

## PROLOGUE

*Uplifting Animals*

Humans very commonly describe their relation to nonhuman animals with vertical metaphors. We think of ourselves as *above* other species of animal – precisely, as *higher* animals. In his 2014 BBC article “Should We Engineer Animals to Be Smart Like Humans?”, Tim Maughan discusses the possibility that, as genetic experiments involving other animals advance, we will reach a point “where we can pull other species onto our intellectual plane.” We may, Maughan suggests, “have already entered the era of animal uplifting.”<sup>1</sup> Uplifting, a notion popularized by the science fiction writer David Brin, means enhancing the cognitive capacity of other animals so that they rival our own. As an example of the practice of uplifting, Maughan cites a recent experiment demonstrating that the cognitive functioning of some rhesus monkeys improved when they were fitted with neural prosthetics. According to one of the advocates of this science, the Canadian futurist, science fiction writer, and bioethicist George Dvorsky, humans have an “ethical imperative to uplift.” “As the stewards of this planet,” Dvorsky claims, “it is our moral imperative to not just remove ourselves from the Darwinian paradigm, but all the creatures on Earth as well. Our journey to a post-biological, post-Darwinian state will be a mutual one.”<sup>2</sup>

With a striking vertical metaphor, animal uplifting projects humans as capable of transcending their biological limits and of helping other creatures to do the same. Despite advocating for a creatural form of democracy, a parliament of the human and the nonhuman, the idea of uplifting in fact turns on the abjection of the animal. The human realizes its humanity, in the uplift narrative, by removing itself from the realm of biology. What is to be overcome in the process of uplifting is precisely the category of

<sup>1</sup> Tim Maughan, “Should We Engineer Animals to Be Smart Like Humans?”, *BBC Future* October 1, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Dvorsky cited in Maughan, “Should We Engineer Animals to Be Smart Like Humans?”

the animal (first the human animal and then the nonhuman animal). Ultimately, uplifting means dissolving the ontological boundaries between the different species so that the nonhuman animal can be viewed and measured in terms of the human. According to Dvorsky: “The idea of ‘species,’ while helpful in such fields as systematics and genetics, is not an entirely useful concept when establishing the moral worth of an animal. Once stripped of scientific nomenclature, nameless organisms can be classified based on their various morphological and psychological capacities. . . . Put yet another way, nonhuman animals such as the great apes can be construed as disabled humans.”<sup>3</sup>

This book is an argument against the logic of animal uplifting, which tries to imagine a post-biological future for human and nonhuman creatures alike. To argue against the notion of uplifting I turn to what may seem a surprising source: the literary form of the fable. For many, the fable is a moribund genre of literature that belongs to the lost hours and forgotten pedagogy of childhood. Few would consider it as an aesthetic form that can help us to think through the grownup and contemporary issue of biopolitics. But the fable acquires new significance, I suggest, in the era of uplifting in which humans prove capable of literally anthropomorphizing animals by scientifically enhancing nonhuman cognition. Synthesizing contemporary genetic science, theology and fable, the discourse on animal uplifting imagines a future in which humans realize their stewardship of the earth by transforming nonhuman animals into truly fabulous subjects: sapient creatures that talk and reason like us. Uplifting is the utopian thought that we might somehow reproduce Aesop’s talking animals in the laboratory. So, along these lines, Dvorsky proposes the “idea of a United Nations in which there is a table for the dolphin delegate.”<sup>4</sup>

In this book, I present the fable and, particularly, the post-Darwinian fable as an antidote to the speciest utopianism of animal uplifting. The fable is an ancient literary cognate of animal uplifting. In fables, animals acquire the power of speech and reason by literary rather than scientific magic. As in uplifting, the purpose of elevating nonhuman animals to the status of humans in the fable is to play with the vertical order of things. But the essential vertical movement here is down not up. Animals are anthropomorphized in fables to expose human foibles and to lower our estimation of the human. Rather than lifting the human up out of the

<sup>3</sup> George Dvorsky, “All Together Now: Development and Ethical Considerations for Biologically Uplifting Nonhuman Animals,” *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 18.1 (2008), 140.

<sup>4</sup> Dvorsky, “All Together Now,” 140.

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realm of biology, fables cast the human down by casting the human as an animal. The act of animal uplifting on the part of the fabulist thus serves an ironic purpose – and the fable challenges all modes of thought that seek to transcend the limits of biology or species. While the discourse of animal uplifting sanctifies the human as a quasi-theological agent able to transcend biology in the name of planetary stewardship, the fable de-sanctifies the human by reminding it of its biological destiny.

