

The Human-Animal Relation in Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*

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Abstract: The *Discourse on Inequality* disputes the human-animal hierarchy in its denunciation of social inequality as unnatural. Stripping away social artifice, it reveals a deep physical continuity between man and animals. As embodied creatures, they share mortality and vulnerability. Human animality does not, however, negate human difference. Man differs from animals through perfectibility: the freedom to change. That difference comes from the lack of any specifically human property, thereby challenging rather than confirming anthropocentric hierarchies. Any properties seen to distinguish man from animals are in fact improper, contingent and artificial. Human impropriety renders man always dependent on external relations for his development. Compassion, vital for a Rousseauian approach to animal ethics, allows man to experience this relationality, transporting him towards others as he identifies with their suffering as recalling the finitude and vulnerability shared by all creatures. For Rousseau, human difference, I argue, enables rather than blocks identification with animality.

Key words: Rousseau; Discourse on inequality; human; animal; impropriety; compassion.

Rousseau's discussion of the human-animal relation in the *Discourse on Inequality* emerges in his undertaking of the fraught task of differentiating what is essential or necessary to the human from what is artificial or socially acquired.¹ This undertaking is important for his investigation into the foundation of social inequality. The *Discourse* can assert the fundamental equality of anyone and everyone only if it clears the grounds of society, only if it shows the radical contingency of that realm and its social divisions and classifications. This lack of any natural foundation for social inequality works to destabilise the hierarchies of strong/weak, rich/poor, government/governed, dominant/subordinate around which society gets organised, highlighting the mutual dependence or mutual subjection which defines all relations of domination for Rousseau.² The contestation of hierarchical structures is not restricted to inter-human relations. While the long title of the *Discourse* refers to inequality among men as its focus, the argumentation disputes all types of inequality, or relations based on the objectification of others, including that between humans and animals.

The clearing of social grounds to explore the origin of inequality also clears the grounds on which the human-animal hierarchy is based. It subtracts institutions, relations, language, morals and laws which appear to separate us from other animals, which create the impression of human supremacy. Attributes such as reason, language, and moral awareness, which historically have been taken as confirmation of human superiority, are exposed as not natural or proper to humans. Humanity is defined by an absence of any specifically human property which allows for the freedom to change. The *Discourse*, I argue, exposes the impropriety of the human to challenge the attempt to identify a fixed difference of value between humanity and animality all the while suggesting the impossibility or undesirability of dissolving difference altogether.³ So while Rousseau's discourse is pioneering in its affirmation of a degree of physical continuity between humans and other species, even conjecturing that man descended from apes, and also in its questioning of human exceptionalism, his work would reject the claim that 'the human-animal distinction can no longer and ought no longer be maintained.'⁴ To abandon that distinction altogether would paradoxically deny animal otherness which can disrupt the sense of human mastery and unity underlying anthropocentrism and which also turns the *animal* into a question.

Rousseau's discussion of pity, explored in the final section of the article, highlights the importance of that distinction for the ethical dimension of the animal-human relation. A degree of human-centredness is essential for critiquing anthropocentrism in the first place. We cannot take responsibility for the ways a misplaced sense of human superiority has engendered the exploitation and destruction of other animals

without reflecting on how our own assumptions, actions or habits as human beings may have participated in this process. Compassion, in its humanised form, does not affirm humanity as much as questions it. It begins from a disruptive encounter with another's suffering that generates anxiety for ourselves, unsettling our sense of security or self-sufficiency through a visceral reaction to seeing another in pain. That reaction momentarily suspends the particular attachments, identifications and affiliations through which we understand ourselves and our place in the world and transports us outside ourselves towards others with whom we have no necessary connection but who can nonetheless still affect us. This movement without exposes us to the impropriety or otherness within as we come to experience others' suffering as appealing to the embodied vulnerability and mortality which we share with all living creatures. The ethical dimension of the human-animal relation, for Rousseau, does not begin from the question of the nature, the extent and value of animal suffering but more fundamentally from the inability of humans and other animals, as part of the living, not to be affected from without. As we shall see, that inability problematises attempts to calculate with certainty whose suffering or life we should feel responsible for, to try to determine which species should command the most human concern.

