

***The Animal Response in Derrida's  
'The Animal That I Therefore Am'***

*Perri Wilson*

Among the many distinctions and boundaries between man and animal that Derrida examines and challenges in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, the one to which he returns most frequently is the animal's inability to *respond*. His critique of the division between man and animal based on the capacity for response is situated within his broader and more well-known critique of logocentrism; Western thought, Derrida believes, has been for far too long entrenched in a hierarchy which separates the signifier and the signified, prioritizing the signified for its reality as presence. For the same reason, the logocentric tradition places speech above writing in this hierarchy, with writing taken to be merely the signifier of the more immediate speech. Derrida, however, wishes to reverse this hierarchy and reveal writing to be more than the representation of speech, but rather originally related to what he calls the "trace" of the signified.

Within this critique of logocentrism, he focuses most intently on humans' interest *not* in the animal's lack of speech, but in "the fact that it is private and deprives humans of a

response.”<sup>1</sup> More than simply a logocentric definition of the animal, this distinction, centered on the *humans*’ deprivation of responses to their questions, reveals an *anthropo-logocentrism*; such a division uses a version of logos which is inherently anthropocentric. The lack of response is an issue only because it cuts off the human from his expectation of an exchange. His questions go unanswered, and no matter how close he comes to the creature he so closely follows, the one he follows never turns around to acknowledge him.<sup>2</sup> It is the questioner then, and not the responder, who seems most concerned with the capability of response. He must *request* a response, and it is therefore the potential responder who holds the power to comply or refuse. From the outset of his lecture, Derrida sets himself up as this vulnerable questioner in search of a response. As he tells his audience, “everything that I am about to entrust to you no doubt comes back to asking you to *respond* to me, you, to me, reply to me concerning what it is to *respond*. If you can. The said question of the animal in its entirety comes down to knowing not whether the animal speaks but whether one can know what *respond* means. And how to distinguish a response from a reaction.”<sup>3</sup>

If the ability to give a response is only relevant when a response is requested, then it seems this power to respond should exist only in the presence of a questioner. Working within this two-sided image of response, when one is *unable* to answer, the only one deprived of anything is the unanswered questioner. All expectation is initiated by, and lies

with, the questioner's demand, while the silent responder lacks nothing. And yet, Derrida also (perhaps contradictorily) suggests that this "power" is a power in itself, one that can be isolated from the exchange as a whole and identified in a single party: the responder. With this assumption, he turns his project toward restoring some exercise of the "power of response" back to the animal, without considering that this power exists merely in being requested, or "entrusted," by another's questioning. He describes the isolated "power of response" in the first part of *The Animal That Therefore I Am*:

"All of the philosophers we will investigate (from Aristotle to Lacan, and including Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, and Levinas), all of them say the same thing: The animal is deprived of language. Or, more precisely, of response, of a response that could be precisely and rigorously distinguished from a reaction; or a right and power to 'respond' and hence of so many other things that would be proper to man."<sup>4</sup>

Here, it is not just the unanswered questioner who is deprived of the ability to take part in the "private" animal language, and to obtain a response to their questions. In fact, the form of response mentioned here does not even seem to include the presence of a questioner or acknowledge the two-sidedness of response. Instead, the "power to respond" lies entirely with the responder. So, to what kind of response, and what

kind of power, is Derrida here referring? He expands on this alleged power as the ability to “*pretend*, to *lie*, to *cover its tracks* or *erase* its own traces.”<sup>5</sup> But do these exercises of “power” not all point toward a potential extreme — the power to *refuse* to respond all together? What makes response a power if not that it can be denied? It seems that, if he is to take response as a “right and power,” it must be possible to exercise this power in its fullest form — by refusing to exercise it at all. And thus, if Derrida aims to restore response, (with all the agency which it implies,) to the animal, he must include with it the option to refuse response.

But Derrida seems to lose track of the two-sidedness of response — of response as a power to respond to the requests of a questioner — falling instead into the tradition of isolating the “power to respond” from the presence of a questioner. He sets out to determine “not whether the animal speaks but whether one can know what *respond* means.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, he seems to begin his investigation, his “following” of the animal, with an assumption that, if the animal *can* respond, it will. Further implied is that our inability to recognize this response is due to an insufficiency in our understanding of “what it is to *respond*.” But why conclude, or begin with, this and not consider the possibility that the animal truly does *not* respond — not out of an inability, but out of a *refusal*? This possibility seems to maintain the animal’s silence without denying it any power reserved for man — and in fact, it exhibits the animal’s exercise of that very power to its fullest.

