

Heidegger's Later Thinking of Animality: The End of World Poverty

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Discussions of the Heideggerian thinking of animality are overwhelmingly considerations of his 1929–30 lecture course *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, where the animal is famously presented as “world poor” and trapped within a “disinhibiting ring.”¹ The focus on this course is surely understandable as it is his most extensive treatment of the matter anywhere in his corpus, but it is not the only one. In the 1953 text “Language in the Poem,” Heidegger rethinks animality no longer in terms of containment, but instead in terms of exposure to world. A more radical break with the earlier course is hard to imagine. Here what comes to the fore is a new relation between mortality and animality, problematizing the distinction between the two. After presenting Heidegger’s later view of the animal, I will briefly address what it has to offer for questions of Heidegger’s purported “ontotheological anthropocentrism.”²

The consideration of the animal in the 1953 Trakl essay “Language in the Poem” arises out of a thinking of departure and wandering. Beginning from Trakl’s line: “The soul is a stranger on earth,”³ Heidegger explains that “strange” (*fremd*) derives from the Old High German *fram*, which means “on the way to”⁴ The soul that is a stranger on earth is one that has set out on the way to somewhere else. It has left any domicile behind for paths on the way somewhere, without yet having reached any destination. The soul that is underway is thus “between”

places. The soul is defined by this being underway, so much so that it is not even the source or “origin” of its own movement, but is “called” out along the paths it traverses. Heidegger asks, “to where is the stranger called?” and answers, in accordance with Trakl’s poem, that the stranger is called “into the downfall [*Untergang*].”⁵ This *Untergang*, however, is not so much a downfall or even a “going under,” rather it is, translated just as literally, a “going among” or “going amidst” (*unter zu gehen*). The soul is called to go among the things of the world, which is to say, it is called into this between.⁶ If there is any downfall or demise to be had here, it is solely that of the self-centered and encapsulated subject that would imagine itself at home, master of the world, regarding it from on high.

Indeed, Heidegger describes this *Untergang* in just such terms of dissolution: “It is losing oneself in the spiritual twilight of blueness.”⁷ To set out underway, to enter the between, is to enter this spiritual twilight of blueness. It is “spiritual” insofar as Heidegger follows Trakl in understanding spirit as a flame capable of offering inviting warmth at a hearth as well as burning everything to ashes in conflagration. Spirit as flame is never wholly one or the other of these, always in between. The loss of oneself by entry into the between occurs at “twilight” (*Dämmerung*), the crepuscular transition of the day. It is not simply the end of the day, but likewise the dawn of morning. “Morning, too, has its twilight [*dämmert*].”⁸ Twilight is always between the end and the beginning. Lastly, the between is a spiritual twilight of “blueness” insofar as blue is the color of twilight, of the time that is neither day nor night. Blue is the color of the trace, of what remains light in the dark and dark within light. As Heidegger puts it, “The brightness sheltered in the dark is blueness.”⁹ In all of these aspects, the loss of self is revealed to be an entry into the between of relationality.

No longer at home and not yet at its destination, the wandering soul finds itself on the way somewhere. On these paths between enclosures, it wanders exposed. The essence of this soul as a stranger means that it is never at home, not even with itself. It is not defined by being in place, but by being underway, neither here nor there. Having left the closure

of the home behind, it is exposed to what comes. This being underway is thus a condition for encounter, for seeing and being seen. Out among the blueness of twilight, the wanderer is caught sight of by a blue deer (*das blaue Wild*). Heidegger's rethinking of animality unfolds in his reading of this recurrent figure in Trakl's poetry.

