

The elephant, the mirror and the Ark

Rereading Lacan's animal philosophy in an era of ontological violence and mass extinction

Key words: animal philosophy – Jacques Lacan – psychoanalysis – animal research – endangered species – philosophical anthropology – animal ethics – continental philosophy

Summary

Lacan's views on 'animalhood' constitute a crucial dimension of his intellectual endeavour. While distancing himself from the traditional Cartesian understanding of animals as 'machines', and of humans as rational 'thinking things', Lacan uses insights from ethology, comparative psychology and palaeoanthropology to reframe our understanding of human and animal existence, articulating remarkable and challenging insights on animal experimentation and the protection of endangered species. And yet, while raising the hope that (on a theoretical level at least) things may change, there is a sense of disillusion as well. Notwithstanding his 'subversion' of Cartesianism, Lacan still adheres to the persistent ontological tendency to single ourselves out as unique living beings. Yet, for Lacan, our uniqueness is a deficit rather than a privilege. We are different not because we *have* something which other animals lack (a 'rational soul' for instance) but rather because we *lack* something which other animals have. Language and culture were meant to counteract our primordial vulnerability and the uncanny sway of modern science and technology over the future prospects for survival of countless species must be seen as a symptom of excessive overcompensation. In this paper, key components of Lacan's 'animal philosophy' are analysed and assessed, but also exposed to new insights coming from contemporary primate ethology (notably the work of Frans de Waal). I conclude that Lacan's views provide an intriguing point of departure for reframing our moral obligations towards animals in an era of ontological violence and mass extinction.

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Introduction

In 1953, the French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) began his famous series of Seminars, fourteen of which have been published in French (seven of which also appeared in English). The cover of his first Seminar (Lacan 1975) bears the image of a large elephant with impressive white tusks, but the link between cover and content is far from clear. For although a plethora of issues are being discussed, elephants are only mentioned in passing - in session XIV, to be exact. And yet, this seminar provides a point of entrance into Lacan's 'animal philosophy', as I will argue. Twenty-five centuries ago, when Socrates shifted the focus of philosophy from nature (as 'object') to humans (as 'subject'), Western thinking became 'infected' with a tendency to single ourselves out as a unique ontological category (as 'rational animals'), distancing personhood from animalhood, a view that has increasingly been challenged (if not besieged) by insights and findings from empirical animal research, notably primate ethology. And this basic tension (between biology and metaphysics) constitutes an important strand of thought in Lacan's work. Already in his first key publication (1949/1966), he develops his views on (nonhuman) animals¹ in a dialectical manner, questioning and incorporating the results of primate ethology and comparative *Gestalt* psychology, while distancing himself from the Cartesian *Cogito* concept. Although he continues to emphasise the singularity of human experience compared to the animal world, the human-animal relationship is reframed in a rigorously post-Cartesian manner.²

In this paper, Lacan's re-conceptualization of the human-animal divide will be critically assessed. To what extent does it still echo the ontological tradition, extending from Aristotle up to Hegel? What was Lacan's response to insights from biology,

¹ In the remainder of this paper, I will use 'animals' as shorthand for 'nonhuman animals', while 'we' and 'us' refers to humans.

² Some years ago, I published a comparative analysis of the 'animal philosophy' of Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, and Heidegger (Zwart 1997), exploring the contours of a post-Cartesian animal ontology. This article constitutes a follow-up, shifting attention to Lacan. Steeves (1999) has edited a volume in which the contours of the views of "continental philosophy's most influential thinkers" on animals are explored (p. xiii). As Lacan is mentioned only in passing, my paper is meant as a supplement to this volume, a flanking essay to Elisabeth Behnke's presentation (1999) of the animal philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961).

notably primate ethology? And, finally, what is the relevance of his views for important contemporary issues such as animal husbandry, research on animals, and mass extinction?

To address these questions, I will begin at the beginning, namely with the views on animalness brought forward in what is generally regarded as Lacan's first key paper, the inaugural nucleus of his work: his famous lecture on the mirror stage, presented in 1949 (*Section 1*). Subsequently (*Section 2*) I will turn attention to Seminar I, already mentioned above, to show how closely Lacan's animal philosophy is interwoven with his core insights concerning the imaginary and the symbolical as basic dimensions of human experience (*Section 3 and 4*). I will emphasise that, for Lacan, the human-animal divide is not an ontological 'given', but rather the outcome of an intricate dialectical development, both on the ontogenetic level (i.e., the vicissitudes of human individuals during early childhood) and on the phylogenetic level (the coming into being of humankind). In fact, Lacan explicitly builds on Hegel's famous account of the relationship between Master and Servant as a philosophical alternative to Darwinist and survivalist conceptions (*Section 5*).

After this conceptual analysis 'from within', I will broaden the scope by assessing animal experimentation (*Section 6*) and primate ethology (*Section 7*) from a Lacanian point of view and by addressing Derrida's criticism of Lacan (*Section 8*). Finally, I will point to the relevance of Lacan's views for contemporary controversies concerning the future prospects of animals (both wild and domesticated) in an era of high technology and mass extinction (*Section 9*).

1. Psychoanalysis, primate ethology, and the Cogito: the mirror stage

Lacan presented his lecture on the mirror stage twice: at the 14th International Congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) in Marienbad in 1936³ and subsequently at the 16th International Congress of the IPA in Zürich in 1949. Neither presentation made much impression on his audience, but the published version

³ In Marienbad, Ernest Jones, as congress chair, cut him short after ten minutes, long before the lecture (referred to in the IPA Bulletin as a paper on the *Looking-glass phase*) reached its conclusion. It marked Lacan's 'failed encounter with the psychoanalytic establishment' (Nobus 1998, p. 102). Lacan left the next day to witness the Berlin Olympic Games, replacing the conference stage (where he failed to experience his moment of 'jubilation'), with a mass audience stage devoted to the celebration of a particular *Gestalt* or *image* of human embodiment.

(1949/1966) became an intellectual classic in the 1960s and is now generally regarded as the inaugural building block of Lacan's oeuvre.⁴ Given the degree of complexity of most of Lacan's texts, this paper is remarkably clear – the fruit of a 13-year gestation period, as Nobus (1998, p. 104) phrases it - and the initial lack of response must no doubt be due to the innovative nature of Lacan's endeavour. For in the 1930s, the systematic study of animal behaviour was still in an early stage of development and although the work of Lorenz and others was beginning to attract the attention of zoologists, many psychologists still clung to the idea that psychology was exclusively about humans (Evans 2005). It was not until the 1950s that John Bowlby again endeavoured to combine views from ethology and psychoanalysis. Thus, in retrospect, Lacan's effort to use comparative research on humans and chimpanzees to further psychoanalytic theory was fairly innovative and daring.

Lacan notably builds on the work of a friend, the Marxist Parisian philosopher/psychiatrist Henri Wallon who had compared the reactions of human infants and young chimpanzees to their reflection in a mirror. Around the age of six months, Wallon claimed, both humans and chimpanzees begin to recognise their mirror image, but whereas human infants tend to be fascinated by it, examining their reflected gestures in a playful manner, young chimps initially presume they are facing a fellow member of their species and quickly lose their interest, turning their attention to other things. Wallon published a paper on this topic in 1931, which became part of a monograph on childhood development (1949/1954, pp. 151 - 180).

