

## Birds of the Air, Lilies of the Field: Revisiting Animality in Heidegger through Derrida and Kierkegaard

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**Abstract:** Although the place of the animal in Heidegger's thought has been the subject of investigation in numerous books and journal articles coming from the most diverse perspectives, a Heideggerian phenomenology of the animal remains to be carried out to the fullest extent possible, as we saw in questions more widely discussed by both Heidegger and Heidegger scholars, such as those concerning language, dwelling, and technology. In this essay, we revisit the question of animality in Heidegger, and recognize how Derrida and Kierkegaard can help us in sensing the possible directions of such a renewed commitment to phenomenology, this time focusing on the question of the animal. This new phenomenological path of inquiry itself might shed new light on those enduring questions in a way that goes beyond Heidegger, even as we remain indebted to him for the initial clearing that he undertook for meditative thinking.

**Keywords:** Heidegger, Derrida, Kierkegaard, animal

This essay seeks to revisit Heidegger's thinking of animality within his phenomenology of the human being, what in *Being and Time* he calls *Daseinsanalytik* (analysis of Dasein).<sup>1</sup> While it is true that Heidegger did devote considerable energy in thinking through animality, notably in the *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (from the lectures held in the Winter Semester 1929-1930 but published for the first time in 1983 as Volume 29/30 of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*, titled *Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit*, and that scholars continue to engage it from the most

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh, rev. with a foreword by Dennis J. Schmidt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010).

various perspectives,<sup>2</sup> still it would seem that a huge gap remains to be filled when we consider how far and deep Heidegger went with his thinking of language, dwelling, and technology.<sup>3</sup> We can even go as far as saying that the thinking of animality might shed new light precisely on these three fundamental questions. If we are to carry out the task of phenomenology as Heidegger so eloquently formulated – “to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself” – then we must let the phenomenon of the animal that also belongs to our being human be seen as fully as we can.<sup>4</sup>

Can we say that there is a forgetting of the animal in Heidegger? It is very easy to claim that this or that philosopher forgot to think about this or that, and that it might even seem to have become almost like a fad to do so (like a clickbait, to use the language of today’s social media). It is often far more difficult to show what in fact a philosopher did say. It hardly occurs to us that no philosopher can ever think of every possible topic or question, to begin with. And so, when we make even only such a suggestion here as Heidegger forgetting the animality of human beings, we do so not so much to imply negligence or oversight, as to indicate the possibility of extending what has been thought to what remains to be thought. As Heidegger himself says in *Being and Time*, “Higher than actuality stands *possibility*. We can understand phenomenology solely by seizing upon it as a possibility.”<sup>5</sup> This essay is merely one of the many attempts in seizing upon phenomenology as a possibility, particularly the phenomenon of animality in human beings.

In *Being and Time*, we know that Heidegger considers temporality as the horizon within which being is to be understood.<sup>6</sup> That is why its title is *Being and Time* rather than *Being and Space*. And while indeed, despite the priority of time over space in the interpretation of the meaning of being and the analysis of Dasein, Heidegger does devote some space for the discussion of Dasein’s de-distancing as well as directionality (both of which connote spatiality rather than temporality), the focus of his analysis remains to be temporality—notably in the concepts of “anticipatory existence” and our “coming to an end.”

A couple of years after the publication of *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger held a series of lectures in the Winter Semester of 1929-30, which now comes

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Beth Cykowski, *Heidegger’s Metaphysical Abyss: Between the Human and the Animal* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2021). Frank Schalow, *The Incarnality of Being: The Earth, Animals, and the Body in Heidegger’s Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>6</sup> “Our provisional aim is the interpretation of time as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of being.” – Heidegger, *Being and Time*, xix.

to us as the book, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. It is here that Heidegger famously posits the thesis that the animal is “world-poor” (*Weltarm*), which could all too easily appear to be a concession to an earlier pronouncement (in *Being and Time*, that is) that only Dasein has world.

Heidegger’s thesis (which he considers provisional given the unavoidable circularity of the inquiry into the essence of life and world in general and animality in particular) that the animal is world-poor is not borne out of naiveté or of the outright dismissal of what the natural sciences—zoology and biology in particular—have discovered throughout their history concerning animals, and especially in comparison with human beings.

