Returning the Ethical and Political to Animal Studies
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[T]here is an undeclared war being waged everyday against countless millions of nonhuman animals. (Regan 1989, para. 9)
[Humans] do all they can in order to dissimulate this cruelty or to hide it from themselves; in order to organize on a global scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence, which some would compare to the worst cases of genocide. (Derrida 2008, 26)

At the same time that animals have increasingly become objects of philosophical investigation, the commodification and exploitation of those animals for food, entertainment, research, and sport are intensifying to historically “unprecedented proportions” (Derrida 2008, 25). Each year in the United States, 10 billion land animals are killed, which means that, in the time it takes you to read this paper, 250,000 birds, pigs, lambs, and cows will be slaughtered (Humane Society of the United States 2006, para. 1). Yet, in the face of these atrocities, many animal studies scholars remain ambivalent about or even hostile to applying their arguments to practical implications beyond a “free-range ethics” (Oliver 2009, 305). Although these purported posthuman theories reject the ontological dualism between human and animal, hierarchical dichotomies reside within these theories’ normative presuppositions (Twine 2010b). Everyday practices, including what (or who) we eat and wear, mark nonhuman animals as killable, maintaining the last vestiges of humanism. Until we recognize the lives of all animate beings as worth protecting, the hierarchical dualisms of human/animal, mind/body, and nature/culture will remain intact. Unless we “sacrifice the sacrifice” of nonhuman animals, as Derrida would say, feminist philosophy, animal studies, and posthumanist theory will simply continue the entrenchment of the very dichotomies that they seek to undermine.

Extending this critique of ontological dualism into the ethical realm, I call for an affective feminist practice that views animal others as grievable, vulnerable, and valuable. The dissolution of the human/animal binary requires a technique of self or ethical know-how that can be used to combat the “philosophical anthropology” that undergirds moral thought and action (Sandel 1998, 50). I believe that veganism is a necessary component (although not sufficient, as any set of ethics always will be incomplete) of an affective feminist ethics of nonviolence. When built upon feminist ethics, vegan practice is not a universal obligation or a fantasy of purity but rather a “bodily imperative” (Weiss 1999, 129) to respond to another’s suffering and to reject the everyday embodied practices that make certain animate others killable. A vegan, feminist ethics of nonviolence
follows from the deconstruction of ontological dualism, a central component of posthuman and feminist philosophies alike.

In responding to a gap between theory and practice in the philosophical investigation of nonhuman animals, I start with the assumption that the division between the human and the animal will always be incomplete, fluid, and indefensible. From this perspective, I identify the domestication, or the “taming” of the radical conclusions of a theory, and anthropological closure, or the limiting of ethical questions to humans, of practical ethical questions in animal studies. Then, I will draw on Judith Butler’s recent ethical work to identify veganism as a responsive, affective ethics of nonviolence.

Many contemporary philosophical discussions of animals remain hypo-critical, insofar as their analyses stop short of or ignore the ethical implications of the deconstruction of ontological dualisms. These theories are hypo-critical in the sense that they are partial and incomplete. As noted above, the boundary between the human and the animal is always unstable, indeterminate, and porous; any capacity that has been deployed to serve as the threshold to humanity (for example, language, rationality, fear of death, culture, and tool use) has proven unable to maintain the human/animal dichotomy. If the human is no longer ontologically distinct from the animal, then nonhuman animals cannot be exempted from prohibitions against killing, and “thou shalt not kill” must apply to all animate life.

The hypo-critical project of animal studies is an ontological or epistemological investigation whose ultimate goal is understanding the being of the human, even if it marks itself as posthumanist (Oliver 2009). Animal studies theorists often seek to bracket, postpone, or eradicate questions of ethics. Philosophers who study animal–human relations often preemptively foreclose explicitly ethical or political questions about animals. For example, conference presentations, conversations, and lectures will be prefaced with statements such as, “I'm not a vegetarian,” “I'm no Peter Singer,” or “I'm not for animal rights.” More specifically, some theorists are downright hostile toward any mention of veganism. This is best seen in the case of Donna Haraway, who calls for responsible killing rather than an ethics of nonviolence (Haraway 2008, 80).

Contrary to her belief in the necessity of killing some animal others, I believe we cannot deconstruct, problematize, or trouble the human/animal binary without addressing ethico-political and practical questions regarding animal exploitation. Ontological and epistemological investigations are inseparable from ethical inquiry; what (or who) beings are determines how we are ethically obligated to respond to them. Work on epistemologies of ignorance shows us that perception frames our understanding of what is morally permissible. For example, Charles Mills describes how the category “savage” distorted early (white) Americans’ perceptions, enabling them to ontologically exclude Native Americans from whites’ moral prohibitions against violence (Mills 2007).
Because it isolates ontological inquiry from ethical practice, hypo-critical animal studies constitute a response to animal suffering that is a nonresponse. These studies do not call upon us to change how we eat, dress, or entertain in the world in regard to our everyday relationships with other animals. Moreover, the positions taken by its practitioners, who distance themselves from veganism and animal advocacy, often serve to reify the status quo “war” against animals. Too many scholars, such as Harold Fromm, claim that human life requires the killing of nonhuman animals, “To be alive is to be a murderer” (Fromm 2010, para. 6). Haraway makes a similar argument, contending that, rather than “[pretending] to live outside of killing” (Haraway 2008, 79), we must learn to kill responsibly. Responding to Derrida’s call for the sacrifice of the making-killable of animals, Haraway argues:

The problem is actually to understand that human beings do not get a pass on the necessity of killing significant others, who are themselves responding, not just reacting. In the idiom of labor, animals are working subjects, not just worked objects. Try as we might to distance ourselves, there is no way of living that is not also a way of someone, not just something else, dying differentially. (Haraway 2008, 80)

