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Abstract

This piece seeks to extend Jacques Derrida's and Cary Wolfe's explorations of posthumanism and the production of 'the human' as divided and removed from its embedding within the world. It does so in order to shift the focus of animal welfare ethics away from specific practices and behaviours towards a fundamental reconceptualisation of animal/human relationships. Cary Wolfe's work questions the fundamental tenets of the construction of the human through ocular domination. This vision-as-mastery permits the capacity for truth and control to be extended from the human self to all other beings. Vision, however, is a fundamentally flawed sense. In the process of acknowledging this flaw and the capacities of other beings to know and to know us in ways we are entirely unable to comprehend, human supremacy is dissolved. This dissolution of supremacy and of the intrinsic relationship between the human and visuality-as-mastery facilitates a re-orientation of the human as embedded within living and non-living systems. Derrida explores the relationships between 'the human' and 'the animal' and suggests that in the process of seeing one another's vulnerability, a re-adjustment of current oppressive ethical considerations of non-human animals can occur. From here there is another avenue that increases the parameters for ethical consideration: that of mutual recognition. In deconstructing the parameters of 'the human' through questioning the very reliability of its perception of the world, the 'I', the self, fails to exist. With this lack of existence, the reliance on external recognition by other beings permits some semblance of solidity in the wash of connections between the 'self' and the world. It is these connections, these permeable boundaries that should be prized above all others. And with this the act of reducing these boundaries and connections is a process of reducing the self, a process not enacted lightly. This reconceptualisation of relations between beings, between 'animals' and 'humans', creates a fundamental shift away from oppression and towards a valuing of extended networks of the self; this is where animal rights dialogue should be focusing.

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Benjamin Bolton

Winning essay of the Vox Animalia *Student Essay Prize 2013, established by HARN: Human Animal Research Network at the University of Sydney.*

Abstract: This piece seeks to extend Jacques Derrida's and Cary Wolfe's explorations of posthumanism and the production of 'the human' as divided and removed from its embedding within the world. It does so in order to shift the focus of animal welfare ethics away from specific practices and behaviours towards a fundamental reconceptualisation of animal/human relationships. Cary Wolfe's work questions the fundamental tenets of the construction of the human through ocular domination. This vision-as-mastery permits the capacity for truth and control to be extended from the human self to all other beings. Vision, however, is a fundamentally flawed sense. In the process of acknowledging this flaw and the capacities of other beings to know and to know us in ways we are entirely unable to comprehend, human supremacy is dissolved. This dissolution of supremacy and of the intrinsic relationship between the human and visuality-as-mastery facilitates a re-orientation of the human as embedded within living and non-living systems. Derrida explores the relationships between 'the human' and 'the animal' and suggests that in the process of seeing one another's vulnerability, a re-adjustment of current oppressive ethical considerations of non-human animals can occur. From here there is another avenue that increases the parameters for ethical consideration: that of mutual recognition. In deconstructing the parameters of 'the human' through questioning the very reliability of its perception of the world, the 'I', the self, fails to exist. With this lack of existence,

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The current conceptualisation of the human ensures the oppression of non-human animals. Dialogue amongst individuals deeming to disrupt this hierarchy of oppression needs to look towards scrutinising the division between 'the human' and 'the animal' and to question the very construction of what we understand to be 'the human'. Posthumanism provides an avenue by which to question the dominant paradigms of liberal humanism, and push back against the current rights-based discourses that urge an inclusion of animals into the human sphere of moral recognition (Wolfe, 'Introduction' 6). Posthumanism articulates a rejection of ability-based ethics and visuality-as-mastery, and moves towards the dissolution of 'the human' and a subsuming of humans into a boundary-less, fluid space. This essay looks to the works of Jacques Derrida and Cary Wolfe in their explorations of post-humanism as envisioning a space of shared vulnerability and as providing alternative avenues for non-oppressive, moral interactions between beings. Using Derrida's assertion: 'The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins here' ('The Animal' 397) as a backdrop for my own exploration of the existence of the self within these occluded spaces, this paper offers a somewhat more encompassing perspective on human-animal relations than that offered by Derrida or Wolfe. These questions and these reconceptualisations open up discursive space to engage with the relationships between humans and non-human animals that do not merely replicate varied forms of pre-existing hierarchies of oppressions.

Cary Wolfe ('Learning from Temple Grandin' 127) discusses the possibilities of the connection between disability studies, animal studies and posthumanism as providing a critique of and an alternative to the extension of subjectivity currently articulated in mainstream human and animal rights discourses. This is enacted primarily by challenging visual potentiality as the basis for the humanist subject and as such the very existence of 'the human'.

Vision, for the humanist subject, is intrinsically related to the process of objectification (Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin' 133). As Derrida states, 'the modern dominance of the principle of reason had to go hand in hand with the interpretation of the essence of beings as *objects*, an object present as representation [*Vorstellung*] an object placed and positioned *before* a subject' (Derrida, 'The Principle of Reason' 9–10). This dialectical relationship relies upon the subject's capacity for total perceptibility and knowability and frames objects' existence as intended purely for their ocular consumption by the subject. Vision as an entirely accurate

capability is thoroughly challenged by Wolfe's exploration of 'normal' vision and Temple Grandin's hyper-visuality ('Learning from Temple Grandin' 130).

