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## Being Humans When We Are Animals

### ***Abstract***

This paper investigates forms of metaphysical vertigo that can appear when contrasts between humans and animals are challenged. Distinguishing three forms of vertigo and four ways of differentiating humans and animals, the paper attempts to achieve a perspicuous representation of what could be termed “the difficulty of being humans when we are animals”; or alternatively, “the difficulty of being animals when we are humans”.

### ***1. Linnaeus' vertigo***

A child who is informed by its more knowledgeable family that “even humans are animals” might feel vertigo. Being a human usually implies not being an animal; being an animal usually implies not being a human. Can even cats be dogs? – How can humans be animals?

I imagine that Linnaeus felt similar vertigo in his work to systematize all living beings; or at least on one occasion. For when he came to the human, he must have expected a salient distinguishing mark to reflect the above feature of language.

Instead, he almost teasingly remarks that he found nothing that separates humans from apes, except for one dental detail without systematic significance.

As a scientific taxonomist, Linnaeus had to admit not only that humans are animals, but also that we are no special animals but belong together with several other animals to the order of *Anthropomorpha*, or *Primates*:

...just as the shoemaker sticks to his last, I must remain in my workshop and consider man and his body as a naturalist, who hardly knows a single distinguishing mark which separates man from the apes, save for the fact that the latter have an empty space between their canines and their other teeth. (Linnaeus, in Agamben 2004: 24)

The remark is quoted in Giorgio Agamben's thoughtful book, *The Open: Man and Animal*, which contains further seemingly teasing remarks by Linnaeus. Apropos Descartes' notion of animals as automata, for example, Linnaeus (2004: 23) writes: "*Cartesius certe non vidit simios*: Surely Descartes never saw an ape".

Although Linnaeus found it inevitable to place humans in the same taxonomic order as the apes and monkeys, he gives expression to the vertigo one might feel in the absence of a clear human distinguishing mark; namely, by not adding a given identifying characteristic to the generic name *Homo*. I always assumed that *sapiens* was meant as a given characteristic, just as Aristotle saw rationality as the distinguishing mark of the human. Agamben points out, however, that Linnaeus initially used the philosophical imperative *nosce te ipsum*: know yourself! The name *Homo sapiens* doesn't appear until in the tenth edition of *Systema naturae*. In that edition, *Homo sapiens* probably still signifies the imperative to know oneself, Agamben submits, citing passages demonstrating how seriously Linnaeus took the troublesome recognition of us in apes. It creates the task to know us as humans: "that is why I endured the derisive laughter of snarling satyrs and the exultation of monkeys leaping onto my shoulders" (2004: 27).

In the absence of a given distinguishing mark, being human was for Linnaeus a task, Agamben suggests. Man is an animal, but he can *become* human, he can *make* himself human: "He becomes himself only if he raises himself above man (*o quam contempta res est*

*homo, nisi supra humana se erexerit*” (2004: 26). Linnaeus’ concept, *Homo sapiens*, Agamben (2004: 26) concludes, is “neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human”. It is an “anthropological machine” *producing* the difference between humans and animals that Linnaeus never found in nature.

Linnaeus’ notion of the human as an imperative indicates how profoundly he experienced the absence of a characteristic difference. That is his significance in this paper. For I want to investigate this vertigo that being human can create, when we face the Linnaean challenge that we are animals of a kind that can be difficult to differentiate from apes. We speak of us as distinct, but scrutiny of the facts seems to reveal an abyss beneath this way of talking. According to Linnaeus, the imperative to know us as humans resides in this abyss.

## **2. Bringing home the scientific fact**

Most people know and can recite that humans are animals, a species of apes. Still, it is awkward to try to apply that knowledge directly to oneself: “I’m an animal” or “My parents are apes”. We can visit the biologist’s workshop and appreciate the fact that we are a primate species. But when we return home, it is embarrassingly difficult to figure out how this fact should be understood there. The embarrassment we didn’t feel in the workshop appears at home. Why? Is it because returning home is returning to human transcendence; to what we *became*; to what we *made* us... which no longer is an animal?

How can I make sense of my humanness, if I am an animal? Am I ninety-nine percent an animal with one percent humanness on top? Is the one percent humanness an animal trait too, because it is the trait of the human animal? Or is it something extra vis-à-vis all animality, a pure drop of human essence that distinguishes the human way of being from all animal forms of being?

Suppose that Linnaeus discovered a characteristic difference between humans and apes. Would that trait insulate us from the animals? Would human essence be scientifically safeguarded? Would it make it easier to *be* human? Science continually finds

differences that Linnaeus couldn't find, but it simultaneously creates more blurring.

I'm not primarily interested, however, in the biological fact that humans are animals, a species of apes. I'm interested in the abyss that this fact appears to open up when we try to bring it home. Neither am I primarily interested in the anthropological machine and its production of a distinction that cannot be found in nature, since it seems to me that the vertigo appears before at least Linnaeus' machine is made. If Agamben is right, Linnaeus defined us as a machine that produces the contrast between humans and animals because the lack of a given distinguishing mark perplexed him.