## CHAPTER I

*Looking Up, Looking Down*  
*Orientations of the Human*

## “Godlike Erect”

In their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson identify a type of metaphor that has “to do with spatial orientation: up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral.” Orientational metaphors, as Lakoff and Johnson call them, “give a concept a spatial orientation; for example, HAPPY IS UP.” They “arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment.”<sup>1</sup> One of the most fundamental orientational metaphors in Western culture gives the concepts of human and animal a spatial orientation: human is up; animal is down. This orientational metaphor derives from a certain understanding of the physical difference between humans and animals: namely, that upright posture allows humans to direct their gaze up and so contemplate heaven. A theological commonplace of Western thought, traceable to Plato, is that erect posture distinguishes humans from other creatures. The Roman poet Ovid writes in Book I of the *Metamorphoses*, “Whereas other animals hang their heads and look at the ground, [the Creator] made man stand erect, bidding him look up to heaven, and lift his head to the stars.”<sup>2</sup> The English poet John Donne echoes this thought in his 1624 text *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*: “We attribute but one privilege and advantage to man’s body above other moving creatures, that he is not, as others, grovelling, but of an erect, of an upright, form naturally built and disposed to the contemplation of heaven.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Mary M. Innes (London: Penguin, 1955), 31.

<sup>3</sup> John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1959), 17.

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In the Christian tradition to which Donne belongs, upright posture is “foremost among the physical characteristics claimed as aspects of *imago Dei*.”<sup>4</sup> When John Milton introduces Adam and Eve in his poem *Paradise Lost*, he describes them as “Godlike erect” in relation to the other animals.

Of living creatures, new to sight, and strange:  
 Two of far nobler shape, erect and tall,  
 Godlike erect, with native honour clad  
 In naked majesty seemed Lords of all,  
 And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine  
 The image of their glorious Maker shone.<sup>5</sup>

Notice how Milton here connects vertical orientation with majesty. He sees upright posture not merely as distinguishing human from animal but also as empowering human over animal. The first humans seem lords of all they survey because they stand erect with their faces toward heaven.

In the Western tradition, the problem of the relation between human and animal is, in some sense, a problem of posture. An extraordinary episode in the biblical Book of Daniel makes this point by telling of how the proud Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar loses his upright posture for failing to acknowledge the sovereignty of Heaven. When walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon one day, Nebuchadnezzar boasts: “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” God punishes the great king most severely for this act of hubris: “He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.” Nebuchadnezzar remains in this bestial state, eating grass on all fours like cattle, for seven years. He only returns to his true human form in the story when he raises his eyes toward heaven and praises God: “At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> C. A. Patrides, *Premises and Motifs in Renaissance Thought and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 84. My discussion of verticality here is indebted to chapter 5 of this study, “‘With His Face Towards Heaven’: The Upright Form of Man,” 83–9. See also Laurie Shannon, “A Cat May Look upon a King: Four-Footed Estate, Locomotion, and the Prerogative of Free Animals,” in *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 82–126.

<sup>5</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. A. W. Verity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 4.287–91.

<sup>6</sup> Dan. 4:30–4, New International Version.

Nebuchadnezzar is made to lead an animal-like existence because he fails to orient himself upward toward God. Instead of acknowledging the sovereignty of heaven, he attributes the might and glory of Babylon to himself. God punishes this arrogance by physically reorienting the proud king toward the earth. Nebuchadnezzar falls from grace by literally falling onto his hands and knees. No longer upright, he is turned away not just from the human community but also from God. Nebuchadnezzar rectifies the situation by looking up – that is, by changing his physical orientation from downward to upward. Through the act of looking up and praising God, he recovers his sanity, his upright posture and thus, finally, his humanity.

The idea that uprightness and vertical orientation define the human is not bound by the religious tradition in which it arises and continues to find expression in modern philosophical and anthropological discourse. Immanuel Kant writes in the conclusion of his *Critique of Practical Reason* of how the “starry heavens above” fill the mind “with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence.” The act of looking up at the heavens, Kant continues, has the effect of annihilating, “as it were, my importance as an *animal creature*.”<sup>7</sup> “In the theater of modern philosophy,” the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero writes in her recent book *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*:

center stage is occupied by an I whose position is straight and vertical. Words like *righteousness* and *rectitude*, which occur frequently in dictionaries of morals, and were often used already in the Middle Ages for the “rectification” of bad inclinations, are an important anticipation of this scenario. The “upright man” of which the tradition speaks, more than an abused metaphor, is literally a subject who conforms to a vertical axis, which in turn functions as a principle and norm for its ethical posture. One can thus understand why philosophers see inclination as a perpetual source of apprehension, which is renewed in each epoch, and which takes on even more weight during modernity, when the free and autonomous self celebrated by Kant enters the scene.<sup>8</sup>

Cavarero makes two important points here. First, we connect the notion of morality with vertical posture and orientation. We use vertical metaphors to describe those who we see as conforming to societal norms – we speak, for example, of upright citizens or of upstanding members of society. The

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor, rev. edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 129, original emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, trans. Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 6.

