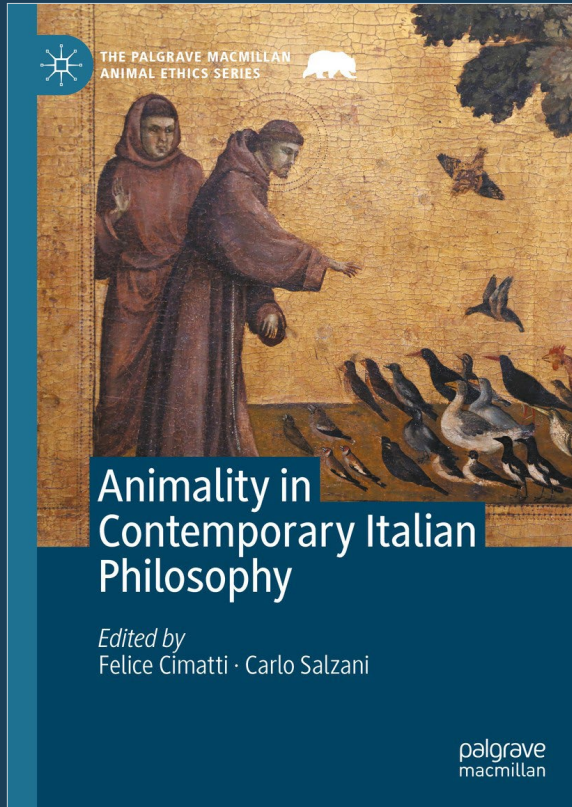


BOOK REVIEW

# Animal Immanence

Deborah Amberson



*Review of:*

Felice Cimatti and Carlo Salzani, eds. *Animality in Contemporary Italian Philosophy*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. xvii + 341 pp. €130.79 (hb & pb); €96.29 (eB).

Deborah Amberson is Associate Professor of Italian Studies in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at the University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA.

Email: [damberson@ufl.edu](mailto:damberson@ufl.edu)

**F**elice Cimatti and Carlo Salzani open their kaleidoscopic collection of essays by confronting the stubborn cultural bias that sees Italy, like other Catholic countries of Southern Europe, supposedly falling short of Anglo-American thinking regarding the so-called Animal Question. Arguably, this entire volume sets out to prove if not the exact opposite, then that the Italian contribution to thinking animality, human and non, is a very particular one, heterodox within the Western philosophical tradition. The volume's central and recurrent contention, echoed across many of its chapters, is that Italy's philosophical difference constitutes a means to "deactivate" the "metaphysical distinction between the animal and the human" (10), a way to thwart that tenacious dualism that represses nonhuman and human animality alike in order to construct human subjectivity upon language and consciousness. The Cartesian distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* and, of course, the identification of humanity with the former, risks trapping even those who denounce the Cartesian hierarchy based on species because "when one wants to criticize it, one must first accept it" (7). As animal advocates struggle for the recognition of the dignity or the cognitive acuity of this or that species — mostly the large primates — they end up doing little more than moving the boundaries between the Cartesian categories. For Cimatti and Salzani, the point is rather to make "inoperative the privileged role language and consciousness always played within Western Metaphysics", a task to which Italian theory can rise because, they claim, it has never embraced a "neat boundary between human and non-human, consciousness and unconsciousness, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*" (7–8).

Perennially late to the party — whether that party is the one at which nations are built, national languages are forged, industrial revolutions are launched, or, in some cases, schools of art and thought are organized — Italy often finds itself playing catch-up. Following on the heels of Roberto Esposito, Cimatti and Salzani recast Italy's philosophical "belatedness", its apparent distance from the tendencies that underpin other national traditions, as a strength. In this very belatedness, they write, lies an explanation for Italy's philosophical difference, "the very reason and rationale of this volume" (4). Italian

thought, they declare, has always sought out that which lay beyond its disciplinary borders, manifesting a “centrifugal penchant for the other” that, ultimately, constitutes its “most original feature” (4). What Esposito and, in turn, Cimatti and Salzani discern in Italian thought is a sustained engagement with life, a circumstance that has meant that, though born and named in France, biopolitics grew up in Italy (6). It is also why Italian philosophy has, more than others, “fleshed out” that relationship with animality which generates thought itself (6). This timely volume sets out to explore the “different and often discordant fashions” in which Italian thinking has “come to terms with its outside in the form of animality” (6).