So why do we become perplexed about our humanness in the first place?

Returning to the child example with which I began, one could be led to think that the vertigo is produced simply by not distinguishing the ordinary notions of humans and animals from the seemingly identical biological terms. We are really asking the child to play a different language game, one that belongs in the biologist's workshop, but the suggestion to play another game is presented as though it *corrected* the child's game at home.

Let the language games exist side by side in their different sites and no vertigo needs to arise. Let the scientific fact remain in the biologist's workshop and don't bring it home! – But is it that simple?

### ***3. Does the vertigo have a place?***

Where are we, asking these questions and making these suggestions? We seem to be neither in the child's home nor in the biologist's workshop. We are philosophizing. Where is this thinking taking place? Are we moving along paths beyond the ordinary sites of action, life and situated speech; beyond all scientific activities?

The child felt vertigo because *we*, or its more knowledgeable family, upset its language by teaching it that "even humans are animals". We made it confused in its home, in its normal whereabouts. We tackled it in its speaking activities where humans

are distinct from animals, just as cats are distinct from dogs. But where did *we* feel vertigo about our humanness? Where was Linnaeus' vertigo produced?

I suggested before that we experience vertigo when we try to bring home the biological fact that humans are animals, a species of apes. But *where* are we when we are trying to bring home such scientific facts?

We know somehow that the biologist's language game belongs in the biologist's workshop and that it differs from the language game played at home. We can move between language games without confusing them. We understand precisely what a child means by saying, "No, it wasn't a human, it was an animal". We would find attempts to correct the child, "So you mean it wasn't a human animal but a nonhuman animal?" as misguided linguistic pedantry.

Speaking of "human and nonhuman animals" doesn't change the child's language game. It just produces a verbal façade on the game; one that makes it seem as though we successfully brought home the fact that we are animals, and made the language game true to it. If the purportedly more truthful vocabulary is used at home to communicate what usually needs to be said there, the distinction continues to be made also in the refashioned language game. Humans versus animals; human versus nonhuman animals: what's the difference?

We contrive "the human animal" just as Linnaeus contrived "Homo-know-yourself", hiding our troublesome vertigo in plain view, so to speak, and luring us into thinking that we control the original philosophical difficulty of our humanness. For notice how Linnaeus interprets his troubling experience as the path to self-knowledge, enduring the monkeys leaping onto his shoulders. He turns his problem into the path to the solution. As a result of such attitudes to the problem as the pathway to self-knowledge, we produce another kind of vertigo in children and people who find themselves at home as humans in their usual whereabouts. We tackle them down with strange discourses, created out of our own vertigo.

I want to shake off this first vertigo. But *where* is it?

#### **4. Heidegger's thinking as exemplary of human essence**

Martin Heidegger appears on several pages in *The Open*. He differs from Linnaeus in not arriving at the human last within a naturalist attempt to systematize all living beings. As a thinker, Heidegger in some sense starts with the vertigo that Linnaeus experienced last. Heidegger (1959: 1) found the task of thinking by asking what he conceived of as the strangest and most vertiginous of all questions, namely, the question of being: “Why are there essents rather than nothing?” Heidegger understands the human through this question.

Can the solution paradoxically lie dormant in *staying* with the vertigo? Can the vertigo, or the question of being, guide us towards the humanity we were searching for? Don't get rid of it as if it were a bad feeling caused by confusing homes and naturalist workshops, for it indicates our essence: the trembling relationship to being. Stones, plants, animals, and in one sense even humans with their hearts and lungs and teeth are beings in the world that can be ordered scientifically: Heidegger hardly rejected biological knowledge of the human as a species. But having a world, as the human does, is a more primordial relationship to being that Heidegger calls *ek-sistence*, which cannot be studied scientifically:

Are we really on the right track toward the essence of the human being as long as we set him off as one living creature among others in contrast to plants, beasts, and God? [...] Ek-sistence can be said only of the essence of the human being, that is, of the human way “to be.” For as far as our experience shows, only the human being is admitted to the destiny of ek-sistence. Therefore ek-sistence can also never be thought of as a specific kind of living creature among others – granted that the human being is destined to think the essence of his being and not merely to give accounts of the nature and history of his constitution and activities. (Heidegger 1998: 246-7)

Heidegger's human essence is not merely a trait that distinguishes a human animal from nonhuman animals. It is rather like an expulsion from the innocence of mere living. It is vulnerability to the question of being. Heidegger dubs this vulnerability *ek-sistence*. It is the thinking relationship to being that comes with the question of being. This thinking is not practical reasoning in people's homes or in scientific workshops, but thinking that he ranks higher and

more primal in that it *opens up* a world that *is*. Heidegger's human cannot be uncovered through biological research. His human can be discerned only in the extraordinary language that Heidegger developed in response to the question of being.

