

Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy

written by: Vanessa Lemm (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009)

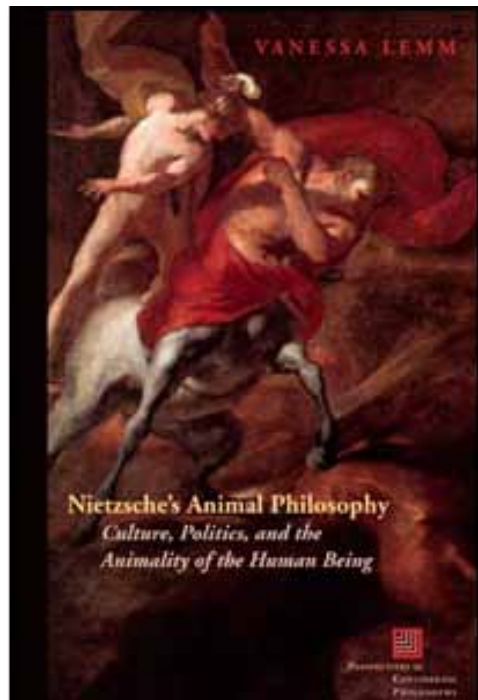
reviewed by: Yunus Tuncel (The New School, New York)

Nietzsche's texts are infused with animal symbolism. Nietzsche uses animal symbols to exemplify a quality; for instance when he refers to the agonistic Greeks as tiger-like in "Homer's Contest." In another context it is to show the necessity to be connected to the animal world, as he emphasizes the place of the satyr-chorus in Greek theater in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, on the other hand, animals are not only essential to Zarathustra's cosmos, but they also embody a spirit that comforts and guides him. There are not many thinkers in the West for whom the animal in the human is revered as strongly as it is in Nietzsche, echoing an archaic reverence for the animal spirit. In *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy*, Vanessa Lemm not only explores the place of animality in Nietzsche within the context of important ideas and themes such

as forgetfulness, creativity, overhuman, gift-giving, and forgiveness, but she also retrieves, via Nietzsche and others, the animal human from the place of oblivion that it has fallen into our "advanced" civilization. Below is a review of each of the six chapters of her book.

The first chapter, "Culture and Civilization," introduces an important distinction between culture and civilization, which is used throughout the book. According to this reading, culture stands for cultivation, freedom from moralization, and counter-memory, while civilization is understood as taming and breeding, morality of repression, and memory. These two different types of forces are in perpetual conflict that plays itself out in the antagonism between human life and animal life. Civilization is "...directed against the animality of the human being" (11), whereas culture is the liberation of the animal human. This distinction, which is supported by passages from Nietzsche's works (but as always Nietzsche is not consistent in the way he uses these two terms), provides a sound framework for the book from which many questions can be posed on the animality of the human and its status.

Another important theme of the book is how Nietzsche de-centers the human as



he retrieves animality or the animal human, which is also the project of culture. A passage quoted by the author from the *Anti-Christ* illustrates this project of culture in Nietzsche, which cannot be overstated. The de-centering of the human is a theme that runs from Nietzsche's earliest philosophical writings to the latest. The opening paragraph of "Truth and Lies," for instance, presents a *humbled* picture of the human, not in relation to animals but in relation to the whole universe. On the other hand, the author presents many examples to illustrate how the Nietzschean culture-project works regarding the "promising animal." Animals lead Zarathustra¹ toward the overhuman, as they embody the wisdom that he needs to overcome himself. Another example for Nietzsche's project is his frequent reference point and source of inspiration: the agonistic Greeks and how they kept alive the cruelty of the animal. Here Lemm makes insightful observations without providing any specific information on the place of animals in the agonistic practices of ancient Greeks. Two such important practices in relation to animals were the following: contestants and their judges had to be purified in pig's blood on the way to Olympia (otherwise they could not enter the sacred precinct) and animals (one hundred oxen for Zeus and a black ram for Pelops at Olympia) were sacrificed at the sites of contest. Through animals they were made sacred (because animals were considered sacred) and through them they were reminded of the perils, sacrifices, defeats, and deaths of the competitive journey. Both of these support the author's observation that for the Greeks "...animality is a source of their humanity" (16). Many other examples, including non-agonistic ones, can be given to demonstrate this point, which she makes here convincingly.

