
Stopping the Anthropological Machine: Agamben with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty

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To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean ... to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man. (Agamben, *The Open* 92)

In *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben diagnoses the history of both science and philosophy as part of what he calls the “anthropological machine” through which the human is created with and against the animal. On his analysis, early forms of this “machine” operated by humanizing animals such that some ‘people’ were considered animals in human form, for example barbarians and slaves. Modern versions of the machine operate by animalizing humans such that some ‘people’ were/are considered less than human, for example Jews during the Holocaust and more recently perhaps Iraqi detainees. Agamben describes both sides of the anthropological machine:

If, in the machine of the moderns, the outside is produced through the exclusion of an inside and the inhuman produced by animalizing the human, here [the machine of earlier times] the inside is obtained through the inclusion of an outside, and the non-man is produced by the humanization of an animal: the man-ape, the *enfant sauvage* or *Homo ferus*, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form. (37)

The human-animal divide, then, is not only political but also sets up the very possibility of politics. Who is included in human society and who is not is a consequence of the politics of “humanity,” which engenders the *polis* itself. In this regard, politics itself is the product of the anthropological machine, which is inherently lethal to some forms of (human) life. Although

Agamben's analysis could be extended to include a diagnosis of the dangers to animal life, in *The Open*, he is primarily concerned with the dangers to human life.¹

Agamben argues that the dichotomy between man and animal is a division within the category of the human itself. In both the earlier and the modern versions, humanity is divided into more and less human types, which in turn becomes justification for slavery and genocide. The question, then, for Agamben is not one of human rights, but rather how the category of the "human" is produced and maintained against the category of the animal, which functions as both constitutive outside and inside such that some "people" are rendered non- or sub-human. In other words, how do we come to treat some people like animals? Extending the scope of Agamben's interrogation, we might also ask, how do we come to treat animals like animals? Or, in other words, how does animality justify enslavement and cruelty? In addition to Agamben's investigation into how the category of humanity is produced through the anthropological machine, we must also investigate how the category of animality becomes beholden and subservient to humanity.

In this essay, I critically engage Agamben's analysis of the man-animal dichotomy and the anthropological machine that produces it. In the first sections, I delineate the ways in which Agamben moves with and against Heidegger. Agamben maintains that Heidegger's comparative pedagogy in his lecture course, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, continues the work of the anthropological machine by defining Dasein as uniquely open to precisely the closedness of the animal. Yet, Agamben's own thinking does not so much open up the concept of *animal* or even open up man to the possibility of encountering animals as it attempts to save humanity from the anthropological machine that always produces the animal as the constitutive outside within the human itself. It is the space of the animal or not-quite-human within the concept of humanity

that for Agamben presents the greatest danger. Agamben suggests that the only way to stop the anthropological machine is through a “Shabbat” of both man and animal. In this essay, I argue that Agamben’s return to religious metaphors and the discourse of religion as a supposed counter-balance to the science and philosophy through which the machine operates, at best displaces the binary man-animal with the binary religion-science, and at worst returns us to a discourse at least as violent as the one from which he is trying to escape. As an alternative, I look to Merleau-Ponty’s reanimation of science in his *Nature Lectures*. In the conclusion, I suggest that perhaps we need both Agamben’s diagnosis of the politics of science and Merleau-Ponty’s creative re-enactment of science if there is any hope of stopping the anthropological machine.

I. Heidegger’s Abyss

Although Agamben begins and ends his diagnosis of the anthropological machine in *The Open* with invocations of a messianic banquet, the centerpiece of his analysis is Heidegger. In a sense, Agamben follows Heidegger in challenging Darwinian theories of evolution on conceptual grounds in terms of the categories of “human” and “animal” (by insisting that biology cannot be separated from the language we use to describe it). And even while ‘deconstructing’ Heidegger’s distinction between animality and humanity or Dasein, Agamben embraces Heidegger’s insistence on animality as what is concealed about and from humanity. Moreover, in some passages in *The Open*, Agamben seems to embrace a Heideggerian abyss between man and animal, an abyss that Agamben suggests is not wide enough in Heidegger’s thought. In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger’s notion of Da-sein as ek-stasis and rupture leads him to postulate an absolute abyss between animal and human. Da-sein’s ek-stasis is precisely his escape from animal captivity, which is dependent upon his entrance into