The animal that therefore I am – as Derrida (2008) rephrased Descartes' first certainty – therefore couldn't trouble Heidegger as a thinker as it troubled Linnaeus as a taxonomist. Heidegger ranks the question of being higher than any challenge that facing apes or scrutinizing facts might occasion. Heidegger's human does not live among "the other" animals, nor even among zoologists busily organizing their facts. He dwells in the house of being, which is Heidegger's name for the language that the question of being demands. Heidegger meticulously developed such language and presented it as the primal abode of the human:

The talk about the house of being is not the transfer of the image "house" onto being. But one day we will, by thinking the essence of being in a way appropriate to its matter, more readily be able to think what "house" and "dwelling" are. (Heidegger 1998: 272)

If Linnaeus's anthropological machine was a troubled gesture in the face of the threat of being just another animal, Heidegger's neologism *ek-sistence* is confident of the uniqueness of human essence, which is not merely the uniqueness of a distinguishing trait. Heidegger is an original thinker, one can learn much from his attempts to rethink the metaphysical tradition from within. But his tendency to present his solitary thinking as exemplary of human essence – his quixotic "thought-centrism" – makes him traditional again, for it makes him approach animals almost like a Cartesian. What strikes Heidegger about animals is the absence of his thinking relationship to being:

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

*Ek-sistence* thus resembles Descartes' universal reason more than Heidegger probably would like to admit: both constitute human freedom; both are intimately linked to language. And both are illuminated by using animals as a negative contrast. Perhaps all

attempts to rethink metaphysics from within are destined to manifold such negative images of animals as non-thinkers, since the tradition was inherently thought-centric.

How can the question of being have higher rank than being born, than having a childhood, than living a life with others? I remember being struck by the question of being in my late teens. Was that when I first discerned the relationship to being that is the human destiny? Was the language I tried to develop in response to that question more authentic than the one I spoke as a child? Which language is lacking in the animals, the language that children speak with friends and family or the lonelier language that Heidegger developed as a thinker responding to the question of being? These personal worries about what weight I honestly can attach to the question of being are unfaithful to what Heidegger takes the highest ranking question to demand. It demands language where there is no “me”, only neologisms like *ek-sistence*, disclosing what apparently is more authentic. The language that Heidegger contrived as the language of authentic questioning prevents me and you and him from questioning that form of authenticity. It functions as a demand: one that impressed Heidegger as the destiny of human being.

Linnaeus fascinates because he seems honestly troubled by his humanity and disrupted by the experience of certain animals: *Cartesius certe non vidit simios*. Whoever makes such a remark had a dizzying meeting with an animal, like Derrida’s (2008) meeting with his family cat. There are no marks of such experiences in Heidegger’s work. The transformed metaphysical language that he believed that the question of being demanded did not allow him to joke about his possible prejudices, as Nietzsche could joke:

“Humanity.” – We do not consider animals as moral beings. But do you think that animals consider us as moral beings? An animal which had the power of speech once said: “Humanity is a prejudice from which we animals at least do not suffer.” (Nietzsche 2007: §333)

I am investigating a self-questioning vertigo that one can perceive in Linnaeus’ teasing style and in Nietzsche’s humor. Heidegger’s thinking is, for our problem, an impasse. Let’s look elsewhere for ideas about the human/animal divide that are more wounded, so to

speak, by animals, to probe the vertigo that animals can make us feel concerning our humanness.

### **5. Cora Diamond's vegetarianism**

A less thought-centric discussion of the human/animal contrast occurs in Cora Diamond's (1978) article, "Eating Meat and Eating People". She seems more vulnerable to animals than Heidegger, who instead emphasizes vulnerability to the question of being. She writes as a vegetarian and discusses moral changes that could exemplify the vertiginous disruptions that we are investigating. Moreover, Diamond talks about people, about you and me, about the lives we live with others, and about how those lives intertwine with our concepts of humans and animals. Being human is not transformed into a neologism.

I will explore if Diamond's thinking might help us towards a perspicuous representation of the difficulty with which we are struggling. Observe that the focus is on the problem in this paper. I'm *asking* whether her discussions of closely related problems might contribute towards a perspicuous representation of our problem. It is through this *question* that I engage with Diamond's ideas. This accounts for the caution with which I render what she "seems" or "leans towards" saying concerning the problem in this paper.

Diamond criticizes how moral philosophers like Tom Regan and Peter Singer argue for animal rights and vegetarianism on rational and scientific grounds, as if only arguments that understand humans and animals scientifically as biological species are binding and convincing.<sup>1</sup>

Diamond too would like to persuade about vegetarianism, I believe. She just thinks that Regan's and Singer's arguments fail to address the humans that we are. To explain why, I return to the image of the biologist's workshop outside the human home: that strange place where Linnaeus couldn't find the characteristic difference between himself and an ape. Regan and Singer argue

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Singer (1975) and Regan and Singer (1976).

