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Bad Faith of Zoophobia

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Sartre and Bad Faith. When Jean-Paul Sartre set out to grapple with the specter of racist identity in Anti-Semite and Jew, he unmasked it as an expression of inauthenticity. Both the person and the concept of “Jew,” he claimed, allow the anti-Semite to develop a hardened shell of bad faith, that is, a form of self-deception pertaining to the very roots of what he feels himself to be. Sartre argued that “anti-Semitism is, in short, the fear of the human condition” (1948, 54), the latter constituted for him by the twin pillars of freedom and responsibility. For, insofar as we are “human” (être-pour-soi, being-for-itself), we must face our basic existential situation of being locked within their parameters. We are bound to choose. We can embrace freedom, accept its concomitant responsibility, and live authentically. But because this option amounts to an immense burden, the anti-Semite denies the availability of that foundational choice and finds himself trapped in an unacknowledged paradoxical position: he chooses to forgo choice altogether. But it is always already too late for that. He has already made a choice, proving that he is capable of choosing, and therefore that he is free and responsible. He must now repress this awareness in himself. In so doing, the anti-Semite chooses “the permanence and impenetrability of a stone” (ibid., 53). He would rather be an être-en-soi, a thing, than a “human being.” Anti-Semitism is a hiding place.

A Different Sense of Inauthenticity. This simplified outline of Sartre’s analysis will frame a discussion of a more primary expression of inauthenticity and bad faith, which his humanism left him unable to notice. Using a sketch of the basic contours of animal life, we will aim beneath the focus of Sartre’s analysis, at something he took to be a set of fairly insignificant givens, and consequently failed to appreciate. In doing so, we may come across some clues as to who and what we must be before we can even think about freedom and responsibility in idealist Sartrean terms.

Analogously to the way that Sartre viewed racist identity as inauthentically human, human identity is itself an expression of inauthentic animality. Like anti-Semitism, “humanity” is a place to hide, an existential defence mechanism, a shelter from the dirt and pain of earthly life. And just as the racist needs the Jew or the black man, the être-pour-soi needs “the animal” as that against which to assert its own brand of permanence and impenetrability—not those of a stone this time, but of an outsider to nature and the world. But, insofar as we aspire to the status of being-for-itself, we invariably end up resenting the fleshy texture of our lives. Far from granting us the transcendence we desire, the denigration of animality keeps us mired in bad faith, swallows us up in a fundamental lie, and thus makes us “bad animals.”

Breaking the Spell. If one was not a living body, imbued with breath and a pulse, one couldn’t do anything at all. In order to think of oneself as not-a-body, or not essentially a body, or something—anything—more than a body, one first needs to be this living body. It is none other than this all too often detested and despised flesh that opens us out onto the world. And it is this flesh, abnegated because of its vulnerability and finitude, that philosophers, artists, and priests have been trying to displace into projected “higher” realms, where it will finally cease to be; to shield and insulate it from the earthly ground whence it arises, so that it will never again be touched or hurt or killed; to train and discipline it, so as to ultimately overcome its burdensome, chaotic impulses. We have to be whereabouts, leaving the blanks to be filled in, breath by breath, by the flesh itself. We have to be especially careful not to say too much. Living bodies matter far too much to be given over to a reassuring but misplaced sense of false concreteness (cf. Whitehead 1967, Ch. III). Laid bare before the physiologist’s cold gaze, opened up to the metaphysician’s wordy craving for certitude and the deconstructionist’s endless chatter, they have already suffered enough.

Beneath the Veil of the Ego Cogito. To speak of the body is already to freeze its living reality and, thus, in a sense, to betray it. But since we have to say something, if only in an attempt to clear away some of bad ideas on the subject that have piled up over the ages, we will begin with the claim that our basic condition is thoroughly “animal.” Our facticity comprises the permanence of ceaseless change; an incompleteness and fragile openness of form; and a profound connection to the universe both nourishes and starves us, sustains and breaks us, energizes and drains us, bears and kills us. We are animal well before we can indulge in distinguishing ourselves as anything else—before we reflect and analyze and theorize, and light-years before we get to call ourselves “civilized.” Our carnal nature is all-pervasive, and nothing, not even our most bizarre escapist dreams, can be severed from the pulse of somatic experience. But anthropic animality is hard to accept.

[Many people who... perhaps feel remote from the nonhuman world, are not sure they are animals. That’s understandable: other animals might feel they are something different than “just animals” too. But we must contemplate the shared ground of our common biological being before emphasizing the differences. (Snyder 1990, 16)]

Far more importantly, and deeper still—before positing the schematic abstractions of biology—we must appreciate the common somatic-existential ground that we share with the other sentient creatures. From the outset we are stuck with a
given—real engagement in worldly circumstance. And we are never alone. Porous of constitution and irrevocably bound up with the flux of nature, we find ourselves lumped together with countless other feeling bodies: vampire bats and sea hawks, red foxes and wild boars, white mice and black rhinos, tarantulas and whiptail stingrays. How arrogant was Sartre to leap across all this richness and launch himself straight into an exclusively human drama?

