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## Avoid capture

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## BOOK REVIEWS



Edited by Manu Bazzano, Book Reviews Editor

### Avoid capture

**What animals teach us about politics**, by Brian Massumi, Durham, NC, and London, Duke University Press, 2014, 152 pp., £14.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8223-5800-8

Long before song before song blues  
Babbette baboon abba zaba zoom (Van Vliet, 1967)

Visiting a San Francisco zoo in the early 1970s, Gregory Bateson observed two monkeys playing with one another and noticed how their playing was similar to, though not the same as, fighting. At first, the observation included himself, the human observer, but he then fails to return to this in the rest of his essay:

It is as if, against everything he says about play and reflexivity and language, [Bateson] reverts ... to the unreflexive assumption that the animal and its evolutionary relation to the human can simply be denoted, the presence of the human observer absent-mindedly placed under erasure. (p. 65)

Incidentally, this absent-mindedness is also at the heart of a philosophy now in vogue, *speculative realism*, which applies this convenient expurgation of the human subject in its allegedly objective observation of ‘things’ in the world.

In opposition to this reactive human tendency, Massumi draws our attention to a continuum of mutual inclusion: ‘of the human in the animal, and the animal in the human’ (p. 65). This stance goes against the ‘rigidly exclusionary operation’ (p. 65) found in the zoo as much as in the laboratory, crucially allowing for recognition of grey areas or ‘zones of indiscernibility’ (p. 49) between one species and another. This notion even made the news a few years back in the *Guardian* newspaper:

Genetic tests on bacteria, plants and animals increasingly reveal that different species cross-breed more than originally thought, meaning that instead of genes simply being passed down individual branches of the tree of life, they are also transferred between species on different evolutionary paths. The result is a messier and more tangled ‘web of life’. Microbes swap genetic material so promiscuously it can be hard to tell one type from another, but animals regularly crossbreed too – as do plants – and the offspring can be fertile ... ‘The tree of life is being politely buried’, said Michael Rose ... ‘What’s less accepted is that our whole fundamental view of biology needs to change’. (Sample, 2009)

From Charles Darwin to the filmic musings of Terence Malick, the notion of ‘tree of life’ – namely, the idea that genes are solely and neatly passed down individual branches

– is still resilient but it is fiercely and playfully shaken up in this magnificent little book alongside other unchecked cherished opinions. The tangled web of life is wholly consistent with Deleuze’s horizontal, rhizomatic rather than arboreal imagery. There are of course differences between species, between humans and animals, but both exist on an animal continuum. This calls for a need to go beyond anthropomorphism – not only when applied to animals but, crucially, to ourselves. We need to question thoroughly ‘our image of ourselves as humanly 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’ (p. 3).

Not only is the human in a continuum with the animal; animality and life itself simply cannot be rigidly separated from the non-organic. ‘Is it not the height of human arrogance’, Massumi writes, ‘to suppose that animals do not have thought, emotion, desire, creativity, or subjectivity? Is that not to consign animals yet again to the status of automatons?’ (p. 51).

Echoing new developments in political ecology and the rethinking of matter in terms of materiality (the trailblazer *Vibrant Matter* [Bennett, 2010] comes to mind), Massumi expands in exciting ways some of the subversive notions inherited by post-structuralism which dominant thought has chosen to ignore in the last few decades in favour of a frantic search for new certainties. Massumi outlines a new mode of thinking – *speculative pragmatism* – which capitalizes on his previous work on *affect* and constitutes the basis for a credible and articulate alternative to fashionable speculative realism.

This is an important book, but also a playful one, revealing the value of play, and of animal play in particular. The relationship between *ludic excess* and *lived importance* is for Massumi one of mutuality. It is the very ‘process of nature’ and the ‘nature of process’:

Lived importance gives creativity something to finesse, and creativity returns the favor with a yield of newly minted givens. The given and what surpasses it are joined at the gestural hip in a cycle of coproduction, each in its own way destined for the other. Affirming one is tantamount to affirming the cycle of life in which they are mutually included. (p. 39)

It is naive to divide creativity from the given, the spontaneous from the established. To advocate univocally one or the other is to rehearse the tired scripts of classical and romantic, the official and the rebel, grey academia and the colourful fringes. There is a lesson here for a Humanistic Psychology perhaps too cosily entrenched in unassailable spontaneity and experimentation and reluctance to accept this inevitable dance of opposites.

What do animals teach us about politics, then? Quite a lot, in fact: for instance, animal inspiration teaches us how to survive the primal mum and dad theatre without becoming irretrievably fucked-up. In Kafka, becoming-animal is a way to endure the constraints of the Oedipal family. Here, creativity is survival. I did wonder, however, whether Massumi sees the ‘Oedipal’ family as a given, as the only way to read the family structure. I resist being pushed into the Freudian or anti-Freudian proverbial corner, despite the fact that to the latter stance we owe the incandescent appearance of that magnificent beast, *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983). Massumi rightly rejects the common assumption that, after Freud, sees creativity as a sublimation of instinct or ‘diversion’ of the latter into ‘symbolic realms’ (p. 91). ‘In nature’, the author writes, ‘creativity and instinct are inextricably entwined’ (ibid.).