language, an entrance closed to the animal. Heidegger cannot abide by evolutionary theory that makes man a mutation of animal because, for him, language is not something merely added onto the body or onto animality. Rather, language is a way of being in the world and a way of having access to it, what he calls “world-formation.” Heidegger is not so much denying evolution on an ontic level, the level of biologists, as on a conceptual level, the level of philosophers. It may seem ironic, then, when in the lecture course he turns to biology and zoology to prove his thesis about animals lacking access to world-formation because they are poor in world.² In the comparative pedagogy of his lecture course, Heidegger uses life sciences to make his analysis more convincing. Heidegger’s well-known criticisms of technology and techno-science make his use of high-tech experiments in zoology and biology to prove his point even stranger.

Heidegger singles out two biologists in particular who made advances he finds helpful: Driesch and von Uexküll. According to Heidegger, Driesch addresses the animal in a holistic way and von Uexküll shows how the animal is bound to its environment (FC 261). Heidegger is especially fond of von Uexküll (a favorite of Merleau-Ponty and a favorite target of Agamben) because “amongst the biologists Uexküll is the one who has repeatedly pointed out with the greatest emphasis that what the animal stands in relation to is given for it in a different way than it is for the human being” (FC 263-4). Even so, according to Heidegger, Uexküll doesn’t go far enough in separating man and animal in that his term “*Umwelt*,” which refers to the animal environment is too suggestive of a world (*Welt*); and he goes so far as naming an “inner world” of the animal, which Heidegger rejects as anthropomorphism (FC 263). Despite these shortcomings, Heidegger thinks that Uexküll’s observations can be useful to philosophy particularly in overcoming the Darwinian view of the ascent of man from animals. On the one hand, Uexküll’s research undermines any neat subject-object dichotomy by defining the organism in

relationship with its environment; the organism is not merely adapting or reacting to outside stimuli; rather its relationship with its environment is dynamic. On the other hand, the organism is englobed by its environment in a way determined by its instinctual body, which Dasein escapes in its access to beings as such. Heidegger finds in Uexküll both an anti-Darwinian sentiment that goes along with his anti-Cartesian one, and also an absolute separation between human and animal. Heidegger concludes that the difference between animals and man, between poor in world and world-formation, is not one of degree or quantity but rather of quality (FC 195; cf. 350); he argues “the world of the animal ... is not simply a degree or species of the world of man (FC 200). And he repeatedly says “the animal is separated from man by an abyss” (e.g., FC 264; “Letter” 230).³

In *The Fundamental Concepts*, this abyss is between behavior (*Benahmen*) and comportment (*Sichverhalten*). Animals behave, whereas humans engage in the self-reflexive activity of comporting themselves. Animal behavior is locked into its instinctual ring, whereas human comportment is intentional and free. Heidegger likens animal behavior to physiological processes in the animal’s body:

It is not as if the beating of the animal’s heart were a process different from the animal’s seizing and seeing, the one analogous to the case of human beings, the other to a chemical process. Rather the entirety of its being, the being as a whole in its unity, must be comprehended as behavior. (FC 239)

Heidegger concludes that captivation does not merely accompany animal behavior but defines it. Animals are captivated by their instincts and therefore have no true or conscious relationships with others or with their environment, while humans comport themselves toward others and their environment in a conscious way, which is to say, a world-forming way (cf. FC 237). Heidegger gives the example of a lizard lying on a rock sunning itself. He claims that the rock and sun are

given to the lizard in a lizard-like way defined by the lizard's way of being, "which we call 'life,'" but not existence. To exist is to have access to the environment and others as beings, which animals do not have. Heidegger concludes that "when we say that the lizard is lying on the rock, we ought to cross out the word 'rock' in order to indicate that whatever the lizard is lying on is certainly given *in some way* for the lizard, and yet is not known to the lizard *as* a rock" (FC 198). Discussing pets that live among us, Heidegger echoes this sentiment when he says that the dog lives but does not exist, which is why they cannot truly be with us (*Mit-sein*). To be with another being requires that one exist and vice versa. He says that domestic animals "belong to the house," but not like the roof belongs to the house. They live with us but don't exist with us; they feed while we eat, and therefore they are there alongside us but not truly with us. In other words, an encounter with an animal, even one with whom we share our home, is not possible. We cannot know their world and they cannot know ours; and therefore any transposition between the two is severely limited, if not impossible. Indeed, from the side of the animal, transposition is foreclosed from the beginning. For Heidegger, animals are not capable of the *Mit-sein* that is characteristic of Dasein.

