, but we haven’t the faintest idea of what occurred to it in the process. The ethical aspect lies in the moment in which the horse, whether it be a moral subject or not, confirms, with a neigh, the name of the one who has killed Pascoli’s father.

Thus without an external world and the corresponding ontology, to which our actions and our thoughts refer, like our acts of testimony, it makes no sense to speak of ethics. Just as it makes no sense to speak of such things without epistemology, that is to say, without any knowledge that refers to what transpires in that external world.

In short, without a world beyond our own minds, there would be no such thing as morality. I would like to underscore this a version of the scenario of brains in a vat. Let us suppose that there are brains in a vat that, as a result of electronic stimulation, imagine that they perform heroic or despicable acts of one kind or another. Would they truly be subjects of moral action? I do not think we could say so. They would simply be brains dreaming of good or bad actions. And one who dreams of committing a criminal act is not a criminal, any more than one who dreams of performing a saintly act is actually a saint. An ethics without the world is the perfect premise for a world without ethics, and this is why the road to hell is paved with good intentions rather than with good actions.

5. One final comment, of a wholly biographical kind. I well remember the first sitting of this particular seminar. I was in Paris, and as always, whenever I was there, I would go to hear Derrida on Wednesdays. I remember the ground-floor of the amphitheatre on the Boulevard Raspail where he held the sessions, the great amphitheatre that no one uses now since the cosmopolitan throng that the seminar once regularly attracted has evaporated. His wife Marguerite was there, also Marie-Louise Mallet, and others, along with the aficionados who had followed Derrida’s seminars for the last thirty or forty years, ever since his time at the École Normale, or even at the Sorbonne. Derrida would smoke his pipe before the sitting, usually there were two, one after lunch and one after dinner, but on this occasion there was an extra one. I went to greet him and said: “There is a huge crowd, as always,” and he replied (I have already recounted this story once before, but it still surprises me, although over the years I have come to understand it better): “The day will come, perhaps, when there will no longer be anyone here.”

This was a moment of anxiety that astonished me in a man that I had regarded as invincible, with a child-like attitude whose implications I have only begun to grasp with the passing of time, as I approach his own age in terms of years. And I was even more astonished by the scene in which he pulled out of the black bag that he always carried over his shoulder a copy of my book *Mondo esterno*, which had only just come out, and asked me to inscribe a dedication to him in the volume in question. I had not done this, unusually, for I was also embarrassed because in this book I had indicated a certain distance with regard to deconstruction and to Derrida precisely through an emphatic insistence upon the distinction between ontology and epistemology, to which I would also add, today, the indispensable significance of ontology for ethics.
For this reason too, I have been particularly gratified to have had the opportunity here to discuss this extremely important seminar, and to concentrate upon my points of agreement and disagreement with regard to Derrida, thereby continuing the unending dialogue (as he would have said with the fine rhetoric of the Ecole Normale, as encountered in his exchange with Foucault in 1963 for example) that constitutes the relationship between master and pupil.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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