Zoophobia. Within a more-than-human perspective, the anthropos figures as perhaps the only kind of creature that is prone to devoting its vital energies to overcoming inclusion in earthly transformations. But, in the process of extricating itself from a living relation to the rest of nature, it ends up crippled in a sweeping spectacle of zoophobia. Fearful of the animal condition, it turns on itself, on others, and on reality as such.

The emergence of a distinct agenda for human identity coincided with the disidentification of the anthropic animals from their own carnality, now equated with a lower, deplorable state, a state to be transcended. Trying to show that they are "not animal" (not "this body"), but rational, inspirited, and cultured has become the signature of a form of life shared by anthropic oppressors and oppressed alike. The latter mimic the former in promoting hierarchical thinking, emotional disconnection, and repressive self-cultivation in an attempt to lift themselves out of the misery associated with animal nature. For instance, struggling for the self-cultivation in an attempt to lift themselves out of the misery associated with animal nature.

According to this typical account, the goal for African Americans has been to free themselves as human beings from a condition of animal unfreedom and filth. Whatever our anthropic race, ethnicity, or gender, we have fixed a sense of human identity atop the broken necks of animal others, as we strove to elevate ourselves in our economic practice, common sense, religious sensibility, and sciences to what Maurice Merleau-Ponty called "a view from above" (1968, 27).

The overall cost of this endeavor is nothing short of extreme. The human is the backbone of a quintessential form of oppression and debt. An abstract essence with no flesh of its own, humanity has perpetuated itself through bodily suffering. The human, with all of its discursive equipage, is a dramatization of daily life-struggles, and an attempt to inflate the meaning of those struggles for a particular kind of animal, an animal that all the while remains but a creature coping with its world alongside other kinds of creatures. As ever, "[w]e eat, excrete, sleep, and get up; This is our world. All we have to do after that—is to die" (Ikkyu cited in Watts 1989, 162). And we love and yearn, and hurt and thrive. But if these are all animal impulses, undergone in the course of animal becoming, the dramatization of the human is unwarranted. And not only that—it is downright preposterous, like trying to amputate one's own legs and still expecting to be able to stand up. Like the white man's burden and other colonialist narratives of self-ennoblement, the human invites a perpetuation of a failed project in the name of a higher destiny.

The Harrowing Narrowing. As anthropic life squeezes itself into the human template, it expresses itself through and is enveloped by protocols of entrenched abstraction: capital and commodity, advanced technology, bureaucratic management, scientific modelling, religious dogma, clock time, and more. Fragmented by these various apparatuses of mediation, our perceptual life has become a shadow of its past unity. Repression of sensuousness, born from our ancestors' increasing volitional interference with the hitherto spontaneous harmonization of their inner and outer worlds, was amplified by the rise of symbolic thinking. Bronisław Malinowski called symbolic thought "the soul of civilization, [operating] chiefly in the form of language as a means of coordinating action or of standardizing technique, and providing rules for social, ritual, and industrial behavior" (cited in Zerzan 2002, 4). Coordination is gradually formalized and takes its toll on experience. What was once a living relation to the world, is objectified, aggregated, and abstracted from the lived situation. "Scientific knowledge shifts the center of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 229). The synaesthetic "primary layer" of sense experience that precedes its division among the separate senses" (ibid., 227) has been buried beneath this shift.

With the proliferation of abstraction, discipline could be anchored in symbolically-grounded systems of religious ideology and life of labor, expressive of progressive social hierarchization and control. It is here that bureaucratic structures, coupled with technological advancements, could find their impetus for growth. Amidst all this, an autonomous temporal dimension emerged as an essential component of the life of an increasingly divided and dysynchronous society. Time has demanded "that its subjects be painstaking, 'realistic,' serious, and above all, devoted to work… the invention of the mechanical clock was one of the most important turning points in the history of science and technology; indeed of all human art and culture” (Zerzan 2002, 21).