Let us note at the outset that the animal in question is a deer, a game animal or wild beast, a *Wild*. The etymologically attested connection with the wilderness, *Wildnis*, should not be missed. But just as the wilderness is understood by Heidegger as a "garden of the wilderness,"¹⁰ indicating the ineluctable relationality of the human such that the wild is never untouched, a similar understanding informs the thinking of the deer (*das Wild*). The deer will not be so wild as to remain completely foreign to us. There is a relation between wanderer and blue deer operative here. Trakl's deer is the "blue deer" (*das blaue Wild*), where blue once again names the slippage of the between, the blurring of just such oppositions as the wild and the civilized, for example, and the appeasement of the antagonisms that they establish. In fact, Heidegger follows Trakl in thinking of the *Wild* as the "shy deer," the "gentle animal."¹¹

But the blue deer must enter the twilight, just as the wanderer must leave home. Heidegger follows Trakl in tracking this transformation of animal (*Tier*) into the deer (*Wild*). The transformation begins with Trakl's depiction of "... An animal's face / transfixed before blueness, blue's holiness."¹² Heidegger elaborates the consequences of this exposure to blueness:

In sight of the blue and at the same time brought to self-restraint [*Ansichhalten*], the animal's face is transfixed and transforms into the countenance of the deer [*Antlitz des Wilds*] ... In being transfixed, the face of the animal comes together. Its appearance gathers itself, composing itself, in order to look towards the holy.¹⁵

The transformation of the animal into the deer is coincident with the look out towards the holy, which we can provisionally sketch as the

space of grace, or arrival. The animal is not some self-contained creature harboring an essence or species-being. The animal is instead what it is on account of a relation that carries the animal out past itself to situate it in the between, to transform it into the blue deer.

Exposed in the blueness, the deer is open for what comes and stands as a witness to it. The deer observes what takes place along the twilight paths of the between:

For a blue deer always follows
these darker paths,
an observer among the twilight trees¹⁴

Trakl calls on the deer to assume this role of witness in regard to the wandering of the stranger.

the steps of the stranger
rang through the silver night.
Would that a blue deer were to remember his path¹⁵

Heidegger asks, “who is the blue deer that the poet calls out to? An animal? Certainly. Only an animal? By no means. For it is supposed to remember [*gedenken*].”¹⁶ The remembrance of the deer is a looking past the present in two ways, first by remembering what it has seen, and second by seeing what is not simply present, but what is instead drawn out into the between along these twilight paths as well. This memory, this capacity for witnessing, makes the blue deer something other than an irrational animal. The deer is past the present in its recollection and this redefines its animality: “The blue deer is an animal, whose animality presumably does not rest in the animalistic, but in that observing recollection.”¹⁷ The animal becomes the deer in looking beyond itself, certainly past any “disinhibiting ring” that would confine it.

To be sure, the transformation in question is a break with all manner of confinement for the animal. Heidegger's new understanding of the animal is on the basis of its exposure to blueness, i.e. in terms of the between.¹⁸ This means breaking with the traditional abstractions and oppositions of metaphysical animality whereby it is set against the

rational and intelligible. In the Trakl interpretation, this animal-rational diremption is thought of as a “curse” that has befallen us, though Heidegger is quick to explain that “not duality [*das Zwiefache*] as such, but rather discord [*die Zwietracht*] is the curse.”¹⁹ Duality and difference are the gift of existence for us, modes of relating. Concomitant with that gift, however, is the curse of discord. The differences all too easily reify into antagonistic oppositions, not simply dividing the separated parties but urging them on to their utmost extremes. Animality becomes sheer wildness, with Heidegger observing that “due to this [the discord] each of the clans [*Geschlechter*; sexes, races, generations, tribes] is drawn into the unbridled uproar of the always isolated and sheer wildness of the wild beast [*bloßen Wildheit des Wildes*].”²⁰ Discord isolates each pole of the opposition it institutes—animality against rationality, for instance—such that the poles are deprived of all contact with each other. Animality is opposed to the rational and becomes sheer wildness and revolting brutality. “Out of the uproar of blind wildness it [discord] carries each clan into a diremption [*Entzweiung*], and thereby casts it into unbridled isolation.”²¹ The segregation of the animal from the rational has led to the animal being understood as the brute wild beast.²² It is isolated and quarantined within itself. Like a dog on a leash inciting the very behavior it would remedy, the isolated animal is caught within a sameness to self that drives it mad.