Human animality

Rousseau devises the fiction of nature in his attempt to disentangle the natural from the artificial, the necessary from the contingent, the animal from the human. This creates a paradox whereby the use of artifice becomes essential for depicting an original state. That paradox suggests how we can never conceive the social foundation in any pure or primary form because any conception of it will always already be traced through with what it allegedly founds and therefore should logically precede.

To think about what grounds society only makes sense from the perspective of what is grounded, from a perspective from within society. As a result, nature emerges as a social construct, losing any certainty, representing a 'state which no longer exists, perhaps never did exist and probably never will exist' (*DOI*, 125). The impossibility of thinking nature from anything but a social perspective resonates with the impossibility of thinking the animal from anything but a human perspective. Just as the *accuracy* of Rousseau's account of nature lies with its uncertainty, objectivity, if there is any, in human accounts of animal others, perhaps lies in acknowledging the subjectivity which shapes those accounts, which renders them partial, modifiable and contestable. Rousseau's discussion of the animal, which does much to refute anthropocentric hierarchies, is itself not beyond question: it is often reductive and homogenising.⁵ To believe that we could reach a neutral, totally non-anthropocentric understanding of animals would in fact close off the question of animality which any critique of anthropocentrism aims to raise and preserve.

His avowedly fictional account of the origin refuses to offer objective grounds for what we recognise as marks of human identity. Instead, it points to the difficulty of demarcating when the human begins and the animal ends. Stripped of social artifice, man becomes an animal, a physical being, governed by two pre-reflexive principles which operate like instincts: self-love (the impulse of self-preservation) and pity (the innate repulsion at witnessing suffering). These instincts are common to all animals, identifying humans with other species through embodied finitude and vulnerability. Once man becomes socialised, he lives according to reason rather than instinct and therefore these principles, which seek to preserve life in common, need to be translated into laws and moral principles. The physical continuity between man and

animals in Rousseau's state of nature questions the anthropocentric hierarchy that indisputably privileges human over animal life or suffering, reconnecting humanity, through self-love and pity, with the living in general. So what is fundamental to man – the preservation of individual life and collective life – is also fundamental to animals. What divides them are artificial, historically acquired traits which, far from ensuring human supremacy, as we shall see, leave the status of humanity unstable. Human identity is contingent and divided rather than essential and whole. It therefore cannot stand as the necessary and unified point of reference from which everything else differs just as the animal can no longer stand as the subordinate term that simply confirms human mastery. Humans and other animals are imagined as naturally equal in their striving for peaceful survival, and by extension, in their susceptibility to pain and death.

That the becoming animal of man, the portrait of him in nature, does not claim 'any historical truth' or show 'the genuine origin' of civilisation does not detract from its critical force (*DOI*, 132). Its overtly fictional status indicates the unknowability of human and animal nature and questions any assumptions hitherto made about it. Rousseau criticises philosophy for assuming too much about nature, objecting in particular to one philosopher's assertion that 'men are wolves and devour one another with clear conscience'.⁶ He does not see traits such as brutality, unconstrained appetites and irrationality, stereotypically associated with beasts, as natural to animals or humans for that matter. That association comes from the projection of socially corrupt human behaviour onto the natural realm. Animals are sentient creatures which preserve themselves without causing unnecessary suffering. Violence and excess arise from denaturation. For example, men learn to prey on one another 'like

ravenous wolves' in social situations of great inequality and injustice (*DOI*, 171). As Judith Still underlines, this comparison is not with 'wolves in general' but 'with starving wolves who have been denatured by this extreme experience and thus turned to eaters of men'.⁷ Rousseau's image of nature therefore refuses, as far as possible, to essentialise about the moral identity of humans and other animals. Governed by instinct, natural man and fellow creatures are amoral, neither good nor bad (150). Morality involves self-reflection, that is, the ability to appraise the impact of one's actions on others. Deprived of the self-objectifying force of language, animals and natural man, while responsive to the pain of others, do not translate those responses into freely chosen actions and principles. Morality does eventually become the preserve of human beings to the extent that they have the freedom to choose whether and how to respond to others. This privilege does not afford them greater moral worth but renders them permanently accountable.