Ongoing submersion in these intimately related spheres of progressive "disembodiment" has fostered estrangement from animal selfhood and disconnection from the spontaneous perceptual activity of preconscious, prereflective, subpersonal life. Never has the rift between perception and sense been so wide. Never before have our lifeworlds been so reified. Reification—the freezing and stiffening of fluid, living realities into solid, thinglike structures—is the common denominator and substrate of alienated anthropic life. Reification constitutes a major key to understanding how all the seemingly different strands of disconnection are in fact internally related and "hold together." Zoaphobically propelled, it is a danger to anthropic perception which, embedded materially in the structures that warp it, loses touch with its natural ground in the spontaneously experienced world.
Reficication institutes a material-perceptual loop in which zoophobia can play out and be reinforced. Perceptual myopia gives rise to structures—industrial-economic, technoscientific, or symbolic, for instance—that in turn reproduce and deepen pathological modes of experience. Experience associated solely with these structures fails to adjust the live body to its immediate situation. Perception, increasingly confined by abstract demands, painfully represses its carnal foundation. This cannot go on indefinitely.

The Technics of Pacification. While somaticity quietly, patiently constitutes and reconstitutes all sentient life, for the most part it remains overlooked. But things change; the tissue of normality is ruptured as we suffer the wholesale revenge of the repressed. Sensuous life reemerges in morbidity: obsession and compulsion; depression and apathy; anxiety, irritability, and aggressiveness; obesity; workaholism; hypertension; chronic fatigue; loneliness, numbness, and boredom in the midst of sensory overload; internet addiction; heart disease; sexual humiliation, exploitation, and rape; the unmitigated violence of serial killing and organized warfare. Our suppressed wildness is going awry, imploding on itself or exploding upon the world.

All of this is compensated for with quick fixes—virtual reality, intoxicants, genetic engineering, and, more conventionally, incarceration. Techno-productivism becomes the go-to response to the questions asked of reified existence. When every problem is a matter of identifying a correct algorithm and requires a technical solution, rationality becomes a language of domination, crowding out everything that cannot be expressed in its specialist terms. Administrative routines and chains of command are rapidly established and reestablished even as the underlying causes of problems are left untouched, to be dealt with by further alienated performance. Bodily sensitivity is effectively drowned out at every step of the way, with major decisions overwhelmingly made “somewhere else” and the live body reconfigured as a patient at best, or else as a victim. Devising its technical procedures, the “scientific mind” is interested primarily in extricating itself from the uncertainties of lived situations—to solve this or that problem, not just on this or that occasion, but once and for all. Whatever promises relief from the vicissitudes of carnal life becomes a viable option. Fantasies of invulnerability are now expressed through technical narratives, and this attitude is spreading like wildfire. The way we go about things, we would all be wearing white coats if we could get away with it. We are all technicians now. Quietly following protocol, we become secret agents of Prometheus, reenacting his archetypal theft. In the process, the world comes to be lived through the lens of a system that promises depth, but withdraws, little by little, into the flatness of an image; a system that boasts diversity, but is established through the despotic leveller of universal quantifiability.

Under these conditions, common-sense individual actions aimed at the fulfillment of immediate interests spill over, aggregated, into irrational outcomes. And so, thousands get into their cars, wanting to return home as quickly as possible after a day spent in a cubicle, only to find themselves jammed up in traffic in the middle of a highway, choking on smog, and stuck there for hours on end. And this scenario replays daily in the midst of talk of a “green revolution.” Kafkaesque absurd is being normalized into a universal. Instead of revolting, most people comply. But how much longer can this compliance last? The feeling of horror in the face of massive systems of impersonal, mechanized, digitized control—the apogee of instrumental rationality—rightly becomes the body’s gut reaction, and there isn’t nearly enough of this. How much longer can the collective superego contain us?

The Economy of Anthropic Flesh. Capitalism eagerly gears into perceptual impoverishment, sensuous repression, and aspirations to transcendence. Early capitalist relations were built on fertile zoophobic ground, and have developed, over the course of a few centuries, into the dominant matrix of corporal regimentation. Capital-accumulating work becomes our lifeline and is alternately forced down our throats and withdrawn from our reach. As commodification proceeds apace, deeper and deeper recesses of everyday life are infused with commodities and subordinated to their circulation. Consumerist imperatives are peddled to contain the overflow of late-capitalist productive surplus, and themselves become a lifelong burden. While there is still, for some, retirement from wage labor, there is no retirement from compulsive consumption. Somatic and emotional disconnection lays the foundation for a world where starvation and gluttony, unemployment and overwork, poverty and overabundance walk hand in hand.

In India, amid a booming economy, farmers’ suicides linked to “agrarian crises” have become commonplace. When prices on the stock market plummet, farmers lose their livelihood by the thousands. It is estimated that over 17,000 of them killed themselves in 2009 alone (Sainath 2010). The Indian National Crime Records Bureau reports that around 216,500 died this way from 1997 to 2009 (ibid.). Money is being made across the world, for example, in cotton production, in strict correlation with the price fluctuations that trigger these deaths. Like the corporate players’ stock market and their massive state subsidies, mass suicide becomes a matter of statistical calculations done as part of business as usual, and not much more. Accountability is so widely distributed as to vanish into abstraction.

