

Animality and/as Alterity in Posthumanist Thought

Nathan DeProspo  

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Abstract:

This article places Heidegger's account of the human-animal distinction in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* in conversation with contemporary posthumanist theory, arguing that this juxtaposition complicates and enriches posthumanism's conceptual foundations. Rather than offering a straightforward critique of Heidegger's anthropocentrism, the article attends to the productive tension within Heidegger's ontology, treating Heidegger's conceptual instability—his unresolved oscillation between humanism and posthumanism—not as a problem to be corrected but as a pedagogical site for rethinking the very conditions of posthumanist inquiry. Three key concepts guide this reading: *ordinary understanding*, which refers to the habitual, unreflective modes of thought that pre-structure our relation to being and difference; *homesickness*, Heidegger's term for Dasein's existential condition of never being fully at home in its own essence; and *captivation*, the state of absorption Heidegger attributes to animals, which this article argues also describes the human immersion in language and understanding. Drawing on both Diane Davis and Jacques Derrida as central figures in posthumanist animal studies, I both affirm and attempt to extend their interpretations of the human-animal (in)distinction, arguing eventually that alterity—humanity's disavowed animality—is not what lies beneath or beyond ordinary understanding, but is itself our entrapment within ordinary understanding.

Keywords: Heidegger, posthumanism, ordinary understanding, homesickness, captivity



Introduction

Since Aristotle, it has been assumed that what the animal lacks in relation to the human is language. More specifically, what the animal lacks is the knowledge of self and world that accompanies the capacity for language. As Diane Davis notes, summarizing traditional philosophical notions of animality, “Without this self-referential “I,” without a representable sense of self, animals are not only without language, but also without thinking, understanding, reason, response (and so responsibility)” (“Rhetoricity” 91). For Heidegger, the animal is said to be “poor in world,” which means that the animal does not own the capacity to build or revise its own life-world, to extend its domain or its frame of reference outside of its limited itinerary of instincts. Because the animal has no subjectivity, no capacity to articulate the self, it also has no objectivity, no capacity to articulate an objective reality outside of the animal’s fully regulated system of instincts and behaviors. An animal’s behavior is never self-directed, as this behavior is structured entirely by a set of tendencies and by a highly circumscribed environmental context. Heidegger illustrates this through an analysis of bee behavior under experimental conditions. The experiment went like this:

A bee was placed before a little bowl filled with so much honey that the bee was unable to suck up the honey all at once. It begins to suck and then after a while breaks off this driven activity of sucking and flies off, leaving the rest of the honey still present in the bowl. (*Fundamental* 242)

This behavior might be explained, at first glance, by the bee’s ostensible recognition that there is too much honey to consume all at once. Therefore, the bee, after recognizing both its satisfied hunger and the presence of overabundant honey, flies back to its nest. But the experiment continues, upsetting this initial interpretation: “Yet, it has been observed that if its abdomen is carefully cut away while it is sucking, a bee will simply carry on regardless even while the honey runs out of the bee from behind” (242). This result proves for Heidegger that the bee never actually recognizes its own internal state of satiety or the external presence of too much honey, nor does the bee even recognize “the

absence of its abdomen.” Instead, the bee is simply “taken by its food,” directed blindly by a system of drives that “excludes the possibility of recognition” (242). Extrapolating from this example, Heidegger argues that the animal, in its very essence, must be defined by this incapacity, by the lack of autonomy, agency, and will: “The behaviour of the animal is not a doing and acting, as in human comportment, but a driven performing. In saying this we mean to suggest that an instinctual drivenness, as it were, characterizes all such animal performance” (237).

Davis summarizes this Heideggerian thesis as follows: “[w]hile human Daseins exist, comporting themselves (in Heidegger’s language) toward others and their environment in a conscious and world-forming way, nonhuman animals merely live, playing out nature’s program” (“Creaturely” 90). And because animals, as Davis suggests, “cannot dis-identify or extract themselves from this affective identification, this captivation” (90), they cannot, within Heidegger’s framework, “respond authentically” (90):

Animals react, to put it bluntly, but they do not respond. The fundamental presumption grounding this ‘insight’ is of course that the human is capable of genuine responsiveness, even if the Copernican and Freudian revelations indicate that nothing could be less certain. (“Creaturely” 91)

The Freudian revelation that Davis refers to is the theory that human consciousness is structured for the most part by unconscious drives and tendencies, that “the ego is not master of ‘its own house’” (“Creaturely” 88). What is strange and somewhat surprising about Heidegger’s construction of the animal-human binary in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* is that Heidegger subscribes, both in this specific text and elsewhere, to the “Freudian revelation” that directly complicates such a hierarchical distinction between the animal and the human. In fact, Dasein is often defined, as is the animal, by the dynamics of captivation and ensnarement. In *Being and Time*, Dasein is said to be thrown into a state of mind, into a series of shared, cultural-historical presuppositions, into certain inescapable comportments, attitudes, and thought patterns.

