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TOWARDS AN ETHICO-AESTHETIC PARADIGM: ANIMAL POLITICS, METAMODELIZATION, AND THE PRAGMATICS OF MUTUAL INCLUSION

Colin Gardner

What Animals Teach Us about Politics by Brian Massumi. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. Pp. 152. $79.95 cloth, $22.95 paper.

A fascinating by-product of recent interest in vitalist philosophies of becoming—particularly in the area of affect theory—has been the import of the works of English anthropologist–cyberneticist Gregory Bateson, in particular his seminal 1972 book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Bateson broke down ecology into a series of three areas: the material (ecology, biophysical); the social (cultural and human); and the perceptual, which treats the mind as an interactive system characterized by an exchange of information: "Difference that makes a difference," as he put it. Bateson argued for the innate interconnection and interpenetration of the three ecologies to the point of always deterritorializating them towards an infinite outside that guarantees their difference and becoming. More importantly, this is also a de-hierarchized system, where humans are given no more preference than nonhumans or material objects, and neither is raised above the *worlding* capabilities of nature. In this sense, geomorphism, anthropomorphism, and biomorphism are equally embedded, with the aesthetic acting as a vital catalyst. Bateson's project has a clear connection to recent explorations in ecosophical aesthetics, in particular the groundbreaking work of Félix Guattari. In *Chaosmosis* (1992, English 1995), *The Three Ecologies* (1989, English 2000), and *What Is Ecosophy?* (2013,

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English 2018) Guattari developed a processual philosophy of the ecological through the use of asignifying components that think beyond the conventional split between subject and object, human and nonhuman, subjectivities and world, transforming the ecological into a machinic, decentered ethico-aesthetic paradigm, a subjectivity without a subject.

Enter Brian Massumi's *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (2014), which also draws heavily on Bateson but in this case one of his more underutilized essays, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy" (1972).[1] Wittily written and rich in philosophical scope (in addition to Bateson, Deleuze, and Guattari, the work encompasses Henri Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, Giorgio Agamben and Raymond Ruyer), Massumi has structured his book as a form of practical user's manual geared towards a greater, creative vitalism of life (in Friedrich Nietzsche's sense of "that dark, driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself").[2] The book's title essay is a relatively short reflection on animal play as the staging of a metacommunicative paradox, an expression of difference and singularity on one hand and, through vitality affect, mutual inclusion and transindividuality on the other. These open-ended, fluid ludic gestures are followed by a series of fourteen propositions that act as a preliminary sketch for a practical philosophy (in Baruch Spinoza's sense) "to be Filled in according to Appetite" (38). Massumi fills out the second half of the book with three supplementary essays that apply Bateson's ludic principles to (a) writing, where, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the human "becomes-animal" most intently (specifically through the role of the "anomalous" in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* [1915] and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* [1851]); (b) the zoological reduction of the animal to an object of spectatorship (via a constructed zone of indifference), and the concomitant need for a mutual inclusion of the animal and the human via an enactive, sympathetic gesture of double deterritorialization (producing a zone of *indiscernibility* of difference); and (c), lest one fall into abhorrent speciesism and anthropomorphism, "Six Theses on the Animal to be Avoided" (91). Massumi's main objective in the supplements is to open a gap between Bateson's original theory of animal play and the affirmative politics that might flow from it, whereby "[o]nly an enactive *ecology* of a diversity of animal practices, in a creative tension of differential mutual inclusion, can begin to do the trick" (89, his emphasis).

So what does Bateson's theory of play consist of, and how does it force us to rethink the very nature of instinct and, by extension, politics? Firstly, as Massumi points out, we

must rethink the human as immanent to animality, for "[e]xpressing the singular belonging of the human to the animal continuum has political implications, as do all questions of belonging" (3). This entails moving beyond anthropomorphism, not just in relation to animals, but also to ourselves as standing apart from other animals, "our inveterate vanity regarding our assumed species identity, based on the specious grounds of our sole proprietorship of language, thought, and creativity" (3). In this sense, Massumi's project has obvious Spinozist roots, attempting to construct an animal politics and carry it to the limit of what it can do by forging new rhizomic connections with other bodies through a combination of sympathy and creativity. In this respect, the project begins and ends in play.

For Bateson, animal play revolves around the reciprocal imbrication of *differencings* through mutual inclusion in a process of continual variation. Massumi illustrates this through an analysis of a play fight between wolf cubs, which is similar to (through abstraction) its analogue, actual combat, whereby "[e]ach ludic gesture envelops a difference in a display of similarity" (4). Similar to, *but not the Same*. In short, the ludic gesture stages a paradox whereby a wolf cub bites and at the same time says, "This is not a bite, this is not a fight, this is a game," standing in for the suspended analogue: real combat. "In a single gesture," argues Massumi, "two individuals are swept up together and move in tandem to a register of existence where what matters is no longer what one does, but what one does stands-for" (5).