In 2010, at a factory in Longhua, Shenzhen, China, a facility belonging to Foxconn, the world’s largest electronics manufacturer, eighteen workers tried to commit suicide by jumping off the tops of company buildings. Fourteen died. In recent protests, about 150 more workers threatened to kill themselves. Faced with this “problem,” the management devised a non-solution: after the first wave of suicides, they installed huge safety nets to prevent further jumps (Moore 2012). The capitalist cannot easily forfeit the productive potential of working bodies, even if there are 920,000 of them left, spread across the manufacturer’s plants (Focus Taiwan 2010). As long as value can still be extracted from their labor, neither the workers’ lives nor their deaths are in their own hands. Imagine a scenario developing from this, in which the workers and their overseers go to ever-greater lengths, trying to outsmart each other in a game of prevention and suicide, making for a spectacle of techno-efficiency and despair.
These grim sights are not limited to the so-called “developing” world. In parts of Australia “a perfect storm” of risk factors in the [construction] industry, including a macho culture, drugs and alcohol, and job insecurity, has created a suicide epidemic” (CFMEU 2012). What of it, then? A programme is created to keep up the appearance of care and to treat symptoms. Mutual support, professional help, and catching early signs of trouble are welcome. As usual, employers and unions join hands in fostering productivity and striving to keep things going. Meanwhile, “work is bleeding into the rest of a worker’s life, and we do not have the means of recognizing or dealing with this [in a way] that suits workers” (ACTU 2011). This is no aberration, but business as usual under capitalism, where the anthropic animal comes to be defined solely by her position vis-à-vis labor and capital—as a worker. Consumption of alcohol and other drugs is the frustrated bodies’ rational response to a seemingly unchangeable situation. If the suffering is to continue, it must at least be numbed down. These escape routes would not be denigrated if they didn’t work so “well.” Addiction is promoted among the workers, as long as it doesn’t diminish the labor pool, weaken discipline, or otherwise disrupt the productive process. In turn, machismo provides the ethos of invulnerability and self-repression upon which capitalist relations depend. Without it, and the accompanying cult of work, they would find no foothold in anthropic life. So, capitalist relations sink their roots into machismo and promote it among men and women alike. It is only when machismo prevents people from coming to work that it becomes a problem for capitalists. Finally, job insecurity is actively fostered, through deregulation of the labor market, for instance, as a means of enforcing employee obedience and timidity. It is true, “workers”—beings who by their very designation seem to have been born to toil—are periodically relieved by a prosperity achieved through the redirection of capitalist violence towards the earth and its other populations (colonialism, imperialism, war). As in the welfare-state era of the 1950s and 1960s, working people come to share slightly more in the fruits of exploitation (to which they themselves remain subject). But in recurrent and worsening economic downturns this violence is redirected back at them. Laboring men and women find themselves ruthlessly exposed and sacrificed. Bureaucratic counter-measures are nothing but stitches hastily applied to repeatedly inflicted wounds, lest the limbs fall off.

The Trail of Victims… Still worse off are the billions of feeling bodies that suffer our bipedal confusion. Manipulated into servility, legion other animals occupy the fenced, caged, penned spaces of a globalized slave economy. Zoophobia radiates out in waves of expansive and systematic violence. Other earthlings, those whom our forefathers hunted and maimed, raped and bred, trapped and butchered, have taught us most of what we know about how to persecute, torture, and kill. Victims range from the precisely targeted (like the trademarked “OncoMouse” cut up in labs in the search for cancer treatments) to collateral damage (like the inhabitants of the Amazon jungle exterminated by the clear-cutting of their homes to make grazing space for enslaved cows). The global animal holocaust is so pervasive that it is hard to tell where lethal intentions end and accidental deaths begin. The number of land animals killed for food alone is in the range of 56-60 billion a year (FAOSTAT 2007). The annual number of marine-animal deaths is difficult to determine, but it is bound to be enormous. Beyond that, the current wave of species extinctions, dubbed the “Sixth Great Extinction Event” by leading researchers, is the largest since the one that occurred 65 million years ago, when the dinosaurs went under (MacFarquhar 2010). The Guardian’s Juliette Jowit comments that

The IUCN [International Union for the Conservation of Nature] created shockwaves with its major assessment of the world’s biodiversity in 2004, which calculated that the rate of extinction had reached 100-1,000 times that suggested by the fossil records before humans. (Jowit 2010)

She adds that, while

no formal calculations have been published since… conservationists agree the rate of loss has increased since then, and… it was possible that the dramatic predictions of experts like the renowned Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson, that the rate of loss could reach 10,000 times the background rate in two decades, could be correct. (ibid.)

