

[Review] Donovan O. Schaefer.

Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power.

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Do chimpanzees dance? Or even more particularly, did the chimpanzees of the Kakombe valley, observed by the primatologist Jane Goodall, dance when they approached an eighty-foot waterfall? Furthermore, is this, as Goodall averred, an ‘elemental display’ that could be understood as an originary variant of religious ritual? My six-year old youngest daughter has a deep and varied knowledge of animals, especially wild animals. She is also a dancer, not only of ballet but also jazz and kapa haka (Maori cultural performance). Although pumas are her favourite, her interests constantly expand. So when she asked what I was reading and I stated it is about chimpanzees dancing, she, in this age of Youtube, wondered if she would be able to see them do so. Sure enough, it was easy to find footage of the Kakombe valley chimpanzees approaching and responding to the waterfall:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjQCZClpaaY>

However, to her mind this was not ‘dancing’. Further on in the clip, Jane Goodall started talking of a chimpanzee spirituality which, lacking language, they can only express through a rhythmic dance. At this point the rest of my family, who had been called in to watch and likewise had rejected any possibility of what they saw being ‘dancing’, erupted in vociferous denunciations and name-calling.

How one approaches Schaefer’s book *Religious Affects* can be summed up by answering two questions: Do chimpanzees dance? Do chimpanzees have spirituality? But before doing so, there are a number of other questions that need to be asked. Firstly, when do what are described as ‘rituals’ become ‘religious’- and why can’t they just remain ritual behaviour? Secondly, while

it could be possible that animals display actions and responses that can be termed religion and spirituality – if we wish to use those terms – do we not have to remember that what these nouns mean and describe are our interpretation and meaning? In seeking to apply them to chimpanzees, are they not outsider nouns? Of course in the world of affect, to reduce religion – or indeed anything else - to that named by and occurring within language is the problem. The affective turn is the turn to feeling, to feelings, to emotions, to what can be termed, embodied, material existence and relationships. Schaefer correctly notes that in western thought, the capacity for religion is defined in opposition to animality. While I accept that we humans are animals, we are animals that have, amongst other things, that which we call religion. For me, the importance is in the naming, it is words all the way down. Feelings are themselves the naming of sensations, as are emotions, and existence itself is linguistic for humans. Of course that may be my deep Protestantism emerging, combined with a longstanding suspicion of talk of universal essences. So I want to ask, why do we want to even extend ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ to non-human animals? Both these nouns have complex histories and are interlinked with taxonomic issues of power, knowledge, race and ethnicity, gender, ‘civilization’, consciousness, history and politics. Of course the answer is simple: to extend the possibility of ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ to non-human animals is just a further extension of these taxonomic issues and debates. It is a question of the possibility of universalistic essences at the level of animal existence. In many ways, it is to extend Jean-Luc Marion’s description of religion as ‘a saturated phenomenon’ (1996) as both saturation and phenomenon outside of humanity. Furthermore, in seeking to describe what is termed ‘an affective reaction to the waterfall’ (3) as spiritual and possibility religious, are not Goodall and all those who agree with her not simply extending the pathetic fallacy to their observation of and interaction with animals?

What has always interested me about affect is how, as in this book, it is taken to mean ‘the flow of forces through bodies outside of, prior to, or underneath language’ (4), and yet so much has been written and talked about affect *in language*. Without language is it actually *affect*? Without language can we name emotions and feelings, let alone what, via language, become their particular nouns? So the intersections of knowledge, power, and, I would add, the politics of naming, are what come to the fore in this fascinating discussion. For why would I want to extend ‘religion’ and/or ‘spirituality’ to non-human animals? This is a political question because is not the wish to do so a political desire? I readily admit that my refusal to do so is

likewise political. I accept we are animals, but we are a particular type of animal that involves issues of consciousness, activity, culture and most centrally I would argue, language.