from the workshop. There, they pick up the verbal gesture of the human animal as their central discursive means. It is within this refashioned language game that they articulate “speciesism” as a rationally indefensible injustice analogous to racism and sexism. Aren’t they on the right track? Aren’t we animals; human animals? What gives us the right to industrially produce and slaughter “other sentient animals”? How can reasoning on the basis of scientific facts fail to convince? It conforms perfectly to what the most prestigious intellectual rhetoric of empirical justification demands!<sup>2</sup>

That modern rhetoric, however, encapsulates the science-centrism that Diamond wants to problematize. Diamond’s writing is difficult, subtle and passionate, and as I mentioned above it is not entirely clear how she would address the difficulty in this paper. Here is how she can be heard as speaking at least preliminarily to our problem: Emphasizing the scientific fact that humans are one of the animal species neglects the imperative to *form* the notion of the human with which Linnaeus associated us. Linnaeus ingeniously classified humans so that the primacy of the home we maintain for us is acknowledged: how we elaborate the sense of human life and find it morally significant. Regan and Singer fail to acknowledge this non-biological human being that *forms the notion of itself*. The verbal gesture of the human animal is terribly superficial in Diamond’s view. It is a form of forgetfulness that threatens to cripple the very sensitivity to animals that it tries to bring about:

The ways in which we mark what human life is belong to the source of moral life, and no appeal to the prevention of suffering which is blind to this can in the end be anything but self-destructive. (Diamond 1978: 471)

I read Diamond to be saying that to morally address the kind of beings we made us into, the language in which the address occurs must be sensitive to what we *became*. Because what we became – partly by contrasting us from animals, Diamond emphasizes – is what we *are*. It is our easily neglected vantage point. Becoming vegetarian occurs “at home”. It presupposes that we are able to

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<sup>2</sup> The notion of an intellectual rhetoric of empirical justification draws on Talbot Taylor’s (1992) discussion of the role of intellectual rhetoric in the theorizing of language.

find ways of talking about human relationships naturally extendable to animals. That is how vulnerability to animals arises, from within human forms of life:

The response to animals as our fellows in mortality, in life on this earth... depends upon a conception of *human* life. It is an extension of a non-biological notion of what human life is. (Diamond 1978: 474)

Regan and Singer fail to engage human language. Therefore, their rhetoric fails to truly enter our relationships with animals. If I may paraphrase Heidegger's forgetfulness of being, their science-centrism suffers from forgetfulness of the human.

### **6. Human language as the vantage point of morality**

Diamond probably doesn't deny that intellectuals who desire to be responsive to the demands of the rhetoric of empirical justification might turn to vegetarianism in order to "live rationally justifiable lives". She just wants to bring out the superficiality and forgetfulness involved in believing that only such reasoning sustains moral sensitivity and conviction. She provides numerous reminders of how the vulnerability that can make a human being become vegetarian has its source elsewhere, and more nearby: in what could be simplified as a human realm of meaning, to use Raimond Gaita's (2003) term. Becoming vulnerable to animals as fellow-beings means perceiving them through some of the notions within this realm, like the notions of friendship.

Diamond does illuminating critical work, bringing morality home from its metaphysical excursion into the intellectual rhetoric of empirical justification, so to speak. But I need to consider why I find her article difficult and not obviously providing the needed perspicuous representation. Let me give a first approximation of what it might be. As Heidegger thought that metaphysics can be rethought only from within metaphysics, which always was thought-centric, Diamond appears to suggest that authentic moral changes with regard to animals can occur only from within human language, which inherently contrasts humans and animals. This makes her discussion waver between on the one hand emphasizing morally changeable human-animal relations, and emphasizing a

more primordially formed contrast on the other, as belonging to the human vantage point through which moral changes vis-à-vis animals can occur.

I don't know how to strike a balance between these two tendencies. Are our moral relations to animals changeable only on the basis of a more importunate language of the contrast?

## **7. A contrast formed in human language**

Here we need to consider what I take to be one of the most central ideas in Diamond's article, namely, the distinction between:

- (i) *the* difference between animals and people, and
- (ii) the differences between animals and people.

Plural differences and similarities are given and can be further explored through empirical research, I believe Diamond admits. The singular difference, on the other hand, isn't given but *formed* within human language. This contrast therefore isn't concerned with the scientific evidence that animal-rights philosophers invoke, in accordance with the demands of the rhetoric of empirical justification. Diamond points out that failing to see the distinction between the formed contrast and the given differences creates confusion; confusion appearing also in discussions applying the same rhetoric to the relationship of men and women:

In both cases people appeal to scientific evidence to show that “the difference” is not as deep as we think; but all that such evidence can show, or show directly, is that the differences are less sharp than we think. In the case of the difference between animals and people, it is clear that we form the idea of this difference, create the concept of the difference, knowing perfectly well the overwhelmingly obvious similarities. (Diamond 1978: 470)

Living in relationships with humans that differ markedly from our relationships with animals, we *learn* the contrast between human and animal, as the following reminder illuminates:

We learn what a human being is in – among other ways – sitting at a table where *WE* eat *THEM*. We are around the table and they are on it. The difference between human beings and animals is not to be discovered by studies of Washoe or the activities of dolphins. It is not

that sort of study or ethology or evolutionary theory that is going to tell us the difference between us and animals: the difference is, as I have suggested, a central concept for human life and is more an object of contemplation than observation (though that might be misunderstood; I am not suggesting that it is a matter of intuition). (Diamond 1978: 470)

Eating them is one of the forms of human life through which a child learns the concept of *the* difference between human and animal. A human is not something to eat; an animal is. At the same time, Diamond emphasizes that human relations to animals are manifold and changeable. A pet is not something to eat; for those people who become vegetarian, a cow is not something to eat. Does she imply that the contrast is challenged in these other relationships (without neglecting the plural differences)?