The pressure exerted upon the bodies and habitats of other earthlings by essentially parasitic anthropic industries is incredible and unprecedented. Left behind on the bloodtrail of capitalist-civilizational development, the animal victims of past and present violence demand an impossible redemption.

The crisis of the sensuous has grave consequences for how the violence occurs. The horrors of slaughterhouses and vivisection labs vanish from sight and, with the distance between sensing bodies increasing, tie in with the institutionalized execution of harmful actions from afar. The distance amplifies disregard for the consequences of violent acts, suppresses sympathy for those on the receiving end, and facilitates mass, indiscriminate killing. Like routine slaughterhouse extermination, species extinction has an “out-of-sight, out-of-mind quality” (MacFarquhar 2010). Zoos also make sure that the extent of animal suffering remains unseen, albeit by scrupulously cloaking it with overt, exaggerated exposure. By being shown too much, we lose sight of the real (see Acampora 1998). When violence becomes overt, at best it gets reported, as with the recent killing of an 18-month-old giraffe (shot in the head in public) and four healthy lions (euthanized a month later) at Copenhagen Zoo (Bilefsky 2014). International outrage follows, and then things quieten again. Many raise their voices, but scarcely anyone raises a hand. How can this ever be enough?
...Extends Beyond the Horizon. In a way, we lack direct, sensorial contact with the very world that supports our every step. Mediation—that which interposes itself between the knowing body and its world—is a means of detachment. And detachment, in turn, is a facilitator of oppression. Yet the topic resists such cold analysis. In the realities of perpetual horror nothing seems to be entirely incidental, but neither is it easy to grasp any kind of totality here. It is mind-blowing that

[i]n the case of the billions of chickens, turkeys, ducks, cows, pigs, and other animals… the genocidal fate is not to be rendered physically extinct, but to be proliferated in virtually endless procrustean reformatations of their bodies to fit the procrustean beds of global industrial agriculture and research. (Davis 2011, 41)

The shocking effect of such accounts is simultaneously countered and amplified by the fact that the evil involved is all too banal (cf. Bauman 1989). Industrial practices are all planned, programmed, clear-cut, replicable, systematic, designed for predictability and non-ambivalence. An intensification and externalization of zoophobia, modern animal oppression figures as a series of holocausts that, by their very scope, eclipse Auschwitz, Treblinka, Chełmno, and other Nazi extermination camps (cf. Patterson 2002).

The institutions of animal slavery have been developed over millennia, and the making of animal slaves was no walk in the park. Pressing a heel down on the necks of the first generation couldn’t have been easy. Hunting was one thing, but outright domination must have felt like something else. Contrary to idealized images of early animal domestication, Charles Patterson reminds us that

- killing animals for their meat and exploiting them for their milk, hides, or labor, herders learned how to control the animals’ mobility, diet, growth, and reproductive lives through the use of castration, hobbling, branding, ear cropping, and such devices as leather aprons, whips, prods, and eventually chains and collars. (ibid., 7)

Wherever it took place, at some point tarring entailed brutality. The goal was to “produce the kinds of animals most useful” to the needs of the herders who “killed or castrated most of the males to ensure that the ‘selected’ breeding male impregnated the females” (ibid., emphases added). Captive animals became the stuff and instruments of production, the object of which was not this or that individual, but a standardized, that is, deformed, kind of creature. Characteristics were promoted or suppressed arbitrarily to suit a preconceived purpose set by the oppressors. Differences notwithstanding, both traditional eugenics and high-tech bioengineering have clear precedents in the modus operandi of animal domestication.

Not long after our ancestors began violently tightening their control over the other animals, they became dealers in their life and death. Animal domestication was not unlike the making of a junkie. In this case, the victims had to be hooked on the oppressive agent and gradually stripped of their freedom of movement, of their opportunities to obtain food by themselves, to give birth and raise their progeny on their own terms, and to die as free beings. Moments of relief from overt violence were priceless for the domesticated, but, bought as they were with the inculcation of servility and compliance, they came at a great cost. The animals were drawn out of their own worlds and thrust into the alien reality of a second-hand existence. The non-compliant individuals were eliminated. The rest would come to tolerate their oppressors and obey, helpless to do otherwise. If they failed to follow commands, they were immediately reminded who was master and who was slave, as is evidenced by innumerable instances of grotesque domination extending to this day. The Lapps, for instance, restrain reindeer, wrap their scrota in cloth, and chew on them with their teeth until the testicles are crushed. Rwala tribesmen will kill a camel calf in order to eat him, then smear the dead little one’s blood over another calf, and bring that one to the mother. Herders at the headwaters of the Sepik, New Guinea, scoop out pigs’ eyes by piercing them with sticks so that the fluid leaks out of the sockets, and then put the eyes back in. The maimed slaves, unable to flee, are soon killed and eaten (Patterson 2002, B-10).