However, ancient Greek culture and its agonistic spirit which is in touch with animality, as it was in many archaic societies, did not prevail; the priestly type with his extirpation of animal passions became dominant. Lemm presents this event, the rise of morality, as a "false overcoming," a civilizing project. From the standpoint of animal philosophy, this is regarded as the "turning of the human animal against itself" (20). She illustrates it by way of two concepts, the over-animal and the over-human; although they both share the same prefix 'over-', it does not give the same signification to them. In the case of the over-animal, the human being is placed as superior to animals, excluding the possibility of an agonistic encounter. By contrast, in the overhuman a space is created for such an encounter as the human and the animal are treated as equals. I did not assume here that the author was referring to an actual contest between humans and animals, but rather to an agonistic sustenance of the animal human within the human. Additionally, we can learn from animals how to become agonistic.

Moreover, the concept of the overhuman is integrally connected to the question of hierarchy in Nietzsche. The author rightly observes that Nietzsche's hierarchy should not be understood in a traditional way, but fails to elucidate the nature of the relationship (as in commanding and obeying) of the agonistic forces. Whether one likes to use the term 'domination' or not, in any agonistic struggle there are higher and stronger types and lower and weaker types. Nietzsche clearly states his

1 Many different kinds of animals appear in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, making it a rich text in animal symbolism. It is not the goal of *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy* to explore this symbolism, but rather animality in Nietzsche in general and its many dimensions. For animal symbolism in *Zarathustra*, one may consult with the relevant chapters of *A Nietzschean Bestiary*, ed. by C. D. Acampora and R. R. Acampora. This and other books are listed in the first footnote of the book.

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version of the “sacred order” in many of his texts². In a given game of contest, the contestants rule over each other during the game and at the end one ends up ruling over the other (*dominari*, the origin of domination, means to rule). In a sense, the winning side “commands” and the losing side “obeys.” Therefore, in contest one force may be dominant over the other force. It should also be kept in mind that the Greek agon took place in a hierarchical world where gods and heroes ruled over the contestants mythically and symbolically, whereas priests and judges ruled over them in actuality and even physically (not to mention previous victors who won fame and were honored at the sites of contest); there would not be any agon if such a hierarchy did not exist. Agon is not only about two approximately equal contestants fighting. Yes, domination and submission exist in agon; however, Nietzsche’s and the Greek version of domination does not create a stagnation or a stifling in the flow of agonistic forces. On the contrary it urges, organizes, and elevates them.

One last topic in Chapter 1 is the memory of culture. Unlike the memory of civilization that crushes animality, the memory of culture, rooted in dreams and illusions, opens up to animality. In this way humans are connected to the whole organic world and to forgetfulness. In this sense, animals too have memory, memory of instincts and the body, for example; and through this memory humans are connected to them and to the animal that they are. Without illusions there would not be any life or culture for Nietzsche, and we are mostly in touch with them in the states of forgetfulness, as in sleep and dream, the domain of the unconscious. For Nietzsche, the unconscious pertains not only to the psychic states but also the somatic ones. Therefore, humans come into contact with their animal selves mostly in their unconscious states, often symbolized by myths and acted out in animal-worshipping cult practices. The genius who appears as evil or demonic to the civilization (28), creates out of this well of forgetfulness, as the author observes: “...forgetfulness is the source of all noble and great actions” (26).

In Chapter 2: “Politics and Promise,” Lemm makes another distinction, this time between the promise of civilization and the promise of culture, as she elicits an intriguing teaching out of Nietzsche related to this second distinction: “...the antagonism between human and animal life forces is the principal feature of human development” (30-31)³. Therefore, what humans do with the animal forces that they are or how they manifest themselves in the economy of their culture becomes an important question; this, according to author, shapes their lives, their *history*.

