

**Italian Philosophy before the Animals**  
**Review of *Animality in Contemporary Italian Philosophy***  
**Eds. Felice Cimatti & Carlo Salzani**  
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At the stormy beginning of a new millennium, the theme of animality has gained popularity in philosophy, possibly due to the intensifying grip of governmental devices on the biological aspects of human and non-human life. Contagion, nutrition, reproduction, environment, and others have become political themes of the utmost importance. They have overtaken subjects of greater prominence from the last century, such as freedom, equality, justice, and independence.

A further element that characterised the ‘animal turn’ was the growing importance of the relationship between humans, animals, and the ecosystem. In this regard, it is useful to recall that, starting in the 1970s, Peter Singer and Tom Regan called for greater moral consideration for animals, thus opening a debate that is still ongoing today. At the beginning of the 2000s, two texts were published that had a profound impact upon the terms and concepts of that debate: *The Open: Man and Animal* by Giorgio Agamben and *The Animal That Therefore I Am* by Jacques Derrida.

These works have contributed to pushing a part of *Animal Studies* toward a focus on human-animal relationships, which led to the inception of *Human-Animal Studies*. In this second turning point that characterised world culture, Italian philosophy (thus filling in a presumed gap within English-speaking philosophy) played a central role, with Agamben taking the lead in the debate.

*Animality in Contemporary Italian Philosophy*, published in 2020 by Palgrave MacMillan, reconstructs the unique way in which Italian philosophy has reflected on the question of the animal. It refers to already well-known figures from ‘Italian Theory’ such as Agamben, Roberto Esposito, and Antonio Negri. At the same time, it also focuses on lesser-known authors, who are introduced to an English readership in some cases perhaps for the first time. The book aims to contribute to the international debate on animality through the specificity of Italian thought, showing both its high points and the marginalisation it has sometimes suffered, which nonetheless also preserved it. The editors of the volume, Carlo Salzani and Felice Cimatti, are two Italian philosophers who have garnered considerable attention in Italy and abroad thanks to their groundbreaking studies. They have enriched the volume with an introduction and two essays. While the volume includes works by the most prominent Italian thinkers who deal with animality, all voices share a common perspective, which is unpacked in the book’s

introduction (*The Italian Animal – A Heterodox Tradition*) and Cimatti's first essay.

The guiding thread of the volume is that Italian philosophy (rooted in mediaeval and ancient thought) has acted as an alternative to Cartesianism that today, as its mechanistic paradigm wanes, speaks to the present with renewed vigour. In short, Cimatti writes, Italian philosophy has never been Cartesian. When, in fact, Descartes articulated a theoretical system founded on the ontological division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* (mind and body, man and animal), he found fertile ground in German and French philosophy, but not in Italy, where Giambattista Vico firmly criticised his dualism. Vico's criticism and philosophy would go almost entirely unnoticed outside the peninsula. This ushered in an era (beginning at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century) in which Italy and Italian philosophy were relegated to the periphery of Europe.

Cimatti traces how this anti-Cartesian paradigm had its forerunners in thinkers such as Dante Alighieri, Niccolò Machiavelli and Tommaso Campanella and reached its highest level of conflict with Giordano Bruno, who affirmed the identity of God and Nature well before Spinoza. Cimatti also shows how the Italian tradition embodied, after Descartes, a path of Western thought that has been violently disrupted. Nonetheless, the anti-Cartesian possibility, which had been rejected and sidelined for centuries, and which may be found in such cornerstones as Vico and Giacomo Leopardi, suddenly re-emerges in the work of twentieth century authors such as Antonio Gramsci and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Their almost Dionysiac immanentism rejects the idea of an unbridgeable separation between thought and matter, or man and nature. And this perspective points the way toward new paths in our society, the relationship of which to animality is so deeply in crisis.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, 'Animality in the Italian Tradition', is a historical reconstruction that opens with Cimatti's essay and continues with Luisella Battaglia's essay on the thought of Aldo Capitini, the 'Italian Gandhi'. Capitini, following in the footsteps of Francis of Assisi, advocated non-violence in the relationship between humans and animals, envisioning a moral consideration that embraces all sentient beings, a position very close to that of Peter Singer. The following essay from Giorgio Losi and Niccolò Bertuzzi, offers a complete overview of Italian anti-speciesist trends, from animal advocacy to the animal liberation movements.