Dasein is held captive, in other words, by certain tendencies and habits, and cannot recognize its own captivity.

Ordinary Understanding

Understanding is never “present-at-hand” for Heidegger, because understanding, as a habitualized structure of thought, is never made explicit as an object of reflection. As a historically sedimented technology of thinking, understanding’s mechanism is obscured—indeed, it must be obscured—during its deployment. According to Heidegger, understanding “belongs to the essential constitution of Dasein itself” (*Being* 28). Heidegger again: “From the very beginning our essence is such as to understand and form the possibility of understanding” (*Fundamental* 307). As that which belongs to Dasein’s essence, however, understanding structures thought in such a way that understanding itself remains unthought. Because of this simultaneous intimacy with and estrangement from our own thinking, Dasein is said to be ontically “close to us—even that which is closest,” and yet “ontologically that which is farthest” (*Being* 37), meaning that we are immersed in certain structural features of Dasein, such as understanding, in our everyday existence, while this existence is effectively unavailable to us in its essential or fundamental character. The inaccessibility of Dasein’s essence is not (exclusively) a flaw to be corrected, but is constitutive of “Dasein’s everydayness” (*Being* 165): ordinary understanding disburdens Dasein of the question of its Being in order to quiet the anxiety of ontological indeterminacy.

In Hegel’s philosophy, understanding divides and categorizes the world, establishing the whole terrain of philosophical and everyday consciousness in which subjects are pitted against objects, nature against culture, animals against humans, and so on: “The activity of separating is the force and labor of the understanding” (Hegel 20). This dividing practice, necessary for subjectivity, and problematic for philosophy, is non-negotiable, in that we are captivated or captured by it in much the same way as the bee is captivated by the scent of a flower or compelled to produce honey for the colony. What we learn, then, from both Heidegger and Hegel, is that subjectivity—which is supposed

to distinguish the human from the animal, which is supposed to grant humanity such distinguishing faculties as reason, creativity, and intentionality—is structured by a network of assumptions, drives, and compulsions that subjectivity itself can never grasp or get on top of. We are captive to subjectivity in the same way that, as Heidegger suggests, the animal is captive to the impossibility of subjectivity.

What Heidegger and Hegel teach us, against the grain of certain Cartesian or Aristotelian assumptions, is that humans are not *superior* to animals on the basis that we possess inherent faculties of language, reason, or logic. Instead, what underlies this assumption of superiority is an ontological situation in which we humans are *compelled* to distinguish ourselves from animals due to our complicity in the dividing practices of the *logos*. In other words, we are driven by language (and by understanding) to make the cut between the animal and the human, as well as to develop and diversify this ethic of division across all domains of knowledge. It is not a result of rigorous deliberation or sophisticated philosophizing that we have defined ourselves, since antiquity, as the rational animal. The persistence of the definition of the human as the rational animal is an effect of the persistence of *ordinary understanding*, as Heidegger calls it. The warrant for Heidegger's critique of *animal rationale* (and of metaphysical humanism writ large)—which we will get to later—is somewhat enigmatic, however, and diverges quite drastically from a contemporary posthumanist critique.

According to posthumanist discourse, ordinary (humanist) understanding orients towards difference—such as the difference between humanity and animality—in such a way that difference can only exist between two pre-existing entities or identities. This conceptual conservatism is the exigence for several posthumanist interventions, including Karen Barad's, which argues that “relata do not pre-exist relations” (140). Humanist understanding first posits relata—things, entities, identities, subjects, objects—and then places them in relation with one another, assuming and emphasizing the separability of phenomena, while posthumanism posits a fundamental relationality out of which relata

emerge, emphasizing the inseparability of phenomena: “Posthumanism doesn’t presume the separateness of any-‘thing,’ let alone the alleged spatial, ontological, and epistemological distinction that sets humans apart” (M136). Casey Boyle argues that humanism, in its pursuit of coherence and certitude, brings about “exclusive and excluding habits of mind” (Boyle 9). According to a posthumanist stance, to organize the world into subjects and objects is, on the one hand, to employ an entirely reductive framework that cannot accommodate the complexity of relations; on the other hand, humanist understanding introduces, at the level of the social and the ethical, the inevitability of the objectification, and thereby the exclusion and oppression, of certain subjects and forms of life. Thus, the Aristotelian and Cartesian denigrations of animality (as fundamentally inferior to humanity) are diagnosed as effects of this exclusionary style of thought.