Of course by stating this I am situating myself against Schaefer's conception of religion; I align myself more with Jonathan Z. Smith's statement that religion is 'the relentlessly human activity of thinking through a situation' (cited in Schaefer, 6). In opposition, Schaefer argues that religion 'is best understood neither as exclusively cognitive nor as exclusively human' (6). This is part of what is labelled the materialist turn whereby religion is part of 'embodied experience outside the production of language' (8). However, it is important to note that affect theory, especially as reconceived by Schaefer, is centrally concerned with issues of power, locating power as phenomenological before expression as thinking, believing or speaking. Religion here is affect before it is language, before it is thought, and by extension, religion is animal affect before we reduce it to the human. The issue for me here is yet again that of the use of the noun 'religion,' which I would argue is a type of retrospective description where that which occurs – what we can call the action – can only be described, recorded, reported, interpreted and circulated through language. Therefore, the language used is of crucial importance and so choosing to use 'dance', 'ritual' and 'religion' are political decisions of retrospective description to extend the politics of affect to the non-human. Moreover, they seek to extend the descriptive nouns as arising from a universal essence of affect, but, crucially, cannot and do not do the same for language. The problem for me is that animal studies, religious studies, and affect theory itself all occur within and are constituted by and via language, and that words are themselves how what we can label is described, interpreted and communicated by humans. In other words, what non-human animals do is what non-human animals do, but I must interpret it via human subjectivity and language.

So I situate myself on the side of what is termed here 'the linguistic fallacy – the myth that the medium of power is language' (22); but because I am always fascinated with the way language and words operate in the world, I read this book with great interest. For affect theory is words, is language, to claim an alternate medium of power which is that of the senses and of bodies, and outside of what is described as 'the autonomous, reasoning human subject' (23).

If we turn to the central question of the 'dancing' chimps, perhaps a way forward is to acknowledge that the chimps 'feel' which creates a response, but that the expression of that

feeling is interpreted by humans via language and our *desired* referents of what is/is not possible. The next stage is to position yourself either on the side of affect whereupon we are open to 'a more expansive, transspecies understanding of religion'(34), or on the side of what I would offer which is an alternate question, and ask does not affect theory respond to what is done 'after' language? That is, the power done by the linguistically constituted *upon* the linguistically constituted? None of this is to discount bodies, but asks whether bodies are experienced and responded to as embodied language by consciousness, or whether bodies are embodied pre-linguistic feelings and affect which are then given linguistic identity and power. In discussing non-human animals we perhaps forget that they themselves are linguistically identified and understood via language and whatever affects we observe are understood and expressed via language and human consciousness and categories.

Of course there are, as expressed and discussed, multiple different variations of affect theory, many of which can be seen as part of what might be termed the biological turn in the humanities, which could also be seen as a crisis of confidence in seeking to validate the humanities via a turn to 'science'. In many cases what eventuates is a reductive sub-field that is neither science nor humanities, but rather a non-identified linguistic turn that seeks to use scientific language, categories and words in a non-scientific, often phenomenological way to identify and privilege what are taken to be pre-linguistic and non-linguistic affects. These affects then give rise to actions that can become ritualized responses. It is here that affect theory does raise important questions to do with the creation, imposition and maintenance of systems of power which operate, at least on one level, as affect and so seek to create, discipline and maintain feeling on and within bodies. So the question then becomes that of *bodies* and whether, as in the focus of this book, we wish to proceed from what is termed the animality of bodies and so claim a universal phenomenological essence of animal bodies within and between which circulate affects regardless of species? If so then such affects as give rise to religion are part of 'semistable, complex formations of embodied sensation that have coalesced through the advance of ancient evolutionary processes operating in deep time'(58). Human religion then becomes only one variant of a much larger possibility arising from animal bodies, of which human bodies are a biological subset. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, to take religion as the expression of a universal biological affect upon bodies. We can call this the hyper-extension of the phenomenological approach and this book does not do this. The other approach

is to use affect theory to nuance the phenomenological but also to undercut the linguistic and so create what is termed ‘onto-phenomenology: the way that the kinds of bodies we are and are becoming in the swaying currents of our living an evolutionary embodied histories feel’ (59). In this nuanced reanimalization of bodies there exist fascinating possibilities for reassessing and discussing ‘how affects connect political, religious and cultural spheres to bodies’ (59).