The notion of vision as the singular and infallible means by which the human knows the world is physiologically and functionally inaccurate (Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin' 131). Visual information is filtered through social, cultural and experiential lenses that facilitate the accumulation, amalgamation and synthesis of that information into accessible conscious knowledge. This requires high levels of unconscious dismissal of information attained by the eye and is the functional method for preventing information overload. There are also fundamental physiological limitations to the human capacity for sight, for instance the blind spot in the human eye (Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin' 131). Further, the physiological variations between organisms' ocular capacities and indeed the functional methods of perception are so varied that their differences are incommensurable – 'does it makes sense to say that a ring-tailed lemur "does not see" the object of the bat's echolocation?' (Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin' 133).

Temple Grandin's hyper-visuality demonstrates the products of the reduction, or potentially the removal, of these limiting factors on vision. Here her capacity to retain vast amounts of visual information produces unique and profound (posthumanist) experiences and yet her visual capacities are deemed disabling (Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin' 130). Her inability to filter information pre-consciously, and the subsequent hyper-visuality, is '*anything but* "human"' (131). Indeed, drawing upon Derrida, Wolfe highlights how intense visibility, like that which Grandin experiences, produces not clarity but occlusion: 'the viewed object itself becomes strangely opaque' (132).

In direct contradiction to humanist conceptions of the subject, the invisible is not merely the as-yet-unseen, but rather remains '*heterogeneous* to the visible' (Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin' 133). The product of not-seeing is produced by each different kind of sight, the physiologically and culturally constrained sight of 'normates' and the inability to 'see' for people who, like Grandin, do not filter their informational input (Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin' 132). In either case vision fails to master because it is not omniscient: one produces an inability to see and as such to know; the other produces an inability to know due to a too-intense ability to see. One has too much information, one not enough, with no form of

vision or perception permitting total comprehension. As such the reliance of objectification and mastery on infallible vision is usurped and with it the notion of human supremacy (Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin' 134).

In light of this 'the animal' unnerves and disrupts the fabrication of human supremacy. Derrida's observation: 'the animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins here' ('The Animal' 397) directs us towards this challenge and its capacity to elicit that which we know, but reject: animals' capacities to see us and to know us in ways we are entirely unable to comprehend. As Wolfe eloquently puts it, a dog, around the corner from us, smells us before visual perception is established, where our scent is 'telling a story we can never wholly script, to a present we have not yet reached' ('Introduction' 5).

The threat to human visual dominance is all the more powerful due to the ever-present, close proximity of the animal to the human (Wolfe, 'Introduction' 6). This threat provides the impetus for the continual (re)production of human domination and animal subservience in an attempt to dismiss their unknowable knowledge of the human, a knowledge that is constantly threatening to overwhelm. It is in light of this that our interactions with animals denote the 'hardest case' of our readiness to be vulnerable to other knowledges in our embodiment of our own, 'an embodiment that arrives at the site of the other before we do' (Wolfe, 'Introduction' 5). To acknowledge the fallibility of our knowledge at the level of the human self truly opens up traditional conceptualisations of the human, so reliant upon control and dominance, to vulnerability.

Vision, and the apparent production of knowledge and mastery from that vision, has been used to define the boundaries between 'the human' and 'the animal'. To construct a truly ethical relational framework, the artificial boundaries (so entwined as to be indistinguishable) between 'the human', reason and visuality-as-mastery must be dissolved (Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin' 134). Wolfe believes that in order to do this, vision must be subsumed into the 'generalized animal sensorium' of all beings' perceptive mechanisms (134), thereby disrupting and challenging the supremacy of human knowledge and opening up possibilities of being vulnerable to other knowledges. Further, as Wolfe states, this amalgamation notes a shift towards the realisation of Derrida's displacement of the real, 'that which resists all appropriation' (134). This allows us to begin, as Derrida's work suggests, to think about the

place of 'the human' and 'the animal', to work towards the disruption of the superiority of the human, through deconstructing the very grounding of ourselves within a knowable world, and to create new forms of understanding of human-animal relations outside of the oppressive frameworks of humanism.

Both Derrida and Wolfe emphasise a shift away from the focus on capacities in defining animal-human relations. As Derrida discusses, this was highlighted by Bentham two centuries ago in the dictum 'can they suffer?', which disrupts the parameters of moral consideration defined by 'logos', 'dynamis or hexis', the 'power to reason, to speak' or any other possession or ability (Derrida, 'The Animal' 395). Instead it produces a discursive shift towards an engagement with suffering as an inability rather than an ability, where suffering is 'no longer a power, it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible' (Derrida, 'The Animal' 396). For Derrida, this opens up possibilities of morality on the basis of the sharing of this 'non-power at the heart of power' (396). Wolfe, agreeing with Derrida, rejects vision and its concomitant process of objectification as the criteria for shaping the boundaries of admittance into the 'sphere of legal rights and ethical consideration' ('Learning from Temple Grandin' 136).