Heidegger is not blind to the profound philosophical import of the question of animality, as we read from the following passage:

Then again, we can only determine the animality of the animal if we are clear about what constitutes the living character of a living being, as distinct from the non-living being which does not even have the possibility of dying. A stone cannot be dead because it is never alive.<sup>7</sup>

We know of course that Heidegger was not only not averse to such circularity of thinking—he even tells us to persist in it, to “circle within the circle,” not to solve a puzzle, but to tarry in it. Circling within the same circle, tarrying in a puzzle rather than attempting to do away with by “solving” it—these all belonged to the method (the way of thinking) of Heidegger’s phenomenology.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the difficulty here is not merely one of *content* with respect to *what* life as such is but is equally and almost more emphatically a *methodological* one: *by what path* can and should we gain access to the living character of the living being in its essence? In what way should life, the animality of the animal, and the plant-character of the plant be made accessible to us?<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Heidegger does persist in tarrying in the circle of thinking concerning animality in the *Fundamental Concepts*, and in doing so gives rise to further and even more intractable questions:

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<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, 179.

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, 179.

We are thus confronted by two fundamental difficulties: [1.] *What* are we to *determine* the essence of life in general *as*? [2.] *How* are living beings as such—the animality of the animal and the plant-character of the plant—originally *accessible*? Or is there no possibility of any original access here at all?<sup>10</sup>

In the same work, Heidegger clearly says that “the animal has world,” but that its world is poor or impoverished.<sup>11</sup> We must immediately clarify that the claim of world-poverty (or any poverty for that matter) is not to be thought of in terms of hierarchy, within which one can identify higher or lower forms (e.g., of animality). In vulgar language, we speak, for example, of “low life forms” even as an expression of insult directed to certain types of human beings. But we will never describe wood or stone as “low life” simply because we do not consider them as living beings. That is to say, “fully alive,” “lacking in life,” “lifeless,” and the like—none of these makes sense in describing beings like stones or pieces of wood.

Thus, we need to understand “poverty” according to the way Heidegger uses the term:

What is poor here by no means represents merely what is ‘less’ or ‘lesser’ with respect to what is ‘more’ or ‘greater’. Being poor does not simply mean possessing nothing, or little, or less than another. Rather being poor means being deprived [*Entbehren*]. Such deprivation in turn is possible in different ways depending on how whatever is poor is deprived and comports itself in its deprivation, how it responds to the deprivation, how it takes this deprivation. [...]

This is meant to indicate that poverty is not merely a characteristic property, but the very way in which man comports and bears himself. Poverty in this proper sense of human existence is also a kind of deprivation and necessarily so. Yet from such deprivation we can draw our own peculiar power of procuring transparency and inner freedom for *Dasein*. Poverty in the sense of being in a mood of poverty [*Armmütigkeit*] does not simply imply indifference with respect to what we possess. On

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<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts*, 179.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

the contrary, it represents that preeminent kind of having in which we seem not to have. 'Poverty' as a noun in its weaker usage implies both these senses, including the 'poor' flow of water in the river, even though in this case the river in its being deprived cannot be in any kind of mood.<sup>12</sup>

Following from such a conception of "poverty," it does not make sense, therefore, to say that a stone is world-poor, simply because it does not have a world, any more than to say that an animal is "mortal," simply because the yearning or even the thought of immortality belongs to human beings but not animals. One does not have to do philosophy to realize that the term "mortal" is reserved only for human beings, as Heidegger himself sees, because as Dasein, only human beings can die, only human beings are capable of death as death.

Thus, the ambivalence: we can say, at the same time, that the animal has no world and that it has a world. Heidegger expresses such an ambiguity as follows:

If by world we understand beings in their accessibility in each case, if such accessibility of beings is a fundamental character of the concept of world, and if being a living being means having access to other beings, then the animal stands on the side of man. Man and animals alike have world. On the other hand, if the intermediate thesis concerning the animal's poverty in world is justified and poverty represents deprivation and deprivation in turn means not having something, then the animal stands on the side of the stone. The animal thus reveals itself as a being which both has and does not have world. This is contradictory and thus logically impossible. But metaphysics and everything essential has a logic quite different from that of sound common understanding. If these propositions concerning the having and not-having of world in relation to the animal are legitimate, then we must be employing the ideas of world and accessibility of beings in a different sense in each case.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

The ambivalence of our relationship with animality—that we humans are animals and not animals (or not just animals)—in turn is tied to the difficulty of the determination of life, that is, what it is that constitutes a living being, as we saw in the crucial passage from the *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* above.

It is in this recognition of our ambivalent relationship with our animality where we find the forgetting of our animality in Heidegger. For it is on this side of the ambivalence—*where animals are on the side of human beings*—where we find that Heidegger leaves much to be desired in carrying out a phenomenology of our animality. For what Heidegger has mostly focused on is one side of the ambivalence, namely, that of the animal being on the side of the human being. What we need to reconsider—and follow through its fullest possibilities—is that of *the human being being on the side of the animal*. That is why his thesis on animals proceeds from our perspective as human beings—we who are always already in the world—and concedes that animals, too, have something like a world, thought in a very limited way. Hence deprivation, hence poverty.