This sets up a series of discussions concerning how the feeling of religion imposes power upon human bodies and situates affect theory as both ‘postliberal and postsecular’ (86) because the flow of feeling and power cannot be contained, separated or excluded when it concerns bodies. The central point here is whether we wish to rename ourselves as ‘animal political actors’ in opposition to ‘autonomous, rational subjects’ (86-87)? But I would want to raise the question of why there is in affect theory the desire to rename – in this case as animal political actors – and ask, is not this itself the expression of language as the basis of identity? Otherwise, why is there this constant desire to rename? For the use of the term and identity ‘animal bodies’ is a fascinating example of what I term affect by language, in this case the affective noun. By relabelling myself as an animal body, as part of what are transspecies animal bodies I am, via the construction of language, attempting to express a politics of consciousness and embodiment that proceeds from a belief in universal animal affect. None of this critique is to deny the affective needs and responses of the body (I am not, I hope, so much a repressed and disembodied protestant to seek to do that!), but rather, as previously stated, to argue that affect is expressed and understood – and missed, when affect is denied to the body – through words. The universal animal body is therefore I would argue a linguistic biological invention for political ends, perhaps to situate an alternative body of power – and power of bodies – against the power of what is understandably critiqued as the white, protestant body. But in doing so, I would suggest, the claimed trans-animality of the body only serves to solidify power in the claimed and named *human* body of the white protestant (or in fact many others who are neither white nor protestant) who does not and will not reduce identity to animality.

In the end it perhaps all comes down to the question of language: is it language that makes us – and made us - ‘human’? If so, then it is the naming of something that gives it meaning and identity and so ‘religion’ is language first and then embodied second in affect, for without language and naming it is not ‘religion’ not even in potential in affected animal bodies. For what gets called (that is, ‘named’) ‘religion’ is a naming of doing (doing by consciousness,

doing by language, doing by bodies), but only of certain doings that are accepted as ‘religion’. Without the noun there is no ‘religion’, there are only doings amidst a myriad of other doings. The naming is therefore political and linguistic all the way down. For to extend the noun ‘religion’ to non-human animal body doings (and all we can deal with is the observation of animal body doings) is a political decision of interpretation and linguistic communication by political actors, and to refuse to do so – as I argue – is likewise a political decision by a political actor.

Here of course I situate myself in the problematic legacy of Heidegger, in which humans dwell in the house of Being which is language (Schaefer 152). Yet I am also open to Derrida’s critique of Heidegger’s metaphysical presupposition as described by Schaefer ‘that there is a straight line between humans and Truth’ (153). But if I do not subscribe to singular universal truth then I can find a place between Heidegger and Derrida that does not mean also a reinscription of identity as that of animalism and posthumanism. Rather perhaps we can argue that humans stumbled into being via language, and it is language that constitutes the creation, expression and maintenance of being and of Being. In line with Derrida religion is therefore not a production of rational determination; it does occur and is maintained, in Schaefer’s phrase, ‘by a network of colliding traces’ (155), but I would argue that it does so as a distinctly human network via language.

So we return to the chimpanzees before the waterfall undertaking action. There are those humans who wish to see this as the affective roots of religion, that is, of religion as a ‘materialist phenomenology’ which precedes the human and extends beyond the human. This I would argue is itself a type of affective claim predicated on the linguistic hermeneutics of identifying and naming chimpanzee action as ‘dance’ and then extending this ‘dance’ as expression of what is named ‘non-linguistic religion’ (179). On one level, we do not know if what we term ‘religion’ or ‘dance’ (with their associated histories of meaning and meaning-making claims and associations) are shared or even possible with and by other non-human animals. The question - which is never properly answered- is *why* do we wish to *believe* that they are? Without answering this question it is all too easy to propose ‘religion as an embodied dance’ (192) which is extended to ‘religion as dance of relating is animal religion: a compulsory, affective web fusing bodies to worlds’ (192). It is therefore in service of ‘the project of materialist phenomenology’ (201) that seeks, I would argue, the affective, essentialist pre-

linguistic basis of 'religion' via what can be termed 'the animal politics of affect'. It further presupposes a universal *thingness* called and, most crucially, experienced as 'religion' that 'affects bodies first and foremost' (211). In contrast, I would want to argue that animal religion is human religion, but not as it is usually meant. Rather, animal religion is that which is referenced to human religion and so is hermeneutics of affect via language from the position of the human so wishing to see that what is described and labelled as 'animal religion'. So perhaps the starting place is actually where this interesting, provocative and important book almost ends: 'affect is a productive starting place for asking why some things get called religion rather than others' (213).

Works Cited

Jean-Luc Marion. 'The Saturated Phenomenon.' *Philosophy Today*, vol. 40, no. 1 Spring 1996, pp103-124.