For Lacan, the mirror experience is an important moment because, in his view, our primordial experience of our bodily Self during very early childhood is one of discord, turbulence, and fragmentation. This is connected with a biological insight: the prematurity (i.e., the, in many ways, still foetal condition) of human beings at birth,⁵ their lack of control over their mobility and bodily functioning in early life, their extreme dependence on others for survival. It is only when we begin to recognise ourselves in a mirror that we manage to see ourselves as a unity, a whole. According to Lacan, the confrontation with this image (*imago*, *Gestalt*) of ourselves triggers in us a sense of

⁴ It serves for instance as the opening chapter of the English translation of *Écrits* (Lacan 1977/2011, 1-6).

⁵ This insight was developed in the 1920s by the Dutch paleoanthropologist Louis Bolk (1926) who claimed that human singularity consists in chronic juvenility. Becoming human constitutes a significant challenge given the early childhood malaise of prolonged dependency and lack of coordination. Yet, eventually, our prematurity becomes a major benefit. As unfinished animals, humans are adaptive, creative and flexible. In contemporary discourse, this view is taken up by Sloterdijk (2001, p. 189) and others.

jubilation. He calls it an Aha-experience, a reference to the work of the German Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Köhler on primate problem-solving behaviour, conducted at an anthropoid research station on Tenerife in 1913 (1917/1925).⁶ Köhler described how chimps, like humans, after having worked on a puzzle for quite some time, may suddenly see how the pieces fit together. In fact, during the first months of their existence, Lacan points out, human infants find themselves surpassed in performative intelligence by infant chimpanzees (p. 93). Due to the mirror event, however, our fragmented bodily sensations suddenly seem to converge and a pre-linguistic sense of Self is established - and this is a fundamental experience, an ontological triumph (Nobus 1998, p. 104, p. 107). And yet, it results in an 'imaginary', alienated Self, grounded in the perception of an external image, an *imago* or *Gestalt*, providing merely an illusion of identity and control. Therefore, this imaginary Self is bound to result in new instabilities, conflicts and threats. A more robust sense of Self can only come about when the child enters the symbolical order, the world of language (Cf. Lacan 1998, p. 222). It is only then, by becoming linguistic beings, instead of staying fixated and immersed in the mirror stage (as in the legendary case of Narcissus), that the uniqueness of human existence, also in comparison to primate life, becomes more apparent. Thus, the imaginary Self that is formed during the mirror stage functions as a precursor to the final subjectivation of human beings within the symbolic realm. Lacan presents his interpretation of the mirror stage as incompatible with a framing of human subjectivity in terms of the *Cogito*, as issuing from Cartesian philosophy (p. 93).

The mirror experience is especially intriguing from a Lacanian viewpoint because it constitutes the onset of our libidinal relationship with our own body: our narcissism, as well as our aptitude for being mesmerised by visual images. The mirror experience is the paradigm of 'the imaginary' as a basic dimension of human existence. Whereas, in (other) animals, sexual, aggressive and other behaviours are triggered by a *limited* set of specific visual cues, acting as signals that are bound to unleash specific behavioural patterns, human beings can project their fears and desires upon almost any object in their environment. Thus, Lacan argues, a plethora of symptoms that surface in the social and erotic life of human adults can be elucidated through a comparative analysis of the behavioural repertoires of animals and very young humans placed in front of a mirror.⁷

⁶ In fact, the term was adopted from Karl Bühler, who originally coined it (1907).

⁷ Lacan's use of primate ethology has been criticised by Webster (2002) who argued that Lacan projected his own inner turbulence and discord, as well as his 'dandyish' dependence on his public 'image', on the

Wallon's interpretations have been challenged/modified by later empirical studies, such as the mirror test devised by the American psychologist Gordon Gallup to demonstrate self-awareness of chimpanzees (Gallup, 1970), which was later successfully applied to other highly intelligent animals such as elephants and dolphins. By some, this is seen as detrimental to Lacan's ideas (Webster 2002). Yet, psychoanalysis is not the same as developmental psychology. It has its own primary source of information: the verbal encounter between analyst and patient. And although Lacan borrows insights from other fields (such as ethology) to elaborate his views, the 'psychoanalytical experience' (the dialogue between analyst and patient) remains his primary test-bed and point of departure. This is already underscored by the title of his paper, presenting the mirror stage as a formative moment in the development of the ego "as revealed to us in psychoanalytical experience".⁸ Still, in view of these more recent developments, the evolving dialogue of psychoanalysis with ethology and developmental psychology (as an iterative process of mutual exposure) must be regularly updated. For that reason, a contemporary specimen of primate ethology will be addressed from a Lacanian perspective in *Section 7*. Before doing so, however, I will outline how deeply Lacan's animal philosophy is entrenched in his theory of human and animal existence as such.

2. Naming the elephant: animal philosophy in Seminar I

The basic issue addressed in *Seminar I* (Lacan 1975) is the relationship between words (concepts, symbols, signifiers) and things. During the first session, Lacan explains that words for him are 'instruments' for dissecting and delineating things – such as animals (p. 8). He sees science, notably laboratory science, as a kind of asceticism, allowing individuals to rid themselves of sloppy and imprecise (everyday) language, thereby sharpening their linguistic tools.

In the final session, this idea is taken up again. Throughout the centuries, Lacan argues, science has functioned as purification: a relentless progress of the symbolic (p. 303). For indeed, Lacan unequivocally attributes the astonishing and uncanny powers of modern science (its far-reaching sway over nature, its penetrating comprehension of the

writings of Köhler and Wallon.

⁸ Köhler had similar motives for turning his attention to primates: it was a return to a point of origin that is difficult to study directly in humans, the performance of a task *for the very first time*: "In the intelligent performances of anthropoid apes we may see in their plastic state processes [which cannot so easily be investigated in humans]" (1917/1925, p. 3/4).

real) first and foremost to the development and effective use of symbols (numbers, mathematical symbols, chemical symbols and the like). According to Lacan, science basically consists in a drastic ‘symbolisation’ of the real, a systematic replacement of primordial phenomena and things by words, formula, measurements, and numbers. Scientists are virtuosi when it comes to handling symbols and it is precisely through the effective use of letters, words, equations, and the like that they manage to gain such control over nature. The availability of words and numbers makes it possible to deal with entities such as animals even without actually seeing, smelling, or touching them.