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English word *rectitude*, meaning “[c]onformity to accepted standards of morality in behaviour or thinking,” derives in part from the post-classical Latin *rectitudo*, meaning “uprightness of posture.”<sup>9</sup> Second, verticality is gendered male. While we traditionally associate inclination – the shift away from the vertical axis toward the horizontal axis – with femininity, we associate verticality with masculinity.

The figure of the “upright man” remains central to philosophical and anthropological accounts of the human in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Sigmund Freud speculates in an often-cited footnote to his 1930 work *Civilization and Its Discontents* that “[t]he fateful process of civilization . . . would have been marked by man’s adopting of an erect posture.”<sup>10</sup> For Freud, the shift from quadrupedalism to bipedalism had a civilizing effect in causing the eye to replace the nose as the dominant organ of human perception. Humans began to feel shame, he reasons, when their genitals, which were previously concealed, became visible to them and in need of protection. According to the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his 1943 book *Air and Dreams*: “The positive dimension of verticality is so clear that we can formulate this aphorism: what does not rise, falls. Man qua man cannot live horizontally.”<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (who is familiar with Bachelard’s text) remarks in a 2001 interview with Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs: “humans as users of lungs are air dependent; like all higher animals, they use oxygen as a metabolic drug, bringing them a high potential for ecstasy. . . . We thus bear already within ourselves, biologically, a dimension of elation, which is not perceived by existing schools of anthropology.” It is not possible, Sloterdijk tells Heinrichs, “to understand the human fact through down-to-earthness.”<sup>12</sup>

But what if we were to challenge this conventional wisdom and think of the human not in terms of rectitude and verticality but rather through inclination and down-to-earthness? What if we were to seek the essence of the human not in the act of looking up at the starry heavens but rather in the act of looking down at the ground? In this book, I claim

<sup>9</sup> “Rectitude, n.” *OED Online*. June 2017. Oxford University Press. [www.oed.com/view/Entry/160040?redirectedFrom=rectitude+](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/160040?redirectedFrom=rectitude+).

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2002), 41–2.

<sup>11</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, trans. Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell (Dallas, TX: Dallas Institute, 1988), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Sloterdijk and Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, *Neither Sun Nor Death*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotexte, 2011), 334–5.

that the literary genre of the animal fable portrays the human in terms of down-to-earthness. The fable, I suggest, challenges the theological notion that the human subject expresses itself most truly in the act of looking up. Rather than orienting us up to the heavens, fables orient us down to the earth and its animal inhabitants. They do so by transforming humans into animals. “What would fable be without metamorphoses?” the French philosopher Michel Serres writes in his 1980 study *The Parasite*. “Men must be changed into animals with a wave of the magic wand. And how can that be? The secret of the fable is metamorphosis in the fable.”<sup>13</sup> According to Serres, the fable, like the fairy tale, depends on the idea of the metamorphosis of the body. As we saw in the story of Nebuchadnezzar, to be turned into an animal is to be turned away from the human community and from the divine. Whereas Nebuchadnezzar’s transformation is temporary, a sign of his spiritual madness, reversible through an act of theological penitence, the fable asks us to contemplate a more permanent and thus troubling transformation of human into animal.

Consider the famous example of Jean de La Fontaine’s 1690 fable “The Companions of Ulysses,” which reworks an episode from Homer’s *Odyssey*. Serres writes in *Variations on the Body*: “Fables, stories in which all living things give signs, teach profound things. La Fontaine began his last book with ‘The Companions of Ulysses’; metamorphosed into animals, these companions decline to become human again, confessing thereby that they have finally found their definitive point of equilibrium, their true character, their fundamental passion.”<sup>14</sup> In La Fontaine’s fable, the goddess Circe tricks Ulysses’ crew into drinking a delicious but baneful potion that transforms the men into various four-legged animals. Ever-resourceful Ulysses then charms Circe and makes her provide him with the remedy to the poison. In the *Odyssey*, Ulysses’ companions, who have all been turned into swine, allow Circe to transform them back into men. In La Fontaine’s fable, by contrast, the companions reject Ulysses’ offer of a remedy, claiming they are now happier in their newfound forms. Not only are they content to remain as nonhuman animals, but they also proceed to criticize the human from the perspective of their new species. The wolf, for

<sup>13</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 99.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Serres, *Variations on the Body*, trans. Randolph Burks (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2011), 53.