Originating in animal domestication, the equation of control, subjugation, and killing with strength has persisted to this day and is the mainstay of modern culture.

Horror Stories. Oppressive cultures are rife with narratives of justification. A story has to be told to reinforce a trick played on perception, whereby “what is there” is occluded by an ideological fog. But because the discourse of the human-animal dichotomy was shaky from the outset, the pangs of conscience not only never disappeared, but have been transmuted into hatred—now simmering, now exploding all the sham pretense to composure.

While it is true that economic motives propelled and underscored animal oppression from the beginning (Nibert 2002), their consideration alone fails to account for the sheer excess of atrocity rampant in animal exterminationism. Footage of slaughterhouse operators jumping in fury on the broken bodies of pigs; photographs of hunters grinning over the blank gazes of their dead victims; crowds cheering at the bleeding of a bull in a Corrida—in all these cases something more than instrumentalism is at stake. An analogy with racial oppression might help shed some light on this. Early in his Muslim ministry, Malcolm X preached to his black brethren, “Do you know why the white man really hates you? It’s because every time he sees your face, he sees a mirror of his crime, and his guilty conscience can’t bear to face it.” (1973, 208). Even a story crafted carefully over many generations is not enough to erase the impact of an immediate encounter. A zoophobic narrative, like a racist one, is always at risk of being seen through, because it covers over a reality that demands acknowledgement: we, the self-repressed, hold the world hostage.

Fear, hate, and guilt are all connected in this interplay of truth and lies. Longing for an abstract and impossible freedom from the flesh, we have grown terrified of the freedom of the flesh to pursue its own rhythms. Though the flesh itself has remained, as ever, implacable, violence off the charts has been used to suppress it. And when reverberations of animal misery made the ensuing guilt unbearable, or perhaps just gave the naked power behind the violence bad publicity, layers of discursive deceit gradually accumulated as an excuse for atrocity. Woven over centuries, zoophobic narratives constitute the superstructure of oppression and the means by which its reality is mystified.
A Hundred Ways to Paint a Demon. To a zoophobe, much of the animal world is populated by “stupid,” “filthy,” and/or “vicious” “beasts.” Sheep, for instance, are held to be “an animal so apparently dim-witted that they have become a byword for stupidity and mindlessly following the crowd” (Gray 2011). In knee-jerk fashion, self-professed individualists resent strong herd, i.e., social, instincts, mistaking them for stupidity. Meanwhile, Cambridge (UK) researchers have concluded that sheep “have brainpower to equal rodents, monkeys, and, in some tests, even humans” (ibid.). Sheep, cows, and other sensitive creatures have long suffered the sorry condition of being alienated from their natural habitats, forcibly estranged from their own nature, and are now blamed for an inability to navigate the blind corners of anthropic artifice.

Pigs and other mud-bathing animals are labelled “filthy,” “vile,” and “foul,” as if mud bathing were bad hygiene, and not a way to cool the body down, get rid of parasites, protect the skin from the sun, or mark territory. Especially pigs, denigrated as the quintessential filthy animal, have entered the popular imaginery as a handy symbol of the “failure of flesh” to purify itself, downtrodden and easily available for ridicule, and transformed into neatly cut-up pieces and served on a plate.

Wild rats likewise carry “an enormous weight of metaphor and meaning,” and are objects of “deep antipathy… believed to carry filth and disease, associated with the gutter,” and “routinely [elicit] reactions of disgust and horror” (Birke 2003, 207-08, 210). Again, “[b]laming the victim provides… [a] way of evading guilt. Rats find sustenance in our discarded food and take shelter in our debris. When our accumulated garbage attracts too noticeable a number, they are condemned for ‘infesting’ the area…. Rats are ‘vermin’” (Dunayer 2001, 9). They occupy the precarious position of being possibly the most despised kind of animal, and as such are a readymade stand-in for what we are bent on eradicating in ourselves, obsessed as we—-the creators of all gutters—are with hospital-grade sterility, endless cultivation, and banishing the irregularity and asymmetry that are all around us. “Animal filth” is the obverse of the mass projection of civilization’s anal-retentive character (cf. Hall 1954, 108).