Man descended from apes

The *Discourse* blurs the border between animality and humanity further, when his poetic account of our development from nature to society conjectures, without providing a fully-developed account of evolution, that humans may have descended from apes (*DOI*, n.X, 205).⁸ As Robert Wokler underlines, this was a radical idea at a time when his contemporaries were certain of the fixity of species and the undeniable qualitative difference between man and animals.⁹ For Rousseau, the physical diversity of human beings resulting from differences in climate, diet and lifestyles across the globe suggests that there could have been even more striking differences in the very distant past, that the bodily organisation of human beings may have known 'successive developments' which had drawn it out of 'the embryo of the species'.

Rousseau, however, never substantiates these speculative remarks with a detailed account of man's physical evolution, insisting on the limited scope of comparative anatomy as a methodological tool and the uncertainty of naturalists' observations (134). So how are we to understand Rousseau's conjecture that our forebears may have been apes or more precisely orangutans given this insistence and his famous setting aside of 'the facts', his broad rejection of empirical data? (132). Just as Rousseau's fictional account of nature seeks to disrupt the self-evidence of social institutions and values, to deny them any objective foundation, humanity's animal ancestry works primarily to disrupt the attempts by his predecessors to found human superiority on the alleged inferiority of animals, to decide the exact point when humanity begins.

The great majority of scientific thinkers of Rousseau's day (Tyson, Buffon, Bonnet Herder, Blumenbach), Wokler asserts, were convinced of the subhumanity of apes on the basis of their lack of reason and speech.¹⁰ For Rousseau, reason is not exclusive to humans: animals, for example, would not senselessly endanger themselves. Similarly, their senses afford them a level of understanding grounded in materiality: a monkey, through the reception of sensory data, would be able to distinguish nuts from other food stuffs but, deprived of language, would not possess the abstract idea of the genus *nut*. In terms of understanding, man differs only 'in degree' from animals. That partial difference comes from the fact that he mediates his sense impressions with language whose abstraction enables him to build 'purely intellectual' ideas that transcend materiality (*DOI*, 148). However, language does not, Rousseau argues, prove the subhumanity of apes because language is not a trait inherent to humanity but something acquired. The human is never identical to, or totally defined by

language. Language, for Rousseau, is a set of abstract signs whose meaning depends on common consent, on a common frame of reference (147). It therefore cannot be conceived as natural to man, for, based on convention, it already presupposes society. Likewise, society requires a shared vocabulary to designate commonly held objects, values, roles, institutions.

The humanisation of the human animal

Humans are not endowed with language as a property but are in fact deprived of a language which they fully inhabit.¹¹ Language opens them to otherness, to reflection, society and culture but it does not define human nature for Rousseau, or suggest human supremacy. Man's objectification in language allows him to distance himself from, or even suppress his animality, as he transcends the materiality of nature to enter the realm of abstract ideas, to give sense to himself and to the world. Language may not be natural to humans, but, it is necessary for their humanisation. Rousseau depicts humanisation as a process of externalisation, so language, as the precondition and result of abstraction, is internal to it. On the one hand, language enables us to overcome our self-immersion in nature, to open up to the outside as we begin to signify it, and on other, it can engender a false sense of mastery and closure to otherness. Whereas the signs which shape our thoughts may be arbitrary, interchangeable and roughly equivalent in status, they enable us, according to Rousseau, to generate seemingly fixed hierarchical systems which privilege some terms over others such as human over animal; terms which come to structure social relations and institutions. For example, the famous speech act which opens the second part of the discourse depicts a cunning individual, the *true founder* of civil society, exploiting the abstract, metaphorical quality of language to invent the divisive fiction

of property. Property is fictional because the earth is fundamentally ‘no one’s’. His assertion of ‘This is mine’ also means ‘this is not yours’. He addresses others only to mark himself off from them. The imaginary speech act founds property but also, at the same time, by exposing its contingency, unfounds it (*DOI*, 161). Language allows man to invent and claim property, to differentiate himself from others, but even as he does so it reveals his impropriety, his dependence on an impersonal linguistic system to identify who he is and what is his own. Since his words become a description of reality only if they are understood and accepted by others, any claims he makes can always be rejected or challenged. His sense of himself and his share of the world is never entirely his own.