The second part, 'Animality in Perspective' embraces the current Italian philosophy. Carlo Salzani, the co-editor of the book, dedicates a chapter to Giorgio Agamben's thought. According to Salzani, animality occupies a central point in the Agambenian reflection (inspired here by Furio Jesi) as sovereignty is nothing but the 'anthropological machine' that separates man and animal, allowing the former's dominion over the latter. Only a notion capable of jamming and going beyond such an opposition can disable this machine and cancel out its deadly effects on both man and animal, thus moving towards the idea of a life as destituent power.

Matías Saidel and Diego Rossello's essay examines Roberto Esposito's philosophy. Although he is not directly involved in a reflection on animality, Esposito has nevertheless engaged in a deconstruction of political dispositifs (such as those of 'person' and 'man') to highlight the harmful attempts that have been made to immunise the human against any contamination by the animal, that led him to elaborate a sort of biocentrism of impersonal life that characterises what he calls 'living thought' (the Italian philosophy of life that runs from Machiavelli to Benedetto Croce and beyond). A similar subject, linked to the 'posthuman' perspective, is dealt with in the paper by Giovanni Leghissa who compares ethology and cybernetics so as to affirm that it is not only humans who have reason and subjectivity.

For his part, Marco Maurizi develops the insights of the Frankfurt School by elaborating the implications of the dialectic between the human and the non-human along with that between reason and nature. His essay traces the history of Italian Marxism – showing how these problems are frequently present from Labriola to the post-workerists – and outlines the perspectives and unresolved issues of the debate. For example, Antonio Negri affirms, in a statement stemming from a Spinozist materialism, that we should break down all barriers between humans, animals, and machines. Applying the perspective of Theodor Adorno to anti-speciesism, Maurizi argues that we consider animals inferior *because* we exploit them, rather than the other way around.

The book continues with Federica Giardini's essay connecting the theme of animality with that of sexual difference as developed by Italian feminist thinkers such as Luisa Muraro, Adriana Cavarero and Rosi Braidotti, according to which women and nature stand equally in need of emancipation from patriarchy. An emancipation that Giardini calls 'zoopolitics': a politics of life that goes beyond any hierarchy between mind and body. This second part closes with Alma Massaro's paper, which illustrates the attention paid to animals, as innocent and Edenic beings, to be found in Paolo De Benedetti's theology, and with an essay by Roberto Marchesini (editor of the journal, *Animal Studies-Rivista italiana di zooantropologia*) on the recognition of animal subjectivity in scientific and philosophical ethology.

The third part, 'Fragments of a Contemporary Debate' opens with an essay by Massimo Filippi, who deconstructs the device of the abattoir as part of the sacrificial paradigm according to which the very idea of a 'rational subject' can exist only against the background of an infinite slaughter of flesh, as an effect of the separation of man and animal imposed by anthropocentrism. Even the apparently biological concept of species functions as a dispositif to separate humans from other beings, with which they might otherwise have stood upon the same continuum of life. His reflection is inspired by philosophers such as Agamben, Derrida, and Haraway. It indicates how the overcoming of anthropocentrism can occur only in an animal-political life as a joyful and sensual hybrid.

