

# BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review  
of  
*This Is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality  
and Human Nature in Derrida*

Leonard Lawlor  
Columbia University Press 2007  
192 pp., hardcover

FRANK GARRETT  
University of Dallas  
fgarrett@udallas.edu

Volume 18, Issue 1

Aug 2015

© *Between the Species*, 2015  
<http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/bts/>

To be sufficient is to be adequate or equal to, to conform to proper measure, to provide enough material or accommodation for, to be capable of. This entire semiotic constellation serves as the navigation star for the course Lawlor charts in his text. *This Is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida* stems from three lectures Lawlor presented in 2006 at the Collegium Phaenomenologicum, a series of lectures and seminars for philosophers held annually in Italy. In the Introduction, Lawlor explains his methodology: to think the supposed animal question with Derrida, to follow the path Derrida lays out in works such as *Of Spirit, Aporias, Rogues*, “Heidegger’s Hands (Geschlecht II),” and the posthumously published *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Admitting to the necessary insufficiency from the beginning, Lawlor then proceeds toward a *more* sufficient response than what philosophy has yet allowed.

Derrida’s main interlocutors on the animal question include Descartes, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lévinas, Freud, Lacan, as well as the Bible and various literary texts. Lawlor, by inserting himself in these conversations, demonstrates a commendable grasp of the arguments and issues at stake. Part of Lawlor’s strategy involves a faith in and a remaining faithful to the ethos in which the thinking of Derrida first arose. But he doesn’t just deal with the typical French and German Continental thinkers. He also attempts to address arguments proposed by Analytic philosophers as well. In this way, Lawlor shows himself as a skilled navigator of the Continental-Analytic divide as he attempts to develop the dialog on animality beyond the bickering of ideologues.

In attempting to track Derrida as he tracks “the animal,” Lawlor begins with Derrida’s position itself. But Lawlor’s

aim, however, is to not rest content with Derrida's work but to expand upon it, to derive some sort of practice from it, and ultimately to push it toward—and perhaps beyond—its everyday implications. First by tracing its development and then by following the trajectories of “the animal”—a problematic moniker that raises the question of language's own injustice—Lawlor shows exactly how this phrase “the animal” belies that awful ontological condition that, since Plato and Aristotle, has marked the boundary between animality and humanity. Lawlor then proceeds to map the problematic of biological continuism and of the “biological machine.” These approaches, according to Lawlor's estimation, however, remain inadequate. Yet the *undeniable* suffering of animals requires a more sufficient response from the human. Just such a “more sufficient” response prompts Lawlor to examine a less violent response. Since it seems that a total elimination of violence is impossible, Lawlor proposes a *less violent* route—perhaps even a route that allows for *the (very) least violence*. The least violent response we humans can offer animals includes a certain form of asceticism (in the form of vegetarianism, for example) and foregoes sacrifice—that is, the *structure* of sacrifice.

An example of the sacrifice structure can be found within the realm of animal experimentation: the sacrifice structure consists of the ability of the human animal to insert a non-human animal in its place. In this way, human subjectivity imitates and duplicates itself while at the same time denying the proxy animal any agency or subjectivity of its own. The human, in effect, sacrifices the animal within an asymmetric exchange predicated upon an extreme form of replaceability that actually masks irreplaceability. We see a similar inflection of the structure within religion when a ram, for example, must be slaughtered in order to purify an evil brought about by human action.

It is only in extreme self-proximity that the human can ever approach something close to the ideal of humanity in and apart from the animal world. In other words, we arrive at humanity by way of the approach to and the detour through the abyssal gap of animality itself. Yet in his tracing of this fault line in Derrida's work on animals—that is, the default condition and position of animals who, through no fault of their own (by neither fall nor decline), find themselves excluded from corridors of power—Lawlor concludes that no response to animal suffering can be properly sufficient. Perhaps affirming unconditional hospitality, as proposed by Derrida, just might offer a new way to think through our relations to animals and our relation to animality itself. But how are we to properly think the powerlessness of such a life? And here Lawlor does not mean a generic, all-encompassing, or universalizing “life” under which humans, animals, and the various plants and microbes could be classified. Instead, we must deal with specificity; we must look at and respond to a specific life, a specificity of life, a certain mode of living *as an animal*, a specific animal who can embrace the very impossibility of that animal life.

The violence of thought pervades in human relations to animal others. The un-languaged, mute, dumb animal cannot escape the regime of *logos* and its imperialism into the animal world. Lawlor insists that the very “question of peace and justice ... arises only on the basis of [a] new conception of thought” (23). The greatest violence of thought, it seems, is unthinkingly denying animals their deaths, which, in effect, transforms animal deaths into the building blocks of what is often read as humanity, progress, and civilization.

It is only from the perspective of a nonprivative lack of language, reason, and *logos* that the unjust metonymy of “the ani-

mal” properly responds to the demands placed upon it by the irrational, human animal who rarely questions the injustice of always speaking in the name of animality in its all-too-human language. Even though the world does not recede into mere backdrop for the human but instead permeates the porous borders of the human body, thus interrupting the self-serving nature of human subjectivity, we do well to remember that it is we humans who claim that an unbridgeable chasm exists between them and us. They, on the other hand, will continue sharing their own world with us, but only for as long as we humans allow for a world that can be sufficiently shared.

What Lawlor accomplishes in this brief text of 119 pages is noteworthy for its erudition and enormity. The one small worry I have really only concerns the readership of *Between the Species*, who seem primarily from Analytic backgrounds. Lawlor’s text does a superb job of developing Derrida’s reading of animality, but to those to whom Continental philosophy is a foreign language, a more introductory text would be needed. To those, however, who have an understanding of Critical Theory, Phenomenology, or Deconstruction, *This Is Not Sufficient* suitably introduces both Derrida’s work on “the animal” as well as Lawlor’s superb analysis and extension of that work.

## References

Lawlor, Leonard. 2007. *This Is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida*. New York: Columbia University Press.