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### **Why Look at Animals?**

“The animal scrutinizes [man] across a narrow abyss of noncomprehension...The man too [looks] across a similar, but not identical abyss of noncomprehension” (Berger, 252). With this statement John Berger explains the mutual, although not duplicate, inability of animals and humans to communicate or form a complete comprehension of what it means to be the other. Yet for many centuries, influential texts such as “Genesis,” Aristotle’s “The History of Animals,” Ovid’s “Metamorphosis,” and Kafka’s “A Report for an Academy,” have attempted to define this enigmatic relationship. This pursuit of knowledge and explanation, although not inherently deleterious, carries the risk of using animals to reinforce contemporary human institutions and stratification which marginalize them. It risks appropriating perceived characteristics of animals for a human purpose and consequently disregarding their diverse, nonhuman facets. Two works which elucidate how the postmodern human has come to rid animals of a central existence alongside them are “From the Letters of 1646 and 1649” by René Descartes and “The Naming of Cats” by T.S. Eliot.

When gazing at an animal, one sees not its “true” form, but rather a superficial tableau. Centuries of socio-historical, religious, scientific, and economic development have relegated animals to a fixed, somewhat invisible existence. Berger explains, “...the essential relation between man and animal was [and is] metaphoric” (Berger, 253). Comparative language and judgement permits that humans view themselves in relation to animals using “more than” or

“less than” terms. And with this discourse, the animal becomes nothing more than a standard used by humans to classify and organize other humans into a social hierarchy. Animals become relative, and as a result, looking at animals in our amalgamated contemporary society is to view marginalization and isolation.

This begs the question: If one is to reject this manner of viewing animals, what is an alternative approach? Does the “abyss of noncomprehension” which lies between animals and humans prevent them from living centrally amongst one another? This cannot be the case, or such a shared gaze and central relationship could never have existed. Therefore, the answer to this question lies within the “abyss” itself. By acknowledging the “abyss” and realizing that it is not animals who are unable to communicate and understand, but a mutual, although not duplicate, inability of humans, a balance of power and respect is restored. One must accept that which is unknown about animals rather than imbuing them with human traits, judgements, and expectations to satisfy the gnawings of curiosity. The pursuit of understanding, of bridging the gap, remains a necessary component of looking at animals; it allows one to be conscious of “... the secrets of the animal’s likeness with, and unlikeness from man” (Berger, 253). And awareness of these secrets grants animals the multifaceted existence, which has been erased in recent years. However, it must be accepted that this understanding can never be complete. Look at animals to appreciate their actuality as intricate, unique beings. Look to realize the extent to which corporate capitalism has ruptured what used to be a central existence of both humans and animals.

Descartes’ portrayal of animals, which overtly contradicts the comprehension of them as complex individuals, exposes the philosophical framework which likely contributed to the use of

animals as tools for the betterment of human life and pleasure. By denying animals thought, he marginalizes them, indicating that they have nothing more to offer the world than a body of flesh and bones. Dissimilar to this belief system, Eliot's poem seemingly acknowledges the thought and secrets which belong to animals, beyond the reach of human comprehension. Yet, it is impossible to ignore how crassly Eliot breaches the "abyss of noncomprehension" when interpreting the text at face value. Whether this breach ultimately reinforces or exposes ways in which humans somewhat instinctually marginalize animals depends on whether the narrator of this poem is understood to be reliable or not. Evaluating these texts reveals how both explicit and implicit ignorance of the "abyss" serve to reproduce philosophical and societal structures which reinforce the exploitation of animals.

In "From the Letters of 1646 and 1649," Descartes writes, "...there are two different principles causing our [human] motions: one is purely mechanical...the corporeal soul; the other is the incorporeal mind, the soul which I have defined as a thinking substance" (Descartes, 61). The animal, he soon after concludes, has only the former. Following this assertion, it is logical to assume that their behaviour is purely instinctual. To eat, sleep, fight, migrate, reproduce, etc. is nothing more than an automatic, unconscious way of surviving. Moreover, he explains, one must not arrive at the false conclusion that animals have thought based on the sounds they utter; these "...are only expressions of their fear, their hope, or their joy; and consequently they can be performed without any thought" (Descartes, 60). With this line of reasoning, Descartes presumes to know animals in their entirety, for without thought, there is nothing more to know than their anatomy. The "abyss of noncomprehension" becomes a one-way street in which humans are

endowed with the ability to understand the simple motivations of animals in contrast to the automata which cannot even begin to contemplate their own actions and reactions.