It is precisely this idea that also surfaces in the brief section devoted to elephants in session XIV. The fact that we at a certain point coined the word *elephant*, Lacan argues, is the single most important event in this animal’s entire history. It is due to the fact that we have the word ‘elephant’ at our disposal that we are able to deliberate about this species’ future. Thanks to the word, we can make decisions (for better or worse) and design policies that will determine the elephant’s future fate.⁹

According to Lacan, animals themselves do not enter into deliberations or policies of this kind. They dwell in a different, ‘imaginary’ world, dominated by images. Indeed, as we have already seen, ‘image’ (often replaced by its Latin and German equivalents *imago* and *Gestalt*) is a key Lacanian term. From a Lacanian perspective it is clear that, whereas the *image* of a large elephant may well evoke in us a sense of admiration, fear or terror, depending on the circumstances, the scientific gaze approaches such animals from a completely different (and apparently more neutral) angle, namely by labelling them (for instance, attributing a Latin name and surname to them), classifying them (for instance, under the heading of pachyderms) or by counting them (for instance, in order to formally determine whether they should be regarded as an ‘endangered species’). This means that, as our relationships with animals are mediated in a very fundamental way by taxonomy, regulations, quantifiable indicators, and the like, it is incomparably different from the relationships that evolve among animals themselves (or among various species of animals). Our relationship with animals is thoroughly grounded in the symbolic order: the world of names and numbers, of science and research, of legislations and treatises, of stock taking and population counts.

⁹ “C’est du fait que le mot *éléphant* existe dans leur langue, et que l’éléphant entre ainsi dans leurs délibérations, que les hommes ont pu prendre à l’endroit des éléphants, avant même d’y toucher, des résolutions beaucoup plus décisives pour ces pachydermes que n’importe quoi qui leur est arrivé dans leur histoire... [Rien qu’avec le mot *éléphant*] il arrive aux éléphants des choses, favorables ou défavorables, fastes ou néfastes – [To this, Octave Mannoni, who participated in this seminar, added that] “La politique vis-à-vis des éléphants est possible grâce au mot”] (1975, 201-2).

By voicing such ideas, Lacan (to a certain extent, at least) seems to build on a long tradition of philosophers who, beginning with Aristotle, developed their conceptualisations of humans and animals on the basis of dichotomies. In his book on politics, for instance, Aristotle claims that, of all animals, only humans are by nature *political* animals (1932/1967; 1253 a 3). Aristotle does not deny, of course, that many other species actually troop together in packs or herds, but he regards such behaviour as something else than being political. Humans are ‘political’ in a different manner than insects or gregarious animals because they alone possess speech. Although animals are able to produce sounds, they do not have a *voice*. Although they are able to shriek and howl and bellow and whistle and wail, they do not produce meaningful *words*. They are able to signal pain or fear, but the possibility of conveying *meaning* is denied to them. They will never develop what can be properly called a *language*.

Although Lacan appears to subscribe to such views, on closer inspection it becomes clear that at the same time he aspires to challenge and ‘subvert’ this tradition in a rather fundamental way. For whereas Aristotle and his followers see the human-animal divide more or less as an ontological ‘given’, arguing that humans ‘have’ something which (other) animals apparently lack, - for instance a rational ‘soul’ -, Lacan reframes this idea by arguing that *we* are the ones who *lack* something which is granted to all other animals but not to a *Mängelwesen*¹⁰ such as us. Lacan builds on Freudian theory, but also makes ample use of insights provided by research fields whose histories more or less coincide with that of psychoanalysis, such as ethology, comparative psychology, and linguistics.

Like psychoanalysis, ethology budded during the 1890s (with the work of Conwy Lloyd Morgan and others) and acquired international standing during the interbellum through pioneers such as Konrad Lorenz and Niko Tinbergen. For Lacan, the use of insights from ethology to elucidate psychoanalytical experience concords with the ‘style’ and ‘spirit’ of Freud’s own work (1975, p. 139) who in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920/1940) had given the example by reframing his theory of the drives with the help of biology, notably the work of Weismann.¹¹ Since Freud, Lacan argues, significant progress has been made in ethological research, due to Lorenz and Tinbergen, whose work he

¹⁰ i.e. ‘deficient beings’, a term coined by Arnold Gehlen (1940/1962)

¹¹ “Freud adosse sa théorie de la libido à ce que lui indique la biologie de son temps. La théorie des instincts ne peut pas ne tenir compte d’une bipartition fondamentale entre les finalités de la préservation de l’individu et celles de la continuité de l’espèce. Ce qui est là en arrière-plan, ce n’est rien d’autre que la théorie de Weismann” (1975, p. 139)

explicitly mentions (p. 140), so that the dialogue between psychoanalysis and biology must be updated. Lorenz and Tinbergen allow us to see how in animals the sexual “mechanism” (p. 140) is triggered, not by the real presence of the partner, but rather by something more powerful: a particular *image* that acts as a signal - a *Gestalt* (p. 141). Ethology shows how the sexual mechanism is switched on by an imaginary interaction (“rapport imaginaire”, p. 141). Therefore, these studies may deepen our insights into the libidinal functioning of the imaginary as such: the world of triggering, inciting or inhibiting images, as encountered and recorded in psychoanalytic practice as well.

3. Animals and humans: the imaginary and the symbolical realm of experience

Lacan’s reframing of the human–animal divide is intimately interwoven with his basic conceptual distinction between two dimensions of experience, namely the ‘imaginary’ and the ‘symbolical’. According to Lacan, two ways of envisioning the real are open to human beings, namely *the imaginary* (relying on the use of images) and *the symbolical* (relying on the use of symbols such as letters, numbers, names, computational symbols, mathematical equations and the like). The symbolical is the realm of legal and physical formulas and is tied up with uniquely human pursuits, such as jurisdiction and scientific research. Indeed, the symbolical, as a basic dimension of experience, is only open to humans. Whereas animals dwell in an ‘imaginary’ world, we have access to the ‘symbolical’ realm through language. And although certain images may trigger certain responses (such as sexual arousal or fear) in humans as well, it is the coming into being of the symbolical world that makes the development of science, ethics, and politics, as well as genuinely *moral* relationships, possible.

Thus, Lacan sees humans as beings that dwell in a world of meaning. More than anything else, they are producers and consumers of meaning, through the creation and interpretation of signs or symbols, i.e., forms (letters, words, sounds, gestures, and the like) that are invested by us with meaning. The sign or symbol functions as a signifier referring to concepts or objects (usually not actually present or visible as such). A symbol is therefore an arbitrary connection between a (visual or acoustical) signifier (a particular set of lines, dots, characters, or sounds) and the meaning/concept signified by it. The signifier is the visual or audible form, the signified the concept to which it refers. Lacan borrows these ideas from linguistics, notably the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-

1913), a contemporary of Freud. That is, he uses linguistic concepts for understanding the symbolical in a similar way as he uses ethological concepts for understanding the imaginary.

Following this line of reasoning, animals do not use symbols. A loud shriek may indicate that an animal is in pain, or is experiencing hunger, and particular behavioural patterns may indicate arousal or aggression, but animal behaviours must not be regarded as gestures and their sounds must not be regarded as words. Although we may recognise and respond to them (for instance, by feeding a hungry animal, or by keeping away from an angry one), the signals exchanged by animals are different from signs. Predators may recognise and react to certain typical behavioural patterns of their animals of prey, but this interaction cannot be regarded as a dialogue in terms of language.¹² In the case of human beings, a particular sign - for example, the word *hunger* - will convey a meaningful message regardless of whether it is spoken in a loud or quiet voice. It can be understood by other human beings, provided they have a sufficient grasp of the language system to which the utterance belongs.