The Convergence of Posthumanism and Animal Studies

Contemporary posthumanist discourse seeks to intervene not merely in the propositional content of Western philosophy, but in a particular style of propositional logic itself—a style seen to underwrite and sustain the conceptual and ethical commitments of humanist thought. Rosi Braidotti observes that traditional philosophy, structured by humanist presuppositions,

[F]ell into a discursive pattern of dualistic oppositions that defined the human mostly by what it is not. Thus, with Descartes: *not* an animal, *not* extended and inert matter, *not* a pre-programmed machine. These binary oppositions provided definitions by negation, structured within a humanistic vision of Man as the thinking being *par excellence*. (Braidotti, ch. 1)

The human-animal distinction, in this context, becomes a privileged site of inquiry not because it is more fundamental than other oppositions—nature/culture, subject/object, self/other—but because it emphasizes the ethical and conceptual conservatism latent in the grammar of humanist thought. The conceptual vulgarity of the distinction between human and animal—its insistence on exteriority, negation, and ontological priority—exemplifies the reductive logic that posthumanism aims to displace.

It is at this juncture that posthumanism converges with animal studies, reframing the question of the animal not as an isolated ethical concern but as a pressure point within a broader theoretical apparatus. Cary Wolfe writes, “the theoretical and ethical issues that attend the question of the animal are only part of the larger issue of nonhuman modes of being and are therefore inseparable from the broader challenge of posthumanist theory” (193). In what Jeff Nealon calls the “classic deconstructive” (Nealon 1) gesture of animal studies, the animal does not simply mark the outside of the human but becomes humanity’s condition of (im)possibility—destabilizing the coherence of the humanist subject and exposing the exclusions that have sustained its historical construction. The critique of the human-animal binary thus becomes exemplary of posthumanism’s deeper intervention: not the rejection of the human per se, but the dismantling of the ontological scaffolding that has rendered certain forms of being legible only through opposition and hierarchy. As an intensification and extension of the insights of post-structuralism, posthumanist discourse aims to complicate not only the human-animal distinction but, more precisely, the humanist modality in which distinctions are formed exclusively through logics of opposition, negation, and non-contradiction. Francesca Ferrando argues that “the posthuman destabilizes the limits and symbolic borders posed by the notion of the human. Dualisms such as human/animal, human/machine, and, more in general, human/nonhuman are re-investigated through a perception which does not work on oppositional schemata” (Ferrando 5). Likewise, Barad’s posthumanism “marks a refusal to take the distinction between ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’ for granted, and to found analyses on this presumably fixed and inherent set of categories” (Barad 32).

In its posthumanist incarnations, animal studies tends to launch from a critique of Heidegger’s sharp distinction between humanity and animality. This critique finds its most influential articulation in Derrida, whose *The Animal That Therefore I Am* stages a sustained confrontation with Heidegger’s failure to adequately think the animal beyond metaphysical capture. Speaking about Heidegger’s (and the entire metaphysical tradition’s) misconstrual of animality, Derrida argues, “[w]henver ‘one’ says ‘The

Animal,' each time a philosopher, or anyone else, says 'The Animal' in the singular and without further ado, claiming thus to designate every living thing that is held not to be human [...] he utters an *asinanity*" (*The Animal* 31). Wolfe summarizes this point: "Derrida wants to insist on the 'unsubstitutable singularity' of the animal and suggests that our readiness to turn it into a 'theorem' is at base a panicked horror at our own vulnerability, our own passivity—in the end, our own mortality" (Wolf 217). Thus, for Derrida and his posthumanist interlocutors, the animal becomes a figure through which the human is forced to confront its own undecidability—its failure to cleanly delimit itself from what it seeks to exclude. What Wolfe does not emphasize, however, and what Derrida himself only hints at and does not pursue at length, is the pedagogical value of Heidegger's ostensible mistake in his reading of the animal. For instance, Derrida suggests at one point that the reduction of the multiplicity of animal life into the general category of The Animal confirms "the animality that [humanism] is disavowing" (*The Animal* 31). Extending Derrida's suggestion, here, I argue that Heidegger's humanism, rather than just expressing yet another naïve exclusion of animal otherness in the history of philosophy, points directly—pedagogically, performatively—to the animalization of the human. Insofar as Heidegger, in his assertion of the ontological difference between human and animal, betrays his indebtedness to the Cartesian and humanist presuppositions he explicitly attempts to dismantle, Heidegger is animalized, captivated, ensnared. Thus, (Heidegger's) humanism teaches us about animality through its very concealment of our captivity by the habits of humanist subjectivity. Humanism discloses something fundamental about animality through its very reduction of the complexity of animal life to the figure of The Animal.