This argument does not distinguish between differences in degree, kind, and intent of killing, which are ethically relevant; the killings for which a vegan is responsible differ significantly from those that an omnivore enacts. First, they are different in degree. By abstaining from the knowing consumption of animal products, the vegan contributes to fewer differential killings. For example, the average vegan will save the lives of 2,000 land animals over the course of his or her lifetime as compared to the average omnivore (Marcus 1998). Second, the killings differ in kind; animals slaughtered in factory farms will have different kinds of deaths than will animals who die because they got caught in farm machinery. Although a vegan may not be able to extricate him or herself from the accidental killing of rodents, insects, or others by machinery in some agricultural practices, these are not the same kinds of horrifying deaths that animals in factory farms and slaughterhouses experience. Third, there are significant differences in intent between the vegan and the omnivore. When one eats a hamburger, one wills the death of the cow whose flesh made the burger possible. When an individual opts for a vegetarian burger, he or she recognizes that death is an undesirable means to the end of his or her culinary pleasure. Simply stated, the vegan refuses to perceive the cow as killable.

My criticism of Haraway is harsh precisely because I have the utmost respect for her work. However, she exchanges her usual rigor and critical edge for polemics when discussing veganism. In addition to homogenizing all forms of killing, she also glosses over vast differences in animal advocacy and theory. Haraway and other hypo-critical animal studies scholars dismiss veganism along with a straw-person “animal rights” argument, as if the latter were the only possible
justification for the former. To the contrary, many vegans reject PETA’s tactics and renounce Peter Singer’s arguments, which are points that Haraway and others miss. This disavowal of ethics in animal studies is especially dangerous because it disengages the relationship between theory and practice. From the standpoint of vegan ethics, the two are inseparable. Our ethics are not just a theory but also a way of life. We sacrifice the sacrifice of the animal in our own lives, in our own ways, as best we can. Each of us struggles with how to answer the call of the suffering animal others.

Judith Butler’s recent work, which analyzes the war on terrorism, attempts to understand how social norms and political contexts portray others’ lives as grievable (or not) (Butler 2009). Through a process that she terms framing, Butler traces the mechanisms that condition the aptitudes for recognizing moral others. By moving ethics to the question of who counts as a who, Butler makes explicit how moral decisions and theories conceal the boundary between moral subjects and nonsubjects. All lives are precarious, but not all lives are perceived as such, and precariousness is differentially allocated. Animal others such as those trapped within the “animal industrial complex” (Noske 1997, 22), although technically alive, are not recognized as grievable or valuable in their own right. Applying Butler’s insight to animal ethics, we see that what is at stake is not merely the question of how to prevent or minimize violence but rather the question of what counts as violence in the first place. An affective ethics of nonviolence not only witnesses violence committed against animal others but also commits its adherents to its eradication.

After recognizing that moral communities are “imagined” (Anderson 2006) and products of historically and culturally specific power relations, we become aware of the contingent nature of our moral “frames.” Understanding the “human” as a production rather than as a natural entity politicizes ontology. Humanity becomes both an accomplishment and a differential value. Anthropocentric humanism, as long as it exists, will continue to be deployed against vulnerable animals, whether they are human or nonhuman. In part, this is because life always exceeds the frames through which it is recognized. There are, as Butler puts it, “subjects who are not quite recognizable as subjects, and there are lives that are not quite—or indeed, are never—recognized as lives” (Butler 2009, 4). Nonetheless, the limits of the moral community could and—I would argue—should be different. We must ask ourselves not merely, “What is a life?” but also, “How can I prepare myself to be addressed by a life that lives below my ability to apprehend it?” The “who” of ethics is prior to the “what” in the sense that injunctions against violence do not protect those whose lives are not recognized as valuable.

As Butler in her analysis of racism indicates, moral outrage, indifference, and guilt in the face of violence are not rational, cognitive acts but rather are conditioned, habituated, and affective responses. Our ability to be responsive to others, a prerequisite for responsibility, is found in conditioned, bodily responses.
Individuals who are not moved by nonhuman animals, who do not perceive their lives as grievable, will not perceive or recognize the atrocities committed against them as violence. For this reason, the process of becoming vegan is a transformation in one’s worldview. The moral community is seen, smelled, touched, heard, and tasted differently. The smell of bacon may no longer recall childhood memories but instead becomes a perception of death and destruction. A vegan ethics of nonviolence acknowledges the making-killable of animal others as a violent act, and it necessitates the symbolic and practical rejection of such violence.

Once we make explicit the boundaries of the moral community, the division between moral subjects and nonsubjects becomes an ethico-political judgment. We must then ask: How do we draw the precarious line between human, animal, and plant? The division between the human and the animal is marked, in Derrida’s terms, by the making-killable of the animal. In other words, those marked as human are subjects protected by the moral prohibition against violence, whereas those marked as mere animals are not. The claim of nonviolence, upon which vegan ethics is based, asks us to hold open the question of who or what requires moral consideration as a means to acknowledge the infallibility of our capacity for recognizing life.

In vegan ethics, ethical action is no longer limited to individual actions in isolated scenarios that demand utilitarian calculation, such as, “Do I eat the bacon or not?” Rather, the concern becomes how to reconceptualize the frames through which animals are perceived to make violence against animals be perceived as violence. Because these frames are rooted in affective and embodied habits, ethico-political strategies must work at the level of perception and the senses. Veganism, from this perspective, can be seen as a practice of expanding the realm of grievable life or as a precautionary principle of moral standing in action. This rejection of violence, or the refusal to accept the “better” and “humane” deaths of free-range ethics as a moral ideal, throws a wrench into the anthropological machine that dissimulates widespread, institutionalized violence against other animals (Agamben 2002).

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REFERENCES