How does Diamond strike a balance between her two tendencies? Referring to the singular difference as “a central concept of human life” that is “more an object of contemplation than observation” can make the contrast sound like a destiny, almost like Heidegger’s *ek-sistence*. Yet, the example she uses to illuminate how we *learn* the contrast that cannot be found in nature is a changeable practice. Is the contrast like a human condition that can only be contemplated, or can it change when relationships with animals change?

In another paper, Diamond replaces the dinner table situation with the mysteriousness of human life, once again illuminating how we form the language of the contrast:

We are mysteriously like them, mysteriously unlike them. [...] The language of the contrast comes from our sense of what is mysterious in human life; and I am claiming that that sense is important in moral thought because of its capacity to enter what we do and say and feel and think. (Diamond 1991: 44-5)

This leans towards the notion that the contrast *is* a human destiny, connected with experiences of mysterious likeness and unlikeness, even for the vegetarian who is vulnerable to animals as fellow-beings. It belongs with the language that has capacity to enter our lives so profoundly that we undergo authentic moral changes, like becoming vegetarian. The language to which the contrast belongs is

the Archimedean vantage point of vegetarianism, Diamond seems to say, and trying to obliterate the contrast, arguing as Regan and Singer do, “is to attack significance in human life” (1978: 471).

Humanity may thus be a prejudice from which the animals at least do not suffer, but it is *our* prejudice: the one through which *we* act, speak, feel and think, and perhaps are led towards vegetarianism. It is our destiny to contemplate the human-animal contrast, just as for Heidegger it is our destiny to be the *ek-sisting* being, contemplating the question of being. The changeability of human-animal relationships doesn’t make the contrast changeable, for it comes with the language that has capacity to enter our relationships with animals.

What are the implications for the vertigo that I’m trying to shake off? Is it failure to acknowledge the density and inertia of human language; failure to note its eternal recurrence, so to speak, even in vegetarian ways of talking about animals as fellow beings? Is humanity like an absolute presupposition that is forgotten in the vertigo? – Is that it?

### **8. A laboratory where WE experiment with THEM**

Finding no further guidance through reading only, I need to describe my own vertigo in detail and see where exploring it leads. My vertigo originated in a place that resembles the dining room that Diamond suggests is one of the places where we learn what a human being is (not the only place). It originated in a laboratory where *WE* perform experiments with *THEM*. I visited a laboratory for ape language research, to see with my own eyes what “*we* can teach *them*”.

Like sitting around a dinner table, visiting such a laboratory tends to sustain the contrast between humans and animals, and can thus be reassuring for a human being. Yet this visit wasn’t. There was an experiment going on, but the humans seemed to be subjects of the experiment as much as the apes. This downplaying of the contrast wasn’t the original goal. The goal was to see if *APES* could be taught language. An unexpected ape meeting changed the approach. A little bonobo, Kanzi, who hadn’t been taught signs, revealed one day that he learned aspects of the use of signs simply

by being with people who talked and used signs. He started using signs of his own accord, as children begin to speak, spontaneously in significant relationships with speaking beings.

When Sue Savage-Rumbaugh understood that apes might become speaking beings precisely if we avoid teaching *THEM*, she opted for the new approach:

Thus, I decided to abandon all instruction and focus my attention instead on what was *said to Kanzi* rather than on what we could teach him to say. (Savage-Rumbaugh et al. 1998: 26-7)

Saying things to Kanzi presupposed *having* things to say that could be of significance to both ape and human. It presupposed sharing circumstances and practices in which one could have reason to warn, “There is a monster on the roof”, or to ask, “Do you want more onions?” or to inform, “Panbanisha [another bonobo] said there were bad dogs in the forest.” – Kanzi’s way of acquiring language, I want to say, meant undoing the contrast and *becoming a group*.<sup>3</sup>

In the experiment, apes and humans often sat on the ground on blankets, eating and talking together. They made walks in the forest, stopped when they felt like it, and ate what they packed together at home. The eating situation that, as Diamond remarked, can contribute to *learning* the contrast between humans and animals here rather contributed to *unlearning* it, at least in this place and for this group. Unlearning the contrast enabled new significance where training *THEM* deformed or even inhibited sense in earlier forms of ape language research.<sup>4</sup> This unexpected finding motivated the multi-generational ape-human experiment that I travelled to see. A source of meaning and ape-human morality was accidentally discovered in the unmaking of the contrast that Diamond appears to present as belonging to the vantage point of changed human-animal relationships.

