

[Review] Markus Gabriel, *The Human Animal: Why We Still Don't Fit into Nature*. Translated by Karl von der Luft.

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Markus Gabriel's *The Human Animal* is an impressive achievement. At the philosophical level, Gabriel demonstrates a remarkable range of competence, pulling from both the analytic and Continental philosophical traditions with equal facility, and situating his project with evident expertise in the history of Western philosophy (with special emphasis on the German Idealists and ancient Greeks). In terms of the intellectual and activist interests common to readers of this journal, here too Gabriel has much to offer. His work is conversant with key themes in animal philosophy and environmental ethics and is committed to addressing the most pressing animal-related and ecological crises of our time. As for the general merits of the book, Gabriel is to be applauded for the clarity of his prose and his willingness to define his technical terms; conversely, he could rightly be criticised for being occasionally discursive and digressive. The latter are minor issues of style and form, however. Overall, this is a substantive work of philosophy that will be of considerable interest to readers who work in animal philosophy and animal studies more broadly. My review of Gabriel's work is intended primarily for this audience. To this end, I will first provide a quick summary of the general argument of the book. I will then focus on the portion of the work that will be of most interest to the journal's readership, viz., 'Part I: We and the Other Animals'.

Gabriel's book is laid out in three parts. Part I offers a fresh philosophical anthropology in response to recent developments in animal philosophy, animal ethics, and related philosophical and scientific research. Gabriel's thesis here is that human beings both

do and do not belong to nature, insofar as we are embodied animals (natural) who also have distinctive capacities linked to our mindedness and agency (cultural). I will have more to say about this section below.

With this account of the human in place, Gabriel then turns in Part II ('Social Freedom and the Meaning of Life') to the task of exploring what a corresponding vision of a good and meaningful life might look like. Here Gabriel defends a vision of liberal pluralism in which individuals are given the space to pursue their own vision of the good (as opposed to a community that imposes a single vision of the good on all its members), but he stops short of defending a libertarianism that unmoors the individual from their community. Following Hegel and post-Hegelian trends in social philosophy, Gabriel argues that individual freedom has its ultimate foundation and ongoing guarantee in collective social conditions (in other words, both the conditions for and the exercise of freedom require the cooperation of others). Gabriel further maintains that liberal pluralism, while value-neutral regarding the specific good lives that individuals pursue, carries with it a basic vision of what constitutes a meaningful life. This vision is ultimately an ethical one that takes as its overarching goal the securing and maximizing of potentiality and freedom (and not simply biological survival) for ever more people.

Our age has been beguiled by the notion that capitalism, technology, and science can deliver on this goal of maximizing individual and collective freedom. Gabriel argues in Part III ('Toward an Ethics of Not-Knowing') that we need to come to grips with the limits of science to understand the human condition *in toto* and with the general inability of technology and capitalism to secure for modern societies a worthwhile and sustainable form of life. To achieve the good and meaningful lives we desire, Gabriel maintains that we need a New Enlightenment. Although his version of this New Enlightenment is by no means anti-science, it insists on a healthy regard for human limitations and complexity, which leads in turn to an ethics of not-knowing and epistemic modesty regarding the ultimate ends of human *Wissenschaft*. Gabriel's New Enlightenment is thus simultaneously an ancient and

contemporary project, renewing Socratic ignorance and aporetic humility for an age that suffers from over-confidence in scientifically reductionistic accounts of human and more-than-human natures.

Here we can circle back to Part I and more fully appreciate the reasons for Gabriel adopting this non-reductionistic and modest approach to the human and more-than-human worlds. At the core of Gabriel's work is a new picture of human nature, which is to say, a new philosophical anthropology – one that challenges the scientific notion that human beings can be understood exhaustively through physical methods. The reason for the impossibility of getting human beings entirely within our scientific grasp, Gabriel argues, is that we have inner, subjective lives that resist the third-person perspective of objective scientific inquiry. While it is always possible and even fruitful in many respects to study human individuals and societies using the methods of the physical sciences, Gabriel maintains that another approach (led by humanistic and social scientific disciplines) is needed to get at the subjective, agential side of human existence. From this perspective, human beings can and should be studied as animals using physical scientific methods; but insofar as we are something more than animals (namely, minded, ethical agents), such methods will fail to illuminate that distinctive mode of existence.