Critics such as Derrida, Davis, and Wolfe have all argued that Heidegger's project, because of its naïve reduction of animality, is irredeemably tethered to a humanist metaphysics. Derrida writes: "When [Heidegger] claims to deconstruct the whole metaphysical tradition, notably that of subjectivity, Cartesian subjectivity, etc., insofar as the animal is concerned he remains, in spite of everything, profoundly Cartesian" (*The*

Animal 147). In the editor's introduction to *Animal Philosophy*, Calarco and Atterton similarly observe: "Despite Heidegger's insightful critique of metaphysical humanism, he is ultimately unable to overcome the anthropocentrism of the metaphysical tradition, which consistently defines animals in opposition to and by measure of the human" (Calarco & Atterton xix). Although I do not disagree with these critiques, I want to take somewhat of a different tack and suggest that Heidegger's blindness—the blindness of humanism itself—requires further meditation rather than remediation. The compulsion to create and sustain an unbridgeable gap between the human and the animal betrays the very specific animality of the human: our thralldom to the dividing practices of humanist subjectivity.

Humanism, defined as the compulsory adoption of predicative grammar, as the benumbing of human being by a naïve image of thought, requires animality not only as its negative foil, as its excluded other, but also as its primary structure of engagement. Humanism, or the persistence thereof, is in fact the strongest evidence for a posthuman reality, since the endurance of humanist subjectivity—even in the face of concerted efforts to deconstruct it, even in the face of increasingly undeniable social-material complexity—points directly to the non-autonomy that posthumanism seeks to centralize. Humans are non-self-sufficient to the extent that they continue to assume self-sufficiency within an ontological context that both obliterates and perpetuates the illusion of the coherence of self. What better evidence is there for the radical non-autonomy of human subjectivity than the troubling endurance of assumptions of autonomy and of relations of exteriority (between self and other, human and animal, etc.)? Even—or especially—when we hope explicitly to disrupt these humanist dynamics, when we've immersed ourselves in the vertigo of (posthumanist) philosophical questioning, we continue for the most part unwittingly to reinstate the presuppositions of humanism through the style and syntax of our thinking. Thus, animality (as radical alterity) is not only that which humanism naïvely excludes, but is also, and more precisely, the persistence of humanist naïveté in the texture of thought.

Animal Subjectivity

In order for humanist understanding to solidify its borders, it must secure an ‘Other’—or in this case, an entire domain of alterity in the form of animality—from which it can differentiate itself. The process by which this alterity is secured rests on two related “errors” of thought: (1) the reduction of the multiplicity of animal life to a generalized theory of “The Animal,” and (2) the exclusion of animality from the world-building ontology of human life. The first error is, as we’ve seen, one of the primary focuses of Derrida’s critique: “Animal is a word that men have given themselves the right to give. They have given themselves the word in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept: ‘The Animal,’ they say” (*The Animal* 32). Davis echoes Derrida’s concern when she notes that the category “animal” tends to function “as a conceptual frame that presumes to encompass every living nonhuman thing, from a blind protozoan to a great ape” (“Creaturely” 91). Both thinkers hearken back to Nietzsche’s famous deconstruction of conceptual abstraction in “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” wherein any given (id)entity—Nietzsche’s example is a leaf—can only be taxonomized by arbitrarily selecting certain classificatory features and ignoring others, thereby obscuring the fundamental complexity of reality. To extract an “essence of leaf,” or something called “The Leaf,” from the sheer diversity of leaves—and to mistake this extraction or appropriation for a pure representation of reality—is to engage, at the most banal and everyday level, the mechanics of humanist understanding (“On Truth” 256).

What complicates this critique, rendering it more diagnostic than corrective, is that conceptual appropriation is, according to Nietzsche, an unavoidable expression of the human will to power. Importantly, the will to power is not the exclusive property of the human; in fact, the will is not a property at all—certainly not in the sense that subjectivity wields the will willfully. Rather, the will to power originates prior to subjectivity, as the formation of the subject’s terrain of desire. It is in this sense that the will indicates an ontology not only of human desire and striving, but of the specific nexus of desires and

motivations immanent to each form of life. Thus, a snake striking at prey, a spider weaving its web, and a lion nurturing its cubs are all particular instantiations of the will to power. Nietzsche's will to power, which he calls "the essence of life," emphasizes the "priority of spontaneous, aggressive, expansive, form-giving forces" (*Genealogy* 79). As something of an aside, and although I do not have the time to elaborate on this, it is important to note that Nietzsche's ontology directly challenges popular Darwinian survivalism; for Nietzsche, life's project is not primarily survival or self-preservation, but appropriation and territorialization.