II. Agamben's 'Deconstruction' of Heidegger

Agamben's relation to Heidegger is complicated in that he takes over the language of concealment and unconcealment at the same time that he "deconstructs" it. He takes it over in his own criticisms of techno-science, while in his critical engagement with Heidegger's lectures, he maintains that the unique unconcealment at the heart of the clearing opened to Dasein turns out to be none other than the captivation of the animal. In other words, the animal is revealed to man as concealed; more precisely, it is man's own animality that is revealed to him as concealed.

Animality is the concealed within the unconcealment of Dasein. On Agamben's reading, the struggle between concealment and unconcealment is the struggle between man and animal itself (cf. 69-70). Man's humanity is dependent upon keeping himself open to the closedness of animality (particularly his own animality). In Agamben's terminology, man suspends his animality in a zone of exception (79); and by effacing his own animality, he retains his privileged position in the dichotomy of man-animal. By closing himself to the closed environment of the animal, he opens himself to the world of the properly human. Humanity, then, is dependent upon the exclusion of animality, which all the while operates as its constitutive outside (or more accurately, outside within). Agamben describes the definitive boredom that Heidegger attributes to Dasein as an awakening *from* captivity *to* captivity such that Dasein sees itself as open to its own non-openness; and "this resolute and anxious opening to a not-open, is the human" (Agamben 70). Following Agamben, we could say that animality with its world-poverty is the mysterious beating heart concealed and revealed at the center of humanity with its world-formation. Because of the structural connection between animality and humanity, Agamben argues that in the case of animals, it is impossible for Dasein to perform the activity essential to it, which is to let beings be. Man cannot let animals be (themselves) because as human he is dependent upon seeing animals as closed systems from whom he differs in his openness (as opposed to their closedness) (cf. Agamben 91).⁴

On Agamben's reading, Heidegger's comparative analysis of man and animal is another example of the anthropological machine in action: humanity is produced by excluding animality, against which it defines the human as precisely not-animal; in this way, it is the human who becomes the exception, the exceptional animal who is not really an animal after all. In a sense,

then, the human is both the *telos* and the missing link between animal and man. Agamben concludes that both versions of the anthropological machine

are able to function only by establishing a zone of indifference at their centers, within which—like a ‘missing link’ which is always lacking because it is already virtually present—the articulation between human and animal, man and non-man, speaking being and living being, must take place. Like every state of exception, this zone is, in truth, perfectly empty, and the truly human being who should occur there is only the place of a ceaselessly updated decision in which the caesurae and their rearticulation are always dislocated and displaced anew. (37-38)

We could say that the notion of the human acts as a transcendental signifier produced through the various and multifarious instances of its own failure.⁵ The truly human is an empty ideal produced through the continual disavowal of the failure of *homo sapiens* to escape their animality. The so-called abyss between man and animal is produced by abjecting animality from the concept of humanity. This way of thinking resonates with Agamben’s argument that the category “human” is ultimately empty because it is continually shifting. Agamben insists, however, that the “missing link” between animal and man has always been filled either by exotic ape-men and wolf-children or by slaves and victims of genocide who are considered sub-human animals.

In *The Open*, even while Agamben points to the shifting and unstable significations of the term “human,” he is more concerned with the ways in which we do and do not maintain the space in-between animal and human, the so-called missing link. The greatest danger of the anthropological machine is that, along with the categories human and animal, it produces a phantom third category in between the two, which both connects and separates them and thereby constitutes and sustains them. He concludes:

What would thus be obtained, however, is neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a *bare life*. And faced with this extreme figure of the human and the inhuman, it is not so much a matter of asking

which of the two machines (or of the two variants of the same machine) is better or more effective—or, rather, less lethal and bloody—as it is of understanding how they work so that we might, eventually, be able to stop them. (37-8)

A bare life is one produced by biological and medical science as a living body separated from its social, political and even ecological context. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben suggests that it is an exceptional body (monstrous or sacred) whose fate can be determined outside of systems of law or reason (see *Homo Sacer*). As such, the deadly killing power it provokes seems virtually unstoppable. Thus, Agamben maintains that only by understanding how this logic works, which is to say, how the anthropological machine creates *homo sapiens* who are considered less than human, can we hope to stop it.

