Violence, Animality, and Territoriality

Cristian Ciocan
University of Bucharest
cristian.ciocan@phenomenology.ro

Abstract

The aim of this article is to address the question of the anthropological difference by focusing on the intersubjective relation between the human and the animal in the context of a phenomenological analysis of violence. Following some Levinasian and Derridian insights, my goal is to analyze the structural differences between interspecific and intraspecific violence by asking how the generic phenomenon of violence is modalized across various levels: from human to human, from human to animal, from animal to human, from animal to animal. I will address questions of incarnated vulnerability and altered states of affectivity, and I will relate the various forms of violence emerging in the context of the anthropological difference to the question of territoriality, arguing that violence is structurally modified in relation to particular articulations of our worldly spatiality.

Keywords

anthropological difference – animality – violence – empathy – intersubjectivity – territoriality

1 Derrida’s Cat and the Crossing of Gazes

In the preamble of his book The Animal That Therefore I Am, Derrida evokes a scene that prefigures the whole intrigue of his reflection on animals. He narrates here, with some self-irony, an autobiographical episode having as central character his own cat: coming out of the bathroom, Derrida discovers himself totally exposed and quite embarrassed in front of his cat, who insistently
scruntizes his nudity.\textsuperscript{1} Starting from this awkward situation, Derrida opens a series of aporetic interrogations regarding human and animal nakedness (which of the two is actually naked?), regarding what is proper to the human, regarding the impossibility of containing the multiplicity of animals in a single conceptual generality. The key to this initial scene is a certain dynamic of intersubjectively seeing each other: more specifically, at stake here is not the man who looks at the animal, but the animal who is staring at the man. In this way Derrida discovers himself exposed to foreign eyes, to a strange look that he cannot fully understand, for there is a fundamentally different gaze. A certain reversal occurs in this situation, a conversion of activity into passivity, a reversal of an active and dominant “seeing” into a passive “being seen,” a switch from a secure and covered subjectivity to a vulnerable exposed and naked one. And one aspect of the criticism Derrida addresses to the traditional understanding of animality is related to the fact that philosophy has neglected precisely the animal gaze: the fact that the animal, too, looks at me. The animal discussed by traditional philosophy is an animal seen by man, sought from the human perspective, starting from human categories, thus reduced to our typically comprehensive structures. Here we are not dealing with an animal who sees, in its turn, and the subjective look of the animal (its own view) is therefore not taken into consideration, having no place in the play of world-constitution. For traditional philosophy, my strictly human subjectivity, and the intentional gaze that accompanies it, is the only one possessing constitutive virtues. In order to overcome the unilaterality of this traditional relation with the animal, Derrida suggests that we should also take into account the reverse side of the question: perhaps the human is not the only agent of the discovery of being, and is not the only subject having the privilege of constitutive sight. Perhaps the intentional vector is not a strictly unidirectional one, exclusively from human to animal: the human too finds him/herself somehow looked at, exposed to other eyes, to a strange and foreign gaze, to a look that s/he cannot analogize fully with his/her own, for it is not a human look, but precisely an animal one, similar but somehow profoundly different.

Although the interpretation of Jacques Derrida is very thought-provoking, it nevertheless seems that this dynamics of seeing, this crisscrossed looking at each other between human and animal, is accomplished in a climate somewhat too domesticated, too secure, and this quite peaceful framework risks hiding an essential dimension of the question of animality. This context—let’s say, the philosopher’s home, the bathroom from which he exits, the room from