The book lists 14 propositions (pp. 38–54). Among these we find a reformulation of ethics away from a normative paradigm and towards a situational affirmation of ludic excess. This implies the refusal of ‘a rigid opposition between the frivolous and the serious’ (p. 40), which considerably ups the ante from that thoroughly anthropocentric Husserlesque old cliché, *horizontalization*. Refusal of the normative does not entail rejection of criteria of evaluation; what is valued here is *intensity*, *affect* and the *enthusiasm of the body*. Readers interested in this topic and already sympathetic to the work of Daniel Stern will find many a gem in Massumi’s 1995 ground-breaking *The Autonomy of Affect* (Massumi, 1995), an essay that sealed the advent of *the affective turn* after decades of cognitivist and behaviourist dominance. Already, Stern (1985) described infancy primarily in terms of affect. Infants ‘take sensations, perceptions, actions, cognitions, internal states of motivation, and states of *consciousness*, and experience them directly in terms of intensities, shapes, temporal patterns, vitality affects, categorical affects, and hedonic tones’ (p. 65).

In tune with Nietzsche’s correct emphasis on the deed at the expense of the doer (*no doer behind the deed*), we also find an appreciation of ‘noncognitive primary consciousness [or] thought in the act, flush with vital gesture’ (ibid.). Closely linked to the above is a debunking of a sacred cow to which all therapeutic orientations genuflect in sycophantic adoration: the notion of *agency*, in favour of a trans-individual process of vital becoming. The *subject* of psychology gives way to a ‘*subjectivity-without-a-subject*’ (p. 41, emphasis in the original), which in turn ‘may be considered spiritual, if by that is simply meant intensely, relationally enlivening’ (ibid.). This in turn linked to the notion of the *mental pole* proposed by A.N. Whitehead (1978), a non-substantive mode of activity that co-creates and co-operates with its complement, the *physical pole*. There is no mediation between the two, nor are they the ‘properties of a substantial being [but rather] they are constitutive modalities of events in the making’ (p. 108, n48). Linked to the above is another vital lesson that animals teach us – to make language play, or to make instinctive use of it: ‘the vital gestures of animal play display a reflexivity-in-the-act that really produces the conditions of human language’ (p. 45).

Above all, animals teach us how to avoid capture: for them, this means not being shackled by the alternatively cute and demonic lenses of anthropomorphism. For humans, this means not falling into a trap of our own device, i.e. anthropomorphizing the human and forgetting that we exist in a continuum with animals. And there is a third, equally important aspect of avoiding capture, and it has to do with the philosophical/psychological enterprise as such. ‘Capture’ here can mean several things: the regression to ontological certainties after the painstakingly radical work of post-structuralism; the supine acceptance of neo-liberalism in the way we operate as therapists/trainers/writers, lulled into believing that our work is still progressive merely because it utilizes a jargon of authenticity and false objectivity.

Philosophy, like poetry, seems to take a long time to become creatively absorbed into our psychological and everyday practices. Many of us are still munching on some rotten old chestnuts scraped from the pages of *Being and Time* or *On Becoming a Person* or worse from the illegible evidence-based twaddle that makes most of the staple reading in therapy courses. Meanwhile, crucial texts like this one get overlooked. But they are essential because they provide profound ideas and playful tools that may help us go beyond our current impasse.

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## Dances of agency

**The legacy of R.D. Laing: an appraisal of his contemporary relevance**, edited by M. Guy Thompson, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015, 180 pp., £26.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1138850156

Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing was both influential and infamous. His critique of conventional psychiatric treatments gained visibility in the 1960s and 1970s, drawing attention to the dehumanizing psychiatric treatment of vulnerable patients and generating an intellectual and cultural polemic reaching far beyond the psychiatric community. *The Politics of Experience* (1967) was a bestseller on American university campuses in the early 1970s. Laing's radical therapeutic communities – where the distinction between patient and therapist was discarded – were the source of both criticism and acclaim. By the 1980s, however, Laing was no longer en vogue. The radical experimentalism of the 1960s and 1970s began to be replaced by a rational reductionism, which continues today. The relationship between psychiatry and Big Pharma rapidly expanded to a \$300 billion dollar industry, subduing the voices that critiqued it. What relevance do the ideas of this seminal psychiatrist have for current practitioners and students of psychiatry, psychology and psychotherapy or, indeed, anyone concerned with contemporary approaches to 'mental illness'? Can Laing's understanding of sanity and madness still offer a valid critique for a society where the prevalent therapeutic focus now lies on symptoms, diagnostic categories, pharmaceutical interventions and panacea? *The Legacy of R.D. Laing* attempts this appraisal.

In October 2013, many of Laing's former colleagues, students and friends, and those who like myself craved critical engagement with Laing's work and ideas, convened at Wagner College in New York for a three-day symposium entitled 'What is Sanity? What is Madness?' Twenty-five years since Laing's death, the symposium intended to commemorate his impact on American culture as well as assaying the contemporary relevance of his ideas on sanity and madness. The book is mostly a