Of Jews and Animals
by Andrew Benjamin

by Verena Erlenbusch and Colin McQuillan

Andrew Benjamin has undertaken a compelling study of the ways in which Jews and animals are figured in the history of art, literature and philosophy in his recent book Of Jews and Animals. Benjamin acknowledges that associating Jews and animals is problematic for historical and political reasons, yet, he attempts to show how both Jews and animals become figures of the ‘without relation’. The without relation is, according to Benjamin, a radical separation that takes the form of an absence of a relation. It is an inadequate conception of difference in which particularity is effaced in the name of universality. The purpose of Benjamin’s study is to develop a metaphysics of particularity, which would allow a more affirmative concept of relationality than can be conceived through the without relation.

Benjamin begins his study by examining how Descartes and Heidegger define the difference between animals and humans, in order to show that the exclusion of animality, and the negation of any relation between the human and the animal, is constitutive of their respective conceptions of humanity. In both cases, however, Benjamin argues that animality remains essentially related to humanity. When one considers the role animal spirits play in Descartes’ account of human physiology, and Heidegger’s account of the ‘existence’ of the dog, it becomes apparent that the without relation is founded on the denial of a more fundamental relation.

Benjamin goes on to elaborate the ways in which human community is defined by the exclusion of the animal. He contends that, for Blanchot, community is defined by the death of the animal. The animal is sacrificed in order to establish the separation from nature and the linguistic relations that obtain between members of a community. The relations that define the community are, therefore, essentially human relations. Benjamin is less concerned about the possibility of including the animal in the community, however, than he is with the possibility of thinking the animal outside the logic of sacrifice and the without relation.

The logic of sacrifice and the without relation are maintained by the anthropocentric bias of the language of metaphysics. Navigating between Derrida’s deconstruction of humanism and the space of ‘play’ that deconstruction opens up between the human and the animal, Benjamin attempts to demonstrate the primordiality of relationality. Relationality is always already constituted by the way in which difference is thought. For
that reason, Benjamin emphasizes the way in which difference is figured, rather than the difference between the human and the animal.

Drawing on Hegel’s discussion of ‘disease’ in the *Philosophy of Nature*, Benjamin introduces the figure of the Jew. Benjamin situates his discussion of the Jew within a discussion of disease since the latter “marks the movement in which particularity dominates a conception of possible universality” (2010: 99). For Hegel, Benjamin claims, the Jew “takes the form of a disease that can be overcome” (ibid.: 104). The Jew can be incorporated into the universality of ‘man’ if his particularity as Jew is effaced. Universality is thus dependent upon the exclusion of particularity and the establishment of a without relation. Instead of arguing for recognition of the Jew as Jew, however, Benjamin insists on a rethinking of relationality which affirms particularity.

Benjamin argues that Agamben neglects that particularity in his account of ‘bare life’. He accuses Agamben of effacing the particularity of those who were reduced to ‘bare life’ in the camps and emptying the political of the “founding mark” of difference (ibid.: 122-124). Doing so, Benjamin maintains, leads Agamben to a utopianism in which ‘bare life’ is an absolutely indeterminate form of life beyond identity. For Benjamin, this utopianism is problematic, firstly, because it is unable to distinguish between potential and actual victims of violence. Violence is not inflicted on ‘bare life’ indiscriminately, but rather on those – like Jews in Nazi Germany – whose otherness leads them to be regarded as enemies. Secondly, Agamben also fails to see that particularity must persist in the “coming community”, even if the differences which distinguish particularity are no longer considered marks of enmity.

Examining the logic of enmity, Benjamin considers Pascal’s reflections on the relation between justice and force. Benjamin argues that justice requires force, for Pascal, because there are always those who are ‘wicked’. The presence of the other, the representation of the other as the enemy, and the denunciation of the enemy as wicked, allows force to be exercised against the other in the name of justice. Rather than being the mystical foundation of authority, as Derrida contends, this gesture is for Benjamin “the original and grounding form of violence” (ibid.: 127). The manifest violence in Pascal’s identification of the Jew as ‘wicked’ is the result of a process of universalization, which substitutes the immediacy of identity for the porous and ongoing incompleteness of particularity (ibid.).

Against this “original and grounding form of violence”, Benjamin poses the work of art. Although the work of art is often beholden to the same process of universalization that led Pascal to declare the Jew ‘wicked’, the portrait also represents the particularity of its subject. The distinguishing characteristics of the particular are presented in the portrait in ways that are
neither simple nor immediate. Particularity breaks through the universal in surprising and unexpected ways, when, for example, faces do not look at one another in Van Eyck’s *The Fountain of Grace* (1430), or while hands seem to touch without touching in Dürer’s *Jesus Among the Doctors* (1506). In both cases, the work of art presents the “complex plurality” that undoes the universalization of identity, exclusion and enmity. For this reason, Benjamin concludes that a just and affirmative encounter with particularity is possible.

Andrew Benjamin offers an important intervention in the philosophical concern with the figures of Jews and animals. His problematization of ethical reflections for being tainted by the founding mark of the without relation between human and non-human beings, draws attention to the necessity of a new way of thinking about relationality. It is not entirely clear, however, if, for Benjamin and in the history of philosophy, the animal is actually presented as something without relation to the human. Benjamin does not consider the ways in which separation, negation, exclusion, and difference, constitute, despite their negativity, forms of relation.

Benjamin’s reading of Pascal is likewise questionable since Pascal does not actually call Jews ‘wicked’. There is an important slippage in Benjamin’s reading, which passes from Pascal’s statement that “it is necessary that Jews or Christians are wicked” (ibid.: 130) to the conclusion that Jews are “automatically” (ibid.: 143) and “immediately” (ibid.: 146) wicked. What Benjamin brings out in his discussion of Pascal, however, is a question of philosophical and political acuity. “What does it mean”, Benjamin asks, “to be just to particularity?” (ibid.: 145). The answer is as provocative as it is powerful. Instead of understanding justice as force, doing justice to particularity requires a temporal and spatial element that allows immediacy to be displaced and the time of judgment to be held open. Doing justice to particularity means

to hold both philosophically and as a matter of social policy to the maintenance of particularities as sites of conflict and thus within terms they set and create to hold to the necessity that particularities have their own sense of self-transformation (ibid.: 146).

Benjamin’s reflections on particularity and the justice it demands deserve the kind of wide readership that the publisher’s price tag seems to preclude. Given the lack of an exhaustive bibliography, as well as the shockingly poor copyediting, one is left wondering about the level of care and attention Edinburgh University Press have chosen to pay to this important intervention by a scholar of Benjamin’s stature.
Reviews

Colin McQuillan (cmcquillan@utk.edu) is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He received his PhD from Emory University in 2010.

Verena Erlenbusch (v.erlenbusch@sussex.ac.uk) is a recipient of a DOC-fellowship of the Austrian Academy of Sciences at the Centre for Social and Political Thought, University of Sussex. She is also a Visiting Research Scholar in Philosophy at Emory University.