

The Posture of the Human Exception

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Translation by Hollis Taylor and Dominique Lestel.

Paradoxically, the position adopted by the vegan concerning the split between humans and animals resembles that of the humanist. The latter considers that there is a fundamental ontological barrier between humans and animals, and that when animals are treated as instruments, this does not necessarily constitute a moral offence. Contrary to the European humanist, the vegan does not assume that he can do whatever he wishes with animals, but rather he reinstates the assumption of man's exceptional status in a new form, by refusing to allow himself to be intoxicated by the animal and in considering that the metabolic connections between man and animal should be minimised when it is not possible to suppress them altogether. However, to eat meat can be perceived as a sort of *animalisation* of the human, as the animal's flesh becomes human flesh.

Such a conception of man's intoxication by the animal is clearly evoked by Florence Burgat in her book *Liberté et inquiétude de la vie animale (Freedom and Anxiety in Animal Life)*, published by Kimé in 2006. In her passionate chapter on xenografts, she quotes professor Pierre Cüer, a specialist in organ transplants, who believes that one of the two ethical considerations that he owes each of his patients is 'to reassure a transplant recipient of his continued membership in the human race'.

This would be of no consolation to the vegan, who refuses the wild by rejecting all forms of savagery or, in other words, any possibility of being metabolically transformed by a living being of another species. In this way, the vegan rehabilitates the thesis of human exception, considering that he is the only carnivorous (or potentially carnivorous) animal who must place himself above his condition as an omnivore by not taking on one of the carnivore's central characteristics: the predation of other animals.

His position appears fundamentally a posture of apartheid, one that is self-assured though lacking any acknowledgement of the full consequences of such a posture, and ultimately very peculiar in Western thought: even if the animal is unthreatening, it must be kept at a distance.

Although the vegan defends other species and even campaigns for their recognition as equals, he nevertheless restores man's exceptional status. At first sight, the situation appears somewhat paradoxical, but it can be explained well enough. In effect, the vegan considers that man is a *moral exception* who should adhere to untold moral prohibitions vis-à-vis other living beings. He is consequently the only moral being, and what distinguishes him *ipso facto* from all other living beings is that he assumes the right to modify animals biologically. In this respect, one question merits further consideration: to what extent can man construct universal principles that contain competencies that he alone can perform?

The vegan could object that such a position resembles that of social Darwinism, with which he would refuse to identify. The objection is weak. In effect, social Darwinists evoked a quite imaginary struggle for life, but they wanted to regulate the social behaviour of power, not fundamental metabolic processes. Opponents of social Darwinism could dispute that we can draw lessons for human social life from that of animals. The vegan works in yet another way, basing her morality on a refusal to partake of what constitutes a fundamental characteristic of all living beings.

By what sort of pride, one that is intrinsically speciesist, can we consider it unethical for a living being to do what other living beings do, unless we give ourselves special status? The vegan wants to remove himself from the circle of life. He imagines that there is a position where he can evade the constraints of the ethics of reciprocity. In this sense, he assigns himself a problematic extraterritoriality. By this act of rupture, he radically excludes himself from animality and attempts to exclude animality from the sphere of living beings.

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