That, at least, is how I’m tempted to describe the experiment that I went to see. Is it a fair description? Did the experiment

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<sup>3</sup> For a book-length discussion of the importance of this shared ape-human culture in ape language research, see Segerdahl, Fields and Savage-Rumbaugh (2005).

<sup>4</sup> See again Segerdahl et al. (2005), and Segerdahl (2012).

reform the language of the contrast, as I want to say, or was that language rather its foundation?

## 9. *Ape rebuking human*

When I travelled, I was unaware of what I describe as an attempt to downplay the contrast. I went to the lab, innocently secure in my humanity, or in my form of humanity, with the aim of observing linguistic behaviors in *APEs*. Had I observed such behaviors, I would have granted them language without feeling vertigo. It simply would have meant that *WE* succeeded teaching *THEM*.

That the apes would respect the contrast that shaped my visit was an assumption I never even considered formulating. Of course they would be safely *there*, inside the lab, hopefully exhibiting aspects of *OUR* language. Would they hold up a banana if someone said “banana”? How fascinating to see!

What I didn't expect was that the apes would make eloquent demands on me. When I small-talked with a caretaker outside Panbanisha's enclosure, disobeying the instruction I recently was given to “sit quietly and observe”, the bonobo inside looked troubled and said on her keyboard – *quiet!* I shivered and felt shame. When I later touched her baby Nathan's hand, she ran up to me and called me a *monster*. The language that I thought I should observe safely on the other side of the divide instead hit me in the face and I felt metaphysical vertigo.<sup>5</sup> The safe-guarding contrast that initially shaped my visit was down for the count.

My first response to Panbanisha's rebukes was shame, because I was caught in the act of doing wrong. My shame instantly turned into metaphysical vertigo, for it unveiled the presence of someone who saw me and scrutinized my conduct: precisely what my manner of visiting the laboratory excluded. The vertigo could be described as speechlessness, for the language that I had at my disposal when I went to *OBSERVE APEs* was disrupted by my meeting with Panbanisha. Or that is what I want to say.

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed description of these events, see Segerdahl et al. (2005: 88-9).

Panbanisha extended her moral notions to me. She talked to me and tried to improve me. And I felt the demand to become who she made me, above all in her presence. The wire between us no longer protected my all-too-human understanding of my visit to the laboratory.

Why did Panbanisha's rebukes make me reluctant to talk and write about animals as Derrida notes that Heidegger and a majority of philosophers do? "Their discourses are sound and profound, but everything in them goes on as if they themselves had never been looked at, and especially not naked, by an animal that addressed them" (2008:14). Why do I want to push Diamond's discussion of vegetarianism in another direction than she seems to take it, and claim that even the language of the contrast was disrupted in my meeting with Panbanisha? Have I over-interpreted my vertigo? Did it rather presuppose the dense and inert language of the contrast, since what made me feel vertigo was the fact that *an animal* rebuked me? Did I fail to note its recurrence in my own reaction?

It could also be objected that Savage-Rumbaugh made a fraction of human significance available to a group of apes. It may be true that locally, in this particular place and group, the contrast was downplayed. But it was downplayed by generously inviting a few apes into a human realm of meaning that more fundamentally is secured by making the contrast. My vertigo, which Panbanisha's dramatic unmaking of the contrast produced, simultaneously meant that the contrast was intact elsewhere and even acted as my own vantage point when I felt vertigo, the objection I imagine goes.

Have I fooled myself about my meeting with Panbanisha? Should I rather have become reassured in my humanity, had I been able to analyze the situation properly? Should I return to contemplating the contrast, rather than stubbornly insist that it was unsettled?

### ***10. Panbanisha's demands on group members***

Here is how Diamond critiques attempts to obliterate the contrast in arguments for animal rights:

...if we appeal to people to prevent suffering, and we, in our appeal, try to obliterate the distinction between human beings and animals and just get people to speak or think of “different species of animals”, there is no footing left from which to tell us what we ought to do, because it is not members of one among species of animals that have moral obligations to anything. The moral expectations of other human beings demand something of me as other than an animal... (Diamond 1978: 478)

This is a crucial critique of Regan and Singer’s tendency to mobilize biology rather than our own language in arguments intended to motivate vegetarianism. Still, Panbanisha’s rebukes had another unexpected quality, aside from being issued by an animal. She demanded something of me as *other than an ordinary human being*. What is an ordinary human being in Panbanisha’s home? It is the kind of people who regularly visit the lab. Hoping that I might join the group, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh and William Fields prepared the bonobos for my visit as an initiation into the group and didn’t announce it to them as simply another visit to the lab. I therefore was to Panbanisha like a baby in the group who had to learn to behave in her home. Panbanisha’s moral expectations on me weren’t derived from a prior human realm of meaning to which Sue gave a few bonobos some access. Within the group, within *their* lives, morality involved making another contrast: between *US* in the ape-human group and sometimes mysteriously different human *VISITORS*.