This perception of animals has many implications, especially in relation to their treatment by humans. To begin, the absence of an incorporeal soul seems to suggest that animals are less evolved than human beings rather than simply having evolved to fill a different niche in the ecosystem. In more general terms, animals are given a lower status, and therefore, their “voices” and wellbeing carry little weight when socioeconomic decisions, which tend to solidify their marginalization, are made. Descartes concisely summarizes, but does not condemn such a system, when he writes, “Thus, my opinion is not so much cruel to animals as indulgent to men...since it absolves them from the suspicion of crime when they eat or kill animals” (Descartes, 62). His paradigm, which allows humans to slaughter and consume massive numbers of animals for pleasure and sometimes sport, to skin them for leather and fur, without marring one’s own conscience is the product of this reasoning. Furthermore, it substantiates Berger’s belief when he explains, “That look between animal and man...with which...all men had always lived until less than a century ago, has been extinguished” (Berger, 261). Berger believes that each may scrutinize the other, but this gaze is no longer returned; it has been obstructed by the control and commercialization of animals. Descartes’ opinion, however, accepts this disconnect as inherent and natural and, furthermore, increases the obstruction by asserting that to simply gaze at animals, let alone to seek a reciprocated stare, is futile due to their inability to experience or communicate dispassionate thought. Therefore, the ability to think, which he believes to distinguish humans from animals, becomes a criterion which allows for the organization and stratification of the innate value of different organisms’ lives. Until

being different, whether in “soul” or appearance, comes to signify different and not inferior, hierarchical systems which empower the powerful and further oppress the marginalized will continue to govern the functioning of society and the relationship between humans and animals.

While “From the Letters of 1646 and 1649” determines animals to be automata, “The Naming of Cats” by T.S. Eliot seems to drastically contradict the mechanization of animals, rather granting the ability of sophisticated thought to cats. He describes cats as having three names: One for general use, a second which is unique but still known by some, and the third— “...that no human research can discover— / but THE CAT HIMSELF KNOWS, and will never confess” (Eliot). This description of felines somewhat acknowledges the inability of humans and animals to fully comprehend one another. For instance, Eliot seems to recognize that the names assigned to animals, both common and particular, are not indicative of their true nature. By extension, he acknowledges that humans can only comprehend the animal as it behaves in front of them and not its inner motivations or sense of self. Although this elucidates some basic abilities, ranges of temperament, etc., a complete understanding of their existence will never be achieved. However, in the process of “acknowledging the abyss of noncomprehension,” this poem also betrays this fundamental aspect of human-animal relations by asserting that, “When you notice a cat in profound meditation / The reason, I tell you, is always the same: / His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation / Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name” (Eliot). This statement assumes that the “I” in this poem, who may or may not be a reliable narrator, is capable of knowing that cats think as humans do, and furthermore, knowing what it is they ponder, that being their name. The duality of acknowledging, yet overstepping the abyss, creates a fluctuating balance of power between humans and animals in this poem.

However, ultimately, animals are still marginalized in these lines because the “I,” who provides no concrete evidence in support of the accuracy of his or her perception of cats, is given dominion over describing their three identities and the abilities they are endowed with.

The most straightforward manner in which to interpret this poem is to understand it as a depiction of the multifaceted lives and identities of cats. However, upon closer analysis, the anthropomorphic nature in which cats are portrayed indicates the likely alternative that Eliot, through the perspective of a narrator, employed the imagery of cats as a metaphor for human relations and identity. By depicting cats as being able to “confess” or withhold secrets, to “meditate,” “contemplate,” and engage in higher-level thinking—unlikely abilities due to only a small portion of their cerebral cortex being comprised of association areas, Eliot indicates that cats are simply used as a metaphor for human behaviour. This portrayal “empties the animal of experience and secrets” (Berger 255) because when humans become the subject of this piece, “cats” becomes nothing more than a term, and the animal is simply a surrogate for human experience. This is evidenced when Eliot writes, “...a cat needs a name that’s particular... / Else how can he keep up his tail perpendicular, / Or spread out his whiskers, or cherish his pride?” (Eliot). Rather than allowing the spreading of whiskers and positioning of the tail to remain feline in essence, this behaviour is described as a manifestation of the human concept, pride. Therefore, even actions which cats are capable of performing are appropriated in order to describe human nature and to do so for the benefit of human self-awareness. In this way, cats are erased from Eliot’s poem, and the animal is denied a central existence alongside humans. Furthermore, when the purpose of the cat is solely to describe humans, it becomes replaceable. It no longer matters whether the animal is a cat or a dog, a stallion or a pig, and this ignores the

unique nature of each species, instead lumping each bird, mammal, and reptile into the category “animal.” Moreover, connecting the presence of an inner identity with the ability to think about this identity further marginalizes and mechanizes such “animals” by assuming that thought is the only mechanism which allows one to be conscious of his or herself as a distinct individual.

