Proceedings of the 25th International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis: 105-110

Animal rationale

MARIA KARDAUN[*]

INTRODUCTION

Aristotle's famous definition of man as *animal rationale,* or in Greek *zoion logon echon* (i.e., a living thing endowed with reason, see *Metaphysics*, book Zeta) seems fair enough. As a biologist Aristotle has no problem classifying humans among the genus of the *animalia* (as the *genus proximum*). And as to the *differentia specifica* of the human species there can be no doubt that it is our reason that distinguishes us from the other animals. *We* possess reason and *they* don't. Reason is our human specialty. So far so good. Not much to object here, at least not at first sight.

But Aristotle doesn't leave it at that. He has other claims to make, such as that the more we train and develop our specific human faculty, namely our reason, the more human we will be. According to the great Stagirite intellectual self-realisation is our highest goal, and our best guarantee to happiness. Developing our intellect as much as we can will make us happy, or as happy as we can get: we become as specialised and as distinct from the other *animalia* as possible and in that way we fulfil our true human nature the best (see *Nicomachean Ethics*).

And Aristotle has yet another claim to make: being human is higher than being whatever other animal (not just for humans, but in an absolute sense). Aristotle's philosophical system presents a strict hierarchy: mind is better than body, organic is better than inorganic, theory is better than practice, male is better than female, adult is better than child, Greek is better than foreign, and, as I already mentioned, human beings are better than other life forms in this world (see e.g. *Historia Animalium* and *De Anima*).

Now I don't like this hierarchy so much, and certainly it is not an 'objective' one, in the sense that it would follow straightforwardly and incontestably from the objects it describes. Aristotle's hierarchy is part of a way of perceiving the world that could easily have been different. There always have been, and there still are, other perspectives.

To my mind, when it comes to understanding our own psyche, especially if we look at ourselves from a moral point of view, we still tend to start from Aristotle's definition, and in a very uncritical manner at that. Without realising it, we conceptualise ourselves according to the old system and thus we tend to make too harsh a distinction between 'animal' on the one hand and 'rational' on the other. Or in other words, I believe that we have – still have – too high an esteem of reason or rationality or of human beings as opposed to supposedly lower forms of being.

We inherited this peculiarity in the first place from the Greek tradition (mainly from Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, but of course *not* from Greek mythology and certainly not from Greek tragedy:

[*] University of Maastricht, Arts and Culture, The Netherlands.

tragedies like *Oedipus Tyrannos* or *Antigon*e warn us over and over again that we shouldn't try to be too clever, and that there are other sources of wisdom than just reason), and in a slightly different manner from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, starting with Genesis chapter 1, where man received "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth".

The Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato, and to a somewhat lesser extent Aristotle as well, had a tremendously rationalistic world view. In fact we might call them intellectual extremists. The Hebrew bible on the other hand is quite anthropocentric in character (much more so than other old religions such as Hinduism or the pre-Socratic Greek mythological civilisation). As everybody knows, these two cultural lines have come together and merged into the Judaeo-Christian tradition to which our modern, western society nowadays is still heir. As I see it, among other things this has led to a general western overestimation of what we regard as 'human'. For sure, we tend to despise those parts of our being that we regard as 'subhuman'. And as to the 'higher than human' goals that we might feel akin to or might want to strive for, we do not actually believe in them any more. Originally God was the centre of our universe, but we were created as His image and likeness to begin with, and besides, ever since Nietzsche, God is dead anyway! In short, in our modern, western, secularised society the centre of the universe is just us. *We* are the highest form of being, and that entitles us to do anything we like, especially to animals.

