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The rhetoric and prose of the human/animal contrast



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ABSTRACT

The opposition in philosophy between humans as thinkers and animals as non-thinkers is often considered to stem from anthropocentrism. In this paper I try to demonstrate that philosophers don't really place "us" at the centre, but rather their own thinking and the philosophical language they develop as thinkers. The human/animal contrast functions rhetorically to communicate that philosophical self-centredness to an audience that recognises itself as "human." I try to dismantle the contrast between humans and animals by exposing what I see as its true core: forgetfulness of how philosophical language (and thinking in that language) is generated by idealisation and sublimation of the reflexive uses of language.

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"I readily agree with this learned author, that the faculties of brutes can by no means attain to *abstraction*. But then if this be made the distinguishing property of that sort of animals, I fear a great many of those that pass for men must be reckoned into their number." (George Berkeley)

1. Introduction

There is a familiar tendency to speak of humans as beings that "have" some extraordinary quality, like reason; and conversely to speak of animals as beings that "lack" that quality. This paper explores the notion of two opposite categories of beings: positive humans and negative animals. How does such schematic plus/minus discourse arise as the format of human self-understanding?

According to a common critical analysis, discourse that opposes human positivity and animal negativity originates in the power struggle of a self-assertive human club, striving for exclusive membership rights:

The human has been configured as a tribal circle gathered around the fire amid the looming darkness of a dangerous world, as the party of revelers sequestered from the plague, as the exclusive club of the Human, complete with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereunto (for example, the right to eat non-members of the club and the privilege not to be eaten). (Halberstam and Livingston, 1995, p. 10)

The contrast can belong to such human club discoursing, perhaps in pamphlets from the meat industry. My aim in this paper is to trace another origin of the contrast as it appears in philosophical discourses about human essence. I argue that the

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philosophical contrast serves a different struggle than that of human against animal. The capacity that is claimed for the human is a philosophical construction generated by idealisation of forms of reflexive language use. The resulting “language of thought” is the ideal, not the human. Plus/minus discourse preaches the ideal by asserting its applicability to humans and its non-applicability to animals. The contrast is thus a way of communicating a philosophical ideal to an audience that answers to the name “human.”¹

Let me first introduce a simpler example of plus/minus discourse to which the “club analysis” obviously applies. It will work as an object of comparison throughout this paper. Suppose that football lobbyists treated football as the sport with which all sports are to be compared. Such a self-assertive comparison, with football at the centre, turns football into the sport that “has” the unique quality of full-fledged sport, while all other sports become grouped together as hollow sports that in one way or another “lack” what football has. This is a simple example of how plus/minus discourse can emerge. Although handball courteously could be described as football’s primitive cousin, as close to a full-fledged sport as a mere proto-sport can get, the discourse is unjust to the great variety of sports that it lumps together as a singular negativity. This inbuilt bias adapts it to rhetorically justify a privileged position for football within power struggles of sports. The contrast could be contested by equally self-assertive handball lobbyists who instead put handball at the centre of their comparisons. However, *all* sports dichotomies can be rejected in a single stroke without emphasising similarities or continuities. It is simply a matter of stopping comparing all sports with an exemplary sport. Unjust plus/minus dichotomies of sports emerge through that method of comparison.

2. Philosophical plus/minus discourse about humans and animals

My reason for writing this paper is that I doubt that self-assertive tendencies of a human club drove thinkers like Descartes, Kant and Heidegger to oppose humans and animals. As I understand them, they make the contrast communicating another importance than that of the human over the animal, namely, *the importance of their own proposed ways thinking over how people ordinarily live and talk*. They could have made other contrasts, for example, between men and women, or between adults and children, or between serious and casual discourse, or between ancient Greece and modern technocratic civilisation, to communicate the same perceived importance of their ways of thinking over how people tend to live and talk: often habitually and mindlessly, in their view, and full of doubtful features. They often made those other contrasts, and for that purpose. Heidegger combined two of them when he called contemporary urban man, “the ape of civilisation.”²

When he spoke of a more authentic, more thinking human, Heidegger used his own proposed philosophical language, a poetically woven discourse of neologisms like *Dasein*, *ek-sistence*, and *thrownness*. These neologisms indicated a way of being human that contemporary urban man had forgotten. Yet, even when I’m spellbound by Heidegger’s philosophical poetry and feel the demand to become more authentic, a part of me still wants to ask: If Heidegger (1971a, p. 205) sees everyday language as “a used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer,” and if he has the gift of contriving more authentic language that truly speaks, then why doesn’t he throw away the old word, the “human,” which he claims is so worn-out by its everyday use and so misunderstood by the metaphysics of the subject? Why not stick to the neologisms, to those more poetically charged words? Why chatter about the human when it’s possible to speak authentically of *Dasein*, pure and simple?

My answer is that Heidegger needs the ordinary word, the “human,” in the communication of his neologisms. It is how the stage is set for his extraordinary, more thoughtful language. No one would attend to the neologisms in the right spirit unless he embedded them in more familiar language, by whispering into our ears: “I can initiate you into the mystery of the human; listen to me, and you will hear what has first rank in us.” Thus the stage is set for the neologisms. Now “we” will attend to them as indicative of “our” authentic being. We will hear the neologisms as being spoken in our name.

When Heidegger instead turns to speaking of animals, he sounds almost like a Cartesian:

Because plants and animals are lodged in their respective environments but are never placed freely into the clearing of being which alone is “world,” they lack language. (Heidegger, 1998, p. 248)

The human/animal contrast is an aspect of how Heidegger’s philosophical poetry is presented to speak to its audience. It entices them to attend to the neologisms as the path to their essence; to what they could become more fully if they were to follow Heidegger and take his thinking as exemplary of what has first rank in them. They would no longer live like contemporary urban man, the ape of civilisation; not if they want to be “human” in Heidegger’s authentic sense, which his poetic language indicates. Heidegger is flattering and threatening his audience into his thinking. The human/animal contrast serves that rhetorical function.

My aim so far was to suggest that when philosophers put the human on display as the being that has some extraordinary quality that the animal lacks, or is poor in, they may have other aims than only human-centred aims vis-à-vis nature and animals, although they rhetorically exploit such tendencies. I wanted to indicate that philosophical plus/minus discourse can have another origin than the power struggle of a human club. If football lobbyists make football the privileged object of comparison, it is really football they place at the centre. They know perfectly what football is and they compare all other sports

¹ For an investigation of the metaphysical vertigo that can appear when contrasts between humans and animals are challenged, for example, in some unexpected meetings with animals, see Segerdahl (2014).

² Heidegger, quoted in Derrida (2008, p. 146). As we will see later, John McDowell combines the human/animal contrast with the adult/infant contrast, describing the infant as a “mere” animal and contrasting infants and nonhuman animals with mature humans.

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