The book closes with a brief overview of essays that extend also outside of philosophy. Laura Bazzicalupo interprets the Anthropocene (or, following Jason Moore, Capitalocene) as the catastrophe of anthropocentrism and its will to dominate nature. The author reads the phenomenon through Foucauldian categories as a biopolitical battle to control human and non-human animality: a governmental apparatus in defiance of which the philosophy of the Italian Renaissance (from Machiavelli to Vico) can represent an alternative paradigm to that of the separation of man and nature. Valentina Sonzogni examines several cases of speciesism in contemporary Italian art, discussing artworks made of dead animals and, through them, documents the insensitivity to the pain of others that is characteristic of certain artistic practices. Finally, Leonardo Caffo, a prominent voice in the media, articulates an ethical vision of a relationship with animals that is no longer instrumental but carried out ‘only for them’, insisting in a deconstructive tonality that the time has come to talk about animality.

In the way of an ‘archaeology of knowledge’, the epistemological subplot that runs throughout the entire book is that of the stratification of philosophical thought, which thus appears neither linear nor univocal. If there is certainly a mainstream current running through it, that which has triumphed and that we can now identify with the Cartesian modernity that looks at nature as the object of scientific knowledge, there are at the same time defeated or underground currents that come to the fore in the form of cancellations or repressions. This is the case with the Italian Renaissance which (after the domination of theology in the Middle Ages) had opened up a number of possibilities for a thought of animality ranging from scientific empiricism to magical hylozoism, or, in other words, from the philosophy of nature of Galileo Galilei to that of Bernardino Telesio, Giordano Bruno, and Tommaso Campanella.

Despite the political theory that runs from Niccolò Machiavelli to Giambattista Vico proposing another way, one that kept together social empiricism and a conception of man in continuity with the animal (i.e. the figure of the Centaur in the former and that of the Beast in the latter), in the theory of nature the victory of the Galilean perspective over the Brunian one is undoubted. This led Italian philosophy to its notable contribution to world scientific culture, and, at the same time, to devalue the vitalistic philosophy of the Renaissance as mere superstitious magic or animism.

However, the defeated vitalism advanced by Bruno and Telesio that languished in shadow and (although it was partially taken up by Spinoza) remained substantially forgotten for a long time, somehow survived the oblivion and was rediscovered in the nineteenth century by Bertrando Spaventa. For this reason, the vitalistic thought of the Renaissance can hardly be considered a fundamental element in the European or Italian philosophy of its time, which went in a completely different direction for centuries. Probably the importance we nowadays recognise in it derives from a projection of the present onto the past, and it could

be more fruitful to ask, as Aby Warburg does, how that which has been forgotten can survive in history through the ages.

Among the images that tradition has handed down most frequently in the form of cancellation is the image of messianism. In general, the whole book is accompanied by Giorgio Agamben's thesis that the form of life practised by Francis of Assisi was a model both for subsequent ontologies, that attempted to reunite man and animal (or, in other words, nature and divinity) and for the communities that have tried to live beyond the law, understood as sovereign politics. This is testified to not only by the book's cover, which shows Giotto's painting 'Saint Francis Preaching to the Birds', but also by the number of times that the name of the saint of Assisi returns in the text to indicate how the gesture of revoking both the separation between man and animal and sovereignty is profoundly messianic in the most authentic and forgotten sense. A gesture that, perhaps, also recalls something of the inoperativeness of the pagan mysteries that early Christianity absorbed and hid in its very most intimate and recondite core.

Animality and Renaissance philosophy have been removed in the same way by scientific modernity. So contemporary 'Italian theory' cannot rethink and reactivate one without the other in its attempt to achieve a different modernity. For this purpose it must go back to the point where the possibility was originally denied: hence the interest in Spinoza (and all the anti-Cartesian heritage) shared by Agamben, Negri and Esposito. This vitalistic thought acquires renewed force in thinkers as different as these and affords new meanings for a Western civilisation in crisis precisely in terms of its relation to nature.

*Animality in Contemporary Italian Philosophy* introduces some of the most prominent Italian thinkers engaged in thinking animality to an English-speaking audience. It is a constructive resource written by highly respected researchers and addressed to scholars and those who care about the relationship between humans and animals, and it demonstrates the way in which Italian philosophy can help to provide an alternative paradigm.