While Rousseau questions *the mine* of humanity and *the yours* of animality, speculating about a deep historical connection between them, he does not, however, place them on the same ontological plane. He maintains human difference without granting that difference any positive or certain content. Human beings are distinguished from animals by their perfectibility, the almost unlimited freedom to change for better or worse. All other creatures, Rousseau conjectures, are endowed with instincts appropriate to their self-preservation. By contrast, humans lack any internal mechanism which determines their behaviour. Perfectibility designates our potentiality, our freedom to be always other than we are. Defining the human as potentiality excludes a state of completed humanisation either in the form of moral perfection or biological adaptation. Completion would suppress our humanity, that is, our always perfectible character.

The perfectibility proper to man means any attributes that he acquires are improper to him, that is, artificial and contingent. Human impropriety implies that there is no nature original to man. Natural man is ultimately a fiction, already distinct from other animals by his potential for perfectibility, his freedom to deviate from nature. He has to ‘observe’ and ‘imitate’ the ‘industry’ of other animals to survive, for whereas ‘each species has an instinct proper to it’, ‘man, perhaps having none that belongs exclusively to him, appropriates them all, feeds indifferently on most of the various foods, which other animals divide among themselves, and as a result finds his subsistence more easily than can any of them’ (*DOI*, 134-135). The boundary between natural/ artificial, instinct/imitation, proper/improper and animal/human becomes undecidable here. Human beings cannot claim anything as their own; what appears as their *nature* is always already copied and therefore paradoxically an *improper* nature. There is nothing truly original about man. He is never self-sufficient or unified, being always dependent on external support. As Stiegler underlines, he acquires skills, tools or techniques from without to supplement the originary lack of any specific human property from within.¹² He is distinguished from animals only by what he lacks – a property that belongs exclusively to him – which in reality stops him from ever being *properly* human.

As natural man is imagined as living at one with nature to the extent that his purely physical needs of hunger, thirst, procreation are immediately satiated, his perfectibility remains dormant. Immediate satiation suppresses consciousness of temporal alteration and consequently the freedom to change. Change implies both an opening to the future as well as the memory of what has gone before in order to sense the difference of the now.¹³ Perfectibility gets activated by chance and alien

occurrences in the form of terrible storms and floods which destroy man's natural plenitude, putting obstacles in the way of his survival and thereby bringing the question of how to survive, of his future into view. Humanity senses the future, enters history, when it anticipates no future, death. Natural man, writes Rousseau, 'would have died without having lived, and would have lived without having died'¹⁴. Death paradoxically brings life alive. To live means to be subject to temporal finitude, to survive after a period that has passed and retain the memory of that past for a future still to come. For this reason, death awakens perfectibility. 'Knowledge of death' is therefore 'one of the first acquisitions made by man in departing from his animal state'. For while both man and animals are motivated by self-preservation, 'no animal can know what it is to die' (*DOI*, 142). Rousseau therefore reproduces a commonly held frontier between them: consciousness of death. However, that frontier becomes somewhat blurred when Rousseau remarks in *Emile* that 'no one knows of his own experience what it is to die'.¹⁵ Humans may anticipate death but they do not know it. Consciousness of death does not ensure a clear division between humans and animals: they both share the impossibility of *living* death. The question of shared limits becomes, as we shall see, in my discussion of compassion, central for reflecting on the (im)possibility of identification.

The risk of anthropocentrism?

As we have seen, man's humanisation depends on exposure to alterity, and that exposure discloses his inherent incompleteness. Being perfectible, humans are always future-oriented insofar as they are never fully determined. They have the potential to adapt to new contexts and challenges precisely because, unlike animals, they are not fundamentally adapted to anything specifically. While Rousseau's focus on

perfectibility rejects a traditional mode of anthropocentrism which opposes human plenitude with animal lack, it runs the risk of ushering in a more subtle form of it which defines man's originary lack of property as grounding his capacity to acquire the skills, attributes, techniques which allow him to surpass animals and to establish himself as the measure of all things. Rousseau's own account of the human-animal relation does not necessarily deny its human-centredness. However, the indeterminacy which enables the freedom and transformation coming from perfectibility excludes mastery and self-sufficiency: they would foreclose the potential for change defining humanity. The openness which makes humans forever susceptible to improvement also makes them forever susceptible to degeneration. 'Perfectibility', therefore, writes Rousseau, is 'the faculty, causing over centuries man's enlightenment and his errors, his vices and his virtues to bloom, which eventually makes him his own and nature's Tyrant' (*DOI*, 141).