Misbehaving *VISITORS* are the kind of people you throw bark at or spit on, to make them go away. When *WE* in the group misbehave, expectations are communicated more eloquently and for an entirely different purpose: to make us improve.

Panbanisha’s rebukes demanded something of me as a would-be member of the group, I want to say. I arrived as a visiting academic wishing to see linguistic behavior in *APES*, but was drawn into Panbanisha’s world where humans are *VISITORS*... only I wasn’t one of them. So what was I? The concept “human being” suddenly seemed to have less weight than the relationship that unfolded when Panbanisha’s rebukes made me aware of her presence.

## **11. Shame turned into vertigo, which was displaced by a relationship**

Shame paved the way for the vertigo. It revealed someone that I didn't expect in the guise of an animal. In some sense, then, my vertigo presupposed the language of the contrast: it was the site of my vertigo. What I haven't emphasized yet, however, is that during my visit, the vertigo was only passing.

Diamond claimed that if we obliterate the contrast, "there is no footing left from which to tell us what we ought to do" (1978: 478). This is pertinent critique of how an abstract argument neglects language that more thoroughly enters what we do and say and feel and think. The critique is further supported, however, by the statement: "The moral expectations of other human beings demand something of me as other than an animal", as if moral sensitivity presupposed the contrast more generally. Panbanisha's way of obliterating the contrast was overwhelming, but it didn't undermine her moral demands on me. It is true that she didn't treat me as an ordinary human visitor, but neither did she treat me as an animal. Her demands concerned me as a response-able fellow creature in the ape-human group, as a messmate, as Donna Haraway (2008) might say. That messmate just wasn't the form of human that I took myself to be when I arrived. Panbanisha not only made me feel vertigo, then; she also made the vertigo disappear, which returned me to the shame... and to the relationship that grew out of that shame. I soon expected Panbanisha to speak "as a matter of course" and I was prepared to respond to what she communicated I ought to be like. What first made me speechless soon was reportable: "Panbanisha said..."

My situation resembled that of a "traditional anthropologist" visiting a group of people with the expectation of studying *THEM*, but finding that life goes on there too, with its own demands. Being there, among this people, without sensing those demands and responding to them would not only be impolite. It would also mean refusing to change and find meaning where meaning is found; within *these* forms of life; within *these* relationships. New friendships can make initially perceived contrasts hollow, and I'm asking if the human/animal contrast can undergo similar changes.

## 12. Panbanisha's activity

Overcoming contrasts between “us” and “them” through friendship is a cultural mobility that Diamond probably acknowledges between humans, but seems to *qualify* between humans and animals. Seeing animals as fellow beings presupposes language that can enter what we do and say and feel and think. This is the language of the contrast. On this foundation, we imaginatively read aspects of human relationships into relationships with animals:

The moral expectations of other human beings demand something of me as other than an animal; and we do something like imaginatively read into animals something like such expectations when we think of vegetarianism as enabling us to meet a cow's eyes. There is nothing wrong with that; there *is* something wrong with trying to keep that response and destroy its foundation. (Diamond 1978: 478)

I never read into Panbanisha the expectation that I be quiet, *for she told me to be quiet*. She was the active one; *not my imagination*. She made it obvious that she had her own expectations and her own scrutinizing eyes: *on me*. That realization made me look more attentively at her, trying to sense demands that were not necessarily spoken but could be expressed in her gaze or posture or ways of occasionally hitting the enclosure between us with her fist (expressions one can find also in non-speaking animals). Eyes are moral tentacles and sight is more than only visual. These eyes on each other meant that we were nomads finding new meanings as we moved along in a new relationship, as Rosi Braidotti (2006) might say. This wasn't one-sided human imagination presupposing the language of the contrast, which suddenly seemed as foreign as speaking of “civilized peoples” and “savages”.

Still, it might be objected that Panbanisha, through being enculturated, mirrored the language I thought was disrupted. Wasn't the meeting made possible by language that originally was formed by humans who *produced* themselves as *other than animals*?

I'm not sure if Diamond would make the objections I've formulated above. I'm torturing myself with objections that are evoked by a certain tendency that *I think* I see in her article. That is what philosophy, as I understand it, very much is about: torturing

oneself with objections. But this is only a short paper. I need to lick the wounds and see if I can diagnose the vertigo under investigation.

### **13. Three vertigos and four distinctions**

I have described three forms of vertigo concerning our humanness: the child's upon being informed that even humans are animals; Linnaeus' upon not finding the distinguishing characteristic of the human; mine upon being rebuked by Panbanisha.

I also discussed four ways of distinguishing between humans and animals:

1. *Referential language*: The child's language game, in which "I saw an animal" implies that it wasn't a human.
2. *Science*: A biological distinction where the human species is distinguished by some characteristic trait or evolutionary history, but still is one of the animal species.
3. *Ethics*: A feature of human life, a contrast in our treatment and perception of animals as opposed to humans (e.g., *we eat them*).
4. *Philosophy*: Heidegger's *ek-sistence* and contrasting image of animals as non-thinkers.