The promise of civilization stems from the memory of the will; it is the memory of universals (or concepts as opposed to metaphors). Civilization responds to a need, a need for self-preservation and protection, and this response takes the form of its promise. The memory of the will that underlies this response is a means of domination to keep societies together, but at bottom it is violent and cruel. According to the author, Nietzsche, like Machiavelli before him, understood this violent nature of the original political power. To achieve civilization’s rule the animal must be tamed

2 TSZ II: “On Self-Overcoming.”

3 There have been many thinkers who have reflected on this difficult topic since Nietzsche, although there is very little information about humanity’s animal past. Levi-Strauss, for instance, focuses on the stages of humanity’s development as every stage distinguishes itself from its animal past as in cooking and clothing. On the other hand, Bataille sees the rise of taboos on death and sexuality (not unrelated to Levi-Strauss’ conclusions) as the distinctive features of early human beings.

and bred; in this way civilization treats everyone as belonging to a herd (this is the “leveling” effect of civilization), and the memory of the will, which subsumes all under universals, prevents the rise of great human beings. If, on the other hand, the animal resists this process of herd treatment, it will be considered a criminal, an outsider and eventually marginalized. In this scheme of the antagonism between civilization and culture, civilization ends up producing “overbred herd animals, animals that are too obedient and too tame...” (36)

In contrast, the promise of culture is based on the animal that makes promises, or the power of the promise-making of the sovereign individual that is rooted in animality. The sovereign individual, according to the author's reading of GM II, has individual self-responsibility, is free from domination and exploitation, and overcomes the morality of customs in the name of its own standard of value. The type of responsibility is amoral, unconscious, and instinctual. However, questions for the other two qualifiers emerge here that must be explored with Nietzsche's texts: is anyone really free from domination and exploitation according to Nietzsche? In the *Genealogy*, First Essay, Nietzsche says that the nobles designate themselves as superior, i.e. dominant and ruler (sec. 5), and it is their desire to overcome and become master (sec. 13). On the other hand, can the sovereign individual exist in isolation from the highest (i.e. collective) values of his/her epoch? How do these values fit into the scheme of the sovereign individual, if every society is shaped and held together by them?

Furthermore, the promise of culture is not a faculty understood in the Kantian sense, but a force of life, as the author claims. And, for Nietzsche, it is counter-institutional (38). Perhaps the author wants to say that this type of promise is not static, not bound by universals and pre-determined, but rather dynamic as life itself is. Kantian faculties aside, we may not assume that all institutions are cut off from life forces. Every human gathering under specifically agreed upon norms for some purpose is an institution. Can one say that every institution goes against animality and the promise making sovereign individual? I beg to differ here and give examples from Nietzsche where, for instance, he refers to ancient Greek cults (also in GM II) and agonistic formations (HC and elsewhere) as institutions. Perhaps we will have to split institutions into two, those that embrace animality and those that repress it.

The responsibility of the sovereign individual is agonistic, “...because it promotes a continuous resistance to the institutionalization of freedom” (41). As the author rightly observes, freedom evolves out of struggle and victory for greatness, and this is how she explains Nietzsche's call for a strong state in which a struggle for freedom can be sustained. However, her conclusion that the goal is to preserve the rivalry between the individuals and the state (42) can hardly be sustained. Neither the indirect reference to the Greeks (through agon) nor the quotation from the *Twilight of the Idols* could support this conclusion. In ancient Greece, the *polis* supported the contestants, and more than that, invested in their formation and success. And, in return, the victorious contestants honored their *polis* by dedicating their prizes to her. The primary rivalry in the Greek world was among the rival states in the political arena and among the rival political groups within a state and among the contestants in the field of agon. As for the quote from TI, freedom is measure according to the resistance and the overcomings of the individual, both of which produce the highest type of a human being. But why does this resistance have to be necessarily

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against the state? The author elicits it out of the last part of her quote: "...five steps from tyranny, near the threshold of the danger of servitude" (TI, "Skirmishes" 38). However, if we read section 38 of the "Skirmishes", we shall see that Nietzsche is not referring to the individual's struggle against the state or tyranny, but rather the conditions, political or otherwise, that produce the highest types. Liberal institutions level mountain and valley and make humans small, cowardly and hedonistic, whereas war-like (and also agonistic) "institutions," in which there are difficulties, privations, and sacrifices, produce the highest types.