For your information I should perhaps add that I am not dealing with this subject on a social nor on a political level, considering e.g., the legitimacy of wearing fur coats or the question of animal rights in society (though it is of course more than awful how we treat our fellow creatures). No, for the remaining fifteen minutes or so my focus will be on our own psyche: how do we treat the less appreciated, 'animal' parts within our own psyche? Quite often, we tend to identify completely with our conscious being. We acknowledge only our conscious views and hopes, and we repress the rest. We needed Sigmund Freud to point out to us that there *is* such a rest to begin with, namely an unconscious part of the psyche that doesn't deserve our attention any less than consciousness. But Freud considered the unconscious – our repressed, animal-like drives as well as any religious or other taboos we might have – as something we should try to overcome. When all is said and done, Freud's ideals about humanity still imply that we eventually should aim at becoming as conscious and rational as we can. However, unlike Freud, his pupil Carl Gustav Jung is truly convinced that sometimes the unconscious part of our psyche is actually our best part, and this includes those parts of our psyche that we tend to project on animals.

ANIMALS IN THE ARTS, MYTHOLOGY, FAIRY TALES

As I just said, there are quite a few elements of our unconscious psychic life that we project on animals. That is not only clear from the arts, but also from mythology, fairy tales, dream symbols, and also from metaphors. To give an easy example: if we bear in our national coat of arms lions with lacerating claws, proudly prancing horses, frightening bears, haughty eagles, then the images of these animals are not meant to show the results of veterinary research. Instead, they are supposed to refer to the impressive power or the ferocity or the unfathomable courage of our respective nations. Or if St. George slays the Dragon, or the innocent Maiden tames the Unicorn, then again these animals are not to be looked for in biology; they are a symbol of something that apparently occupies our mind. These 'animals' are to be found inside us, not outside. Not even the highly realistic faithful little dog at the feet of the two lovers that we find so often in 18th C. painting refers primarily to dogs in the outside world: art historians and art lovers immediately grasp the little animal's iconographic meaning. The painted dog is there because it represents something of the human soul.

In the religion of Old-Egypt, in mythological systems all over the world (including the mythology in the older parts of the Hebrew Bible), in Hinduism, in European folktales, in literature,

animals can always be good or bad, smart or stupid, friendly or hostile, depending on the context, or whether the animal involved is perhaps a monster to begin with (like the Minotaur). They represent a rich arsenal of human drives. Quite often these drives are actually morally better or have a more accurate view of the situation than human consciousness and reason. For example in Numeri the prophet Balaam unknowingly gets himself into a precarious situation. Luckily his she-donkey recognises a dangerous angel that is invisible to Balaam himself. Somewhat later in the story the angel explains that he would have killed Balaam if it had not been for the natural alertness of the latter's animal. In T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* it is of vital importance that the protagonist, young Arthur, learns how to 'regress' properly into an animal-like state of being, because in order to be a great king Arthur simply needs his instincts. In the Harry Potter series, one of the characters, Sirius Black, survives years of torture because of his ability to change into a huge black dog (instead of reacting as a complicated human being he simply sticks to his enormous, doglike loyalty and endures his suffering).

Especially fairy tales provide us with an abundant amount of representations of animals of all kinds, nice or unpleasant, dangerous or meek. And of course not one of them is to be taken literally, that is to say in the biological sense.

Let us have a look at *Puss in Boots*. Most people will be familiar with this fairy tale. A miller dies and his firstborn inherits the mill, the second son gets the donkey, but the youngest gets nothing but a granary cat. From a social point of view the inheritance of the youngest is near to nothing, and of course he doesn't think much of the cat. He even plans to eat the poor thing for dinner. But the cat persuades him to give him a bag and a pair of boots. With the help of some cunning tricks the cat manages to help his master not only out of the gutter but even to the throne of the country. What is important to us here is what the fairy tale tells us about the often despised animal aspects of our being. Unlike what the young miller's son thought, he was actually the one who received the best part of his father's inheritance, namely self-confidence, trust, and a strong inclination for self-determination. Though Puss is animal-shaped, and thus supposed to be 'low', he represents a very positive complex. This complex enables us to make things come true by the power of imagination, perhaps even bluff. Puss is a perfect embodiment of the American Dream: anything is possible, as long as you believe in it. Start acting as if you are fantastic and the rest will come by itself. However, as a conscious strategy these things don't work so well, or perhaps not at all. The self-confidence depicted in *Puss in Boots* is of a natural, instinctive nature. That is why it shows up in the form of a cat. It has to be noted though that this particular 'cat' is keen on artificial things like boots and a bag, walks upright like a human being and is exceptionally well-mannered according to any standards of human social behaviour. Now that is what I call domestication! Apparently this complex is not a completely wild instinct. You can have a talk with it, so there is some middle ground between the spontaneous, animal-like impulses coming from the unconscious, and the ego. And this helpful complex does not appear as a dog, or a horse, or an eagle, but as a cat, that is to say an elegant small predator that usually has its own dark little ways, and is often a bit ruthless, with just enough lack of conscience to do well in life. By the way, at the end of the fairy tale, when Puss has achieved his goals, he voluntarily retreats to the background again. That makes this animal-like complex not only clever, but wise too.

