

Massimo Filippi, Marco Reggio

A Variety of Animals, and No One Animal: a Conversation with Judith Butler

Face, Grief and Animals

1. The notion of face is central in Emmanuel Lévinas' philosophy. Despite Lévinas' anthropocentrism, one can actually use this notion to support animal liberation. However, when it was explicitly asked of him whether the snake has or does not have a face, the French philosopher answered, with some hesitancy, that he did not know. Something similar seems to apply to your notion of a "grievable life": this is a powerful notion to promote animal liberation, which however still needs to be fully explored in this context. Now, here are the questions: does a snake have a grievable life? Does a grievable life coincide with human life or exceed it?

A grievable life has to include an animal life. A human life is already an animal life, and yet it does not comprise all animal life. One thing we can say about animal life is that there is a variety of animals, and no one animal. The human belongs to this variety. Sometimes we have to listen to Lévinas when he tries to explain what he means, but often a philosophical concept can have implications that exceed the stated intentions of its authors. This is true for Lévinas. He is the one who tells us that the face is not literal, and that it expresses the commandment, «Thou shalt not kill». He also claims that a sound can express this commandment, and so function as a "face" – the face does not have to be something that impresses itself upon us visually, but can operate through the senses. Animals are sensuous beings whose suffering and persistence is perceivable through sound and movement, and so they can, and do, express this same prohibition on killing. The human life is dependent on non-human animals, and both sorts of animals depend on life processes that include natural and technical dimensions. So we have to rethink Levinas' anthropocentrism in order to figure out how best to preserve what is living.

Biopolitics or Zoopolitics?

2. Your dialogue with Michel Foucault's thinking is massive and important. You agree with some of his views, but criticize many others, including his understanding of psychoanalysis. What do you think about his notion of biopolitics? Should he have spoken of zoopolitics instead, since it is clear from his own writings that it is the impersonal animal life within the human what politics, at least in the last three centuries, aims at controlling and tries to discipline and – ultimately – to domesticate?

Perhaps he should have thought about animal life. My problem with “biopolitics” is that it does not go far enough for us today when, indeed, the situation of the biopolitical might better be described through Achille Mbembe’s idea of “necropolitics”. Foucault understood that sovereign acts of killing give way to bureaucratic forms of power that let people die. But actually, forms of direct killing continue (for instance, the death penalty in the U.S., Egypt, and elsewhere) and through targeted acts of war. And these forms of explicit and deliberate killing are fully compatible with the biopolitical management of populations. Disposable labor and disposable populations are overlapping demographic terms. One can easily slip from one category to the other. When we think about animal life and environments, we have to understand that the very conditions for sustainable and livable life are destroyed by war and its spread of toxic soil, for instance. So when we start to think about the management of life, we are already beyond the human.

Bare Life and Precarious Lives

3. What is the difference between your notion of precarious life and that of bare life by Giorgio Agamben? And again, does precarious life cross species barriers?

I think that “bare life” is a concept that is related to the problem of sovereignty, and I am not convinced it works well to describe the situation of radical dispossession. A particular life may

well be jettisoned from the *polis*, and a sovereign power may refuse to protect its rights, but is it then a form of fully exposed life, one that no longer belongs to a political domain? Or do we have to think about such a life not only by virtue of its relation to sovereign power (which withdraws its protection and rights), but also forms of population management that is not organized by sovereign power (this is a Foucaultian point)? But do we also need to understand that those who are stateless, living in or near shelters on the border of Europe, for instance, are “outside” of power just because they are no longer protected by sovereignty? It seems to me that such populations are saturated in power, and that they also have their own forms of resistance. I am not sure that bare life can resist – and I wonder whether it is an impossible notion, this idea of life separated from all power. Does it describe a being stripped of power, or does it, as a notion, strip that being of power?

Morality and Politics

4. In the lecture that you delivered when you were awarded with the Adorno Prize, you underlined how a good personal life is difficult to achieve in the context a bad society, given that we are all formed by relationships. In other words, you tightly linked morality to politics. Don't you think that the question of the animal, the derridianian war on pity, the antispeciesist movement and veganism are all pointing in the same direction?

I do think that such movements are trying to underscore networks of interdependency that are generally not recognized. It is true that I link morality with politics and, in this way, probably follow a tradition that one can track through Aristotle, Arendt, and Adorno. But this does not mean that politics can be reduced to morality, but only that morality finds itself recurrently implicated in relations of power.

Human Slaughter and Animal Slaughter

5. Can we compare situations like those that are happening in Gaza to the condition of non human animals in a slaughterhouse?

No, I do not think that the primary organizing principle of Gaza is “slaughter” – it is a territory that is currently under siege, but that contains within itself several different political movements that are trying to figure out what Palestinian self-determination might mean under such conditions. The regulation of water and goods by Israeli authorities creates a situation of enormous scarcity within Gaza, as does the forced unemployment of the majority of its people. Bombings happen recurrently, and the spectre of death by bombing is ever-present, but that does not mean that it is the only issue that is organizing everyday life. It is probably best to resist analogies that do not let us see the specificity of the situation there, which is one of intense political strife, efforts to rebuild that are constantly undermined by lack of materials and periodic bombing. The question is whether Gaza will be rejoined with the rest of Palestine, and how that might happen. And though some think that the occupation applies only to the West Bank, “siege” is an instrument of occupation – Gazans do not control any bit of their border – so though nominally independent, Gaza is also occupied.