The transformation of animality likewise promises a transformation of humanity insofar as the antagonism between the animal and the rational has been written into the definition of the human as *animal rationale*. This dirempted being has not yet made its way into the indeterminacy of the blue. Invoking Nietzsche, Heidegger accordingly observes: “This animal, namely the thinking one, the *animal rationale*, the human, according to a word of Nietzsche’s, is not yet established.”²³ But for Heidegger this does not mean that the animal has not been sufficiently determined—indeed, he mentions that the contemporary human is all too decisively constituted and determined—rather that “the animality of this animal has not yet been made firm, i.e. ‘brought home,’ brought into what is native of its veiled essence.”²⁴ The home for this human animal

is out among the twilight paths. Its only home is on the way to . . . What is not yet established for it is no further determination, but the dissolution of these in the blue. The animality of this animal has not yet been allowed to remain veiled, indeterminate, so as to essence.

The diremption and exacerbation of oppositions dissolves in the blue twilight. Heidegger writes that “the countenance of the deer in sight of the blue takes itself back into the gentle [*das Sanfte*]. For the gentle is, according to the word itself [Grimms’ dictionary derives it from *sammeln*, to gather²⁵], the peaceful gathering. It transforms the discord in that it converts [*verwindet*] what is injurious and scorching of the wild [*der Wildnis*] into an appeased pain.”²⁶ In the blue, the animal is no longer forced by its confinement to be ever only brute and wild animality. Rather than being endlessly goaded into ever purer forms of self-sameness, ever more extreme expressions of its irrationality, the animal in the blueness is able to be calmed and become gentle. The appeased and calmed pain remains a pain, but the discord of it is “converted” (*verwindet*). The discord is not forgotten as though it never happened, instead it is understood as dependent upon a prior field of relations from which it was an abstraction. The discord that arose from a drive to purity (of the animal, of the rational, of the space between them) is understood as dependent upon a preceding context of non-oppositional relations, a deformation of the between.

With the appeasement of discordant opposition, a new sense of animality can emerge. Heidegger refrains from trying to define it any further. Indeed, in some sense this would be impossible, insofar as the animal is now understood as essentially connected through its look with what it is not, and thus not simply present-at-hand for an assessment and evaluation. In Heidegger’s words, “this animality is still far off and scarcely to be sighted. The animality of the animal here intended thus vacillates in the undefined.”²⁷ Let us note, however, that this animality is not unseen; there are traces. And if this new animality is as we have said, then it could never be fully present for the viewing anyway. It could only be sighted by a vision that likewise occurred within the between, one not constrained to the simply present, an observing recollection once again.

What then does this tell us about the relationship between humans and animals? The stakes of this question are high, since Heidegger is often taken to be a “metaphysical humanist” who inserts a strict divide between the human and the animal, keeping each side in its purity free from contamination by the other.²⁸ One of the grounds cited in support of such a claim is precisely the distinction between “dying” and “coming to an end” that plays a strong role in the *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, but which is also to be found in *Being and Time* as well as in later texts like the Bremen lectures.²⁹ The current analyses allow us to respond to such claims.

The transformation of the human in blueness would parallel that of the animal that is transformed into the blue deer. The human would become the mortal—a stranger to itself, and one defined by what lies most outside it, something that it can never possess and which keeps it open and disposed towards the world, i.e. its death. This is surely a shift from a thinking of the living being (*Lebewesen*) to that of the beings that can die (*die Sterblichen*), but it is a shift that is not automatically the privilege of the human. In “The Danger,” the third of the Bremen lectures where Heidegger first develops the role of the mortals within the fourfold, he intones that “the human is not yet the mortal.”³⁰ Mortality is not something simply pre-given as a distinction to the human against the rest of life. It marks a kind of transition out of the living being, out of humanity itself: “From the rational living being, the mortals must first become.”³¹ Mortality is something that humanity does not possess.