The situation is more nuanced for domesticated animals or animals kept in confinement, Lacan admits. Dogs, for example, are addressed verbally by us, so that to some extent they participate in a world of language (1991, p. 194) and Lacan also mentions the example of minks who learn to respond to human voices in captivity (1998, p. 339). Still, whereas dogs may be trained to recognise auditory signals and to respond to the tone and loudness of our voices (regardless of whether we address them in German, French, or English), only human beings really grasp the meaning of the words we utter. The difference between humans and animals is not that humans produce *different* sounds, or more *complicated* sound patterns, but that human beings convey meaning, produce meaningful speech acts, rather than sounds. The wonderful sound sequences produced by blackbirds or nightingales, for example, will never convey lyrics or stories. And in this resides the basic difference. Only humans have the possibility of entering a symbolical universe, the world of language, numbers, and negotiations (2011, p. 78). Rather than arguing that we 'have' something that animals lack (intelligence, a rational soul, or something like that), we dwell in different worlds. Whereas the animal

¹² According to Lacan, ancient cave paintings ("art pariétal" p. 503) in Lascaux and elsewhere indicate that even in primeval times sheer fascination with the *image* of a deer-as-prey had already given way to animals as symbolic items in graphic constellations that probably functioned in the context of religious practices and processions: Unpublished Seminar XIII: *L'objet* (1965-1966). Source : <http://www.lacaninireland.com>

world is basically composed of threats, food, predators, cubs, partners and the like, human beings dwell in a world of symbols.

This is especially noticeable on the visual level where, according to Lacan, animals inhabit a world of visual forms likely to incite responses such as fear, sexual arousal, maternal care, or rivalry, images that effectively guide these animals through their *Umwelt* (1981). Yet, they have a propensity to ignore much more than they actually see (1978, p. 370). Sense organs first and foremost function as mechanisms of defence. Out of the overwhelming fullness of the real, only particular visual patterns or images with survival value are selected (1978, p. 371), while other sensory input is neglected. Animals of prey, such as chicken, will panic or freeze when spotting a buzzard (1981), but ignore the silhouette of an airplane. They are well adapted to, but also engrossed in – even “chained to” – their surroundings (1978, p. 371). For us, however, such well-trodden paths through an *Umwelt* that is able to satisfy our needs are missing (1978, p. 137-138). It is precisely the *lack* of concordance with our natural environments, the fundamental *split* between what we seek and what we find, which allows the symbolic to invade our world, to overwhelm us with verbalisations of desire. Famous tales about mice or men offering lions their future help if the latter allows them to escape for once, are implausible. Animals will never negotiate like that. The eagerness of a particular lion to respond to the visual, acoustic, or olfactory ‘image’ of a potential prey will predominately depend on the lion’s sense of hunger.

Visual items, such as scarecrows, may frighten or attract certain animals, but these items do not function as signs, like traffic signs do for us. In the interaction between animals, visual cues may play a significant role, for instance, as items of intimidation. With the help of feathers, fins, or tusks, animals (notably males) may present themselves to fellow-males as exceptionally frightening and to members of the opposite sex as exceptionally powerful or attractive. Such items function in duels, parades, and other signalling games (described by ethologists) featuring animals that provoke and challenge one another (1998, p. 182). Yet, according to Lacan, the world of human culture, of dance, ballet and music, is of a completely different nature.

Also, only humans can really engage in a therapeutic relationship (based on language). Whereas horses, dogs, and other animals may be subjected to therapy by horse whisperers (Evans 1995),¹³ dog whisperers,¹⁴ and similar professionals, in contrast

¹³ Better known from its cinematic version, starring and conducted by Robert Redford (1998)

to psychoanalysis these therapies rely on dressage rather than verbalisation. From a Lacanian perspective, words and numbers are not merely additional communication techniques. They open up worlds of their own, expanding cultural and temporal horizons in a way that is without precedent in nature. This does not mean that animals are bereft of moral status. Rather, the idea is that, because we inhabit a symbolical world, we are obliged to respond to animals in a *responsible* manner, modifying and curbing our natural impulses. It would be a misunderstanding to conclude that Lacan sees humans as ontologically privileged beings. Quite the contrary, he sees them as having fallen 'prey' to language (2011, p. 70). The symbolical is basically a compensation for our prematurity, our ontological deficit. In other words, Lacan sees human subjectivity as a 'symptom'. This already applies to the imaginary, which, in the case of humans, assumes very singular, fragile, and instable aspects. The fact that humans (unlike other animals) can project their desires unto a plethora of images arising in man-made techno-cultural environments should not be regarded as 'liberty', but rather as maladjustment, and as a basic human aptitude for perversity and aberration. Thus, rather than saying that we 'have' something that (other) animals lack, it is the other way around: we *lack* something which other animals have; namely, a natural concordance or adaptation between *Umwelt* and drives. Indeed, it is only in captivity that (other) animals develop neuroses similar to ours. It is the artificial estrangement from their habitat (i.e. the captivity imposed on them) which causes psychic malfunctioning, although most 'model organisms' have become artefacts of contemporary laboratory life to such an extent that they seem exempted of a natural habitat for good, so that the laboratory *is* their habitat. In humans, however, neuroses develop in supposedly free and autonomous individuals who inhabit what is considered a more or less normal environment, namely modern civilisation, an environment moreover which allegedly was brought into existence in order to meet our needs more effectively and readily than wilderness is likely to do. To the extent that civilisation *is* a large-scale experiment, we ourselves as its test animals, for sure.

¹⁴ The most famous contemporary dog whisperer is perhaps Cesar Millan: <http://www.cesarsway.com/>

4. The phenomenon of intimidation and the world of chivalry: Seminar IV

We may nonetheless look for similarities and continuity between the human and the nonhuman animal world. At first glance, countless analogies to duels and parades as they occur in the animal realm can also be found among humans. Take, for example, medieval contests involving valiant knights in full armour with flying colours and coats of arms. Can we see them as efforts to mimic similar phenomena in the animal world? According to Lacan (1994), also in this case, the differences are much more astute than the similarities. Lions or eagles painted on medieval flags or shields, for example, although they may to a certain extent have served to frighten and deter opponents in a distant past, were principally used to indicate the knight's symbolical allegiance to one of the parties in the field. These images were signs or symbols in the strict sense of the term. All those lions and roses painted on armour served as arbitrary signs: their meaning was highly political, highly symbolical: the soldiers involved expressed their allegiance to a particular political entity, represented by a white or a red rose, a lion or an eagle. In the regions these knights came from, lions had never really existed. To the medieval knight, the lion was an imaginary animal, a fascinating Gestalt, a sign conveying a certain message. Heraldic images indicated the 'house' or clan to which medieval knights belonged: allegiance to a particular Duke or King, allowing them to distinguish friend from foe, even in the midst of battle, when time for complicated gestures, words or explanations was scarce. A similar role is played by fetish-like erotic items, such as a particular pearl earring or a particular type of shoe.