III. The Ghost in the Machine

The philosophical inquiry that potentially breaks the machine is opposed to the scientific inquiry that fuels it. Agamben suggests that science collapses the distinction between man and animal in dangerous ways by reducing humanity to sheer biology. By so doing, man is reduced to an animal determined by his own disinhibiting ring; his freedom becomes merely one effect of physical causes among others revealed by biological and medical science to be predetermined after all. The mystery of the universe and of life evaporates under the searing gaze of the scientist. Agamben seems nostalgic for a philosophical gaze that invests rather than disinvests meaning into life. He claims that today philosophy has lost its relevance because it has become mere spectacle or a private affair; it has lost its relevance for public life and for history. Even philosophy is becoming more scientific in its mode of inquiry such that, rather than enhance the mystery of life through multiple interpretations, it attempts to reveal all of its secrets, which of course also signals the end of interpretation, and the end of both philosophy and science.

Agamben's criticisms of science and our techno-scientific age revolve around the disappearance of the mysteries of biological life under the gaze of ever more powerful instruments. He argues that by closing ourselves to the mysteries of animality, we become like Heidegger's animals caught in a disinhibiting ring of cause and effect or stimulus-response determined by our physiology (Agamben 77). We are no longer open to the mysteries of life but rather toil under the impulse to disclose all of life's secrets. Medical science and biology attempt to reveal human life to be determined by our DNA or chemical reactions in our brains and thereby render us no different from other animals. If science succeeds in turning man into an animal whose every desire can be determined by chemical processes in his brain, then "neither man nor animal—and perhaps, not even the divine—would any longer be thinkable" (22). And when human life becomes another form of animal life, then Agamben warns that we are in danger of collapsing a distinction upon which the very categories of ethics and politics are based:

When the difference vanishes and the two terms collapse upon each other—as seems to be happening today—the difference between being and the nothing, licit and illicit, divine and demonic also fades away, and in its place something appears for which we seem to lack even a name. Perhaps concentration and extermination camps are also an experiment of this sort, an extreme and monstrous attempt to decide between the human and the inhuman, which has ended up dragging the very possibility of the distinction to its ruin. (22)

Agamben argues that what was merely an "innocuous paleontological find," the ape-man, becomes the Jew or others deemed subhuman (37). Given the oppositional and hierarchical nature of the man-animal dichotomy, however, in what sense is paleontology, or zoology or biology for that matter, ever innocuous? Although it may be harmless (even beneficial to man), is the subordination of animality to humanity ever innocuous to animals? In fact, doesn't the animalization of man work to enslave or justify "extermination" only when animals are imagined as abject and disposable creatures subjected to the whims of man? The anthropological machine

produces the human and the dangerous in-between space of sub or non-human *homo sapiens* only by producing the animal as deprived intellectually, morally, and politically. The machine must be stopped not only for the sake of man but also for the sake of animals. A possible wrench in the works could be to revalue animals and animality rather than accept and thereby perpetuate their status as denigrated. Justifying abusing or killing some ‘people’ by arguing that they are animals or like animals, is compelling only if we assume that animals deserve or even require abuse and killing. Using the argument that people are animals or like animals in order to treat them as inferiors likewise assumes that animals are inferior. A Nietzschean revaluation of the animal and animality, then, may be one strategy to address the animalization of man as a justification for slavery and genocide.

Another strategy would be to follow Derrida in attempting to render obsolete the categories man and animal by opening ourselves up to diversities both of animal species and individual animals (Derrida, *L’animal*). Derrida argues that the vast differences between various animals makes the category “animal” particularly inappropriate. As I argue elsewhere, following Derrida, along with examining how the anthropological machine produces humanity, we need to begin to see how it also produces the monstrous category “animal” that not only effaces nearly infinite differences between species but also corrals them all into the same abject and inferior pen (Oliver, *Animal Pedagogy*). The machine, then, produces not only subhuman *homo sapiens* who supposedly therefore deserve their exploitation and enslavement, but also other subhuman species who therefore deserve their exploitation and enslavement; moreover, unlike the other subhumans, they can never make an appeal to human rights. And, given the dichotomy that produces the categories “human” and “animal,” animal rights operates as an oxymoron. The anthropological machine may produce the human and the subhuman within the human, but it

also produces a world filled with other living creatures and other “resources” that “exist” only for man. In this light, Heidegger’s insistence that animals live but do not exist (except *for* man), takes on a new twist.