For scholars in animal studies, this sort of dualistic stance – which views human beings as an exception to the rest of the natural, animal order and that defends a sharp anthropological difference – would seem to render Gabriel's work largely irrelevant to the field. Yet Gabriel's approach to the human/animal distinction is not traditionally anthropocentric. For one thing, he does not convert the human/animal opposition into a hierarchical difference in which humans always and everywhere count for more than animals (on this point, his work closely resembles Martin Heidegger's discourse on animals). For another, Gabriel does not use his notion of a specific anthropological difference to homogenize animal life; to the contrary, he is wont throughout the book to remind readers that animal life is exceedingly complex and cannot be captured in a single essence (here his work resonates with Jacques Derrida's writings on animals). Inspired by Alice Cary's work,

Gabriel maintains that some animals have something of an inner, value-laden, meaningful life, even if it is different in kind from the inner lives of human subjects. Ultimately, Gabriel argues that our uniquely minded and ethical subjectivity does not give us higher value than animals, but instead it *obliges* us both to respect and to support the flourishing of animals and the more-than-human world as a whole.

As someone who shares Gabriel's evident concern with ecological degradation and with the unnecessary suffering we inflict on animals, there is nothing here that I would object to at a general level. His efforts to rethink and redirect the course of our hyper-technological, scientifically reductionistic, and exploitatively capitalist societies are welcome, and they reinforce and supplement much of the work that is currently being done in animal studies. The chief problem I see with Gabriel's project resides at the deeper level of the intellectual presuppositions that inform his project – and, more specifically, with his attempt to contribute to and defend the traditional aims of the field of philosophical anthropology.

A philosophical anthropology such as Gabriel's that develops a more generous picture of both human and animal life is, to be sure, preferable to the traditional, simplistic binary and hierarchical divisions that have long structured the dominant culture. Yet continuing the traditional project of defending and shoring up human propriety (even in a modified and more conceptually refined form) comes at a cost. One of the chief insights of a large body of work done in animal studies over the past few decades is that focusing on human propriety can all too easily lead to human navel-gazing rather than to the more pressing task of rebuilding our relations with animals and the more-than-human world. (Witness Parts II and III of Gabriel's book, in which questions about obligations to animals and the more-than-human world drop out almost entirely in favour of a focus on human uniqueness and interhuman affairs.) When we are primarily concerned with determining the uniqueness of who we *are*, we tend to overlook what else we might *become* through the process of reconstituting relations with our more-than-human kin.

At their best, the sort of philosophical anthropologies we find in Gabriel and related philosophers lead – usually in the name of being more ‘humane’ – to efforts to stop the worst sorts of exploitation of animals and the more-than-human world. What they fail to accomplish is making a more engaged, affirmative, and experimental turn toward rethinking human-animal relations from the ground up. Such a turn might entail, for example: not just considering the status of animals in our extant political institutions but considering whether the polis itself should become a zoopolis or ecopolis with altogether different institutions; not just modifying our mobility systems to be more sustainable and less deadly but rethinking mobility from the bottom up from within a shared creaturely space of varied kinds of movement; not just adopting vegetarianism or veganism but rethinking what it means to eat well in view of the edibility we have in common with more-than-human others.

The list could go on. My basic point here is that these deeper transformational possibilities are almost impossible to envision if we remain within the confines of the traditional project of determining human propriety, even if that project is carried out in the sort of generous and capacious manner that Gabriel’s *The Human Animal* does. And there can be little doubt that the crises we are currently facing demand just such fundamental transformations. These crises call us to go beyond our traditional interest in determining who we are over and against all other beings to risk becoming something other than – and very different from – the human beings we take ourselves to be.