This shift in moral basis moves away from the ideas of reciprocity, ability and agency (Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin' 141). Rather, in its disruption through passivity, there is an embedding of engagements between beings based on the shared vulnerability of all living things. This is not founded on certainty, logic or objective knowledge but on the undeniable upwelling of compassion that marks the connection between beings. The sharing of suffering is of particular note here as it provides an opportunity for the disruption of the division between 'the animal' and 'the human', forging possibilities for mutual recognition based on shared vulnerability. In using this affective response we are not relying on something certain or concrete, but something undeniable (Derrida, 'The Animal' 396).

Shared vulnerability, then, relies upon and brings to the fore the shared connections and mutual recognition currently obscured by liberal humanism's divisive discourse that separates and values beings based on abilities. These connections are particularly significant when considering posthumanism and the disruption of 'the real' as discussed by Derrida (qtd in Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin' 134). This disruption suggests a shift from a concrete

and dominable world to one freely floating in a vast space of unknowablility. Not only does this remove a stable sense of the world around us, it also produces a nonconcrete sense of self. It is here then that this diffused and undefined self can provide possibilities of an alternative to a morality based purely on shared vulnerability.

The posthuman is defined by its enmeshing with technology and other systems, including other non-human living organisms (Wolfe, 'Introduction' 6). With this enmeshing comes a loss of a sense of self, of a definable boundary of the self. Like the autistic person hitting their limbs, we too clamour to find the parameters of our bodies and the world (Wolfe, 'Learning from Temple Grandin' 135). But in this case those parameters do not exist because even the body boundaries, which are traditionally used to define the self from the world, are unclear and ever shifting.

Any maintenance of a definable 'I' is not only a false construction but also one that reinforces the process of objectification that permits human domination. To objectify we must know the 'I' such that the 'I' can lay claim to the rest. As Derrida states of the subject, 'a man who says "I", an ego certain of itself thus ensures his own technical mastery over the totality of what is' ('The Animal' 133). The 'I' and mastery over all else are mutually contingent because for there to be an I there must be a sense of knowability, of concrete reality, and for there to be a concrete knowable reality there must be a rejection of uncertainty; we must be able to 'see' and to know all, human mastery must be possible and the self can never be open to the possibility of not knowing.

Within this context Derrida's representation of humans as naked before an animal's gaze ('The Animal' 137) hints at an alteration to an ethics of mutual vulnerability. Inasmuch as the 'I' exists (which it does only in the most elusive of manners), it exists only as it is perceived by the world. 'The animal looks at us' is the capacity of the animal to perceive 'our' existence, to acknowledge 'our' presence, without which, in the understanding of the inconclusive, indeterminable 'I', 'I' would not exist. Further, 'we are naked before it', within the perspective of another, as much as is possible without the overarching objectification that filters all that is perceived – we are *seen*. Not only is one's existence produced through the perception, adjustment and accommodation of 'I' in this way, the loss of (false) concreteness is

supplemented by a true perception. One is unable to assess the truth of a being that is ever shifting and ever changing, so that it is in the *relation* of that look, that connection, that in-between, neither one nor the other but both, that the truth of the self exists.

Vulnerability and passivity then are but one facet of connection between beings, as Ursula Le Guin highlights:

> And the attraction that that many of us felt, the desire to smell one another's smells, feel or rub or caress one another's scales or skin or feathers or fur, taste one another's blood or flesh, keep one another warm, – that attraction was now all one with the fear, and the hunter could not be told from the hunted, nor the eater from the food. (195)

The connections between beings, where beings are overlapping, not singular entities, is through a multitude of relations like sensory perceptions and emotional connections that also include shared vulnerability. A conception of the self so embedded within the world that its existence is contingent upon that world, its very existence only through that look, that smell, that caress, that movement around and sometimes through, that slight suggestion from that being that 'you' exist, this most tentative but fundamental sign of one's existence is not so readily and callously extinguished.

Rather than attempting to disrupt the hierarchies embedded within social structures by reasserting new boundaries for moral consideration, the very nature of what is deemed to be 'the human' must be dissolved back into the world. Derrida and Wolfe's explorations of posthumanism extract these possibilities in a move away from the liberal humanist subject and from humanism as the central mechanism for establishing rights for subordinated groups, including animals, and towards a conception of animal-human relations founded on mutual vulnerability. This paper poses the possibility of an extension of mutual vulnerability to mutual recognition in light of the indefinable 'self', so occluded that no lines exist between self and the other, that one's very existence is intrinsically dependent upon the other. This opens up possibilities of moral consideration regarding non-living systems and produces the cultural recognition and psychological reorientation that recognises the individual's embedding within the world. With this recognition there no longer exists a notion of 'the human' or 'the animal',

of the self or the other, with its concomitant oppressive divisions, but a space where delicate tendrils of recognition work to create some spatial and temporal boundedness of the self that is entirely ephemeral, entirely transitory, and so incredibly valuable that any callous or frivolous disintegration of these bonds would be unthinkable – 'thinking perhaps begins here' (Derrida, 'The Animal' 397).

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