In authentic, spontaneous fairy tales, that is to say the kind of fairy tale that has had a long oral tradition before it was written down, animals that offer help should not be rejected or things will go wrong. That much is clear. For the rest animals in fairy tales are like life itself: anything is possible. That viewpoint is very different from the more 'official' western view, the view that is primarily inspired by philosophy and the Jewish-Christian faith, where animals are narrowed down to something principally backward and inferior. But fairy tales, and comparable types of narrative, are rooted in life itself. They tend to counterbalance some of our more extremist cultural convictions and beliefs. *Little Red Riding Hood* for example, contains some really useful information if we consider the exclusively Christian background of the later Middle Ages. That naive little thing with her one-dimensional sentimental attitude symbolised by the red cap that she keeps wearing instead of brains, she too is an extremist! When asked, she gives away all vital information to the first wolf she meets.

That is very trusting and obedient, but not exactly an example we should follow. In the old French version of Perrault cute Little Red Riding Hood is simply eaten by the wolf/the Great Mother, and that's it. No need for unrealistic happy endings like the one the Grimm brothers invented. The animal was right! (I am exaggerating, I know, and there is much more to this fairy tale than we can go into right now, but nonetheless, naivety provokes evil, as Perrault saw quite well. In any case, the folktale shows us something quite different from what we are supposed to believe according to mainstream Christian and post-Christian tenets; even in the Grimm version, where in the end the little girl is rescued and restored to life, her behaviour is not presented as something we would like to copy, because it's quite obvious that she isn't any better off for having been in the belly of the wolf. Innocence simply doesn't pay, not even in the vanilla version of the story).

ANIMALS IN PLATONISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Our traditional western conceptualisation of 'animal' has been highly influenced by our conceptualisation of God. We still suffer from a huge moral polarisation within our psyche, and it doesn't help that we have done away with Christianity or with religion in general: the system is still the same, only the underlying structure has become less conscious nowadays. I will sketch very briefly what I think has happened, starting with Plato.

Plato himself hardly speaks about animals in a literal sense. No doubt this is because he regards them as too low and too uninteresting. To him they belong to the same category as slaves, small children and women. However he does mention animals now and then in a metaphorical sense. E.g., in Book IX of the *Republic*, in the context of his outline of the Ideal State, Plato warns us that we should never go to sleep without taking precautions. At night we should have the discipline to concentrate on reason and eternal beauty, because if we don't we are likely to become a victim of "dream visions that are unlawful". We may go to sleep, Plato says, but a hidden animal inside us will do the exact opposite: it awakens, shakes its filthy head and starts doing all those terrible things that contemporary stage plays nowadays like to show on stage, such as sleeping with our own mother. (Plato seems to refer to *Oedipus Tyrannos* here.) In other words, in the Platonic Ideal State people are supposed to control even their unconscious life, make sure they won't have illegal dreams! So much for totalitarianism.

Plato introduced into our western culture a strong, morally coloured polarisation between our (animal-like) drives and reason. Platonism induces us to strive idealistically for perfection instead of for balance and completeness. But perfection is unrealistic and sterile, you can't live in it. Also perfection excludes so many things that are worthwhile too, even if they do not fit into the pattern.