*Animality in Contemporary Italian Philosophy* broaches the multifaceted question of animality with a tripartite organization. The first part, titled “Animality in the Italian Tradition”, is the shortest, encompassing only three chapters. Characterized as “historico-descriptive” (10), this section plots out Italy’s contribution to the animal question in the spheres of philosophy and animal advocacy. Cimatti himself opens the section with “Animality and Immanence in Italian Thought”, an exploration of Italy’s circumvention of Cartesian dualism, a chapter that constitutes a central pillar of the volume and to which I will return. Luisella Battaglia’s chapter, “Aldo Capitini, Animal Ethics, and Nonviolence: The Expanding Circle”, comes next. Here, Battaglia presents and assesses the thought of Aldo Capitini, a representative figure within twentieth-century Italian animal advocacy whose philosophy of nonviolence and ethics of responsibility set him up as a “true prophet” of bioethics (60). In the third and final chapter, “What is Italian Antispeciesism?”, Giorgio Losi and Niccolò Bertuzzi survey the various activist threads within Italian animal advocacy, clarifying key terminology and challenging the practical and ethical force of an activism grounded within mainstream neoliberalism as opposed to a more radical resistance that deliberately sets itself up as a counter-hegemonic practice. As a whole, this opening section reinforces the claim, presented in the introduction, that Italian philosophy has always reached out toward the “nonphilosophical” (6); it is not easy to discern a stable boundary separating the more conventionally theoretical side of the question from the practices of care and resistance

enacted by what we might term the activists of the debate. Here, thinking seems to turn always and inevitably toward an engagement with the world, an impression the editors have rightly orchestrated for the reader who moves from Francis of Assisi's sermons to the birds (24–26) to the story of Scilla, a calf who took it upon himself to swim the Sicilian Strait to escape the abattoir (87).

The volume's second section, entitled "Animality in Perspective", offers six chapters that explore animality across a range of thinkers and fields. Here too, thinking remains firmly rooted in practice. This is true as it relates to the strictly biopolitical, explored in depth in the first two chapters addressing two central pillars of Italian biopolitical thought, namely Giorgio Agamben in Carlo Salzani's chapter, "Beyond Human and Animal", and Roberto Esposito in "Deconstructing the *Dispositif* of the Person", written by Matías Saidel and Diego Rosello. It is also true as it relates to the theological and the quandary of animal suffering, explored in the concluding chapter, "Paolo De Benedetti: For an Animal Theology" by Alma Massaro. The remaining chapters are equally embedded in questions of practice, exploring the various hues of the animal question in three fields of thought: Posthumanism in Giovanni Leghissa's chapter, Marxism for Marco Maurizi's, and Feminism in Federica Giardini's contribution. Among the principal strengths of this section is the way in which the editors have allowed the various inflections of the animal question to emerge in full. The chapters even embrace the contradictions within a single field as, for example, in Maurizi's mapping of the term animality through a range of Marxist schools, underscoring its inconsistent deployment within the writing of a single (and foundational) figure like Engels (161–162). What becomes crystal clear across these chapters is that animality has never been a fixed given; it is instead a category applied inconsistently, invoked to demarcate humankind from some scarcely defined other, deployed as a weapon to marginalize one specific subgroup of humans, or proposed more positively as the basis for a duty of care.