As human development has no predefined limits, no ultimate finality, history, as possibility itself, becomes the site both of our failure and our achievement. While perfectibility enhances our survival by giving us the capacity to develop technics to overcome obstacles to the preservation of the living, it can equally jeopardise it, allowing us to construct oppressive types of social organisation which subjugate, exclude and destroy human and animal life. Being future oriented, we understand the impact of our decisions only after the fact, through their effects. The deferred effect structuring our development indicates that there is nothing inexorable about our current situation. If we could totally predict the outcome of our actions or decisions, our defining potentiality would disappear and we would no longer need to decide anything at all, we would simply realise a pre-programmed set of tasks. We remain

forever responsible for our actions and decisions because we can never be certain of their outcome and therefore must always remain ready to critique them from the perspective of present events. Perfectibility makes us morally and politically accountable for ourselves and others because it excludes total mastery or self-sufficiency. If nothing could ever disturb or afflict us, the question of responsibility would become redundant, as we would have nothing to be responsible for.

The ethical dimension of the human-animal relation: compassion

The question of responsibility, of responsiveness or lack of it towards others arises in Rousseau's theory of pity. That theory explores the (im)possibility of identification and is therefore essential for reflecting on the human-animal relation. Compassion, for Rousseau, constitutes a vital component of humanity, representing our potential to move outside ourselves to identify with the plight of those *different* from us. The significance of compassion in his philosophy means that ethical concern for other animals is not primarily grounded in objective reasons such as shared capacities, rights or biological similarities which call for their equal treatment, as it is for analytical philosophers like Peter Singer and Tom Regan, although we may certainly derive principles from our compassionate responses.¹⁶ Rather, that concern is more relational, coming from an imaginative engagement with them as fellow creatures whose suffering we experience as appealing to pity.

On this point, my reading of Rousseau anticipates Cora Diamond's affirmation of the role of pity in animal ethics to counteract what she sees as the overly rationalistic approach of Singer and Regan. Her work retroactively exposes, without

acknowledging Rousseau, the importance of his theory for current debates. 'Pity', she argues, 'beyond its primitive manifestations, depends upon a sense of human life and loss, and a grasp of the situations in which one human being can appeal for pity to another, ask that he relent.' 'The abstract appeal to the prevention of suffering as a principle of action', she continues, 'encourages us to ignore pity, to forget what it contributes to our conception of death and suffering'.¹⁷ That appeal cannot exhaustively capture what generates a sense of moral concern, it cannot explain what moves us to a feeling of injustice when human and animal life is disrespected. As Diamond argues, if the concern about eating meat, for example, simply reduced to the prevention of suffering, we would not find it wrong to eat those who have died from natural causes or accidents. Animals, she argues in opposition, become morally considerable because we imaginatively project pity on to them. That projection includes them in the world of human feeling and meaning whereby their life and loss call forth a shared sense of finitude and vulnerability. Pity initiates this sense of sharing by allowing us to place ourselves in others' position so that we come to imagine our own potential for suffering in similar ways. For Diamond, 'horror of the conceptualising of animals as putting nothing in the way of their use as mere stuff' relies on 'a comparable horror at human relentlessness and pitilessness in the exercise of power' towards humanity.¹⁸ Therefore, the importance we, as human beings, accord to our own lives and bodies, is not necessarily an obstacle to our feeling ethical responsibility towards animals. It does not prevent us from engaging seriously with their suffering but actually underpins the injustice we feel when their bodies are subjected to cruelty.