The metaphor of *machine*—as in the anthropological machine—is central to Agamben’s analysis of the dependence of the category of human on the category of animal in the production of the very notion of humanity. Yet, the category or notion of machine (in relation to the other two categories) is never questioned within *The Open*. This seems odd in an era dominated by technologies that simulate intelligence and life. How does the binary man-animal change when machines are thrown into the mix? Isn’t medical science replete with machine and computer metaphors to describe the human body, particularly the brain? Perhaps Agamben would see this as a continuation of Descartes’ conclusion that animals are types of machines. Still, in the computer age, it seems as urgent to investigate our investments in androids and bionic men as subcategories of man as it does to interrogate the man-animal divide as it sets up the category of the human. For, in the contemporary era, the category of the human is at the same time set off against the cyborg and also imagined as functioning like a machine. Like the animalization of humanity, the mechanization of life also can lead to the loss of meaning and the valorization not of bare life but now of the efficiency, along with the exchangeability and disposability of the machine: the body as machine that can be turned on or off at will; the body as machine that can be assembled or disassembled. Along with science and medicine, machine metaphors are seeping into philosophy, as evidenced not only by Agamben’s discourse of the anthropological machine but also by that of Foucault, Deleuze and others. Perhaps what Agamben prescribes as a “Shabbat” of the categories man and animal could be the awakening of an analysis of the categories *living* and *machine*.

What happens if we add the machine to the man-animal dichotomy? Perhaps we merely end up with Descartes' machine-animal. Or, perhaps we open up the man-animal dualism to a third that transforms our thinking about both. For example, Adèle Thorens argues that Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty come to radically different conclusions in their discussions of man and animal because, while the third term in Heidegger's comparative analysis is the stone (an inanimate object), the third term in Merleau-Ponty's comparison is the machine and the science of cybernetics. By comparing both humans and animals to machines, Merleau-Ponty finds similarities issuing from the fact that, unlike machines, both man and animals have living bodies. Considering man in relation to machine forges an alliance between humans and animals as creatures, who, in Merleau-Ponty's words, live rather than function: "the machine functions, the animal lives" (*Nature* 162). Moreover, perhaps reflecting on the metaphors of machinery that inflect our articulations of the man-animal binary also will help defuse "the anthropological machine." Following Agamben's example, we could diagnose the role of machine metaphors in setting up the opposition between man and animal and in producing the notion of humanity. The most striking example might be Descartes's animal-machines against which he defines man's freedom and man's soul. We could extend Agamben's discursive analysis to the category "machine" as essential to the division between man and animal. This investigation might include the various transformations that the machine-age, industrialization, and now artificial intelligence have produced in the philosophies of man versus animal. Within the confines of this essay, I can only gesture in that direction.

IV. The “Shabbat” of Man and Animal

Although Agamben says that a new mythology of man or animal will not stop the anthropological machine, in an odd turn he embraces religious discourse as an alternative to science (cf. Agamben 92). In a strange echo of Heidegger’s famous “only a God can save us now,” Agamben concludes:

To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean no longer to seek new—more effective or more authentic—articulations, but rather to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that—within man—separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man....Perhaps there is still a way in which living beings can sit at the messianic banquet of the righteous without taking on a historical task and without setting the anthropological machine into action. (92)

Agamben’s messianism is perhaps more reminiscent of Derrida’s than Heidegger’s, particularly when he says that both man and animal might be “saved precisely in their being unsavable” (Agamben 92). Both man and animal can be “outside of being” as more than bare life or biological automatons. For as bare life, all creatures are not only unsavable (i.e. mortal and finite) but also unknowable and without meaning, that is to say, uninterpretable. Agamben discusses the etymology of the Latin verb *ignoscere*, which means “to forgive,” and not, as we might expect, “not to know” (*ignorare*) (91). He suggests that not forgiving by not knowing is to leave something be, “to render it unsavable” (91). Here he follows Heidegger in embracing a letting be of beings so that their being might show through. Yet, he criticizes Heidegger for describing Dasein in terms of its opposition to animality, which not only makes Dasein dependent upon animality but also prevents letting animals be in their own animality rather than their animality as it exists for us.