The following chapter, "Culture and Economy," presents other perspectives on animality, namely economics and politics of culture, which emancipate life forces. There are three important themes in this chapter that I would like to discuss. The first theme is wholeness in the diversity of forces or completeness; this is achieved through an "aristocratic" culture that produces great human beings. Human beings become complete again through these great types, and this is an antidote against the disintegration, or what the author calls 'incompleteness,' a malady of socialization and civilization (53). While the author observes that completeness is only an illusion, she also states that "...human animal life, whether under the rule of civilization or under the rule of culture, cannot be completed..." (54) However, their incompletenesses, as she states, are radically different. An interesting point which leaves the reader with many questions.

The second theme in "Culture and Economy" concerns the redemption of nature, which can happen by way of the pluralization of singularity through culture, precisely because it is culture that upholds the genius and privileges the singular over group and the herd. While the economy of culture opens up a free relationship to the other and releases a free expenditure unrestrained by utilitarian concerns, civilization has unleashed, as the author correctly diagnoses in agreement with Nietzsche, its own projects in the form of democratic movements and mass political ideologies. As a result we have two opposing currents, a counter movement as against the "new type of enslavement" (57) in contemporary society, and they play out their own battle, their own version of the battle between master morality and slave morality. And perhaps the battle is fought on that bridge that spans from the *Mensch* to the *Übermensch*.

The last and the third theme in "Culture and Economy" is about power and mastery. The "rule of higher culture" needs surplus of power and a public space where the exceptional types who are singular and who are in touch with their animality and forgetfulness can flourish. For an example the author gives the Greek agora where people or rather these exceptional types competed. Although the Greek agora was not a major site for contest, with 'agora' she must be alluding to the public aspect of the Greek agon. While such cultures are great, they are also short-lived, because they bring growth and ruin, life and death together and run on an excess of life and power. This is in agreement with Nietzsche, especially when he says or implies that the great age of agon died in the fifth century BC. However, one statement in this discussion was puzzling to me, which is when the author states: "culture exists beyond mastery and control..." (59). As she acknowledges, Nietzsche seems to call for the opposite. Why mastery would be excluded from the economy of great cultures has yet to be explained. Isn't it the mastery over oneself with or without the guidance of a master over oneself that leads to greatness? Ancient Greek athletes (and other types of

contestants) went through rigorous training under the supervision of their trainers at their gymnasia and later on were selected and judged by the judges of contest on the way to victory or defeat; this is how greatness was achieved. In many other cultural contexts we come across similar paradigms of master-disciple relationship. Or, perhaps another kind of mastery is meant by the author here, but it is not clearly defined.

In Chapter 4: "Giving and Forgiving" Lemm engages in an extensive discussion of Christian forgiveness and gift-giving virtue in Nietzsche, as she sees the latter to be Nietzsche's alternative to the problem of the former. First, I will summarize Nietzsche's critique of forgiveness as she presents it. Forgiveness does not break the cycle of revenge (on the contrary, it perpetuates it) and does not enhance human animal life. Since forgiveness depends on an external institution to forgive, it takes away the power to forgive from the individual (hence more emaciation of the human animal) in addition to the fact that it widens the gap between the forgiver and the forgiven. Since mediated revenge⁴ is a sign of impotence for Nietzsche, the connection between forgiveness, on the one hand, and revenge and powerlessness, on the other hand, can easily be established. All of these points on forgiveness provoke one to ask the question as to who is forgiving whom and also the question as to in what power constellation the forgiving takes place. For Nietzsche, forgiving becomes a tool for the weak to exercise power and perpetuate their weakness. But the weak cannot *give*, and ultimately they cannot *forgive*. Finally, forgiveness presupposes a moral standard (i.e. God) and operates with guilt (the feeling of indebtedness and sin), punishment (a form of exercise of power), and free will (a tool in the hands of the priest to rule over the masses), all of which Nietzsche jettisons along with God and posits the innocence of becoming.