Plato's pupil Aristotle softened some of his master's most extreme ideas. It is clear that Aristotle presupposes less hostility between the 'higher' and the 'lower' parts of the human soul. Still, Aristotle did not fundamentally change the Platonic system, least of all did he correct Plato's overvaluation of reason. Not for nothing is the only divine figure in Aristotle's metaphysical system, the so-called First Unmoved Mover, equated by him with Pure Reason. And of course animals find themselves at the other side of the Aristotelian spectre.

Next, with special thanks to St. Paul, St. Augustine and much later St. Thomas Aquinas, Christianity forged the Greek rationalistic philosophical tradition together with the Jewish monotheistic religion into one, more or less consistent, system of beliefs. The result is that our conscious or unconscious metaphysical views tend to depart from a spiritual Father God very high above in the sky where all the light comes from. God represents the highest form of Being. He does have a son though, and together with the Holy Spirit the three of them rule the universe. Actually, the Holy Trinity is 'three' and 'one' at the same time, because the Son is the Father and the Father is the Son, and anyway the Holy Spirit unites them, so they are a unity. Apart from being a unity, the Holy Trinity – that is to say our highest divine principle – is human (because in the form of Christ God

became human), exclusively masculine, immaterial, unchanging, eternal, radiant with light, morally perfect, omniscient, omnipotent, probably virgin (no sex please), and also more or less adult (though Roman Catholicism also tends to worship the just born Christ, that is to say the Holy Child). For women, for earth or matter, for the body, for change and temporality, and especially for animals there are no clear labels in the Christian pantheon. Therefore they easily become an expression of what is *not* God, that is to say evil.

Of course for women the situation is much less dramatic than for animals: women have their mother goddess, the Holy Virgin-Mother Mary, and every 200 or 300 years or so she makes a career move within the Roman Catholic Church. The last one was in 1950, where it was officially proclaimed as a *dogma fidei* that she is accepted into heaven together with her (virgin) body and soul. As an image of femininity she is far from complete though, and besides, Protestantism is much less enthusiastic about her. However, it is a start. There is hope! Let us try and do the same for our fellow animal creatures too. I mean not only animals in the outside world but also and especially our own inner animal side: it is divine too.

MONOTHEISM

To my mind the real problem behind all this is monotheism. The good thing about monotheism is of course that it may provide a civilisation with a deeply felt sense of unity and focus, but what I do not like about it is the monoculture that it favours, a monoculture that doesn't leave room for important aspects of life. In our western cultural past animals, women, the earth, matter, and sexuality were held in very low esteem. Their place in the structure of the universe was low. That is why in popular belief the Devil lives in hell together with his granny. Granny is the Great Mother who is excluded from the pantheon. Hell is a place where everything is opposite to God, to the ultimate Ideal. Hell is not high above but deep down. In hell there is no light, but darkness, no eternal unchanging immaterial beauty but down-to-earth stench and decay. In hell we do not find cool rational celestial blue (as in the cap that the Holy Virgin is wearing in iconography), but the colour red of sexual heat, uncontrolled lust and emotion. And we definitely picture the Devil as having animal features. He is a red or perhaps black male figure (black meaning that he is our unconscious brother). He is highly sexual, in fact completely oversexed: that's what repression leads to. And he is hairy, he's a kind of beast with a goat's legs and a tail. In fact the western Devil looks a lot like the Satyrs in Antiquity, only the ancient Satyrs weren't that morally bad: they were the slightly lower, animal counterpart of the sensual divinity Dionysus. In ancient Greece all the different deities had their different metiers. Dionysus and his animal-like companions the Satyrs together saw to it that humans didn't lose their link with nature, including their own nature. (Of course Plato, and later Christianity, didn't like this type of deity at all, even less so because the Dionysus rituals were in part performed by so-called Maenads, dangerous and hysterical women: Satyrs and Maenads following a frivolous wine-drinking deity in a religious procession, this type of scene must have been like a nightmare to Plato).