Roberto Marchesini explicitly addresses the ambivalence of animality in the opening pages of his chapter, "Philosophical Ethology

and Animal Subjectivity”, included in the third and final section, the hardest to pin down. Though characterized by the editors as being “more speculative” and offering “more theoretical chapters” that might serve as “‘fragments’ of an extremely diverse and articulated debate” (14), the volume’s third part, “Fragments of a Contemporary Debate”, actually seems to engage in a more sustained manner with the sphere of life, signalling a myriad of practices that might shape artistic, scientific, and political activism. The section begins in the slaughterhouse with Massimo Filippi, whose chapter, “‘Il faut bien tuer’, or the Calculation of the Abattoir”, offers a geometrically structured, Derrida-inspired reflection on a fabulistic human subjectivity constructed on the butchered bodies of our nonhuman animal kin. From here we move to Marchesini’s aforementioned chapter which, sidestepping consciousness as a criterion of subjectivity and looking to the descriptive sciences for a less discriminatory framework, charts a human and nonhuman animal subject projected outward towards the world in a relation of openness grounded in the endowments employed by each species to shape their being in the world. From here we shift to the explicitly political as Laura Bazzicalupo, in “From Renaissance Ferinity to the Biopolitics of the Animal-Man”, delves into the political deployments of animality and the persistently troubling ambivalence of the naturalization of human life. Valentina Sonzogni’s chapter takes us to the realm of artistic practice, exploring a sampling of artworks controversial for their incorporation of animal bodies, living and dead, and posing some key ethical questions about artistic freedom and public sensibilities regarding corpses, human and non. The focus of Leonardo Caffo’s final chapter, “Animality Now”, is the present and the future. Gathering many of the concepts, methodologies, and figures explored over the course of the volume and casting them outward again in a variety of directions all at once, Caffo, with urgency and creative energy, imagines the end of philosophy, fallen silent when a future generation, which only now appears on the horizon, will speak with a voice that “will now be animal” (320).

While the volume offers an impressive assortment of perspectives on animality and animals in contemporary Italian thought, it is worth delving into the central theory of Italian philosophical difference.

Co-editor Cimatti's volume-opener, "Animality and Immanence in Italian Thought", serves as a type of "meta-introduction to the rationale of the volume" (11), presenting content and positions that echo through many of the chapters. Reprising the thesis of the introduction, namely, that Italian thought offers a conceptual thread able to sidestep the Cartesian dualism that separates humanity from animality and animals, Cimatti maps out this alternative Italian philosophical genealogy, starting with Francis of Assisi's embrace of a nonhierarchical principle rooted in the diversity of life, and moving through philosophical and literary figures including Dante Alighieri, Giordano Bruno, and Giacomo Leopardi. Saint Francis serves as the foundation for a vision of animality grounded in immanence as his engagement with life in all its diverse forms, his preaching to the birds, his embrace of poverty, all stem directly from a refusal not simply of anthropocentric hierarchies but of any form of transcendence, anything that would distance a being from the world and from the form of life appropriate to its own self. Animality becomes "the model of a perfect human life" (27). To embrace animality opens the way to a holy life for to live beyond need is to live a blessed life: "a bird's life, for Francis, is a blessed life because it does not desire anything else than what is already at its disposal" (25).

Italian Renaissance naturalism, in particular the thought of Bernardino Telesio, Giordano Bruno, and Tommaso Campanella, also features centrally in Cimatti's nonhierarchical Italian vision of animality, setting the stage for repeated echoes across several chapters. Described by Cimatti as presenting a "genuinely uninterrupted mutual contamination" between humanity and animality (33), Italian Renaissance thought and, especially, the political thought of Niccolò Machiavelli acquires a notable weight in the volume. Specifically, the figure of the centaur as deployed by Machiavelli returns numerous times, first through the lens of Saidel and Rossello's assessment of Esposito's thought, again in Giardini's reflections on sexual difference, and, finally, in Bazzicalupo's chapter on the political deployment of animality. Saidel and Rossello spell out the centrality of the centaur to this Italian thinking of animality, writing that the human-equine hybrid "seeks to account for the corporeality, vitality, and contingency