Lacan argues that not only human perception, but also human memory is organized differently from that of animals (1981, 1994, p. 234). Whereas in animals the memory function is based on the retention and connection (through conditioning) of visual, acoustic, or olfactory impressions, human memory is predominantly organized in a symbolical manner, through series or circuits of signifiers. Phenomena like free association, dreams, and neurotic symptoms show that such connections often rely on words, on alliteration for instance, rather than on images. It goes without saying that the imaginary is present in the human world as well. We remain animals in many respects, frightened or captivated by images that correspond to mental templates, triggering pre-wired responses. Yet, in the human world, all this is eclipsed (although never completely erased) by the force of the symbolical. Lacan's reading of Hegel's famous analysis of the

encounter between master and servant allows us to further elucidate this view.

5. Master and servant: human history as a step-wise transition from the imaginary to the symbolical

The phenomenon of intimidation as a possible link between human and animal behaviour was already mentioned. With the help of certain bodily features (such as tusks) or with the help of certain behaviours (such as growling), animals (especially mammals, notably males) may intimidate, frighten, and deter one another, and analogies of such behaviours abound among humans, who likewise may present themselves as frightening apparitions, forcing the other to withdraw. Guns or helmets worn by soldiers, for example, are not only safety devices, but also function as items of intimidation. Still, Lacan maintains that even intimidation is different when it occurs between humans. Hegel's dialectical analysis of the emergence of self-consciousness, one of the highlights of his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807/1973), provides us with a concise yet intricate account of the step-wise transition from sheer intimidation to the intricacies of modern politics.¹⁵ I will summarise this famous section here in outline before turning to Lacan's reframing of it.

Initially, Hegel argues (1807/1973, p. 145 ff.), our relationship with our environment is fuelled by pure desire. We try to overcome the division between Self and object (Self and otherness) by simply abolishing otherness: by *consuming* the object. In this primordial state, we are bent on annihilating the living images - *Gestalten* -, the edible entities we come across. The Will to abolish or annihilate these independent life forms is called desire (*Begierde*). In the course of this process, however, subjects are bound to experience the obstinacy, the relative independence of objects. Instead of being satisfied by their abolishment, desire is aroused time and again. As we annihilate an object, it essentially escapes us, it cannot survive. The satisfaction is transient. Perhaps one could say that this 'stage' roughly corresponds to the world of primordial hunter-gatherers, roaming natural environments as clans searching for edible items.

True satisfaction of desire, Hegel argues, can only be achieved in an encounter with a true Other, another Self, a double: an unknown challenging living figure, an

¹⁵ In the 1930s, together with other famous French intellectuals such as Georges Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Raymond Queneau and André Breton, Lacan had attended the seminars of Alexandre Kojève, which provided him with a model for his own seminars in the 1950s. In Kojève's lectures, the Master-Servant dialectic played a pivotal role.

object who verbally acclaims its own otherness and independence. Both entities, both Selves, will try to realise themselves through the destruction of the other. Thus evolves a lethal conflict. The possible outcome of this violent encounter is twofold. We may either refrain from conflict, thereby becoming an object for the Other, losing our independence in slavery; or the otherness of the Other may be abolished by us. In order for the Self ('self-consciousness') to maintain its own integrity, the other has to be annihilated, so it seems. This other being, however, is not merely an object, it is an independent Other, acting in a self-conscious manner, quite similar to us. Both Selves mirror one another, engage one another in a kind of game that entails a serious threat to both. Eventually, through a series of dialectical movements, both Selves will have to recognize their mutual independence and self-consciousness. How does this come about?

The first dialectical movement is that both Selves *face* one another in a self-conscious, daring, provocative manner. They still basically consider the other as an object, a figure or image amidst the extensive fullness of life. Both of them are bent on annihilating the other. They both aim to destroy the intimidating foe. They challenge and intimidate one another and put themselves to the test, until one of them gives way. In the struggle for life that is about to erupt, they will have to put their lives at risk, they will have to prove their readiness to die, showing that there is nothing they would not be willing to give up in order to stand the test. One of them will either die or prove unwilling to risk his life. The latter thus betrays attachment to life, an unwillingness to give it up. This means giving in to anxiety in the face of death - the 'absolute master', as Hegel calls it - fearing for one's whole being. At that point, the precarious game is over. The first dialectical movement has come to an end, and we end up with an unequal relationship between, on the one hand, the slave or servant (someone who recognizes the independence of the other) and on the other hand the master: the one whose independence is now firmly recognized. From now on, the servant lives on behalf of someone else. Life was the chain from which he was not willing to free himself in battle, as Hegel phrases it, and this chain now chains him to servitude under his master's sway.

But this is not the final outcome. As for the master, instead of having a direct relationship with the world of objects, the servant functions as a mediator. Whereas the master enjoys the pleasures of life and consumes the fruits of the latter's labour, the servant is the one who really encounters living objects in the outside world. These objects are not completely abolished by him. It remains the master's privilege to

annihilate and consume them. Rather than abolishing the objects he encounters, the servant cultivates them, processes them, depriving them of their independence by means of his labour, but without destroying them. Perhaps we can say that, at this stage, humankind has entered the world of agriculture.

Gradually, it becomes apparent that the 'masters' have in fact become highly dependent on (the service of) their servants and that the masters' apparent independence is actually an illusion. The servants are the ones who really achieved control over nature, by cultivating it through labour. The masters, moreover, when it comes to recognition of their mastery, are dependent on their servants, but because the servants are themselves dependent upon the masters, they cannot genuinely recognize them, because true recognition presupposes independence. Meanwhile, in contrast to this imaginary recognition, servants achieve real independence through their hands-on interaction with nature. Labour is restrained desire, and therefore, through labour, they not only transform nature but also themselves: through self-discipline (self-labour). The capricious freedom of masters does not yield true autonomy. Real freedom is the privilege of the servant.

From a Lacanian perspective (1975, 1981, 1991, 2004), Hegel's analysis reads like a concise reconstruction of the phylogenetic process of becoming human. The world of consumption and sheer intimidation gradually gives way to a more humane world of negotiations and labour; the imaginary is gradually eclipsed (but never completely erased) by the symbolical. At first, the Self encounters a frightening 'Other', an intimidating, captivating image or *Gestalt*. Techniques of intimidation will be displayed to frighten one another, engage one another in a kind of game, a show of strength, until one of them (due to fear of death / attachment to life) submits. Both are bent on annihilating the other, until one of them shudders before the frightening image of the rival. In the animal world, such contests (usually between males) will always remain on this imaginary level (Lacan 1975, p. 310; 1998, p. 182). Often, rivalry takes the form of a show or parade so that the supremacy of the other is recognized without a real battle actually taking place. Instead, one of the rivals suddenly assumes a posture of defeat. A real physical violent collision is thus prevented. The participants were merely posing as an intimidating *Gestalt*; their conflict remains an imaginary contest.