What might the explanation for the animal's willful silence be? Firstly, it avoids certain consequences and risks of response, including those surrounding *name*, which Derrida explores elsewhere. A response must follow an address, and by addressing one, (in this case, a particular animal,) as an individual, Derrida seems to suggest that one is named. But, perhaps, in refusing to identify with a name, one avoids the risks associated with it, namely the mortality inherent in a name. As he mentions in part I, "from the moment that it has a name, its name survives it. It signs its potential disappearance" (9.) So perhaps, if refusing to respond allows one to successfully avoid identification with a name, then the animal does not "sign its potential disappearance."<sup>7</sup> It would thereby remain a potentially immortal creature, one left uncommitted to a symbol whose relative immortality threatens to render its own lifetime finite.

Derrida deals more directly with the question of "silence," or "mutism" in *Abraham, the Other*, where he considers the case of a different kind of cautious silence. Perhaps, the animal's silence is not an involuntary mutism, but rather a reluctance to claim the responsibility of answering for a name. As he concludes in this piece, "anyone responding to the call must continue to doubt... whether it was in fact his name that was heard, whether he is the only or the first addressee... whether he is not in the process of substituting himself violently for another... It is possible that I have not been called,

me, and it is not even excluded that no one, no One, nobody, ever called any One, any unique one, anybody.”<sup>8</sup> There is a “responsibility” inherent in responding to one’s name, and in answering too hurriedly to a “call,” one risks the shame of “being ridiculous, like someone who, hard of hearing, would come to answer ‘yes,’ ‘here I am,’ without having been called himself, without having been designated.”<sup>9</sup>

But even in refusing to respond, can the animal truly deny the responsibility of its name? And even if it can, is simply being given a name by *another* enough to make the animal mortal and responsible for that name? It seems, according to Derrida, that the autobiographical animal is inherently the signatory of its “trace.” As he argues in *Abraham, the Other*, any form of response, even a “disavowal,” contains within it an “originary ‘yes’”— an “acquiescence given to some self-presentation.” For Derrida, this “self-presentation”<sup>10</sup> is contained within the autobiographical trace--a trace which is inscribed by every living thing through the mere act of living. Thus, even the act of *refusal* to claim a name is an act which presents the trace, and with it, the signature, of every “autobiographical animal.” And further, even if the “erasure” of one’s “traces” is possible, Derrida seems doubtful that one “*can of his own accord* erase his traces.”<sup>11</sup>

But, perhaps the pussycat, “my pussycat,”<sup>12</sup> who faces Derrida as an “irreplaceable being” does not make the same claim to a name for herself, as an “unsubstitutable singularity.”

While Derrida cannot help but see the cat as an individual, as “*this* irreplaceable being that one day enters my space,” he feels the need to clarify the cat’s singularity only in contrast to a long and anthropocentric tradition which has imbued the “pussycat” with “immense symbolic” weight. In feeling the need to point out its individuality then, Derrida seems to be working within this tradition. Yet, this seems to be a contrast that the cat herself would not feel the need to make, as it is an inherently anthropocentric distinction. Further, by adding the detail of the cat as an individual “that one day enters my space,” Derrida seems to suggest that it only becomes a named singularity in relation to himself and *his* personal space. At the moment of their coincidence, the cat becomes namable *for him*. But, while Derrida has a name *for* the cat, does this necessitate that the cat *has* a name? What allows Derrida to assume that the animal claims an outlasting name simply because he himself has recognized one when it happened to “one day enter” *his* space? If naming is not, in fact, as reciprocal as Derrida seems to assume it to be, then perhaps the name goes unclaimed by the named one, like a gift offered but not accepted. In this case, the animal would be able to exist as a living “singularity,” leaving a trace of itself in itself, without “signing” a name that might be called to prompt a response.

None of this is to deny the cat’s *ability* to respond or to defend in any way the Cartesian distinction between man and animals based on this capacity. And it is not to deny the cat

its existence as a singular living creature, either. It is simply to point out that perhaps there are ways to explain the animal's silence — such as a willful refusal to respond — without denying it the response capacity altogether.

Derrida's anecdote of standing naked before his cat might perhaps be used as an example of man's habitual responding — of mistaking the *ability* to respond with the *need* to respond. Standing before the unquestioning cat, (the cat who merely gazes, who looks “just to see,”<sup>13</sup> not to question or to challenge,) Derrida cannot help but respond. His ashamed response is not asked for, or triggered by, the “other” in the room. In fact, it is superfluous. In his shame, he “dares therefore to posit” himself, claiming the “I” of the one who is naked.<sup>14</sup> But his self-positing is redundant and unnecessary, because his very nakedness has already involuntarily and unknowingly presented him to the other in the room. As Derrida has previously explained, “I am presented to it before even introducing myself. Nudity is nothing other than that passivity, the involuntary exhibition of self.”<sup>15</sup> His shame, then, is a sort of redundant introduction. It is as if his need to posit his “power of response,” a power stressed by the word “dare,” is so deeply ingrained that he cannot help but respond even in the absence of a questioner, and even when he has *already* been “presented.” He charges on with his self-positing response of shame, ignoring the fact that it is both unsolicited and unnecessary. Is this sort of response perhaps what Derrida meant when he warned that autobiography always

risks becoming “auto-immunizing,” “auto-infectious for the presumed signatory who is so auto-affected”?<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this power of response becomes “auto-infectious” when we habitually and impulsively *display* the capability, losing sight of the fact that, implied in the power of response is the power to *not* respond. The self-positing shame, then, would look much more like a “reaction” than a response.