In turn, “vicious” is reserved for animals who are unafraid to bite back. Wolves figure prominently here, their reputation for aggression being vastly exaggerated and their sociality downplayed. No wolf has been observed biting the testicles off of his prey to keep him around as a hapless slave. Instead, the strong bonds of affection, loyalty, care, concern, playfulness, cooperativeness, communicativeness, and trust that persist among the wolves of the pack are the most striking characteristics of wolf group behavior as noted by ethologists who have spent time in close proximity with wolves. Evidence of these traits is their shared care of the young, their year-long courtship and mating for life with continual displays of affection, their feeding injured members of the pack, their grieving for months when they lose a pack member, and their need for belonging in a pack. (Mazis n.d., 9)

Cultural representations of wolves have served one-sidedly to support exterminationist anthropic practices in both North America and Europe. “Not only were wolves killed to the point of extinction, they were also slaughtered with a vehemence that is shocking” (ibid., 8), a reaction to a previously projected threat. Someone, we can’t help thinking, was looking for reasons to kill.

While ordinarily oppression is made acceptable through narratives of denigration, similar results can be achieved with a discourse of ennoblement. As a symbol of courage and strength, the lion figures in the popular imaginery as “the king of the jungle.” The prevalence of this perception makes it ever-enticing to dethrone and subdue him, which accounts for the presence of lions in zoos and circuses beyond their simple exotinstness. In zoos they are caged and exhibited as defeated, while in circuses they are reduced to court jesters, performing at their trainers’ whim and to the audience’s satisfaction. Hence, even when apparently elevated, the flesh becomes an object of domination and transcendence. Beyond the nominal praise there lurks in such discourses a most pernicious prison-survival mentality, albeit in the absence of any objective conditions that would call for it: find the most feared and dangerous guy around, kill him, and take his place.

Against the Wall. Of course, one will find numerous instances of aggression among the other animals, directed at members of both their own and other groups. Chimpanzees, for instance, have been spotted sneaking into the territories of neighboring chimp clans and mauling unsuspecting males to death, patiently picking off their competition “until both the territory and the females are theirs” (Weisman 2007, 50). Chimpanzees have also been seen pitched in “blood battles within a group to determine who is the alpha male” (ibid.). Moreover, in rare cases, females have been observed to kill and even eat other females’ infants (Choi 2007). However, most of this was noted in areas under heavy anthropic encroachment and severe environmental pressures that signal a state not of normality, but of emergency.

Animals of countless species live in chronic anxiety as their worlds close in upon them. Discussing C. H. Southwick’s research on the influence of crowding on increase in animal aggressiveness, Erich Fromm remarked that “the narrowing down of space deprives the animal of important vital functions of movement, play, and the exercise of its faculties…” (Fromm 1973, 105). Another aspect of crowding, possibly even more conducive to aggressive behavior, is the breakdown of the social structure of an animal group. “Every [known social] animal species lives within a social structure characteristic for this species. Whether hierarchical or not, species-specific social structure is the frame of reference to which the animal’s behavior is adapted. A tolerable social equilibrium constitutes a necessary condition for its existence. Its destruction through crowding constitutes a massive threat to the animal’s existence, and aggression is the result one would expect, especially given the defensive role of aggression, especially when flight is impossible” (ibid., 105-106).
Although social structures vary from species to species, and are not as strongly pre-defined as Fromm might have thought, his general conclusion seems right. Under pressures of crowding, an animal community typically turns into a spiteful mob. In the midst of this, however, in 1962 ethologist Adriaan Kortlandt witnessed a group of chimpanzees in which “a silver-haired old chimpanzee… remained the leader… even though he was physically far inferior to younger apes” (Fromm 1973, 106). Relating Cortland’s observations, Fromm contended that “apparently life in freedom, with all its many stimulations had developed a kind of wisdom in him which qualified him as a leader” (ibid.). Does one become the alpha through violence, then? If physical superiority was an automatically assumed priority among chimpanzees, the silver-hair would not have survived as long as he did. Instead, we see how diverse their lives can be, depending on variations in environmental and social living conditions. This is not to disingenuously explain away all of the cruelty and violence observed among chimpanzees or, say, in a cat’s apparent torturing of a mouse. Maybe cruelty is in part a pathological sort of play. Maybe it’s a sickness. Or maybe it’s just part and parcel of being animal, and surfaces here and there, inexplicably. Whatever the case, it holds that, as the humanist Fromm says, “if the human species had approximately the same degree of ‘innate’ aggressiveness as that of chimpanzees living in their natural habitat, we would live in a rather peaceful world” (ibid., 103).

The Irresistible Charm of Reality. There is yet another, altogether more devious way of justifying oppressive practice. Displacement, subjugation, and extermination are naturalized simply by virtue of the fact that they are already happening. Whatever else animal oppressors might be telling themselves, whatever those who willingly thrive on animal suffering are trying to make themselves think, there is no story and no evidence of superiority like that of the actual practice of domination. Despite some attention devoted to it, domination welcomes in each successive anthropic generation more entrenched in the lifeblood of society, and so becomes more difficult to overcome. Indeed, based on paleontological, anthropological, and historical evidence, Fromm concluded that “the degree of destructiveness increases with the increased development of civilization, rather than the opposite” (1973, 4). This is not just because of the growing power of the technology at the disposal of its agents, but also because of the common-sense perception of destructiveness as being ineradicable, which consolidates its perceived status as a self-perpetuating pattern—a pattern into which it subsequently becomes ever easier to fall.