In an imaginary world, Lacan argues, it is impossible to tolerate the other's independence (1975, p. 200). The other emerges as rival, someone who frustrates our

desires and draws us into a 'struggle for life'. Yet, Lacan vehemently discards the political 'myth', fostered by Darwinism, that social life is a continuation of the struggle for existence we encounter in the animal world.¹⁶ He contends that, in the human world, struggle for life remains a highly exceptional situation. The unequal situation that results from submission (slavery) has given way to a modern civil society, a situation of mutual recognition in which all parties recognize the independence of the other. Mutual recognition is what constitutes "the supra-natural world of the symbolical" (Lacan 1975, p. 243). An important precondition is the establishment of human sway over nature through labour and technology. Political autonomy and justice presuppose a certain level of technical control over nature, making slavery redundant. Through their interactions with nature, only the servants realise genuine humanity (Lacan 1981) and this process was nearing its completion in Hegel's era: the famous 'end' of human history. Genuine and mutual recognition is fundamentally different from intimidation, where one of the rivals is *forced* to recognize the supremacy of the other.

The most important outcome of the efforts of servants is not the consumables they produce. Their most important 'product' is the symbolic world of organized labour, of negotiations, agreements, and time schedules. Instead of begging for mercy, the modern servant signs a contract, as a citizen in the world of labour. Quite often, modern 'servants' logging into electronic systems will hardly ever meet their CEO face to face. Fear and intimidation long ago gave way to a world of regulations, although they may resurge in dreams and nightmares involving managers no doubt. Battles gave way to labour, direct consumption to a gradual transformation and domestication of nature through agro-technology. Instead of being completely at the mercy of the other, the relationship between employers and employees is regulated by mutual consent and stipulations. It is not the dreadful grin of the master, but the signed contract that sets the employee to work, unless of course we are dealing with severely neurotic individuals. In modern life, things like dread or admiration only play a concomitant role, as both parties have entered a symbolical environment composed of time schedules, salaries, deliverables, and quantifiable output (including academic h-factors). One of the dangers of the current wave of neoliberal globalism is precisely this relapse into situations of violence and intimidation, notably in regions where industrialisation and urbanisation evolve at a staggering pace.

¹⁶ According to Lacan, such an idea could only arise in the mind of someone who belonged to a "nation of pirates" who at that time were establishing their global colonial empire (1975, p. 200).

In the animal world, organised labour is unthinkable, as it presupposes a symbolical world of technologies and agreements – in short: the use of language. Both parties consent ('Yes') and can always appeal to the 'letter' of their mutual agreement. As animals are neither able to speak nor count, the possibility of entering into a symbolical relationship is denied to them. They remain dependent on behavioural repertoires involving intimidation and attraction: parades, postures, vocal signals, facial expressions, or (if must be) down-right aggression. They continue to rely on colour or size of feathers, tusks, and fins—in short, on their physical tools for seduction and enforcement.

6. On animals 'serving' in research facilities

A strategic meeting-ground for the ('symbolical') human world and the ('imaginary') animal world is the animal laboratory where experimenters (as absolute Masters) employ research animals basically as laboratory gadgets. According to Lacan, animal laboratories, such as the one set up by Ivan Pavlov, are highly *symbolical* environments (1998, p. 340). All items are carefully selected, all activities are standardised and all important events are meticulously quantified. Signals act as 'signifiers' to which animals respond by producing certain behaviours, or certain bodily fluids, such as gastric excretions (1998, p. 339), although on closer inspection these are produced by the experimenters themselves, using animals as mere 'machines', as living reactor vessels (1973, p. 254-255). Basically, the sense organs, the perceptivity of research animals is tested and employed, but a true dialogue never comes about (1998, p. 340). Although model organisms, such as dogs, may actively (or even eagerly) participate in the research, they will never become equals or partners,¹⁷ as the crucial moment of informed consent is lacking.

Ideally, the animal laboratory is a perfectly organised setting that satisfies all animal needs. It reflects a modernistic, even utopian ideal (1998, p. 461): a brave new world perfectly managed with the help of science and technology (1998, p. 463). In reality, however, the laboratory produces neuroticism in its animal inhabitants, surfacing

¹⁷ In publications, Pavlov expressed his gratitude to his dogs, formally thanking them for their assistance: "[T]his method was adopted as a result of a hint given by one of the dogs subjected to the operation. We gratefully acknowledge that by its manifestation of common sense the dog has helped us as well as itself" (1955, p. 89/90); For Pavlov, the dog was "almost a participant in the experiments conducted upon it, greatly facilitating the success of the research by its understanding and compliance" (Todes 2002, p. 52; Zwart 2008, p. 110 ff.).

in various kinds of symptoms (2004, p. 72). It is a severely pathogenic environment, a totalitarian regime that ‘cares’ for its animals but exploits their bodies as production factors, while the scientific Master enjoys the fruits of their labour, namely publishable knowledge—a truth factory driven by desire: the human will to know (1973, p. 264).

7. The primate world according to De Waal: a Lacanian reply

The more we learn about great apes, the deeper our identity crisis seems to become (Frans de Waal)

The humans-animals divide propounded by traditional ontology has been emphatically challenged by biologists, notably ethologists studying the world of primates, - a field that made impressive progress since the days of Wolfgang Köhler, notably due to the work of authors such as Jane Goodall and Desmond Morris.

A prominent representative of contemporary primate ethology is Frans de Waal,¹⁸ a scientist who, both in his publications and in his lectures, eagerly contributes to philosophical debates as well. For decades he studied what he explicitly refers to as chimpanzee ‘politics’ (1982/1998). Using terms like ‘coalitions’, ‘reconciliations’, ‘seeking reassurance’ and ‘recruiting support’, he invites us to look at the primate world with different eyes. Chimpanzees, De Waal assures us, have outspoken personalities, and a plethora of communication techniques at their disposal. They mourn, grieve, care and love, use sign language, and can even learn to rear their new-borns on the bottle (p. 59). Their power games, moreover, are very reminiscent of what happens in the human world.

And yet, if we read De Waal’s rich descriptions of the politics (or should we say: group dynamics) of chimpanzees, it becomes apparent that, although these studies have greatly expanded our knowledge of (and hopefully our empathy with) these admirable and intelligent animals, and although they emphasise that the dichotomous opposition between humans and (other) animals that was once imposed by the Cogito-perspective can no longer be upheld—a view which Lacan basically shares, as we have seen—the human-animal divide as such is not completely erased.

Let me use as an example the very first anecdote recounted by De Waal in his highly intriguing book, in which power plays among humans (in this case represented by

¹⁸ Whose surname happens to be the Dutch version of Henri Wallon’s.

Richard Nixon, at one time first citizen of the U.S.) is compared to the vicissitudes of chimpanzee leadership:

Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein describe in *The Final Days* Richard Nixon's reaction to his loss of power: "Between sobs, Nixon was plaintive ... How had a simple burglary done all this? ... (H)e got down on his knees ... leaned over and struck his fist on the carpet, crying aloud, 'What have I done? What has happened?'" Nixon was the first and only U.S. president to resign... As we shall see, one of my chimpanzees had tantrums similar to Nixon's (minus the words) under similar conditions (p. xiii).