According to the author, a new notion of forgiveness can be re-constructed out of Nietzsche; she also brings Arendt and Derrida into the discussion. This new forgiveness, fueled by animal forgetfulness, must be a gracious gift, without any conditions attached to it. It signifies a new beginning between two singulars. And as such it stands for a political friendship; "...forgiveness is possible only among friends..." (72). For Derrida, this type of forgiveness is not verbal and not human; it is a silent, animal forgiveness. Mortals fight over words, but silence reigns over them as a noble presence; it is the silence of the human animal who feels speechless in the face of human comedy.

However, Nietzsche's alternative to forgiveness is the gift-giving virtue that is unique and incomparable. As opposed to a virtue that is given from top to bottom, this virtue is one's own invention; it is what makes one who one is: it is a singular virtue or the virtue of the singular. To give out of abundance and exuberance and to give to become a sacrifice and a gift underlie the gift-giving virtue, which the author sees as the primary motive as to why Zarathustra leaves his cave. He wants to shine upon those who will receive him as a gift. Ultimately gift-giving is an animal virtue that fluctuates in the tension between proximity and distance; one must keep a distance even to one's friend to be a gift and a sacrifice. In this context of gift-giving, the author raises the question of agonistic friendship in which the plurality of singular

⁴ In WS 33 Nietzsche makes a distinction between immediate revenge, which is based on self-preservation, and mediated revenge, which has the element of time (and is linked to the memory of the will).

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friends is sustained and not subsumed under what is common to or what is shared by the friends; they are closest to and yet furthest apart from each other. Finally, the gift-giving virtue "...presupposes, suffering, struggle, and a striving for power" (82), all of which are agonistic functions and are embodied in agonistic friendship.

Chapter 5: "Animality, Creativity, and Historicity" deals with other important themes in Nietzsche's thought. Presenting a close reading of the second *Untimely Meditation*, she makes several observations. First, animal forgetfulness is prior to human memory, which also means that one remembers because one can forget. Second, Nietzsche decenters the human and changes the hierarchical relationship between the human and the animal. Third, Nietzsche rejects, in favor of the unhistorical, both the suprahistorical and the historical perspective on life (92). It would be more accurate to say that they are rejected by Nietzsche insofar as they deny the unhistorical. Otherwise, for Nietzsche they are all *equally* important and needed in their proper doses. As for the historical and the unhistorical, Nietzsche says that they "...are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture."⁵ As for the suprahistorical, this is what the visionary needs to have one foot in memory and the other in forgetfulness; as a notion it foresees the rise of the eternal recurrence. However, it is clear that Nietzsche privileges forgetfulness over memory, as the author claims. Forgetfulness is the ground of all great deeds; it is the seat of illusions and myths on which all history-making is based.

Therefore, history is an interpretation, it is a *fabrication* just like any other myth; it is primarily based on animal forgetfulness, and she gives the Greeks as an example for "unhistorical animal sensibility" (102). We can also say that for the ancient Greeks myth and history are so fused together that they are difficult to separate; this is how one can explain why moderns have difficulty approaching the Greeks with their ultra-historical perspective. This is also why history for Nietzsche is not a science but an art, according to the author: "Accordingly, the artifacts of history should be recognized as interpretations rather than truths..." (99) Here the author relies on Nietzsche's earlier thoughts on the division between concept and metaphor, science and art, as in "Truth and Lies," but does not discuss Nietzsche's new conception of science as it is presented under *la gaya scienza*. Does not Nietzsche present a novel way of *knowing* with this conception, a new science, so to speak? In this sense, can one not say that Nietzsche may regard history both as art and as science at the same time? The author ends this chapter by giving Nietzsche's later prefaces as examples of his artistic historiography. By writing these prefaces, she claims, Nietzsche overthrew an old book, disrupted memory, created tensions within himself between his old self and his new self in order to inspire a new life. In this re-invention of his self, one sees Nietzsche's own agonistic struggles within himself.