Lastly, even were one to interpret “The Naming of Cats” as a depiction of the sophisticated thought and identity of cats, the stylistic decisions of this poem still constrain and mechanize the portrayal of animals. The alternating rhyme scheme creates a mechanical, anticipated sound quality. Beginning each line with a capitalized letter and ending the majority with a form of punctuation slows the poem and makes the rhythm repetitive and choppy. This rhythm is mirrored in the language used. For instance, the word “name” is written fifteen times throughout the poem, emphasizing not only the significance and complexity of naming, but also the formulaic nature in which the narrator determines these names are assigned. “...a cat must [not may] have THREE DIFFERENT NAMES” (Eliot), the narrator asserts. The word “must” gives the narrator the authority to define what it means to be a cat, yet Eliot provides no explanation for where this authority comes from nor whether there is any veracity to the definition. No reason is put forth to support why “naming” is the definitive criterion which makes a cat a cat and excludes all other beings.

This lack of substantiation calls upon the reader to question whether Eliot’s beliefs are in alignment with the perspective of the narrator or if he has created an unreliable narrator in order to expose readers’ human instinct to interpret the poem selfishly by either assuming the ability to fully comprehend the behaviour of cats or, as described previously, erasing their centrality in the text altogether. When the “I” declares knowledge of how to define what a cat is, the “abyss” is

again breached, and without awareness of such instinct, the reader breaches it alongside the “I.” Like in “From the Letters of 1646 and 1649,” the “abyss” is furthermore violated in a one sided manner by demonstrating that humans, the readers, have the capability to comprehend the identity and behavior of cats while no indication is given that the reverse is also possible. However, the ABAB rhyme scheme employed, which creates a playful, sing-song tone in the poem, indicates that the narrator may not be genuine in his authority, nor his assertions tenable. For instance, when explaining that, “The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter, / It isn’t just one of your holiday games” (Eliot), the seriousness of this task is juxtaposed with a frivolous sound quality by using the words “hatter” and “NAMES” to create end-rhyme in the third and fourth lines. Furthermore, directly addressing the reader, the narrator declares, “You may think at first I’m as mad as a hatter” (Eliot), inviting them to question his explanations. This is especially significant because the Mad Hatter character originates in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, published by Lewis Carroll in 1865, where he is known for reciting unsolvable riddles and nonsensical poems. This reference suggests that the arguments presented by Eliot’s narrator are also somewhat illogical, or at least lack veracity. Speaking directly to the reader, moreover, demonstrates that he or she must be conscious of how not only the opinions of the narrator, but also his or her own ideas and schemas, influence how the piece is understood. Additionally, in the first line of the poem, “The Naming of Cats” is capitalized in congruence with the title. Yet, with the exception of “Name” being capitalized at the beginning of one line and once more at the end, “naming” and “cats” are not capitalized throughout the poem. This indicates that Eliot is not referring to the process of naming cats in this line, but rather to the poem itself. He cautions readers to be wary in their interpretation of the poem and the ideas it conveys because it is a

difficult task. Overall, analysis of this poem most clearly evidences the probability that the narrator is unreliable, and therefore, the reader should be conscious of how the poem anthropomorphizes and decentralizes animals in order to reveal that his or her human instinct is to do the same. Only this awareness prevents him or her from breaching the “abyss of noncomprehension” alongside the narrator.

To conclude, Descartes’ belief in the mechanical nature of animals allowed him to justify the marginalization and exploitation of them while Eliot employed many literary devices throughout “The Naming of Cats” to elucidate how readily humans have been primed by dominant institutions and structures to view animals as simple, completely understood organisms. Although scientific studies since Descartes’ years have provided support for animals’ conscious perception of feelings such as pain, their ability to use sounds and other behaviours for communication, and the complex social lives of many species, both as individuals and as larger collective units, the formulaic nature in which humans have viewed and categorized animals has persisted and evolved to become progressively more entrenched in society. With many major capitalist industries entirely or at least heavily reliant on animals, and often only specific components of their being, it has become increasingly difficult to stitch together the meat, leather, ivory, wool, dairy products, etc. in order to view an animal undistorted by commercialization. Without the ability to observe such animals, to gaze at them and understand that this gaze was once reciprocated, the distinction between animal and human becomes more and more severely reinforced. Eliot encourages readers to challenge his narrator’s unsubstantiated assertions about cats and to become aware of their own biased perceptions, and it is critical to employ such an approach when evaluating all structures and beliefs which are firmly

rooted and taught within society. Whether it be the notion that animals are inferior, the belief that racism has been eliminated, or the idea that certain religions promote violence, it is necessary to critically evaluate any arguments being made to support such claims and to consider motives, such as reproducing the present organization of social hierarchies, for disseminating a dominant opinion. Only when we challenge information which seems to confirm the beneficence of the status quo and acknowledge reasoning which threatens to undermine, for instance, the post-modern way of “knowing” animals, can ingrained systems of stratification be unraveled and a new way of thinking emerge.

## Works Cited

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