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example, draws a lesson from Plotinus and says: “Why, man, not seldom, kills his very brother; / What, then, are you but wolves to one another?”<sup>15</sup>

Nebuchadnezzar stops being an animal when he recovers his sanity and realizes that to be human is to look up at the heavens and praise God. His is ultimately a story about the overcoming of the animal by the theological subject that stands “Godlike erect.” In “The Companions of Ulysses,” the crewmembers refuse to transform back into humans or readopt their upright posture and orientation. Their preference for animal over human form, four legs over two, enables them to criticize aspects of human society from below, so to speak. As Frank Palmeri notes:

It is true that in the moral that follows this fable, addressed to Louis XIV’s grandson, La Fontaine cites Ulysses’ crewmen as negative models, to be condemned and avoided because they chose to enslave themselves to their passions. However, the explicit, conventional judgment of the moral does not outweigh or negate the sharp challenge to human superiority in the narrative of the fable. The required expression of respect by the seventy-year-old poet for the eleven-year-old prince, like Ulysses’ expectation that his crewmen will defer to their king and captain, illustrates the constraints and artificial inequalities in human society to which the animals refuse to return.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the contradiction between the fable’s narrative and moral only further accentuates the incompatibility of the human and animal perspectives.

For most readers, fables have little to do with real animals or with what we might call “the animal perspective.” According to Samuel Johnson in his *Life of Gay*, a fable “seems to be, in its genuine state, a narrative in which beings irrational, and sometimes inanimate, are, for the purpose of moral instruction, feigned to act and speak with human interests and passions.”<sup>17</sup> Likewise, for Thomas Noel, a fable is “a pithy narrative using animals to act out human foibles and a consequent moral, either explicit or implicit.”<sup>18</sup> In these definitions, rather than representing themselves, the animals in fables are subject to the allegorical tutelage of humans. This leads French philosopher Jacques Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore*

<sup>15</sup> Jean de La Fontaine, *Fables of La Fontaine*, trans. Elizur Wright, 2 vols. (London: Edward Moxon, 1841), 2:267.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Palmeri, “The Autocritique of Fables,” in *Humans and Other Animals in Eighteenth-Century British Culture: Representation, Hybridity, Ethics*, ed. Frank Palmeri (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 90.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson cited in Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin, 1991), 42.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Noel, *Theories of the Fable in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1975), 1.

*I Am* to censure the entire genre: “We know the history of fabulization and how it remains an anthropomorphic taming, a moralizing subjection, a domestication. Always a discourse *of* man, on man, indeed on the animality of man, but for and in man.”<sup>19</sup> But in *Animal Fables after Darwin* I argue against this critical commonplace that the anthropomorphized animals in fables are ciphers for purely human dramas. La Fontaine’s “The Companions of Ulysses” helps us to see how the form of the fable uses the transformation of human into animal to play with the vertical order of things and to imagine the difference between a human and a nonhuman perspective. Making the fable a subversive and ultimately antitheological literary genre, I suggest, is the fact that it unsettles the orientational metaphor that we have seen is fundamental to Western thought: “human is up; animal is down.” Ulysses expects his companions – now become lion, bear, wolf, elephant, and mole – to give up the “shame and pain”<sup>20</sup> of being animal and become human again. But the form of the fable exists precisely to disappoint this anthropocentric assumption that the human is the highest animal.

French novelist Marie Darrieussecq’s 1996 international bestseller *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation* provides a kind of updated, post-Darwinian version of “The Companions of Ulysses.” *Pig Tales* is told from the point of view of a woman who has gradually transformed into a sow. The novel’s unnamed first-person narrator resembles Ulysses’ companions in La Fontaine’s fable in that she comes to accept and even revel in her new physical form. She writes at the end of her narrative:

Now I’m a sow most of the time. It’s more convenient for life in the forest. I’ve taken up with a very handsome, very virile wild boar. . . . I’m not unhappy with my lot. The food’s good, the clearing comfortable, the young wild boars are entertaining. I often relax and enjoy myself. There’s nothing better than warm earth around you when you wake up in the morning, the smell of your own body mingling with the odour of humus, the first mouthfuls you take without even getting up, gobbling acorns, chestnuts, everything that has rolled down into the wallow while you were scabbling in your dreams.<sup>21</sup>

Darrieussecq’s porcine narrator critiques human behavior and standards by finding pleasure in the earthy grotesquerie of her newfound animal

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008), 37, original emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> *Fables of La Fontaine*, 265.

<sup>21</sup> Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation*, trans. Linda Coverdale (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 134–5.