The second "error" of humanism, then, in which a stark division is established between humanity and animality, is challenged directly by Nietzsche's flattened ontology. Each species is *compelled* by the will to power to form its own world. This thesis effectively reverses, so it would seem, the Heideggerian scheme by which human agency is seen as the only world-forming agency. On the one hand, Nietzsche attributes world-forming agency to nonhuman life, outright rejecting the anthropocentrism of Heidegger and his humanist-Cartesian counterparts. On the other hand—and this is where Nietzsche and Heidegger are much closer conceptually—the will in Nietzsche is positioned behind or beneath the sense of will or volition advocated by humanism. Thus, to form a world does not mean that an autonomous subject or individual wills it, but rather that the will wills it, and that human subjectivity is but one particular aftereffect of the will to power. Subjectivity, far from establishing the superiority of the human over the animal, animalizes the human to the extent that the subject is deprived of meta-reflective access to its own structure of desire. If the animal has subjectivity, as certain instances of critical ethology claim, it is not because the animal has "free will" or uncomplicated agency, but because subjectivity itself is always already animalized, always already in thrall to the will to power. Hence, Nietzsche does not elevate animal life to the level of autonomous subjectivity, but rather submerges subjectivity in the alterity of animality.

In *Critical Ethology and Post-Anthropocentric Ethics*, Roberto Marchesini aims also to reverse or disrupt the humanist-Heideggerian dogma, but rather than de-

subjectivize the human, as Nietzsche does, Marchesini hopes to fully subjectivize the animal:

Borrowing a Heideggerian concept, one could say that the animal has a Dasein. And, perhaps, the metapredicate that Heidegger sought in vain—the Being—has precisely animality. It is in this protagonism, in this desiring condition about the world, that an animal expresses its subjectivity. (Marchesini 149)

In response to Marchesini's provocations, I want first to mention that for Heidegger Dasein and subjectivity are not synonymous. In fact, Heidegger's enduring critique of subjectivity—most notably in his later work and in the "Letter on Humanism"—has secured his place as a central figure in posthumanist and new materialist theory, rather than simply as the favored target of animal studies. Heidegger goes as far as to suggest in his letter that subjectivity poses a "danger to our essence [as Dasein]" ("Letter" 222). Essentialism aside, posthumanist discourse on the whole agrees that subjectivity, in its tendency to exclude otherness, threatens not only the flourishing of our species but the survivability of all life on our planet. If subjectivity (as a mechanism of negation, appropriation, exploitation) is *the* problem for posthumanism, then it is questionable whether bestowing the animal with subjectivity achieves what it sets out to achieve: namely, a post-Cartesian, post-Heideggerian, post-anthropocentric conception of animality.

What interests me more in this context, however, is the early Heidegger for whom subjectivity and Dasein are tangled in a much more fraught and convoluted, rather than simply antagonistic, relationship. When Marchesini suggests that "the animal has a Dasein," the Heidegger of *Being and Time* would not only reject this attribution—on the grounds that the animal, for him, lacks the ontological openness that defines Dasein—but would also insist that not even human Dasein "has a Dasein." To say that Dasein "has" anything, let alone itself, is already to misunderstand it in terms of a metaphysical logic of ownership, agency, and self-presence—the very logic that Heidegger's analytic of Dasein attempts to deconstruct. Subjectivity, in this frame, does not indicate the

uncomplicated freedom of Dasein but Dasein's flight from itself and from its own conditions of emergence. Dasein is nothing other than a "fleeing in the face of itself" (*Being* 229). This is why Marchesini's claim—that we are only "endowed with subjectivity if we are the protagonists of our intersection with the world—if we are able, that is, not only to be in the moment but to own it" (Marchesini 136)—must be read as precisely what Heidegger's analytic works to unsettle. Dasein does not own the moment; it does not own anything. It is the site of a dispossession it cannot escape. Its being is not a moment of mastery but a response to a thrownness it neither initiates nor controls. Dasein does not stand freely before the world as its protagonist—it flees from its own thrownness into the sedimented comforts of subjectivity, into the certainties of understanding, into the grammar of humanism. What Heidegger calls "thrownness" is thus structurally analogous to Nietzsche's will to power—it is not something chosen, but something that constitutes the choices of subjectivity. The will to power, understood not as an attribute of subjectivity but as the structuring drive behind it, names a compulsive tendency to appropriate, to differentiate, to form a world. Dasein, far from transcending animality, is driven by it—driven by the need to make distinctions, to form concepts, to secure its own coherence through the labor of negation. To say, then, that the animal has a Dasein is to miss Heidegger's point. But to say that Dasein's struggle to differentiate itself from the animal is itself an expression of animality—that is the more difficult, and perhaps more fruitful, revision. The human is not the being that transcends animality, but the being that is captured by its own effort to transcend. Heidegger's humanism, in its very insistence on the human-animal distinction, becomes the site where animality returns—not as what is excluded, but as the logic of exclusion itself.

Homesickness

In a few evocative passages at the beginning of *The Fundamental Concepts*, Heidegger announces that *homesickness* is the fundamental attunement of philosophy—"Philosophy, metaphysics, is a homesickness, an urge to be at home everywhere" (6)—and of Dasein in general: "our very being is this restlessness [of homesickness]" (5).