This level of abstraction is game's "-esqueness," its metacommunicative level that self-reflexively mobilizes the possible, a situation (or in Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, a people) to come as vital gesture. In this sense, metacommunication precedes its denotative communication, for the latter needs the prehuman level as a precondition for language: "Animal play creates the conditions for language. Its metacommunicative action builds the evolutionary foundation for the metalinguistic functions that will be the hallmark of human language, and which distinguish it from a simple code" (8). As Bateson himself ludically puts it, "These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote."[3] In this sense, the ludic gesture metacommunicates: it comments on what it's doing as it does it—"I'm not biting, I'm nipping"—thereby opening the analogical gap, but at the same time the gesture's abstraction puts into play a conditional difference. Combat is also present but held in suspense by the stylism of the play and its ludic logic (not unlike the prerehearsed moves in

professional wrestling). The result is a zone of indiscernibility without differences being erased: game and combat are performatively fused without being confused, their differences actively coming together.

This is another way of saying that ludic gestures produce transindividual transformation via a performative act while at the same time retaining their affective force across the ludic divide. Thus, the power of affect in the abstraction is no less profound than that in its analogue: the play bite can induce just as much fear as its combat equivalent. What is important here, however, is what Massumi calls "the included middle" (35). When play and combat come together, their union creates a third dimension—the included middle of their mutual influence. However, animals and humans react differently to this mutual interface. While humans experience paradox as a breakdown of the capacity to think—which causes agitation and, in extreme cases, paranoia—animals are activated by it: in play the animal actively and effectively affirms paradox, raising its actions to a metacommunicative level where it prepares itself for the rigors of combat by having rehearsed the moves in advance.

So how might this be a lesson in politics? Because the ludic presupposes collaboration or, as Massumi argues, "The ludic gesture is impotent unless it captures the other's attention" (35). By anticipating the partner's countermoves, point and counterpoint generate a mutual inclusion that might be dubbed "sympathy" or, alternatively, "primary consciousness" (36). "Sympathy is the transindividual becoming brought into being by intuition's acting out," notes Massumi. "Sympathy is *the mode of existence of the included middle*" (35, his emphasis). As the thinking–doing of life, sympathy thus plays out (and at) the in-between, but immanently from the inside, not from an outside overview (like cognition). In other words, this is not a dialectical move but rather a genealogical one, in Nietzsche's sense of unearthing the origins of bodily forces.

Ultimately, and this is perhaps Massumi's key point and what brings him most clearly into alignment with Guattari's ecosophy, is that what animals teach us about politics is the philosophical equivalent of play's metacommunication—namely, metamodelization. According to Guattari, metamodelization reorients theoretical activity by taking into account the diversity and interconnectedness of modeling systems themselves. It is by its very nature transindividual: "I have proposed the concept of ontological intensity. It implies an ethico-aesthetic engagement with the enunciative assemblage, both in actual and virtual registers. But another element

of the metamodelisation proposed here resides in the collective character of machinic multiplicities."[4] In short, metamodelization privileges the primacy of the supernormal tendency in animal life so that, as Massumi concludes,

> What we learn from animals is the possibility of constructing what Guattari calls an *ethico-aesthetic paradigm* of natural politics (as opposed to a politics of nature). The idea of natural politics has been well and truly debunked by critical thinking over the last century. Now it is time to relaunch it, well and -esquely—marshaling all the powers that the false nature provides." (38, his emphasis)

Colin Gardner is Professor of Critical Theory and Integrative Studies at University of California, Santa Barbara, where he teaches in the departments of Art, Film & Media Studies, Comparative Literature, and Art History. He is the author of critical studies on Joseph Losey and Karel Reisz for Manchester University Press and Beckett, Deleuze and the Televisual Event: Peephole Art *(2012) for Palgrave Macmillan. He is currently coeditor of two anthologies with Professor Patricia MacCormack (Anglia Ruskin University):* Deleuze and the Animal *(Edinburgh University Press, 2017) and* Ecosophical Aesthetics *(Bloomsbury, 2018).*

NOTES

1. Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 177–93.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R[eginald] J[ohn] Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazeale, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 57–124, quotation on 60.
3. Bateson, "Theory of Play and Fantasy," 180 (his emphasis).
4. Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 29.