To conclude: the extreme polarisation, sometimes even split-off, within our soul is much more of a problem than the elements in our nature that we have in common with our fellow creatures out there. There is a persistent western image of evil that we keep projecting on animals, because we cannot accept ourselves for what we are. When (the atheist) Goethe in one of the most famous German poems ever depicts the evil principle Erlkönig, then he suggests in so many words that this evil figure has a tail, like an animal. Also, the Erlkönig lives together with his daughters and his mother in a colourful other world that is threatening and tempting and real; yet this world is weird and invisible to the normal eye. As a picture of our unconscious Goethe's world of the Erlkönig should worry us: a powerful evil ruler that like the Christian Devil lives in a separate world together with repressed femininity. And from there he lures upon us: it is Erlkönig's ambition to snatch little children, not just the child within us but perhaps also future generations, and to incorporate them into

his world. The poem sketches a very dangerous situation, not far from dissociation. We suffer from an evil hostility, a kind of civil war within our souls. The more we try to be perfect and the more we identify with reason, truth, light, efficiency and goodness, the more the rest of our psyche tends to go its own dark ways behind our backs. As Jung says in the only film interview with him that we have, at the very end of his life (*Face to Face*, John Freeman 1959): "The only danger of man is man himself. We know nothing of man, or far too little".

Indeed, what we need is insight into the human soul, more especially we need depth psychology and the arts, and of course we need great psychology-and-the-arts conferences like the one we are attending right now!

LITERATURE

Armstrong, K. (1995[1993]). *A History of God*. Reading: Cox and Wyman.

Brunel, P. (1992). *Companion to literary myths, heroes and archetypes*. London & New York: Routledge. (Translation of *Dictionnaire des mythes littéraires*. Paris 1988, Éditions du Rocher).

Edinger, E. F. (1994). *The eternal drama. The inner meaning of Greek mythology*. Boston and London: Shambhala.

Freud, S. (1920). Jenseits des Lustprinzips. *Gesammelte Werke* III (pp. 213-272). Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

Freud, S. (1930). Das Unbehagen in der Kultur. *Gesammelte Werke* XIV (pp. 421-506). Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

Graf, F. (1993). *Greek mythology.* Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.

Graves, R. (1977[1955]). *The Greek myths.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Jung, C. G. (1935/1954). Archetypes of the collective unconscious. In *Collected works* 9/I (pp. 52-95). Princeton (NJ): University Press.

Jung, C. G. (1943). The psychology of the unconscious. In *Collected works* 7 (pp. 3-117). Princeton (NJ): University Press.

Kardaun, M. (1997). Why Plato banished the artist. Some Jungian observations. In Frederico Pereira (Ed.), *Literature and psychoanalysis. Proceedings of the Thirteenth International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis* (pp. 197-204). Lisbon: ISPA.

Kardaun, M. (2000). Platonic art theory: A reconsideration. In Maria Kardaun & Joke Spruyt (Eds.), *The winged Chariot: Collected essays on Plato & Platonism in honour of L. M. de Rijk* (pp. 135-164). Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, vol. 100).

Nietzsche, F. (1889). *Götzendämmerung oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert*. Leipzig: Naumann (Translated as *Twilight of the Idols*)

Nussbaum, M., C. (1986). *The fragility of goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Petersmann, H. (1992). Beobachtungen zu den appellativen für "Gott". Ein sprachwissenschaftlicher Beitrag zum Gottesverständnis der Alten. In: *Triuwe. Studien zur Sprachgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft*, pp. 127-141.

von Beit, H. (1997[1952-1957]). *Symbolik des Märchens: Versuch einer Deutung* (3 Volumes). Bern: Francke.

von Franz, M.-L. (1980[1970]). *A psychological interpretation of the golden ass of Apuleius*. Irving: Spring Publications.

von Franz, M.-L.(1999). *The cat: A tale of feminine redemption*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.