To ignore human difference in order to avoid the charge of speciesism is to ignore the perspective from which we relate to animal life. If animals become morally considerable only because we can prove that they have an equal interest in not suffering, their moral worth would hang in the balance, subject to proof or counter proof.¹⁹ Such an approach would not in fact exonerate itself of speciesism: humanity would still stand as the point of reference from which equality is measured. For Rousseau, such reasoning would allow us to distance ourselves from the anguish we feel at the sight of their suffering. Compassion depends on otherness and imagination rather than likeness and evidence.²⁰ We need to identify with another's suffering only because we do not immediately feel it or know exactly how it feels. Otherwise, the act of identification would be redundant. The impropriety of the human in the *Discourse* is central. The absence of any specifically human property or identity forces us to identify with the outside, to adopt alien identities, in order to fill that absence. This process of self-externalisation therefore allows us to respond compassionately to others, to internalise their suffering as recalling own vulnerability to affliction or pain. But it also threatens compassion, possibly leading us to perceive others' suffering as totally external to us, as of no moral consequence, as confirming our own relative security and superiority. Rousseau's theory surpasses Diamond's by exploring more fully the ambiguity and fragility of compassion as the source of ethical responsibility. As we shall see, the conditions of possibility of pity also restrict it.

For Rousseau, compassion is present in all animals despite its specifically human form. Natural compassion entails 'an innate repugnance at seeing a fellow creature suffer' (*DOI*, 152). It consists of a visceral rejection of pain, of repulsion at witnessing life in a diminished or weakened form. Being pre-reflexive, it does not

involve interpreting what that reaction means and how to respond to it through time. It simply represents a primordial openness among the living which counteracts the egoism natural to man for Hobbes (151-2). It acts as a brake on the drive to self-preservation, so that humans and other animals do not unnecessarily endanger one another in their bid for survival. Rousseau's insistence on this form of compassion as natural, as undeniable, affirms the susceptibility to suffering that we share with animals.

He depicts animals engaged in proto-ethical forms of behaviour which exceed the narrow range of actions (eating, sleeping, procreating) to which they are limited in other parts of the text: horses showing 'reluctance to trample on living bodies', the 'disquiet' of one animal at the sight of the dead body of one of his species; some animals giving 'their fellows a sort of burial'; the 'mournful' cries of cattle when they react to 'the horrible spectacle' of the slaughter house (*DOI*, 152). Images of untamed animals resisting captivity or enforced labour are also used to underline the unnaturalness of social man's acquiescence to oppression (177). These scenes awaken us to the mortality, vulnerability and refusal of suffering that fundamentally (re)connect us to animals; they include animal life in the realm of human feeling and meaning, as part of a shared moral world.

Rousseau's discussion of animal compassion as rooted in a universal susceptibility to being affected or afflicted from without, aims to arrest, to destabilise the attempts depicted in his own portrayal of history, but also beyond, to establish hierarchies of moral worth. It exposes the disruptive force of affect which can initiate moral and political questioning and action. For Rousseau, rational calculation does not therefore

ground ethical responsibility. '[I]t is reason', he argues, 'which turns [man] back upon himself, which divides him from everything that could disturb or afflict him' (*DOI*, 153). This turning away from affliction or disturbance does not deny natural compassion but affirms it through negation: we can turn away only if we have felt disturbed or afflicted at some point. So while all animals are affected by others, humans, as perfectible creatures, can choose whether to respond, to decide which modes of political, moral or juridical action to take. That choice marks the emergence of the humanised form of compassion, enabling responsibility precisely because it also enables the possibility of turning away. Without that possibility, no one could decide to turn towards others and act on their call.

Humanised compassion requires a reflexive act of comparison which involves imagination, meditation and reason, the very faculty which can both frustrate compassion as well as transform it into cause for action and reform. Without the ability to reflect or compare, compassion would simply stop at the mere repulsion at suffering. The externalisation which humanises the human animal allows us to recognise others as *other* and thereby take account of our relations, and consequently be accountable for them. Rousseau does not deny human exceptionalism outright but does deny that it gives us mastery over the world. In fact, it implicates us consciously and deeply within it since we are always externally facing and thus never self-sufficient. We are always in relation.²¹

Pity gives us a heightened sense of relationality. Its humanised form, as we have argued, entails a movement outside the self, the assuming of an alien identity, which rests on an act of imagination as we identify with what we do not feel directly in

ourselves.²² It does not produce oneness: we are transported towards others but do not fuse with them. If the experience of compassion involved our totally internalising others' suffering, reproducing it identically, it would cancel itself out as we would or could no longer relate to them as *other* and would therefore no longer feel the anxiety within us of how to respond. While reflective activity can suspend compassion, it is also essential for interpreting its meaning, for thinking through how to act on it morally and politically. So human compassion depends on what equally threatens its operation. While the difference between self and other make acts of compassionate identification possible, for Rousseau, it can equally short circuit as we experience that difference as indicating total separation or detachment, as we see their suffering as exclusively belonging to them and of no concern for ourselves (*DOI*, 75). The uncertainty over how we respond to compassion does have an affirmative dimension, enjoining us to reflect on, to check and critique our responses.