A consequence of this is that it is not only the animal that does not die. It is the human, too. Heidegger makes this brutally clear in notorious lines from the same lecture:

Hundreds of thousands die in mass. Do they die? They perish. They are put down. Do they die? They become pieces of inventory of a standing reserve for the fabrication of corpses. Do they die? They are unobtrusively liquidated in annihilation camps. And even apart from such as these—millions now in China abjectly end in starvation.³²

These are harrowing words, to be sure, and what they express is the fact that death is nothing pre-given. More, death is something that can be taken from another. No one may be able to die my death for me, but they are in the position to take that death from me, it would seem. Humans do not die, they come to an end. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that in the wake of the war this purportedly essential marker of a difference between the human and the animal would waver, if not give way altogether. The idea that only humans would die and that this would ground an essential, even ontological, distinction from the animal for Heidegger must be surrendered.

Despite this, objectors might respond that Heidegger's conception of the "mortals" is precisely what is at stake and that here, far from abolishing his anthropocentrism, he only inscribes it all the more fully. The idea of mortality by this account would be one more strategy of seclusion and quarantine to protect Heidegger's privileged version of "subjectivity" from contamination. Heidegger would be responding to the recognition of a disturbing similarity between animal and human. His response would take the form of a still more drastic flight away from this proximity into a shielded realm of purity. Now it would only be a cadre of human elite who achieve mortality and death, leaving the rest of humanity to end with the animals. Not every human is mortal, they might say, but only humans are.

And yet, what is mortality but a matter of exposure? Mortality is not a privilege of the human. In fact, mortality for the human is only possible through a liberation of animality, a rethinking of the animal, our relation to animals, and the animality of ourselves. Mortality is not at all a privilege of the human, and Heidegger notes this himself. "The name 'blue deer,'" Heidegger writes, "names the mortal."⁵³

The animal, like the wanderer, belongs to the between. It exists beyond itself and this means it requires that beyond to be what it is. All that appears (essences) marks the world around it, perhaps even finding it remarkable, memorable. What appears takes part in the reciprocal relation of exposure. Whatever appears in the blue between, like the blue deer, offers the relations of support and witnessing that bear the world and make it bearable in turn. Such is our mortality.

Notes

- 1 A reliable recapitulation of the course, along with critical commentary, is found in William McNeill, “Life Beyond the Organism: Animal Being in Heidegger’s Freiburg Lectures, 1929–30” in *Animal Others: On Ethics, Ontology, and Animal Life*, ed. Peter H. Steeves (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 197–248. Didier Franck’s provocative essay “Being and the Living” treats the 1929–30 lecture course while calling attention to overlooked passages in *Being and Time* where biological and physiological aspects of Dasein are mentioned or discussed. His consideration of anxiety is particularly intriguing; see Didier Franck, “Being and the Living” in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, eds. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 144–45.
- 2 Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 30.
- 3 In citing the works of Georg Trakl, I will refer to both the German text of Georg Trakl, *Dichtungen und Briefe*, 2nd Edition, *historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, vol. 1, ed. Walther Killy and Hans Szklenar (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1987), hereafter abbreviated “HKA,” and, after a slash, to the English translation, *The Poems of Georg Trakl*, trans. Margitt Leibert (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2007). Here, “Frühling der Seele,” HKA 141/160, tm; cited at GA 12: 35/*On the Way to Language* (hereafter “OWL”), 161.
- 4 GA 12: 37/OWL 163; tm.
- 5 GA 12: 47/OWL 171; tm.
- 6 I have discussed this going among the things in Trakl’s poetry in “Entering the World of Pain: Heidegger,” *Telos* 150 (Spring 2010): 83–96.
- 7 GA 12: 47/OWL 171; tm.
- 8 GA 12: 38/OWL 164.
- 9 GA 12: 40/OWL 165; tm.