But if we turn the tables around, might we not see that from the “perspective” of animals (admittedly even if such a perspective, if access to it were to be possible at all, is coured through human interpretation, as we saw above), we humans also share in their animality in many ways? Seen from such a “perspective,” it is us human beings who are now deprived of our earthliness—that is, *we humans are earth-poor, or have become earth-poor, and increasingly so*—insofar as in our formation of the world and through our modern technology we veer farther and farther away from the earth, that is to say, from nature. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan offers an insightful approach to understanding the city in terms of our distance from nature.<sup>14</sup> Heidegger himself, whether he realized it or not, in effect refers to our animality by deciding against what otherwise was an attractive career in Berlin and instead remaining in the province, as we read in the famous little piece, “Schöpferische Landschaft: Warum bleiben wir in der Provinz?” (Creative Landscape: Why Do We Remain in the Province?).<sup>15</sup>

We see and we understand that we share so many things with animals. We get hungry and so we search for food. We get thirsty, and so we look for water or something else to drink. We move about with our limbs and try to reach for objects we need or want with our hands. But a phenomenological reconsideration of our animality does not consist mainly

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<sup>14</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, “The City: Its Distance from Nature,” in *Geographical Review*, 68, no. 1 (January 1978), 1-12.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Schöpferische Landschaft: Warum bleiben wir in der Provinz? (1933),” in *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 13: *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983).

or solely in a description of our animal nature, as Heidegger himself correctly indicated above, for this is already being carried out for a long time now by various disciplines in the social as well as the natural sciences. One only needs to think of E.O. Wilson or Richard Dawkins, among others.

What we need, however, is a properly philosophical (more specifically, phenomenological) reflection on our animality. For this, Derrida's encounter with a cat as he stepped out of the shower room may have served as an excellent starting point and exemplar of what we aim to accomplish.<sup>16</sup> In that encounter, where we see Derrida gazing at the cat as it gazes at him (it was the cat that first gazed at the human that was Derrida), unused to seeing him without his usual clothed self, led Derrida to think of the double nudity (the cat is not naked because it is naked), and in so doing was brought before his own nakedness, not just the nakedness of the body, but the nakedness of his being, partly embarrassed and feeling insecure about himself, that is, insecure about his knowledge and understanding of the self. It took the gazing of a cat at Derrida's naked self, and Derrida gazing back at the gazing cat, for a whole path of thinking to open itself up. I am convinced that, when thought through properly and given the patience it deserves, that moment of encounter between Derrida and his cat signals the possibility of a radically new path for thinking that can shape the world that is yet to come.

Such a phenomenological project will have serious implications for the way we human beings, for example, build and inhabit the city, and what role animals (domesticated or otherwise) play in such an endeavor. In the same way, it will help us rethink the city's relationship with what lies outside the city, namely, suburbs and rural or provincial areas.

Where have we come in our inquiry? What have we achieved? What this essay has sought to show is that we need to take this path of phenomenological inquiry into animality and the animal in us, and to offer indications of what promises such a path holds for us, humans and non-humans alike. To that end, a lot of work surely awaits us, and we cannot but seize this possibility that belongs precisely to phenomenology.

Ultimately, which means more fundamentally, we will be confronted once again with the question of what it means to be human. That staggeringly radical and incalculably momentous character of that encounter between Derrida and his cat lies in the possibility that, perhaps, for once—finally—we humans can turn our gaze back to the animals. For did not the Teacher Himself bid us to do so? "Look at the birds of the air," we hear from the Sermon on the Mount. "Consider the lilies of the field ..." (Matthew 6: 24-34). And here, it is to Kierkegaard that we must turn: "[T]he ability to keep silent

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. by Marie-Luise Mallet, trans. by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).



is something you can learn out there in the company of the lily and the bird, where there is silence and also something of divinity in that silence.”<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps here we begin to sense mystery and one irony after another. Since the dawn of humanity, the human being’s supposed superiority over animals has often been asserted based on language. Unlike animals, so the self-assertion goes, human beings are capable of language. Now, humans are being invited to learn to enter into and dwell in silence from the animals themselves. Standing between animals and the divinities, human beings have always directed their gaze, away from the animals, and towards the gods. Now the divine itself is inviting us to look at the birds of the air, and to sense that “there is also something of divinity in that silence.” The mystery here perhaps consists in this, namely, that the only way to behold the divine is for us humans to look at the birds of the air and consider the lilies of the field. In doing so we humans just might be able to begin finding our way back home, precisely at this juncture in history when we face the extreme danger of losing it.

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<sup>17</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air: Three Godly Discourses*, trans. by and with an introduction by Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 23.



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