If we submit these lines to a Lacanian reading, some significant details strike the eye. One of the most telling elements no doubt is the—apparently casual—insertion (between brackets) of the phrase *minus the words*. This is a reference to what Lacan sees as the 'symbolical order'. *Minus* refers to the mathematic symbol for subtraction, and the term 'words' refers to the symbolical realm as such. From a Lacanian point of view, it is precisely the use of mathematical and linguistic symbols that opens up a whole dimension of experience.

Although 'alpha' chimps doubtlessly display fascinating rituals of resignation, the entity 'U.S. president' can only exist within a symbolical realm, a world of language. Leaders (alpha individuals) are everywhere, both among domesticated animals and in the wild, but U.S. presidents can only exist in a human world. And only U.S. presidents can be 'the first one to resign', for such a phrase presupposes historical records and a temporal horizon that can only be provided by annals, mass media, historiography and grammar. This does not imply that the human world is more interesting in terms of social drama and intrigue; quite the contrary, it must be extremely fascinating to meticulously monitor the real-time interactions of primates, more fascinating perhaps than political journalism – but that is not the point. The point is that, notwithstanding the many similarities in behaviours, postures and rituals among chimps and humans, a basic difference persists. Due to the symbolical realm, we may relate to events or individuals we cannot touch, smell, or see. Richard Nixon died almost two decades ago, but we can still deal with his 'case', for instance by using the suffix '-gate' to refer to more recent 'scandals' (political and otherwise) such as Monica-gate, Climate-gate, Tiger-gate, etc.¹⁹ And we can design policies with the explicit purpose of preventing such things from happening in the future.

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_scandals_with_-gate_suffix

As our daily lives to some extent remain under the sway of the imaginary, the superb ethology of De Waal may provide us with a behavioural ‘mirror’ allowing us to discern the intricacies of this dimension. Yet, from a Lacanian point of view, the quintessence of politics resides in the (singularly human ability) to deliberate about (make decisions about, regard or disregard the interests of) humans or animals we cannot touch or see, simply because they are present in the words, names, and numbers that we use. And this adds a fundamental dimension to human politics compared to chimpanzee politics. Indeed, it is only in humans that the observation of chimpanzee rituals can give rise to what De Waal refers to as an ‘identity crisis’. Again, however, the symbolical is not a ‘privilege’ of humans, but rather an (often hopelessly insufficient) overcompensation for our adaptive weaknesses and chronic defects.

8. Subversion of the Cogito: hope or disillusion?

Lacan sees his views on human subjectivity as incompatible with the Cartesian understanding of the subject as *Cogito*, as we have seen.²⁰ And this is important, because Cartesianism not only conveys an ontological understanding of the human subject (as a rational *thinking thing*, detached from its own body), but also a (no less radical) ontological view on *animalness*. From a Cogito-perspective, the animal is literally a machine, not only incapable of thought, but also of pain and sensation (Zwart 1997). According to Descartes, animals cannot really suffer—a somewhat perverse, if not sadistic view that has had severe practical consequences as well, granting philosophical legitimacy and moral backing to vivisection (the dissection of living animals, including mammals, without anaesthesia) as a research practice, exemplified in the 19th century by master-physiologist Claude Bernard.

At first glance, Lacan apparently aims to distance himself from this anthropocentric tradition, taken by Descartes to its logical extreme. And yet, by rephrasing the human–animal divide in terms of the imaginary and the symbolical, we may question whether and to what extent he really succeeds in doing so. This is precisely the question raised by Derrida (2003) in his essay on Lacan’s understanding of animals.

Initially, Derrida argues, Lacan’s dispersed statements concerning animals give rise to the “hope” (p. 121) that things are going to change, that the “subversion” (Lacan

²⁰ [The experience of psychoanalysis] “nous oppose à toute philosophie issue directement du *Cogito*” (1966, p. 93)

1960/1966) of the Cartesian subject—as well as its flanking concept, the animal-machine—will finally come about. Yet, Derrida’s essay basically conveys a sense of disillusion. The “hope for a decisive displacement” (Derrida 2003, p. 122) of the Cartesian view quickly expires when it becomes clear that, for Lacan, the animal’s way of being-in-the-world is still remarkably mechanistic and pre-programmed. Lacanian animals are basically captivated, imprisoned, and immobilised by the imaginary. Their coded messages and pre-wired behavioural mechanisms do not really convey meaning (p. 122). Access to the symbolical order is firmly denied to them. Therefore, they are not subjects in the genuine sense of the term. They cannot really *respond* to a stimulus, but can merely *react*. For Derrida, Lacan’s texts on animals “announce *at the same time* a theoretical mutation and a stagnant confirmation of inherited thinking” (122). Lacan persists in dissociating the anthropological from the zoological. And perhaps this must be seen in connection with the resurgence of humanism and its anthropocentric ethos (p. 135) during the post-war years, which apparently affected not only Sartre but Lacan as well. Still, Derrida also points out that, from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, the uniqueness and exceptionality of human beings should not be seen as a kind of ontological privilege somehow bestowed on us. Rather, Lacan reframes it as compensation for a basic fault or defect, grounded in our prematurity, our foetal condition at birth.

And this indeed may serve as starting point for a reply to Derrida (and likeminded critics). The uniqueness of humans is difficult to ignore. We are the only species who (verbally or in writing) critically reflect on our obligations towards other species. Our astonishing, if not excessive, ability to generate artificial, man-made, global socio-cultural environments is unprecedented in evolution, as is our talent to unleash devastating destruction and decimation, not only on other humans, but on a quickly expanding number of other species as well. We are the only beings (as far as we can tell) to develop a sense of global responsibility. In short, the subversion of the Cartesian Cogito does not exempt us from the philosophical duty to address the moral implications of the ontological uniqueness of our way of being-in-the-world. And we cannot live up to this duty simply by ignoring it. What is so intriguing about Lacan’s view on humans and animals is that, for him, our uniqueness stems not from something we ‘have’, but rather from something we ‘lack’, as we have seen. It is a symptom of our prematurity at birth, our chronic sense of uneasiness (even in a world of luxury and comfort), our persistent

defectiveness. Language, culture, and technology have emerged as large-scale compensations for our initial defects as ontological disadvantageous *Mängelwesen*. These compensations became devastatingly effective and downright excessive so that they now pose lethal threats to an exponentially growing number of other living beings. Thus, Lacan's understanding of culture as an *excessive* compensation for a primordial *deficit* constitutes a point of departure for coming to terms with the intra-species challenges of the present.

