

Book Review

Caleb J. Basnett: *Adorno, Politics, and the Aesthetic Animal*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021. Pp. x, 205.)

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The significance of a thinker can be measured by the variety of interpretations and responses that s/he provokes, and Caleb Basnett's *Adorno, Politics, and the Aesthetic Animal* bears eloquent and often surprising testimony to the continuing relevance of Theodor W. Adorno. Surprising, because Basnett frames his reading of Adorno around two poles, neither of which is generally associated with Adorno's work or concerns: on the one hand, animality, and on the other, the philosopher who very early on helped establish the parameters through which the animal-human distinction would be considered, Aristotle. If Aristotle is associated with the first Frankfurt School, it is usually as a forerunner of the Hegelian dialectic, an approach that informed the doctoral dissertation of Herbert Marcuse but not the work of Adorno. Basnett, however, begins his study by considering a very different aspect of Aristotle's work: the political implications of the human-animal distinction.

Building on recent scholarship, Basnett concludes that for Aristotle, politics is not exclusive to human beings, even if they occupy a privileged place. This extension of the notion of politics to nonhuman animals involves what Basnett labels the "Aristotelian problematic," which is a problematic insofar as it questions the exclusive place of human beings as political animals, while still asserting a hierarchy of value, with human beings at the top and nonhuman animals below. Politics in Aristotle is thus related to the capacity to "share a common work," and in this sense can be attributed to nonhuman animals as well as to humans. It thereby involves a "shared experience of space and time in which animals are capable of orienting themselves towards others" (15). It is true that Aristotle insists on distinguishing humans from other animals by emphasizing their exclusive capacity for *nous*, "divine thought" (15). Nevertheless, the other-directedness of nonhuman animality is inseparably linked to bodily existence, even if human beings are not reducible to this. Basnett associates the alterity involved in bodily existence with the Aristotelian notion of mimesis, and in particular tragic mimesis, which he conceives as being a uniquely transformative, or "creative," activity (20).

Basnett argues that tragedy is what teaches humans to be human while at the same time perpetuating "a division between higher and lower human types" (21). He thus extrapolates from his reading of Aristotle three basic

claims that serve as a bridge to his reading of Adorno: First, nonhuman animals can also be political and thus can offer the possibility of conceiving “other subjective possibilities.” Second, “self-preservation” is not necessarily the sole or highest aim of life. And third, art can contribute to the discovery and development of alternative modes of life and of subjectivity. Basnett’s ultimate aim in rereading Adorno from this perspective is “to theorize a way of transforming the relation between human and animal, art and politics, so as to think the possibility of (a) subject no longer constituted by and through the violence of self-preservation and the domination that frequently accompanies it” (23). This transformation would ultimately tend to render the very word “human” anachronistic (23).

Basnett thus reads the work of Adorno as an attempt to rethink the traditional “humanist” hierarchy of values that places humans above (other) animals while denying or downgrading the animal dimension of human being. Basnett rightly insists that this attempt aims not simply at inverting the hierarchy but at transforming it entirely, so that the two constitutive terms or poles, “human” and “animal,” no longer retain the properties that traditionally define them. This distinguishes Adorno’s critique of “nonidentity” from traditional but also contemporary attempts to affirm the identity of oppressed groups against their oppression, but which often underestimate the exclusionary premises of identity-based thought.

It takes some courage, especially today, for a politically committed thinker such as Basnett to insist that an abstract notion such as the “nonidentical” can therefore be politically more critical than more positive concepts, precisely by virtue of a certain indeterminacy. The notion of the “nonidentical” presents itself as an alternative to the identity-based thought that Adorno analyzes as the basic support of the project of “self-preservation,” which he sees as the condition of violence and domination. A certain animality functions often as an alternative to the notions of “self” and of “constitutive subjectivity” as the matrix of social and political subordination. Adorno’s effort to affirm what he calls the “nonidentical,” Basnett argues, is exemplified in the assertion from *Negative Dialectic* that one should “try to live so that one may believe himself to have been a good animal” (106). An animal is “good” in this context when it is recognized and affirmed as that which disturbs the self-identity traditionally ascribed to human being: “Our own animality is the necessary starting point for the resistance against inhumanity. . . that which resists what is seen to be definitively human” (106).

“Our own animality” involves a recognition of the role of corporeality as that which links the “human” to the nonhuman “animal.” Basnett links the experience of the transformative power of art to a kind of bodily experience (149), involving the encounter with one’s “fragility and finitude”—one of the very few places in this book where the word “finitude” occurs, here equated with “one’s animality.” In art, this experience of “fragility and finitude” is “combined with the impulse to reflect on this animality and its relation to others” (149). The question that arises here—and throughout—concerns precisely the nature of this “relation to others.”

Following faithfully in the path of Adorno, Basnett seems to conceive of such “others” almost exclusively as other subjects—indeed, other human subjects, wherever it is a question of conceiving “violence” and “domination” and of envisaging their “elimination” (173). The “other” is construed as the other of the “self” of “self-preservation.” This is why the “good” animal—which for Basnett is also the “aesthetic animal”—cannot simply be identified with any existing form of animal life. If a certain animality can be seen as a guide in thinking about what Adorno often describes as a “reconciled humanity” (26), it cannot be conceived as an alter ego or as what Adorno often called a “constitutive subject.” Rather the “animal” becomes important as the guardian of an irreducible alterity with respect to the humanist tradition. “Solidarity” with “others” would replace the struggle for domination of competing projects of self-preservation (26).

Yet, if such “solidarity” is inseparable from the recognition of the shared “fragility and finitude” common to all living beings as corporeal, vulnerable, and mortal, then perhaps it is not sufficient to point to a model of “violence” and “domination” that is the result of willful and conscious acts, such as “the violent activity of the police” (145). Can such violence and the drive to dominate be properly understood, and therefore combatted, if they are separated from the anxiety that any project of self-preservation must feel before the unthinkable corporeal finitude of singular living beings, whether human or other? If violence is defined as that which produces suffering, then must it not be related to nonvolitional events as well—illness, for instance, or accident? These may well be mediated by social and political factors, but that mediation cannot exhaust their structural implication in the finitude of life in the singular.

The project of envisaging a world in which “violence” would be entirely “eliminated” (173) may turn out to be counterproductive if it does not reckon with causes of suffering that are structurally endemic in life itself, seen from the perspective of singular living beings. Basnett’s argument for the transformative potential of an “aesthetic animal” takes us to the threshold of this question, which remains unelaborated in this book and which therefore can be seen, to adopt a term from Adorno that Basnett rightly highlights, as its “addendum” (144–45). Or even as its “excescence” (150). As long as the question of the finitude of the living—and particularly its motivating role in the “struggle for self-preservation”—remains unaddressed, the alternative with which Basnett leaves his readers remains strangely abstract: “some *other, lighter, softer, swifter animal*, one that has yet to grace our world of blood and muck” (184). The task that grows out of his own analyses, as addendum and excescence, would be to analyze the conditions in which “our world of blood and muck” could possibly give rise to that “other. . . animal.”

—Samuel Weber

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