I hope that the list of distinctions helps us dissipate some of the vertigo that haunted us in three forms. I want to say:

- (i) The child felt vertigo because the scientific distinction (2) was presented to it as an intellectual correction of its language game (1).
- (ii) Linnaeus felt vertigo because he couldn't make the scientific distinction (2) reflect the divides (1) and (3) as they already were manifest in his language and life outside of the workshop.
- (iii) I felt vertigo because my shame upon being rebuked revealed the presence of someone that my own language of the contrast precluded.

The question is under which heading the language of the contrast belongs. Does it belong under (3), "Ethics", as another changeable feature of moral life? Or does it belong under (4), "Philosophy", as necessary human vantage point of ethical changes?

It isn't obvious where Diamond places the language of the contrast. She certainly seems to be talking about (3), about ethics, and she seems to be emphasizing how manifold and changeable human-animal relationships are. Yet, a recurring tendency in her criticism of animal rights arguments is insisting that the language in which the contrast is formed is the vantage point of manifold and changeable human-animal relationships. The latter tendency makes the language of the contrast appear more related to (4), to Heidegger's notion of a human destiny; *ek-sistence*. I cannot avoid discerning in Diamond, then, a certain tendency to mobilize philosophical modes of thought (4) to support her critique, and (paradoxically) to support her notion that *we must remain within ethics*.

Perhaps my impression of a foundational tendency in Diamond's thought arises through reading her reminders about the weight of the language in which we live and talk – effective in her critique of forgetfulness in Regan and Singer – as akin to statements about issues she had no reason to consider in her paper. Had she considered being rebuked by an ape, for example, she might have modified the way she emphasized human language and the concept of the human being. She might have emphasized the agency not only of human imagination, but also of specific animals. When developing perspicuous representations, we emphasize what needs to be emphasized for the particular difficulties at hand. Nevertheless, modified emphasis requires more philosophical labor. By engaging with Diamond's way of emphasizing human imagination, I hope I've contributed to such an altered emphasis, bringing into the picture also the agency of animals.

#### **14. Shaking off the vertigo**

What the perspicuous representation of three forms of vertigo and four distinctions suggests, I conclude, is that the philosophical notion of a specifically human vantage point can be “thrown away”, like Wittgenstein's ladder (TLP, 6.54), while the first three distinctions remain:

1. The child's language game.
2. The biological notion of the human animal species.

3. The moral contrast, which can be downplayed and even unmade with animals.

The child's language game is resilient. It is a device for specifying what we are talking about and what we are not talking about. I continue to be the human in this language game while Panbanisha continues to be the animal. Language game (1) doesn't *make* the moral divide (3) and it doesn't *contradict* the scientific notion (2). It can persist even when some form of moral divide (3) is unmade, just as it persists in the face of the scientific notion (2), according to which "even humans are animals". The pedantic correction that gave the child vertigo was unnecessary: *its vertigo is free to disappear*.

The scientific way of distinguishing the human among the animal species is probably also resilient, even though new differences and new blurring continue to appear. Yet, science is not obliged to reflect the linguistic distinction (1) or contrasts of the ethical kind (3). The demand to reflect those contrasts taxonomically that gave Linnaeus vertigo when he failed to do so was unnecessary: *his vertigo is free to disappear*.

Perhaps Linnaeus felt vertigo also because he was seen by a monkey leaping onto his shoulders? Panbanisha's rebukes created such vertigo in me. She unsettled the moral language of the contrast that guided my visit to the ape language laboratory. I soon shared Panbanisha's guarded stance to certain *VISITORS* – in her language: *bad visitors* – and I didn't want to be like one. As a matter of fact, I would have preferred to be a *human animal*... though not in the spirit of Regan and Singer's rhetorical device, but as Panbanisha made me, and she had become in the ape-human group.

*But did I meet an animal? Did an ape rebuke me?* It is true that Panbanisha was an animal in the child's language and an exemplar of *Pan paniscus* in the scientific sense, but wasn't her animality too impure, didn't she reflect too much of my humanity, to motivate a claim that the contrast (3) was unmade? What is significant is that I met *Panbanisha*. Meeting *her* made me incapable of using the language of these purifying demands, which conforms to the notion that *WE* succeeded in teaching *THEM*. Her enculturation

was no impurity, unless we insist on forms of language that I lost in her home. *My vertigo is free to disappear.*

It pains me to have to mention that Panbanisha died in November 2012, not recovering from a cold. She did affect a number of people and memoirs reflecting this influence could be written. In a sense, this paper is one. Yes, Panbanisha prepared me to claim the notion of the human animal: not as a rhetorically mobilized scientific concept or as a pedantic correction of children, but as a self-image in ethical language that her rebukes kicked beyond the contrast.

Have I shaken off my vertigo? Panbanisha did: this paper only recollected the process.<sup>6</sup>

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### **Biographical Note**

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