- 10 GA 9: 423/*Pathmarks* 320.
- 11 “Kindheit,” HKA 79/95, “An den Knaben Elis,” HKA 84/100; tm, cited at GA 12: 40/OWL 165.
- 12 “Nachtlied,” HKA 68/85; tm, cited at GA 12: 40/OWL 166.
- 13 GA 12: 40–41/OWL 166; tm. One of the arguments in Lawlor’s *This Is Not Sufficient*, following Derrida, is that such gathering is denied to animals: “In any case, and this is the central point, animals do not have access to the ‘as such’ or gathering.” See Leonard Lawlor, *This is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 50.
- 14 “Passion,” HKA 125/142, tm.
- 15 “Sommersneige,” HKA 137/155, tm, cited at GA 12: 39/OWL 164.
- 16 GA 12: 41/OWL 166; tm.
- 17 GA 12: 41/OWL 166; tm.
- 18 Calarco views part of Derrida’s concern with the animal to be that “working through the question of the animal at this level, at the level of proto-ethical exposure, will challenge the metaphysical grounding of modern ethics and politics and reorient thought along alternative lines” (Calarco, *Zoographies*, 119–20). We believe the observing recollection of the blue deer to have gone no small distance along these same lines.
- 19 GA 12: 46/OWL 170; tm.
- 20 GA 12: 46/OWL 170; tm.
- 21 GA 12: 46/OWL 170–71; tm.
- 22 It has also turned rationality into unimaginative calculative planning. See “Overcoming Metaphysics” on the instinctual nature of planning, GA 7: 92–93/*The End of Philosophy*, 105–6.
- 23 GA 12: 41/OWL 166–67; tm. For Nietzsche’s claim, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 5 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), 81 and vol. 11 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), 125.
- 24 GA 12: 41/OWL 167; tm.
- 25 Grimm and Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, s.v. “sanft.”
- 26 GA 12: 41/OWL 166; tm.

- 27 GA 12: 41/OWL 166; tm.
- 28 The 1928–29 lecture course *Introduction to Philosophy* devotes a few pages to the nature of childhood (more specifically to Dasein in both its early [*frühzeitliche*] and young [*frühmenschliche*] forms). Heidegger immediately specifies young Dasein, noting that “essentially different without further ado it is not, even if it is to be understood otherwise than as human” (GA 27: 123). Heidegger then worries over the methodological question of how to conceive of such a Dasein, deciding that it can only be pursued in something of a “privative manner, i.e. in departure from a positive foundational conception of Dasein” (GA 27: 123). The similarities with the treatment of the animal are striking. And just as the animal operated in a ring of behavedness (*Benommenheit*) which has connotations of a kind of captivated daze, so too is the child said to be in a “semi-conscious state [*Dämmerzustand*]” (GA 27: 125). Most importantly, however, the child does not simply comport to beings, rather “Some being is already open to the child, although still no comportment to this being follows” (GA 27: 125). As Heidegger explains, “the semi-conscious state in which such a young Dasein is, does not mean that there would be still no relation [*Verhältnis*] to beings, but rather only that this self-comporting to ... [*Sichverhalten zu ...*] still has no definite goal. The being with the beings is to a certain extent still clouded over, not yet illuminated, such that this Dasein can still make no determinate use of the beings” (GA 27: 126). So let us simply note that even at the time of fundamental ontology, there is recognition of a distinction between the adult and the child, that the human is not simply human. The category that is supposed to be preserved against contamination by an animal other, for example, is already compromised. Not all humans are alike.
- 29 See GA 29/30: 388/267; GA 2: 320/*Being and Time* (2010), 232; and GA 79: 17–18.
- 30 GA 79: 56.
- 31 GA 79: 18; cf. GA 7: 180/*Poetry, Language, Thought* (2001), 176.

- 32 GA 79: 56.
- 33 GA 12: 42/OWL 167; tm. Obviously such a view calls into question the supposed anthropocentrism of Heidegger, a central tenet of the interpretations of animality in Heidegger. Calarco, as one instance among many, claims: “The problem is rather that Heidegger uncritically accepts two basic tenets of ontotheological anthropocentrism: that human beings and animals can be clearly and cleanly distinguished in their essence; and that such a distinction between human beings and animals even needs to be drawn” (Calarco, *Zoographies*, 30). With the mortality of the blue deer, this no longer seems the case.