of politics” and, in opposition to Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, indicates the “place of the immanentization of antagonism instead of the realm that excludes conflict as such” (116). This repeated return to Italian Renaissance thinkers is welcome indeed as animal studies has too often been dominated by a focus on the twentieth century, leading to the mistaken impression that humanism and early modern thought more broadly represented a monolithic anthropocentrism intent only on proclaiming humanity as the measure of all things. Cimatti and Salzani’s volume confirms the importance of a developing field of scholarship that identifies a multiplicity of Renaissance humanisms and, even, a Renaissance posthumanism.

Here, I would like to repurpose Machiavelli’s centaur and, indeed, Machiavelli himself to underscore another welcome hybridity that echoes throughout the volume: namely the fact that, beside the philosophers, we find close to an equal number of literary figures. Machiavelli himself straddles philosophy and literature; though he might be better known globally as a political thinker, his literary texts are an undisputed part of the Italian canon. A reader might infer that animality can be broached adequately only by a thinking that is both philosophical and literary. It can be no coincidence that Cimatti’s own chapter underscores the porosity of the border between literature and philosophy, placing Francis of Assisi beside Dante and Leopardi, two figures that, like Machiavelli, straddle the literary and the philosophical. Cimatti easily finds relevant thinking in the literary, discerning resonances of Francis’s animality of immanence both in Dante’s lark from *Paradiso* xx (31–32) and Leopardi’s reflections on the “animal model” (43). The reader should not be surprised to find repeated reference to other Italian authors and poets such as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Elsa Morante, Italo Calvino, and Ivano Ferrari. After all, Esposito, as underscored by the editors in their introduction, stressed that Italian philosophy was not practiced by “‘professional’ philosophers,” suggesting instead a philosophical practice characterized by a refusal of “neat distinctions” and a preference for what the poets produce, namely a “natural blending, where all human categories get confused” (9). This interest in the literary is not limited to the editors. For example, in his analysis of the Italian schools of Marxism, Maurizi

draws on Morante, Calvino, and Pasolini, going so far as to affirm the “superiority of the poetic imagination” on citing Pasolini’s equation of animals going to slaughter with humans being deported to the Nazi Camps (171). And, finally, Caffo’s closing chapter explicitly embraces what its author terms a “simple and literary style” (303).

Precisely because the porosity of the border between philosophy and literature is so persistently evident here, I feel the volume would have benefitted from a chapter explicitly addressing literary practice, even if only to challenge any assumptions regarding disciplinary norms. Such questions remain pertinent. For as Jacques Derrida, a philosopher cited throughout the volume, wrote, “thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. [. . .] It is what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of!”<sup>1</sup> The world of artistic creation is incorporated through Sonzogni’s chapter on animal bodies in contemporary art. But here the questions, however significant and well-formulated, remain ethical and practical rather than conceptual. The editors do indicate a desire to limit their critical bibliography to thinkers who develop a “notion” of animality as opposed to authors who simply speak of “dogs and lizards” (46, n.1). However, this need not exclude the literary, as the editors know. Given the extent to which they draw on literature, there can be no doubt that they fully accept that “notions” are developed programmatically in novels and that thinking takes place in poetry.

Referencing a recent text by Marchesini, Cimatti and Salzani acknowledge that animality remains “a maze of clichés, preconceptions, biases, and vested interests” and that the task of philosophy (and, I would suggest, culture more broadly) is to emancipate animality from the “straitjacket imposed on it by the Western cultural tradition” (10). The editors certainly make the case that Italian thinking has a crucial role to play in this project, as its disciplinary flexibility opens the animal question up to a “wider consideration, breaking the narrow limits of orthodoxy” (7). This important and opportune volume seeks to do precisely this, practicing a thinking that “begins with, arises from, and is in a constant and essential relation with animality” (7).

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 7.