There seems to be a tension, however, in Agamben’s insistence on the role of philosophical inquiry in stopping the machine, on the one hand, and the role of letting beings be

“outside of being” on the other. Is philosophical inquiry any less invasive and penetrating than science? (Heidegger, among others, repeatedly uses metaphors of penetration.) How does philosophical interpretation preserve the mystery of life any more than science? Agamben’s turn to religious discourse appears to be an attempt to allow for mystery rather than to endorse the violent penetration of nature, particularly of the human body, by science and medicine. Yet, where does this Shabbat leave philosophy? And, for that matter, where does it leave science? Moreover, haven’t religion and religious discourse caused as much violence, enslavement and genocide as science—or even more? Indeed, haven’t philosophy, religion and science all been put into the service of justifying the inhumane treatment of some subset of humanity? In the end, doesn’t Agamben’s own discourse replace the opposition between man and animal with the opposition between religion and science? Given the influence of religion on philosophy and science, might we discover that the opposition between science and religion has been behind the opposition between animal and man all along? In this case, revaluing religion over science may not give the binary a rest after all.

V. Demystifying and Re-mystifying Science

Consider as an alternative to reinstating religious discourse, re-animating science itself. Agamben diagnoses one of the central problems with scientific discourse as the tendency to reduce life to bare life by evacuating it of all mystery and therefore of its meaning. Without mystery, life is more like a machine that functions than an assembly of living creatures. Without mystery, the meaning of life is reduced to nothing more than a determination of what stimulus causes which reaction. Given the realities of our dependence upon techno-science, however, we might do better to look for the mysteries in science itself rather than return to religion. In this

section, I will suggest that reanimating and reinterpreting science are parts of Merleau-Ponty's project in the *Nature Lectures*.

Like Agamben, Merleau-Ponty injects with meaning every experiment from biology, zoology or psychology he discusses. Merleau-Ponty goes further by suggesting that science is always motivated by a mystery that exceeds it, the mystery of life. For example, in discussing the twenty-seven species of crab in the Barbave Islands and their twenty-seven different types of sexual display, Merleau-Ponty insists that we cannot reduce their behavior to the utility of reproduction because that is to ignore the richness of their expression and “the mystery of life in the way that animals show themselves to each other” (*Nature* 188). He also says “there is a mystery of the sensible ... which entirely grounds our *Einfühlung* (empathy) with the world and the animals, and gives depth to Being” (312). In these passages, it is precisely the relationships between animals, and between human animals and other animals, that sparks the mystery of life. Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to suggest that there is a natural magic that attracts scientists to the study of nature: “If these facts retain so much attention from scientists, it's because something is in question with the observer, or because the facts seem to realize a natural magic,” which is the animal's “mysterious” relationship with its milieu (185). By magic and mystery, Merleau-Ponty is clear that he does not mean some type of vitalism or magical life force operating within organisms. Rather, he is referring to a scientific curiosity about life that always exceeds the mechanistic tendencies of the scientific method. By rediscovering that aspect of science, we can regain its mystery, and even its magic.

Merleau-Ponty describes the interplay between magic or mystery and fact, extraordinary and ordinary, sensible and miracle, visible and invisible, as the heart of science. Through his creative and philosophical interpretations of science, and specifically biology, Merleau-Ponty—

unlike Heidegger and Agamben—refuses merely to dismiss science and technology as dangerous. Rather, he attempts a reanimation and reinterpretation of science by continually navigating between vitalism and mechanism without giving up on the meaningfulness of science. For Merleau-Ponty, science is not simply or in principle opposed to philosophy; rather, science and philosophy can engage in a reciprocal exchange that enlivens both. If empirical science needs an infusion of philosophy, perhaps philosophy too needs an injection of empirical life. Meaning lies somewhere between abstract philosophical categories and the so-called brute facts of empirical observation.