Homesickness refers to a longing to be “at home”—to feel secure in one’s thinking, language, and sense of self. It signals a fundamental condition of Dasein, a symptom of the disjunction between ontic reality (our everyday existence) and ontological reality (the deeper structures of being) that defines human existence. As noted earlier, understanding is central to Dasein’s essence, yet it is so deeply immersed in the everyday (ontic) world that its ontological structure remains hidden. There is a discrepancy between what understanding believes it is doing and what it actually does. But this gap is not a flaw—it is constitutive of understanding itself. On the one hand, Dasein takes itself to be grasping beings as they truly are—this is the ontic level of understanding. On the other hand, Dasein’s ontological mode of access to beings always occurs within a contingent, historically conditioned field of intelligibility structured by the *logos*. Because ordinary understanding tends to presume the autonomy and stability of the spheres of subjectivity and objectivity, it experiences this ontic–ontological gap as a loss or displacement of essence. In this context, homesickness functions as a compensatory or restorative response: a yearning for ontological security or grounding that remains perpetually unfulfilled. Human beings, Daseins, are apparently the only beings enveloped in homesickness, since we are constituted by a distance from ourselves in language. Paraphrasing Judith Butler, Davis suggests that “what makes a human being human” is not “the power of reason,” but is perhaps the “experience of bereavement,” the “experience of self-loss,” and the “experience of powerlessness that comes from never being able to acknowledge or express this trauma without repeating it” (“Autozoography” 544).

This incapacity or inability to be at home with our own essence is, paradoxically, the condition of possibility for human freedom, for creative thought and action, according to Heidegger. In contrast to traditional philosophical accounts that ground human distinctiveness in a positive faculty—reason, rationality, will—Heidegger frames the human not as a being with a unique ability but as a being with a unique *inability*: the inability to dwell seamlessly within its own being, to experience existence as self-evident

or unmediated. This constitutive estrangement from ourselves, this ontological unhomeliness (*Unheimlichkeit*), is not a defect to be overcome, but the very condition that opens Dasein to the horizon of Being, to questioning, to meaning. What distinguishes the human from the animal, then, is not a *supplementary faculty*—not language as a mere tool layered atop animality—but a rupture, an ontological gap that language both expresses and sustains. This is why, for Heidegger, the animal-human distinction cannot be understood in terms of a binary opposition between incapacity (the animal) and capacity (the human), but must instead be thought in terms of two different modes of incapacity. The animal is not defined by a mere lack of something the human has—such as language or rationality—but by its distinctive captivation within its environment. As Heidegger argues, the animal is “poor in world” not because it lacks sensory or biological complexity, but because it cannot encounter beings *as* beings—it cannot *take something as something*: “It is this quite elementary 'as' which—and we can put it quite simply—is refused to the animal” (*Fundamental* 287). The animal is absorbed in its environment in such a way that it cannot step back from this absorption, cannot question it, interpret it, or represent it. The animal relates only to what is immediately vital or useful, never to beings in their being. By contrast, the human, as Dasein, is “world-forming” precisely because it experiences a rupture in this kind of absorption. It stands outside of any stable or instinctual relation to its world, and this standing-out (*Ek-sistenz*) becomes the ground of its freedom.

Dasein is not simply an animal with an added or elevated faculty—reason, logos, or language—but an entirely different kind of being. This is why Heidegger insists that the traditional definition of the human as *animal rationale* is fundamentally misleading. Such a definition presupposes a metaphysical continuity between animality and humanity, treating reason or logos as a quantitative supplement to animal life. But for Heidegger, the immersion of human beings in language effects a *qualitative* break from animal being. As Derrida argues, “[t]he difference [Heidegger] is talking about between poverty and wealth is not one of degree” (*Of Spirit* 49). Language, understood not as a

communicative instrument but as the clearing in which beings appear as such, radically alters the structure of existence. To include “animal” in the definition of the human is, therefore, to obscure the very ontological discontinuity that constitutes Dasein’s distinctiveness. The abyss between animal and human is not bridged by any biological, behavioral, or evolutionary similarity, however empirically compelling. For Heidegger, these empirical resemblances operate on the level of ontic features—traits or behaviors—whereas the difference between animal and human is ontological, pertaining to the way beings are disclosed or withdrawn.

