

# ANIMAL METAPHYSICS, METAPHYSICAL ANIMALS: THE RESTLESS HOPE OF/FOR THE NEGATIVE

Review of OXANA TIMOFEEVA. (2013). *History of Animals: An Essay on Negativity, Immanence and Freedom*. Jan van Eyck Academie. 167 pp.

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IN THE HISTORY OF (Western) metaphysics, the figure of the “human” is striped with the scars of an ever-surfacing and ever-receding animality. Following the recent scholarship of Giorgio Agamben (i.e. *The Open* 2004), the dynamics of such an intermittently beaming animality in, and through, the language and thought of “man,” is ultimately operative within an “anthropological machine” driven by the fuel of Hegelian dialectics. As such, the flickering animal has either been reabsorbed, usually within the framework of naturalistic materialism, into ‘organic continuity’ with the human — as a *qualitative difference* potentially trans-

cedable; or, alternatively, it has been ejected at the edges of humanity as an insurmountable protective gap maintaining the solitary and autonomous intelligibility of the anthropic spirit. This logics of *inclusion/exclusion* Oxana Timofeeva does not claim to bring to a halt, but rather to re-orient by means of an intervention in its functional kinetics: her self-proclaimed “naïve” readings of the *animaux/animots* of the metaphysical tradition is meant not so much as an emancipatory technique, but as a problematization of philosophical humanism through its historicity. Thus, she argues that “the very inevitability of the representational frame provides viability to the utopia of the

“real” animal, which rather than being represented or representing something already given instead “opens” - but always retrospectively – the immediate givenness of the “real” of the human being itself” (2013, p. 13).



One fundamental concern of Timofeeva's work is the potentiality inherent in different philosophical systems for transforming the regimes of physical and conceptual relationality between the human being and the animal – indeed, for overcoming the historical “failure” of animals in their immanence to an anthropocentric cosmological order premised upon their “negativity.” The unfolding narrative of Western structures and mechanisms subservient to troubled human-animal co-existence stretches from Bataille's ancient totemism, to medieval animal trials in Europe; from Saint Francis of Assisi's poverty as a methodology for human-animal communication, to Cartesian animal-excluding rationalism, from Hegelian ontology to Kojévian anthropology, from

Kafka's animal stories to contemporary performances of ritualistic sacrifice. Underlying it, there is a Marxist-inflected reading of Hegelian idealism as a latent form of pressure upon situated networks of material relations for them to transform in line with their historical conceptualizations: “On the contrary, therefore, it is general determinations which must be made the rule and natural forms compared with it. If they do not tally with it but exhibit certain correspondences, if they agree with it in one respect but not in another, then it is not the rule, the characteristic of the genus and class, etc., which is to be altered, as if this had to conform to these existences, but conversely, it is the latter which ought to conform to the rule” (Hegel, qt. Timofeeva, 2013, p.71). Timofeeva's reading of Hegel not only opens up a *transformative politics of the natural status quo*, but allows for a subversive reconceptualization of the “negativity” of the animal. The “negativity” of the *zoologicus* is premised upon (1) on the one hand, Giorgio Agamben's theory of the subsumption of animal “pure voice” within human articulated speech as the signature of death branding the emergence of

consciousness; (2) on the other hand, a Canguilhemian understanding of organic sickness as an inherent condition of animal life, namely the fundamental incapacity of the animal to spontaneously recreate its vital internal milieu contingently, in response to imminent changes in environmental conditions. In a sense, the animal does not seem to enjoy a surplus of organic mobility and indeterminacy allowing it, in Simondon's words, "an individuation by the individual and not only a functioning that would be the result of an individuation completed once and for all" (qt. Timofeeva, 2013, p.27) – therefore the mechanics of animality canonically stultifying animal life and individuality within the history of philosophy. But Timofeeva ultimately offers a bold reading of such "negativity" (via Jean-Luc Nancy) by rendering it the turning point for the rethinking of the animal as "restless" for becoming-something-other. The immanent "negation" of animality within the framework of Western thought has conferred upon it a drive towards escaping the immanent into a future of "freedom *from*."

Metaphysical animals are always already desirous for their own otherness, for their becoming-other, in a way that the human being might not be. According to Timofeeva, an animal metaphysics will use this insight for problematizing the human as an animal not "negative" enough, and consequently, not enough desirous for striving against its own condition. Perhaps we have never been truly human, only not animal enough: "Is it not possible, then, that the passage from animality to humanity is either still underway, never to be completed, or, in what might be the same thing, was always doomed from the start to be a failed passage? Might not the transgression of the boundary separating humanity and animality be not against animality per se, but against the idea that animality had been left behind in the thought of our birth? [It is] the acknowledgement of being always already prehuman" (Brett Buchanan, qt. Timofeeva, p.106). I heartily recommend this intellectually stimulating book to scholars in animal studies, Continental philosophy, political philosophy, and feminism & gender studies. ◻