

PHL 629: Seminar on Contemporary Problems Human Being, Animal Being, Plant Being

Instructor: H. Peter Steeves Office Hours & Info: Tuesdays, 5:00-6:00PM (and by appt.); 773/325-1153; psteeves@depaul.edu

Required Texts:

- (1) *Species: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, Wilson (ed.)
- (2) *Species of Mind*, Colin Allen and Marc Bekoff
- (3) E-reserves

Recommended Texts:

- (1) *Mind of the Raven*, Bernd Heinrich
- (2) *Plant-Thinking*, Michael Marder
- (3) *The Great Ape Project*, Cavalieri and Singer (ed.)

Course Description: This course is a phenomenological investigation into the assumed distinctions drawn among different forms of life, especially human and animal, but also plant and animal (though, with apologies, we will only focus on plants for a short time this quarter). We will be looking at how life appears, doing a phenomenology, that is, of *life*. In many respects, the course could also be said to fall under the domain of philosophy of science—specifically, a philosophy of biology. Our time together will be interdisciplinary in nature in that we will be studying the distinctions among different forms of life from a variety of viewpoints and asking a variety of questions: (1) What is the general basis for all categorization? How do philosophical accounts of categories fit into and/or set the foundation for the long Western tradition of the apparent need to compartmentalize and conceptualize in order to understand? Are there any real categories, is nominalism the best alternative, or are there other possibilities? (2) Specifically, what is a species and are they “real”? Here we will be looking at the history of the idea of species and the alternatives to both Aristotle and Darwinism (e.g., the Ancient Greeks had three “family-types” of centaurs, and Linnaeus’ pre-Darwinian schema separated beasts of burden into their own natural category). (3) Ultimately, is it a question of consciousness and cognitive ability that supposedly separates humans from other forms of life? In pursuit of this line of inquiry we will be turning to neurologists, phenomenologists, psychologists, biologists, cognitive ethologists, and philosophers who study the animal mind, animal phenomenology, and animal epistemology (as well as plant consciousness). (4) Does language play a role in distinguishing human life from other forms of life? What is so special about language that humans are (mistakenly?) the only organisms thought to possess it? What is the philosophical status of animal-language projects (e.g., teaching apes sign language or teaching parrots to speak English in a meaningful way)? And do plants communicate? (5) How do we *conceptualize* animals and what happens at the endpoints of the supposed human-animal spectrum? Toward answering this question we will look at the documented cases of feral children, the possibility of Bigfoot, *Mono Grande*, and Yeti creatures, and the role of monsters and bestialization in an attempt to see how we deal with crossing the (false) borders of our categories. (6) Finally, we will introduce and analyze artistic representations of the human-animal-plant divide, focusing on literature, film, poems, paintings, dance, and other expressions of the worldview that has come to separate human being from animal being, human beings from animals, and “our” way of life from other forms of life.

Grading Procedure and Requirements: Your grade will be based on one final fifteen-page paper and on your class participation. It is expected that you will attend all of the classes and participate by asking questions and taking part in the discussions we will be having. There is a great deal of reading to be done in this class, so you should take seriously the fact that you have no writing assignments or protocol presentations throughout the quarter. Spend your time reading, thinking, and preparing for class. The final paper is due by 6:00pm on Monday, November 24. More information about it will be passed out around mid-term.

Introduction

1. Sept 16 Philosophy of Science & Biology; Conceptualizing Human/Animal Dichotomies

The Nature of Species

2. Sept 23 Read: *Species: New Interdisciplinary Essays*: Ch. 2, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12; Locke; Frazer; Ruse; Mayr
3. Sept 30

Species and Humanity

4. Oct 7 Read: Kant; Tanner; Lewinsohn; Dawkins; Diamond; Clark

Other-than-Human Consciousness and Language

5. Oct 14 Read: Nagel; Cangland; Dennett; Margulies; *Species of Mind*; Radner; Savage-Rumbaugh; Fouts; Sebeok; Griffin; Hearne; Marder; Chamovitz; Heinrich; Norris; Kafka; Le Guin; Searle
6. Oct 21
7. Oct 28

Conceptualizing Borders: Monster Territory

8. Nov 8 Read: Midgely; Davidson; Haraway

Aesthetics and the Presence of Non-Human Life

9. Nov 11 Read: Lippit; Deleuze; Campbell; Chabon
10. Nov 18