This is also why rationality, logic, and cognition—those cherished faculties that have long been taken as the hallmark of humanity—do not, for Heidegger, penetrate to the essence of human being. These faculties, particularly as they are deployed in traditional metaphysical and scientific thought, operate within the confines of representationalism: a mode of thought that apprehends beings as objects, as things to be classified, measured, and controlled. But representational thinking remains oblivious to the more fundamental question of Being itself—the question not of what entities are, but of how they come into presence at all. In remaining bound to ordinary understanding, these faculties reduce the ontological richness of Dasein to a set of functional or definable characteristics. In contrast, Heidegger locates human essence in a more originary attunement to Being that does not manifest as conceptual clarity or intellectual mastery, but as disquiet, displacement, and an abiding sense of estrangement from oneself. This attunement is not a faculty but an affliction: the structural non-coincidence of Dasein with itself, its inability ever to be fully present to or at home in its own being. It is precisely this *not-being-at-home*, this existential *Unheimlichkeit*, that constitutes what it means to be human. And it is the painstaking disclosure of this displaced essence—an essence defined by the concealment of itself—that animates Heidegger’s project of fundamental ontology.

Captivation

From our analysis thus far, we can see that Heidegger vacillates between a sort of *hyper*-humanism and an anti-humanism, between an insistence on humanity's absolute distinctiveness and a concerted deconstruction of traditional humanist presumptions. I argue that this vacillation is precisely the pedagogical value of Heidegger's philosophy, as it articulates performatively, and often unwittingly, the homesickness that Heidegger diagnoses as fundamental to Dasein. For Heidegger, the problem with humanism is not that it prioritizes the human at the expense of nonhuman life or material complexity, but rather that humanism fails to prioritize humanity's essence properly, fails to understand the precise character of humanity's essence. In other words, humanism is not yet humanistic enough. This is the exigence for Heidegger's intervention: humanism is burdened by ordinary understanding, which, in its pursuit of final answers to philosophical questions, satisfies itself with various vulgarities such as *animal rationale*. Heidegger wants actively to resist, methodologically, the philosophical judgment in the form of the one-sided proposition. This is because the proposition *as answer* is ordinary understanding's way of coping with indeterminacy: "[t]he answer is a fixed proposition, a dogma, a conviction" (*Fundamental* 161). Heidegger wishes instead to dwell in the discomfort and disquietude of ontological indeterminacy, to achieve something other than ordinary understanding's negative and repressive orientation towards Dasein's ontology, to "bring us ourselves into the possibility of an *exceptional understanding*" (*Fundamental* 136). In order to foster this "exceptional understanding," one must open oneself up to, rather than repress, the vertigo that accompanies genuine philosophical questioning: "anyone who has never been seized by dizziness in the presence of a philosophical question has never asked the question in a philosophical way" (180). This reorientation is no cinch, however, considering that ordinary understanding's pursuit of stability is just as fundamental to Dasein as the relational or ontological indeterminacy that precludes such stability. Each of us is culpable in the naïveté of ordinary understanding: "Misinterpretation constantly and repeatedly arises with predictable certainty. The reason

for this lies in the ‘natural idleness’ of the ordinary understanding in which each of us is caught up” (*Fundamental* 294).

In an apparent capitulation to ordinary understanding, Heidegger insists on the distinguishing quality of animality. Davis argues that for Heidegger “it is this lack of language that defines what is called ‘the animal’ in general” (“Creaturely” 91). But as Heidegger himself argues elsewhere, the capacity for language, which is supposed to mark our superiority over the animal and our specific agency as human beings, turns out to be more precisely a captivation by language. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger poses this problematic as follows:

But even if we ask, ‘What *is* Being?’, we keep within an understanding of the ‘is,’ though we are unable to fix conceptionally what that ‘is’ signifies. We do not even know the horizon in terms of which that meaning is to be grasped and fixed. But this vague average understanding of Being is still a Fact. (*Being* 25)

Put differently, the unassuming “is” in “What is Being?” delineates implicitly the structure of the question and the possibilities of the reply, providing the coordinates of the concept of Being before one can even begin to question these coordinates. Thus, our understanding is captured by grammar, by the constraints of grammar, without ever being fully aware of the implications of this constraint. Heidegger’s most famous suggestion, “language is the house of being,” addresses the same situation, wherein grammar compels thought to adopt a predicative logic. Predication, for Heidegger, lulls the subject to sleep, persuading subjectivity of the security of self-identity, while at the same time obscuring the relations of alterity that condition subjectivity. Inhabiting unconsciously the “is” of routine predication guarantees the humanist attunement of Dasein, which “in advance determine[s] our being with one another” (*Fundamental* 67). Indeed, for Heidegger, this attunement is never

[S]imply a consequence or side-effect of our thinking, doing, and acting. It is—to put it crudely—the presupposition for such things, the ‘medium’ within which they

first happen. And precisely these attunements to which we pay no heed at all, the attunements we least observe [...] these attunements are the most powerful. (67)

Of course, and as we have seen, the goal for Heidegger is to escape ordinary understanding, to surpass the conventional orientation towards language: “The liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework is reserved for thought and poetic creation” (“Letter” 218). The goal of certain versions of contemporary posthumanism, following Heidegger, is to subvert the dynamics of subjectivity, to foster different forms of understanding, to change our attunements so that we do not simply reject or negate alterity, but embrace it. But perhaps alterity itself, humanity’s disavowed animality, *is* our entrapment within ordinary understanding, within conservative or conventional structures of thought. Perhaps our indoctrination in grammaticality, in the dynamics of language, in subject-object or animal-human binaries, is humanity’s singular captivation, our prison house, from which we cannot escape. Our immersion in language, in its grammatical, ontological, and ideological machinery, is not a resource we wield but a structure that wields us. In this sense, the human is no less captivated than the animal: not by instinct, as Heidegger claims of the bee, but by syntax, predication, and the force of linguistic convention.