The significance of difference, spacing, imagination, over likeness, unity or immediacy for human compassion challenges attempts clearly to fix the limits of moral considerability, to decide exactly who or what is capable of suffering and to what extent they suffer as the basis of calculating whose suffering is worthy of consideration. This is not to say that Rousseau diminishes the importance of fairness or rationality for moral reasoning. He recognises that acts of compassion can never be unconditional or total but do and should, at times, involve limits so that we do not indiscriminately identify with anyone, including those that persecute or violate others. However, the attempt to calculate whether a particular animal other suffers in an equal way to us, or is equally aware of suffering as us would not be a valid line of enquiry for Rousseau. First, by presenting the self as the measure of the other, it would

suppress what Rousseau calls ‘the anxiety’ for the self.²³ That anxiety is important for compassion since it brings us to question how our situation, our affiliations or values can lead us to deny suffering or perpetuate it. Secondly, such a line of enquiry does not pay sufficient attention to the finitude which conditions relating.

My discussion of his theory of compassion advances a double argument about the self-other relation. On the one hand, our openness to human and other animals is always mediated through our own experience. On the other, we remain marked by an alterity that exceeds us: we can never fully assimilate or directly experience others’ suffering. These limits prevent closure, leaving open the question of who or what the other is, and how we respond to others, or whether we respond at all. The spontaneous compassion we share with all animals reinforces this openness. It stems less from the ability to suffer than from an inability not to be affected, afflicted, or disturbed by others. It involves a disruptive encounter with suffering which affects us before our attempts to calculate and establish the ethical status of that suffering, thereby unsettling the rational basis of those deductions. Our *animal* vulnerability interrupts the potentially divisive and hierarchising work of human reason.

Conclusion

The *Discourse* aims to challenge all relations based on the subjugation and instrumentalisation of others by exposing the absence of any objective basis for social inequality. To this end, it disputes the human-animal hierarchy. The attributes which have been taken as confirmation of human superiority are exposed as improper to humanity, as supplementing the lack of any specifically human property. Human impropriety refuses a clear division between humanity and animality while also

enabling man to take on traits, skills, identities that create contingent and artificial differences between them. That process of differentiation is also one of self-externalisation, allowing man to recognise and identify with otherness. Human compassion exposes our capacity to move outside ourselves towards others. It allows us to experience both affectively and consciously our connectedness to fellow creatures. Their suffering affects us from without, calling on us to identify with it as a mark of our own animal vulnerability from within. It is our humanity which allows us to acknowledge and feel animality as part of us. Compassion exposes the alterity which conditions relating, an alterity which marks the self as much as the other. While we cannot completely identify with others without destroying the otherness which simultaneously conditions and restricts identificatory acts, we can never completely close ourselves off to others without in some way affirming the openness, the force of the outside which that closing off tries to deny. The *Discourse* appeals to us to recognise the embodied existence that we share with other animals as the reason to resist the oppression and degradation of life in society. Its affirmation of human animality is an affirmation of the equality of anyone and everyone.

NOTES

¹ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 'Discourse on the Origin of Inequality' (*DOI* henceforth), *The Discourses and other early political writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 111-222. Page numbers will appear in the article.

² 'One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they.' Rousseau, 'The Social Contract', II: 2, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, translated by G.D Cole (Everyman: London, 1993), p. 181.

³ I owe the idea of 'impropriety' to Bernard Stiegler's reading of Rousseau's account of the origin: 'what is usually considered specifically human is immediately and irremediably linked to the absence of property (*impropriété*), to a process of "supplementation", of prothetisation or exteriorisation'. Stiegler, Bernard, *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus*, R. Beardsworth and G. Collins (trans.)