In a section of the *Nature Lectures* entitled “The Phenomena of Mimicry: Living Beings and Magic,” Merleau-Ponty says “To admit the existence of a sense organ is to allow for a miracle just as remarkable as allowing for a resemblance between the butterfly and its milieu” (186). He sees his discussion of mimicry and his attempts to reconcile inner agency with outer agency, and activity with passivity, as an attempt “to make the ordinary and the extra ordinary communicate,” because “on the one hand there is a frenzied freedom of life, and on the other, an economy of life” (186). By choosing one pole over the other, scientists and philosophers find themselves caught up in classical binary oppositions that make us choose between sides of life, between inner and outer, mind and body, activity and passivity, proximity and distance, identity and difference, continuity and separation, and between animal and man.

Merleau-Ponty brings these two sides together with his notion of “strange kinship”: “What the meditation of our “strange kinship” with the animals (and thus with the theory of evolution) teaches pertaining to the human body. It is to be understood as our projection-introjection, our *Ineinander* with Sensible Being and with other corporeities” (*Nature* 271). “Strange kinship” allows us to be together with other embodied beings, not because we share an

origin and evolution, or a language and culture, but rather because we have bodies that relate to their environments and to other bodies. Merleau-Ponty says that “the relation of the human and animality is not a hierarchical relation, but a lateral, a surpassing (*dépassement*) that does not abolish kinship” (*Nature* 268, translation modified; see *La Nature* 335). He insists on the “lateral union of animality and humanity” insofar as they are necessarily given together (*Nature* 271). If humans and animals are laterally related as kin, then humanity neither emerges from animality nor is it forever cut off from animality. The question of the origin of man or the origin of language cannot be answered in terms of evolution but necessarily remains a mystery because, according to Merleau-Ponty, quoting de Chardin, “man came silently into the world” (*Nature* 267).

The “strange kinship” (*étrange parenté*) between humans and animals that results from the lateral union of animality and humanity cannot be reduced to evolution where humanity is the *telos* of animality, on the one hand, or to an abyss between body and consciousness (or animal and *Da-sein*), on the other (*La Nature* 339). This kinship neither erases all differences between animals and humans, rendering them identical, nor erases any similarities between them, rendering them radically separate. Rather, “strange kinship” allows for an intimate relation based on shared embodiment without denying differences between life-styles or styles of being. Merleau-Ponty’s theory of stylistic differences maintains difference without allowing it to become the grounds for ethical or epistemological hierarchies between beings. Human beings have a style of behavior particular to them. Various animals have their own styles of behaviors. One type of being is not the ascent or descent of the other; but neither is one radically separated from the other. This strange kinship is not based on descendents nor on generation but rather on shared embodiment in a shared world, even if the style of body and of inhabiting that world are

radically different. We are akin by virtue of our embodiment, yet we are strangers by virtue of the differences in our life-styles. For Merleau-Ponty what Agamben calls the hiatus between man and animal is neither filled with some ape-man or missing link, nor is it empty and void. Rather, it is the space of the fold between two sides of the natural world or, as he says, the relationship between notes and melody.

What in the *Nature Lectures* Merleau-Ponty calls the “intertwining” of animality and humanity, becomes in *The Visible and the Invisible* the “intertwining” between the visible and the invisible, body and mind. What in the later work, Merleau-Ponty calls the “thickness of flesh” and permeability of skin makes “intercorporeity” possible (*Visible* 141). Both the thickness of the flesh and the permeability of the skin make communication with the world and other possible (135). The thickness of the flesh guarantees relations, while the skin insures that we can distinguish our experience from the other's. Yet, since the flesh and skin are not objects, but synergetic, we are never cut off from the other. The skin is a boundary, but a permeable boundary. Flesh makes communication possible because, as Merleau-Ponty says, it is “reversible.” By reversible, he means that we are both sensing and sensible, both subject and object: The body is both subject and object “because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things” (123). By virtue of the flesh, which we share with other living beings and the world, we can sense and be sensed by others and by ourselves. The reversibility of the tangible opens up an “intercorporeal being” which extends further than any one individual and founds the “transitivity from one body to another” (143). This transitivity extends between humans and animals because they also have flesh that connects them and skin that keeps them

separate. Both connection and separation are necessary for relationships, and both are entailed by embodiment itself.