A common posthumanist critique of Heidegger, which we have received from Davis, Derrida, Wolfe, and others, is that Heidegger remains indebted to certain metaphysical or humanist presuppositions that he assumes to have surpassed in his philosophy. What follows from this analysis, particularly for Davis, is an ethico-theoretical imperative to either select a version of Heidegger that best accommodates the posthumanist project, to find “Heidegger at his best” (*Breaking Up* 191)—which is effectively to read Heidegger against Heidegger—or to more radically revise Heidegger’s conceptual framework such that this latent anthropocentrism is guarded against and even perhaps eliminated. My analysis does not follow this critical trajectory, arguing instead that the unresolved tension in Heidegger’s thinking between ontic and ontological reality, between ordinary understanding and fundamental attunement, between humanist and

posthumanist inclinations, is precisely the pedagogical value of the Heideggerian text insofar as it elaborates the force and persistence of humanist subjectivity even or especially in the face of this subjectivity's concerted deconstruction. This is the utility of Heidegger's (post)humanism, rather than (exclusively) its blind spot, as Heidegger repeats symptomatically the very attunement that he attempts to problematize, illustrating both deliberately and unwittingly the sway and structure of ordinary understanding. The naïveté of ordinary understanding is woven into thought due to our immersion in language, in grammar. We are compelled by the structure of predication to treat subjects as subjects and objects as objects, regardless of their fundamental ontological entanglement. In fact, and as Heidegger teaches us, a key aspect of this fundamental entanglement—of subject and object, language and reality—is the illusion of separability between them. In other words, it is not that entanglement (ontological) is fundamental while separability (ontic) is illusory, but rather that subjectivity is entangled in an illusory orientation toward the function of language—an orientation that is as fundamental to language as the ambivalence that ultimately undermines this orientation's authority.

As we have argued through our quasi-deconstructive reading of *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Dasein's animality is confirmed in and through Heidegger's exclusion of animality from the world of Dasein. We are, in other words, contaminated by, even constituted by, what we seek to resist or oppose—this is one of the primary lessons of deconstruction. This lesson, though accepted and even articulated explicitly in contemporary posthumanist theory, is often abandoned or sublimated in the shift from the theoretical to the ethical, from a description of how things are to a prescription of how things should be. For instance, and this is the most banal example, posthumanism quite obviously (and justifiably) takes issue with the humanist modality of thought, aiming explicitly to withdraw from, or at the very least to transmute, this modality, to make humanism function differently so as to potentially have less deleterious effects. Humanism, in its tendency (at the level of conceptuality and sociality) towards appropriation, totalization, and exclusion, must be resisted, if not entirely dismantled. As

the argument goes, a philosophical drive towards totality, such as could be found in Hegel's system, goes hand-in-hand with a drive towards political totalitarianism. Or, in Heidegger's case, a drive towards the exclusion of (animal) otherness might provide the philosophical coordinates of Heidegger's political involvement with the Nazi party: "one might legitimately wonder whether this course on animality constitutes a skeleton key to Heidegger's embrace (however tenuous or short-lived) of Nazism" (Nealon 46). Now of course there are various styles of conceptual appropriation, and this is what I take to be the point of departure of (rigorous) posthumanist inquiry: to attempt to appropriate differently, rather than to evacuate entirely the dynamics of appropriation. From Nietzsche we've learned that appropriation is not something we do, certainly not something we choose to do. Rather, appropriation brings us into being, comes from behind us, and pushes us into the world, making both "us" and "world." For Nietzsche, appropriation is the only game in town, such that every position, including a posthumanist stance, will always be ethically compromised. This is why Heidegger's "error" in his reading of animality, although potentially catastrophic in its ethico-political consequences, is not just one to which we are all susceptible but one that we are guaranteed to make (even if we make it differently than he does).

Author Bio

Nathan DeProspo is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Writing and Communication at Oberlin College. His research explores contemporary rhetorical theory, posthumanism, writing studies, and continental philosophy. His book manuscript in progress argues that anxiety is a constitutive force in the scene of writing, in the formation of academic subjectivity, and in the affective rhythms of contemporary hyper-capitalism. He teaches courses in professional communication, rhetorical theory, autotheory, and academic writing.

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