But there is another layer of shame, a secondary sort, that Derrida explains as emerging when the cat leaves the room. It is a more “acute” shame. Might this be his pure *reaction* to the realization that he has “responded” without being questioned? Maybe the “mirror of a shame ashamed of itself”<sup>17</sup> is simply representative of the self-containedness of this particular “question-answer coupling”; it is an “exchange” that lacks two parties, an unnaturally one-sided exchange that he only comes to see, and be secondarily ashamed of, through the mirror of the cat as witness. In recognizing, on some level, that his response is both unsolicited and unnecessary, and that it has been given passively or impulsively, perhaps Derrida has also come to realize that his “power” of response is in fact relatively powerless.

As I have argued thus far, there are two possible explanations for why Derrida does not seem to consider this alternative — a choice of non-response. Either he has mistaken the power of response with the power *to* respond. This would explain why he does not thoroughly examine the advantages

that come with refusing to exercise that power, or through exercising its negative. Additionally, it would explain why he neglects to fully consider the many risks that one takes in so consistently responding — that is, in responding so habitually that response itself becomes almost a reaction. Alternatively, in taking the signature to be inevitably included in the “trace,” the animal *cannot* refuse a name any more than any other autobiographical animal does. This would make the refusal to respond, even if possible, a futile exercise of the “power to respond” and would render irrelevant any supposed reasoning for this willful silence.

But we should not too quickly conclude that the animal really *does* respond simply because a refusal is not “useful.” There is yet another possible explanation for the animal’s silence that Derrida does not seem to consider. Perhaps the animal remains unresponsive simply because it has not been *summoned* to respond. This would shift the focus of his analysis from the interpreter to the questioner. In the *Animal that Therefore I Am*, Derrida identifies the communicative gap as existing somewhere between the animal’s response and our interpretation of this response, with the insufficiency lying in our definition of “what it is to respond.” But in this explanation, Derrida leaves out an examination of the first step in any response: the question. If a response is always to something — some summoning, question, or request — then it seems the first hurdle in the way of there being a successful response is a *successfully posed question*. Could

it not in fact be *here* that the breakdown occurs, only later to be misinterpreted by philosophers such as Descartes as an *incapability of response*, and then reinterpreted by Derrida as an *insufficient understanding of response*? Perhaps, then, it is not for a lack of a sufficient definition of “response” that we consider the animal unable to respond; rather, the animal could be capable of response as we generally interpret it, but has simply never been summoned by the name to which it responds.

Derrida *does*, in fact, suggest this explanatory route in his critique of our use of the singular “the animal.” Concluding the first section of “The Animal that Therefore I Am,” he asks his audience a series of questions regarding the animal, questions asked of the animal, and our expectation of a response from it:

“The animal in general, what is it? What does that mean? Who is it? To what does that ‘it’ correspond? To whom? Who responds to whom? Who responds in and to the common, general, and singular name of what they thus blithely call the ‘animal’? Who is it that responds?”<sup>18</sup>

In this series of questions and challenges, (the opening of a sort of autobiography that declares “here I am,”) he seems to suggest that perhaps, in summoning the “singular name of what they thus blithely call the ‘animal,’” we do not, in fact, summon anybody, “any One,” to respond. Here, he seems to

suggest that it is an empty and meaningless call. If no animal fits that “who?” then no animal will respond to it.

### **Notes**

1. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Willis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 53.
2. *Ibid.*, 52.
3. *Ibid.*, 8.
4. *Ibid.*, 32.
5. *Ibid.*, 33.
6. *Ibid.*, 8.
7. *Ibid.*, 9.
8. Jacques Derrida, “Abraham, the Other,” in *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, ed. J Cohen et al., trans B. Bergo and M. B. Smith (New York, 2007), 34.
9. Derrida, “Abraham, the Other,” 2.
10. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Willis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 3.
11. *Ibid.*, 33.
12. *Ibid.*, 9.
13. *Ibid.*, 4.
14. *Ibid.*, 58.
15. *Ibid.*, 11.
16. *Ibid.*, 47.
17. *Ibid.*, 4.

**References**

Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Translated by David Willis. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.

Derrida, Jacques. "Abraham, the Other." In *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, edited by Bergo Bettina, Cohen Joseph, and Zagury-Orly Rapael, by Bergo Bettina and Smith Michael B., 1-35. New York: Fordham University, 2007.