9. The global Ark

To paraphrase Rousseau: animals are by nature free, and yet everywhere they are in chains. This notably applies to myriads of domesticated animals kept in high-tech facilities, as plants or bio-machines of meat, but we may extrapolate this to 'wild' animals as well, whether living in zoos or inhabiting wild life parks (the real-space zoos of global tourism). The vicissitudes of animals in the current global animal industrial complex is likely to evoke moral uneasiness or even downright disgust. They seem to exemplify the utter reverse of a moral relationship. Yet, from a Lacanian perspective, moral talents and destructive tendencies are two sides of the same coin, much as Kant and De Sade were contemporaries (Lacan 1986). In an era of ontological violence and mass extinction, an animal philosophy seems exceptionally urgent, but its starting point should *not* be the idea that we 'are' animals. Due to language, records, international regulations, species counts, and the like, we *know* what we are doing, even to animals we cannot directly touch or see, even to *future generations* of animals. As speaking subjects, we can coin moral concepts and principles and design moral policies. To paraphrase the section quoted by De Waal: we are the only living beings who can really ask the question "What have we (as a global community) done (or failed to do)"? We must acknowledge the devastating impact of our *specifically human* qualities on ourselves and the rest of the planet.

Fascinating theatres of group dynamics no doubt flash up among primates or elephants, but the decision to formally regard these animals as 'endangered species', deserving protection, is a decision that can only be taken by humans. This ability is intimately connected with our uncanny and unprecedented power to allow countless species of animals to become extinct in an era of devastating mass destruction. But it is

precisely this symbolical realm (which gave rise to our uncanny and pervasive technologies) that allows us to develop an ethical stance towards other species.

The progressive intrusion of the symbolical into human-animal relationships cannot be undone. Human culture has experienced a symbolic turn long ago and the hegemony of the symbolical is bound to prevail as long as we stay human.²¹ The paradigm of a symbolical relationship with animals is the Ark. In its original version (in *Genesis*) it functions as an emblematic image, an idealised picture of human-animal relationships: the idea of domestication taken to its very extreme. The inaugural gesture is nonetheless a highly symbolical one. After Adam had already *named* the animals, Noah *counts* them. *Two* specimens of each species are admitted into a wooden mobile zoo to await a time when animal passengers can again be released into the wild. Interestingly, whereas the *imaginary* Biblical Ark probably never existed in the real, the Ark as a *concept* has become more real than ever (Zwart & Penders 2011), on a symbolical level. The Biblical story anticipates a basic truth, namely that animals (both wild and domesticated) have become fundamentally dependent on us (on our deliberations and decisions) for their survival. Indeed, our sway over animals has become thoroughly symbolised, based on international guidelines and population counts. We select, list and number the species we single out as worthy for preservation. Nowadays, it seems as if the world *as such* has been transformed into a global Ark, floating through the flood of extinction, keen on keeping in existence this highly symbolical category of animals called endangered species.²² Of course, imaginary elements continue to play a role. Notably for broader audiences some of these endangered species may stand out as especially valuable, because of their admirable image, their *Gestalt* – such as tigers or ice bears or pandas. They are ‘imaginary’ animals in a way, because as (stylised) icons, they become increasingly detached from their real surroundings and conditions of life (like imaginary wild-life pets). But these emblematic images can only function against the backdrop of a thoroughly symbolical world where science and technology allow us both to erase and to preserve the animals with whom we share the planet. In the course of what Lacan refers to as the symbolisation of the real, we have acquired decisive responsibilities concerning the phenomenon of survival

²¹ Lacan acknowledges the possibility that, at a certain point – at the end of history, as it were – humankind may revolve into normal animals again (1978, p. 282).

²² The IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List of endangered or even critically endangered species sets fairly precise criteria for placing species on this list on the basis of their quantified extinction risk. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endangered_species#IUCN_Red_List

as such. And this seems more relevant than ever, given the current spring tide of high-tech globalisation, putting the vast remaining expanses of natural wilderness increasingly under pressure, so that these landscapes (and the animals inhabiting them) run the risk of quickly becoming imaginary rather than real.

The most extreme version of the Ark, as a thoroughly symbolical environment in the Lacanian sense of the term, is the animal research facility, as we have seen, where lab animals dwell as objects of scientific inquiry, spending their lives in confinement until a 'humane end point' is reached. Such facilities function as fleets or archipelagos of high-tech, air-conditioned Arks. Amidst a world of 'wild type' animals, a limited number of 'model species' are kept as laboratory artefacts. An intricate decision process is installed to determine which animals should be allowed to live for how long and under which circumstances. Their daily life is closely monitored and protocolled. Animal ethics committees allow researchers to engage in scrutinised experiments, involving pre-set numbers of animals. Such committees are established with the explicit purpose to deliberate about living beings who they cannot directly see, smell, or touch. Members are not supposed to react to visual cues, such as the sight of a suffering or imprisoned lab dog as a *Gestalt*, and they have even learned to discard or ignore such images as irrelevant to their ethical triage. Such cues are put aside as 'emotional' ('imaginary') images that may disturb the symbolical process of ethical assessment. We could see this as a moral mechanism of defence, allowing animal ethics committees to focus on symbolical items, such as regulations, prior decisions, licences and permits, number of animals within a trial, quantifiable degrees of suffering or discomfort, or humane end-points (operationalized in terms of body weight). They will focus on formal procedures, rather than on (disquieting or even revolting) images of sick animals or dissected corpses. More concretely, they will focus on a limited set of signifiers, such as 'suffering', 'distress', 'discomfort', 'well-being', 'relevance', and (perhaps) 'integrity'. These are quantifiable moral precision tools involving scales, standard terminologies, and ratings. In other words, the deliberations are de-subjectivated. Animal ethics committees formally determine whether our treatment of animals must be regarded as responsible scientific research or as sadistic torture. Yet, the basic uneasiness is never completely silenced.²³

²³ "Through the blanks between the concepts of the symbolic order one experiences 'something', especially in the case when there is only you and the suffering animal... It should be a challenge to fill the blanks in our symbolic order by a denser net of concepts. The introduction of new concepts like 'intrinsic value', 'integrity', 'subject of a life' are illustrations of this activity to close the grid of the symbolic order" (Cock Buning 1997, p. 193).

Should uneasiness (in the Freudian sense of *Unbehagen*) disappear altogether, ethics would give way to proceduralism.

The uneasiness evoked by visits to high-tech research facilities does not stem from animal suffering as such—for, as a rule, these animals tend to be adequately cared for by trained professionals, so that they may often be better off than countless household pets. The uneasiness comes from the awareness that this drastically symbolised world entails *ontological* violence. Food intake and waste disposal are managed in a thoroughly scientific way—using “applied mathematics”, as Upton Sinclair phrased it in his highly disconcerting novel *The Jungle*, depicting the fate of livestock arriving at the Chicago beef industry around 1900, where whole ‘rivers of life’ are processed into canned meat within a day’s work.²⁴ Our uneasiness pertains to the concern that these animals, or, rather animals in general, have lost their former independence in a very fundamental way. Increasing numbers of animals are faced with two options: either mass extinction or the Ark.

²⁴ “Eight or ten million live creatures turned into food every year... The stream of animals was continuous; it was quite uncanny to watch them - a very river of death ... the wonderful efficiency of it all (p. 38) ... It was pork-making by machinery, pork-making by applied mathematics” (p. 40)

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