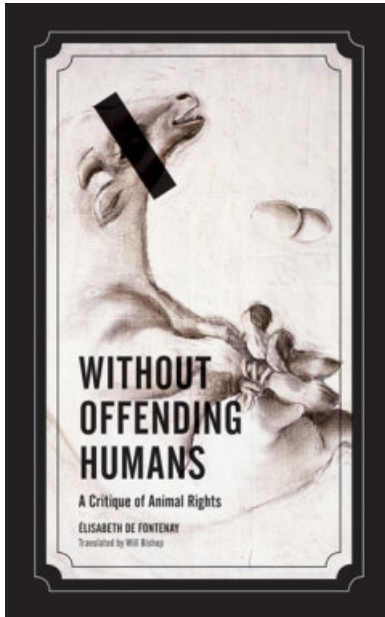


<http://somatosphere.net/2014/11/without-offending-humans.html>

## Élisabeth de Fontenay's Without Offending Humans

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By Les Beldo



[Without Offending Humans: A Critique of Animal Rights](#)

by [Élisabeth de Fontenay](#) (trans. William Bishop)

University of Minnesota Press, 2012, 168 pages.

In the opening paragraph of *Without Offending Humans*, Élisabeth de Fontenay describes the first time she saw her mentor Jacques Derrida speak at the Collège de philosophie:

I reacted, all things being relative, as Malebranche did upon reading Descartes's *Treatise on Man*: "His beating heart sometimes forced him to stop his reading," .... From that moment on, I did not take leave of this work nor of this man, even if it would often cause me distress to place myself in certain of his footsteps.

(1)

Besides its recursivity, which hints at the almost pathological dependence on citation that is to follow, such a reverent opening primes the reader to question whether a work so firmly situated in Derrida's project can deliver an argument original enough to warrant its book-length runtime. The author does nothing to defuse this growing fear when, some pages later, she introduces her key intervention in the book's first chapter as certainly the *only* point where she feels she is in disagreement with Derrida, adding that "it is not without a certain amount of anxiety that I wish to formulate these reservations, now that he does not have the time to explain himself further" (14).

As it turns out, de Fontenay's cautious critique is an important one. In his writings on animals, Derrida observes that with few exceptions philosophers from Aristotle onward have built their conceptions of "the human" on an unexamined set of foundational assumptions that reduce nonhuman life to a single homogeneous category, "the animal." Between the category of the human and the category of the animal—or *l'animot*, as Derrida playfully dubs the latter category—philosophers have presumed the existence of an abyssal rupture that serves to assure humans of their own uniqueness. In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy in 1991, Derrida refers to this kind of thinking as a "sacrificial structure" that links the human domination of nature with the acceptance (and meaningfulness) of animal sacrifice. De Fontenay points out that for Derrida's argument to work, he must treat all the diverse cultural and historical instantiations of sacrifice as tokens of a single transhistorical type, whereas anthropologists have shown us many different kinds of sacrificial functions that cannot be reduced to a single catchall category.

Unfortunately, this intervention into Derrida's thinking does not lead to anything like a sustained thesis for de Fontenay. Lacking a coherent framework on which to hang on its many observations, *Without Offending Humans* instead reads like a series of riffs on a set of topics related to the animal question in philosophy. This is a familiar danger for academic volumes based on independent essays, but the problem is amplified here by the fragile internal coherence of each entry. Derrida's inimitable style makes for some notoriously impenetrable prose, but there is a sense in his essays that even the throwaway moments will reward a careful reading. Not so with Fontenay, who writes with a complexity that seems only to distract. Most intrusive is her unrelenting use of quotation and paraphrase, a ventriloquism that at its worst—and I can think of no other way to say this—amounts to vapid name-dropping. For instance:

We know that after having displayed a strong interest in physiognomic research, Goethe distanced himself from Lavater, and that Diderot, at first tempted no doubt by the monism underlying the enterprise, ended up refusing to participate in the

translation of texts by the illustrious Swiss pastor, and that Hegel was ferociously critical of him in the *Phenomenology of Spirit...* (79).

Such passages are characteristic—this one is taken from a paragraph that also mentions Lichtenberg and footnotes Proust—and after a while the effect is dizzying.

Among the most frustrating ambiguities of *Without Offending Humans* is whether de Fontenay herself wishes to give said offense or avoid it. I suspect that part of the allure of the book's title, at least to some, is its apparent suggestion that the *cause animale* has not gone far enough. Has the animal rights movement held in reserve some fundamental anthropocentrism, some respect for humans and human sensitivities that limits the scope of its possible achievement? [At least one previous reviewer](#) concludes that the title in fact has the opposite (and much plainer) intent, signaling de Fontenay's desire to critique animal rights without disturbing the species boundary.

Perhaps, however, there is a puckish element in de Fontenay's choice of title after all. Someone like Peter Singer, whom de Fontenay takes to task for his ahistorical assertion of the natural rights of animal and man, courts mainstream backlash as a rhetorical strategy. But Singer does so recklessly, and for this his provocations often find the wrong target. Eva Kittay, a philosopher and the mother of a severely mentally disabled child, bristles at Singer's assertion that if chimpanzees are not deserving of rights, then reason dictates that neither are severely disabled humans (Singer's intent, clearly, is to argue *for* the rights of chimpanzees and not *against* the rights of disabled children, but for Kittay that is beside the point) (Kittay 210). De Fontenay's criticism seeks out narrower and safer targets, but it would be unfair to call her efforts inoffensive or trite. Her denunciation of "banal, quotidian, and legal" forms of cruelty indicts anyone who has eaten factory-farmed meat or shopped at a pet store. The mass slaughters that followed from the "mad cow crisis," traceable to the decision to feed meat and bone meal to herbivores, works, according to de Fontenay, "as a way of not having to point at the madmen that we have become" (129).

There is more than enough here to inspire and to provoke thought, especially for fans of deconstruction and perhaps also for fans of the Posthumanities series edited by Carey Wolfe, of which this book is a part. The book's memorable moments are mostly disparate, however, and that lack of coherence is likely to limit the endurance of its appeal. Heavy use of citation, coupled with the absence of an organizing theme, makes the entire work feel like a kind of annotated bibliography, and perhaps that is

how this book is best appreciated.

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