The continuity that Merleau-Ponty describes between animals and man is not that of Darwinian evolutionary science, but rather that of configurations and styles of behavior that are repeated throughout the natural world. Or perhaps more precisely, we should call them styles of style that are repeated, in that all living creatures have life-styles that resonate with their environment and their fellows.⁶ Both dissonance and harmony are parts of the melody of life. To emphasize one over the other, as Heidegger and Agamben do when they insist on separation over continuity, is to risk losing the richness of life that brings with it the mysteries that they also cherish. To “let beings be” in Agamben’s sense of the unsaved, the unforgiven, and that of which we are ignorant, is not the same as celebrating the mysteries of life, or the mysteries of philosophy and science for that matter. Returning philosophy to religion, as Agamben does, seems like a step backwards on the journey away from scientific demystification and technological management of life, particularly in terms of the hierarchy between man and animal that not only produces the human at the center of God’s creation but also justifies man’s inhumanity to man. Another tack might be to follow Merleau-Ponty’s revisioning of science as a creative endeavor motivated by the infinite mysteries of life and fulfilled by on-going interpretations of the between, the chiasmus and the kinship, that together signal both the gap and the intertwining between living creatures as a fold in life itself that is part of the mystery of life.

In conclusion, Agamben may be right that we need to suspend the suspension of the animal within man. And certainly we need to break the anthropological machine that creates subhuman “peoples” who are enslaved, tortured, and murdered. But we also need to consider

how this machine affects nonhuman animals and investigate the man-animal dichotomy from both sides and not just the side of humanity. Even in Agamben's critical analysis of the man-animal split, he engages the category of animal from within the category of human in order to diagnose the ways in which some humans are exploited by others. With this complex form of what elsewhere I call "animal pedagogy," we learn something about the category human by exploiting its relation with the category animal (see Oliver, *Animal Pedagogy*). And with the exception of the tick whose pleasures and mysteries he imagines, animals themselves are irrelevant to this analysis.

Still, Agamben's final prescription for a Shabbat of both animal and man has profound consequences for animals as well as for humans. If the category of the human has been used to justify all sorts of atrocities inflicted upon humans by humans, it has also been used to justify all sorts of atrocities inflicted upon animals by humans. Perhaps by demonstrating, as Agamben does, how the violence at the heart of the concept of humanity justifies man's inhumanity to man in terms of the exclusion of his own animality, we can also highlight the violence of considering animality a characteristic in need of excluding. Moreover, Agamben's insistence on framing the philosophies of humanity and the perpetuation of the man-animal dichotomy in terms of the politics of power shows how what appears to be "innocuous" scientific discovery becomes, or is part of, deadly political maneuvering.

Notes

¹ Matthew Calarco makes a similar argument in relation to Agamben's earlier work ("Death and Mourning").

² Derrida suggests that Heidegger's analysis in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* risks biological determinism insofar as it seems to ground metaphysics in biology (cf *L'animal* 197).

He goes so far as to say that this latent biologism signals a latent politics. Is Derrida suggesting that Heidegger's latent biologism shares the same political impulses as eugenics?

³ William McNeill provides an insightful interpretation of Heidegger's insistence on abyss. He argues that, for Heidegger, it is not the case that animals and humans are separated by an abyss and that therefore we become linguistic beings or Dasein; rather, our very becoming-Dasein opens the abyss. In other words, the abyss does not refer to the ontic level of beings, but rather to the ontological level of being. Indeed, it is the ontological difference that opens the abyss and not vice versa. He says, "The *Augenblick* thus shows itself as the veritable abyss of world, an abyss that does not lie between different entities as beings present at hand, but that is the finite opening enabling and calling for attentiveness to Others—to all Others—in the context of their worldly presence" ("Life Beyond" 246). The essential rupture between man and animals, then, is precisely what opens up the possibility of ethical responsibility, and more specifically man's responsibility toward other beings, including animals.

⁴ Following Derrida, we might also ask what kind of power is the passive "letting be" that is definitive of Dasein. Is it then that animals cannot be passive enough? That they lack the "ability" or "power" of passivity, the ability or power to "let it be"? Derrida takes this tack in relation to the possibility of animal suffering. If humans are distinguished from animals in their capacity to suffer pain—or in Heidegger's discourse, melancholy—then what kind of strange power is this power to suffer? (see *L'animal*).

⁵ Here I am applying Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks' analysis of whiteness as a transcendental signifier to the notion of humanness. See Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness*.

⁶ I recently heard a report on National Public Radio that even plants recognize their kin. When neighbouring plants are related to one another, they are not as aggressive in taking water and nutrients from the soil as they are when they are not relatives.

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