Born too Late. Even on such a cursory view, some disturbing conclusions come to the fore. It seems that a dark historical trajectory envelops us, effectively set in motion by a gradual “unhinging” whose impact continues to increase. Zoophobia forms the backbone of this process as an ideological and emotive legitimizing force, as the “other side” of civilizational development. It is plausible to think that it first arose around the epochal transition from a foraging to a sedentary, agricultural, civilized mode of life that aimed at gaining increased control of the supply of nature’s riches and at systematically reducing the limitations it imposes. We have diligently followed in the footsteps of our forefathers. Fast-forward to the present. We are invested in a system of control that verges on near-total domination.

But what if it were possible to turn things around? Nothing short of an end to zoophobic domination, and a return to our senses, to a freer animal life, would suffice. In fact, this may be the only way forward. According to Adorno, “the individual is left with no more than… to try to live so that one may believe himself to have been a good animal” (1973, 239). Developing this insight, Christoph Menke remarks that the animal subject does not separate itself from its “forces” or “impulses” for the sake of following the law and in order to make itself feel freed from them but “as such that its freedom, indeed, its very strength, consists of allowing its forces or impulses to express themselves. Only in this way, in “harmony,” even in “reconciliation” with himself, can man be good to others. (Menke 2004, 320)

Breaking out of zoophobia, we can only be good animals if we “do not act, let alone posit [ourselves], as persons” (Adorno 1973, 277), that is, as egos succumbing to the superego in suppressing our inner impulses in the name of a preconceived standard of goodness. Drawing on Nietzsche, Alphonso Lingis notes that “[t]he libidinal forces of an individual can withdraw from the ideal image of himself projected by adults of his family, class, ethnicity, nation, and race to invest in those ancient instincts resurfing in himself, affirming them and empowering them” (2005, 15). But the traits that make up a good animal cannot be manufactured. “[N]obility does not arise from character management” (ibid.). True virtue is unselfconscious and unassuming, and emerges with the liberation of impulse, which can now spontaneously take on a multiplicity of meanings.

Still, the full expression of libidinal forces would put today’s “individual” at risk. Civilization as such was concocted precisely to tame these forces and to subordinate them to a “higher” authority. Whatever they may be, instincts “will make that individual maladapted to his time and can make him eccentric or mad” (ibid.). Until civilization itself is remodeled to make room for him, he will remain “a savage born too late” (ibid.). But can it even be done? Is civilization not founded, to the extent that we have already seen, on a long and painful process of subjugating the flesh? “Civilized’ man has always lived in the ‘Zoo’—i.e., in various degrees of captivity and unfreedom—and this is still true” (Fromm 1973, 103). And probably more so in the most technologically advanced societies than anywhere else. The ultimate aim of civilization, unstated in its official claims but incipient in the zoophobic impetus that propels it, is once and for all to arrest the flow of animal becoming.
Homecoming. Anthropic attitudes to prereflective body dynamics oscillate between reluctance and hatred, as if suppression of animal nature were to provide impenetrable insulation from the pitfalls of living as an animal. But zoophobia not only fails to diminish the risks of being in the world; in the long run it actually multiplies the dangers. In extreme cases it leaves us paralyzed, making life an unlivable nightmare. In fact, from within the self-strangulation that zoophobia mandates, life itself emerges as the ultimate threat. Meanwhile, the world simply remains unruly. It follows its own rhythms, of which we, along with the other animals, are but passing iterations. The more neatly civilized we become, sweeping our instincts under the rug, the deeper the chasms thus created become and the more the pulse of the world is lost on us, even as we continue to be subjected to it. Our lives fall out of sync with the diverse flow of the surrounding ecologies and their sentient inhabitants. We lose whatever animal grace we once still had, the grace whose flame now faintly glimmers in us, to be rekindled or finally to die out. The perpetually strained anthropic flesh is in dire need of decontraction.

As the saying attributed to R. D. Laing goes, “There is a great deal of pain in life, and perhaps the only pain that can be avoided is the pain of trying to avoid pain.” Going beyond mere fear and embracing the whole spectrum of our impulses—becoming good animals—would pave the way to a post-Promethean existence in which resentment, hatred, and violence would be much less pronounced. We would make slingshots, perhaps, but not atom bombs. With the emptying of our collective bloodstream of zoophobic poison, maybe we could call this often harsh and unwelcoming world our home. It really is all we have.
References