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 133. For Stiegler's reading of Rousseau, see Roberts, Ben, 'Rousseau, Stiegler and the Aporia of Origin', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 42:4, 2006, 382-392.

⁴ Calarco's overarching thesis contradicts his alignment with Derrida for whom the distinction is undecidable rather than untenable. Calarco, Matthew, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 3. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* translated by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

⁵ He describes animals as 'ingenious machines, to which nature has given senses to wind itself up and, to a point, protect itself against everything that tends to disorder or destroy it.' Humans are also similarly 'machines' but have been endowed with free will which allows them to improve or harm their chances of survival (*DOI*, 140). As we shall see, Rousseau's discussion of compassion challenges this mechanistic description of animals.

⁶ Rousseau 'A Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts', *The Social Contract and Discourses*, p. 26. Rousseau refers to Hobbes here. For the question of man and wolves in Rousseau and Hobbes, see Still, Judith, *Derrida and Other Animals* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2015), pp. 80-90.

⁷ Still, *Derrida and Other Animals*, 89.

⁸ See also Rousseau, 'Letter to Philopolis', *The Discourses and other early political writings*, pp. 223-8.

⁹ Robert Wokler, 'Perfectible Apes in Decadent Cultures: Rousseau's anthropology revisited', *Rousseau, The Age of Enlightenment, and Their Legacies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp.1-28 (7).

¹⁰ Wokler, 'Perfectible Apes', p. 9.

¹¹ Rousseau's understanding of man's relation to language as a process of self-externalisation bears comparison with Giorgio Agamben's reading of that relation in *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). Whereas Agamben, Terry Eagleton asserts, 'fails to say enough about how this self-objectifying can be a source of value as well a cause of calamity', Rousseau, I advance, exposes its ambiguity. Eagleton, Terry, *Materialism* (New Have and London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 54.

¹² Stiegler, *Time and Technics*, p. 133.

¹³ Rousseau's claim that natural man lives with no sense of the future is complicated, Stiegler shows, by the fact that he has 'projects, a kind of immediate future which is impossible without the whole future coming along in its stead'. Man cannot originally exist outside time 'for this would be a man before creation – a non-existent man who would yet be the only natural man, the only man truly himself, true to himself.' *Technics and Time*, p. 125.

¹⁴ Rousseau, 'The General Society of the Human Race', *The Social Contract and Discourses*, 169-77 (171).

¹⁵ Rousseau, *Emile*, B. Foxley (trans.) (London : Everyman, 1993), 225.

¹⁶ Singer, Peter, *Animal Liberation* (London: Random House, 1995). Regan, Tom, *The Case for Animal rights*, 2nd edn (Berkeley, CA: Berkley University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ Diamond, Cora, 'Eating meat and eating people', *Philosophy*, 52:206, 1978, 465-479 (478).

Diamond's insistence that our vulnerability and mortality as embodied beings underlies our compassion and sense of justice towards animals shares much with Derrida's articulation of animal ethics in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

¹⁸ Diamond, Cora, 'Injustice and Animals' in Elliot, Carl (ed.) *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2001), p.136.

¹⁹ Singer's affirmation of the equal consideration of animals' interests as a moral principle is criticised precisely in this way by both McCloskey and Frey who argue that there is not adequate proof that animals actively have interests. See McCloskey, H. 'Rights', *Philosophy Quarterly*, 15, 1965, 115-27; Frey, R. *Interests and Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

²⁰ 'It is only through imagination that we can feel the sorrows of others', Rousseau, *Emile*, 231.

²¹ 'Social man, always outside himself, is capable of living only in the opinion of others, and, so to speak, derives the sentiment of his existence solely from their judgement.' (*DOI*, 187).

²² 'We only suffer as far as we suppose he suffers; the suffering is not ours but his. So no one becomes sensitive til his imagination is aroused and begins to carry him outside himself.' Rousseau, *Emile*, 220.

²³ Rousseau argues that 'theatrical imitations' can induce more tears than the 'objects imitated' because they do not involve 'anxiety for ourselves' or require us to give anything of ourselves, to decide whether or how to respond. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letter to d'Alembert*, Bloom, A. (trans.) (New York : Cornell University Press, 1960), 25.