In the final chapter of the book, "Animality, Language, and Truth," Lemm starts with a discussion of three types discourse on truth in Nietzsche: 1) theoretical, 2) practical, and 3) bio-political. In the first one, what emerges as significant is the idea of truth as singularity. Nietzsche does not deny all types of truth, as she observes, but the metaphysical conception of truth that prioritizes the concept over the metaphor, that separates the abstract from the concrete, and that severs the human from the animal. By contrast, intuited metaphors, *Anschaungsmetapher*, which Nietzsche

5 UM II, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," tr. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): sec.1, p.63.

discusses in "Truth and Lies," have to do with picture thinking, *Bilderdenken*, which we share with animals; one may also add sound-thinking here, two senses Nietzsche emphasizes in his essay, or even sense-thinking in general. Picture thinking and animal forgetfulness confirm the continuity between human and animal life. In addition to the singularity that underlies intuited metaphors (the metaphorical activity that Nietzsche sees at the origin of creation of words pertains to singulars), the author considers animal silence as significant for singular truth in Nietzsche who "...separates truth from language and, aligning the former with silence, associates it with the animals" (115). The silence of the animals is not any kind of silence, but constitutes an alterity that stands opposed to conceptual language, or that which cannot express itself in conceptual language; this is why there will always be a rift, an unspoken, incommunicable rift, that separates the silence of metaphorical picture-thinking from the noise of abstract thinking. Therefore, "pure and honest drive for truth" that often appears in Nietzsche's text and spirit must start with a denial of metaphysical truth and proceed towards a revival of metaphorical, singular truth that is in touch with the animal human.

In the practical treatment of truth, one finds Nietzsche's social criticism; here the author likens him to an Enlightenment thinker and claims that Nietzsche renews the tradition of Enlightenment by recovering the intellect's ability to critique society. She diagnoses this renewal in the shift from *Vorstellung* to *Verstellung* in Nietzsche's thought, a shift that is accompanied by the shift from the critique of metaphysics to social criticism. However, the author falls short here for not acknowledging the following: a) that Nietzsche's critique of all highest values (including Western metaphysics) has its ramifications in all areas of culture including religion, art, philosophy, and science as well as social and political institutions (which she emphasizes); and b) that for Nietzsche the intellect is not the only force that critiques society or that contributes to the transformation of the society. Here the author falls at odds with the basic premise of her book, the recovery of the animal in human. In the third and last treatment of truth, namely the biopolitical, the central question for Nietzsche, according to the author, is: what value does truth hold for life? Rather than seeing the intellect as an instrument of knowledge, Nietzsche considers the intellect as an instrument of dissimulation in the service of life.

More than a century after Nietzsche, the philosopher of the animal human, we still do not *know* what to do with the animal that we are. Moralists of the old school still perpetuate the model of human being as a weak, emaciated animal with a pretension of fake Biblical superiority of the human over the animal (this superiority may be an expression of the animal in the human that is repressed, emaciated and sick, ultimately an expression of the fear of animality). Then there are those who, fueled by the modern zeal for self-preservation of the many at all costs, are experimenting on animals that are silent witnesses to human meekness. And finally, there are the weak-hearted utilitarians who feel sorry for the animals, forgetting that it was a similar world-view that placed the animals under the chopping block of the scientist to maximize the happiness of the many. Nietzsche, on the other hand, stands at a different threshold regarding animality and who human beings are as animal beings. Vanessa Lemm explores this subject from a variety of perspectives, as she raises many questions to reflect over. I highly recommend her book, *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy*, to anyone who is brave enough to open up and embrace the question of animality in the face of contemporary problems.

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