

**Introduction:
Defining the Human and the Animal**

Alexander Mathäs
University of Oregon

Foreword:

First, I would like to thank the contributors to this special volume of *Konturen: Defining the Human and the Animal*. All the authors presented drafts of their manuscripts at a conference on this topic, which took place on May 2 and 3, 2013 at the University of Oregon.

I am grateful to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Oregon Humanities Center, the Journal of Comparative Literature, the University of Oregon's College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Philosophy, Department of Comparative Literature, the German Studies Committee, and the Department of German and Scandinavian for their generous support. Without them both the conference and the ensuing publication would not have been possible.

Special thanks go to my departmental colleagues, and foremost to my Department Head and Chair of the German Studies Committee, Jeffrey Librett, who gave me the opportunity to publish this volume. I am grateful for the support of Alexis Smith, Eva Hofmann, Stephanie Chapman, and Judith Lechner, who assisted me at various stages of the project. I am also indebted to the graduate students who participated in a class on Human-Animal borders that I taught in Winter 2013. Sarah Grew's assistance with the web design is greatly appreciated. And I would like to thank our office staff, above all Barbara Ver West and Joshua Heath, who were of great help in organizing and advertising the conference.

Introduction:

In recent years the fairly new field of Animal Studies has received considerable attention (see bibliography). In view of the growing number of pet owners, the increasing visibility of animal rights activists, the media exposure of inhumane

animal experiments, a heightened awareness of the ecological and ethical implications of raising enormous quantities of animals for food consumption, the disappearance of species, hunting practices, deprivation of habitats, the harvesting of animal organs for medical purposes, the destruction of eco-systems and other human interferences, our relationship to non-human beings keeps changing considerably. In other words, attempts at defining the human versus the animal have to be considered as transitory; and yet certain essential categories have endured for long periods of time: for instance, the Cartesian distinction between thinking and non-thinking creatures that can be traced back to Aristotle and still influences our attitudes towards animals today.

The somewhat provocative title of this volume, *Defining the Human and the Animal*, could be misunderstood as an attempt at providing clear-cut definitions between humans and animals. Far from seeking to define the human or the animal, however, the volume engages with established literary, philosophical, and scientific texts that have shaped ongoing and historic debates surrounding the human-animal divide. As the contributors' diverse approaches will show, definitions of what is human are always projections and depend on specific social, political, scientific, literary, and ethical frames of reference. Keeping the historical and subjective nature of such projections in mind, this volume examines how various textual examples from different genres and periods of European literature and philosophy reveal specific ideological and aesthetic presumptions in depicting the human-animal divide.

In the eighteenth century, some remarkable changes took place in European thought suggesting that human life and animal life have much more in common than previously assumed. British utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham's (1748-1832) famous dictum "The question is not, Can they [animals] reason, nor, Can they talk, but, Can they suffer?" appealed to human empathy by stressing animals' neural and emotional capacity for feeling pain. If the sole distinction between humans and animals was the ability to reason, so Bentham's argument goes, infants or mentally handicapped persons could not be

considered to be human, either. He thus posited a different mode for thinking about humans and animals.

The growing awareness of the similarities between animals and humans in the eighteenth century can be attributed to a number of factors. For instance, the discovery of the nervous system was initially confirmed through animal experiments and recognized as a common transmitter of sensations in animals and humans alike. In view of their common neurological apparatus one was able to assume that both humans and animals have similar sensations. The heightened awareness of physiological similarities between humans and non-humans made it necessary to discover other distinctive traits. Consequently, ethical and metaphysical distinctions came into focus. The ability of humans to make autonomous decisions – decisions that are independent of the instincts or in defiance of these – became a very important quality that distinguished the moral human being from the amoral animal. In Kantian philosophy, for instance, the human ability to resist the animal instincts became the marker of the human being's moral integrity and freedom (Kant, *Schriften zur Geschichtsphilosophie* 21-25).

While individual autonomy presupposes a reliance on reason and a moral integrity that cannot be corrupted by emotional inclinations or sensual temptations, civilized human beings are also expected to have empathy with the less fortunate and weak. In fact, the empathetic identification with other living beings becomes a key ingredient of Enlightenment philosophy and the discourse on human rights. Many literary and philosophical texts of this time helped create a universal standard for what it means to be a civilized human being (see select bibliography: i.e. Kant, Herder, Schiller). The ethical and social norms that bourgeois individuals were expected to fulfill have come to be known as humanist values. While these values have served as a model for Western individuality and the human rights discourse, one has to be aware that they are constructs that emerged at a time when the middle classes established rules that would enable them to be on equal footing with members of the aristocracy, and thus to have a much greater share of power.

However, already in the nineteenth century during the course of industrialization and the rapid growth of urban centers with a large contingent of underprivileged laborers, the idealist notion of individual autonomy was becoming more elusive and ultimately lost credibility, as the fate and political rights of most members of society still depended on their economic and social status. Marxism attempted to do justice to the socio-economic realities by providing a materialist explanation of world history and challenging the idea that all would be able to be master of their destiny (*Die deutsche Ideologie*). Another factor that questioned the humanist outlook was the growing importance of empiricist methods. Discoveries in the so-called life sciences damaged the creationist myth, blurred the border between “Man” and animal, and discredited the assumption of the independence of the human mind (Darwin, Haeckel). With the realization that the mind is not independent from the body but the result of a late physiological development in the long history of evolution, individual self-mastery became even more of a myth.

After Darwin’s theory of evolution had made it more difficult to distinguish the human species from non-human creatures, Nietzschean, Freudian, and Marxist philosophies challenged idealist universal explanations of what is human by subordinating empirical knowledge to their particular points of view. Their different anti-humanist approaches epitomized that there is no single, objective Truth. Yet despite the widely accepted assertion – held by both Marxists and Nietzscheans – that scientific analyses of perceived phenomena are subject to the historical, cultural, and ideological conditions from which they arose, empiricist methodologies and their claims to objectivity have prevailed to this day. Moreover, anthropocentric explanations of human sovereignty still persist. Whether the human-animal distinction is based on the human capacity for “world-making,” the ability to adapt to any environment through the inventive production of tools, the broader range of human communicative abilities through language, imagination, introspection, or the deliberate and meaningful transformation of the environment, ontological human-animal distinctions have been invoked

throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century to define the human in philosophical and scientific discourses.

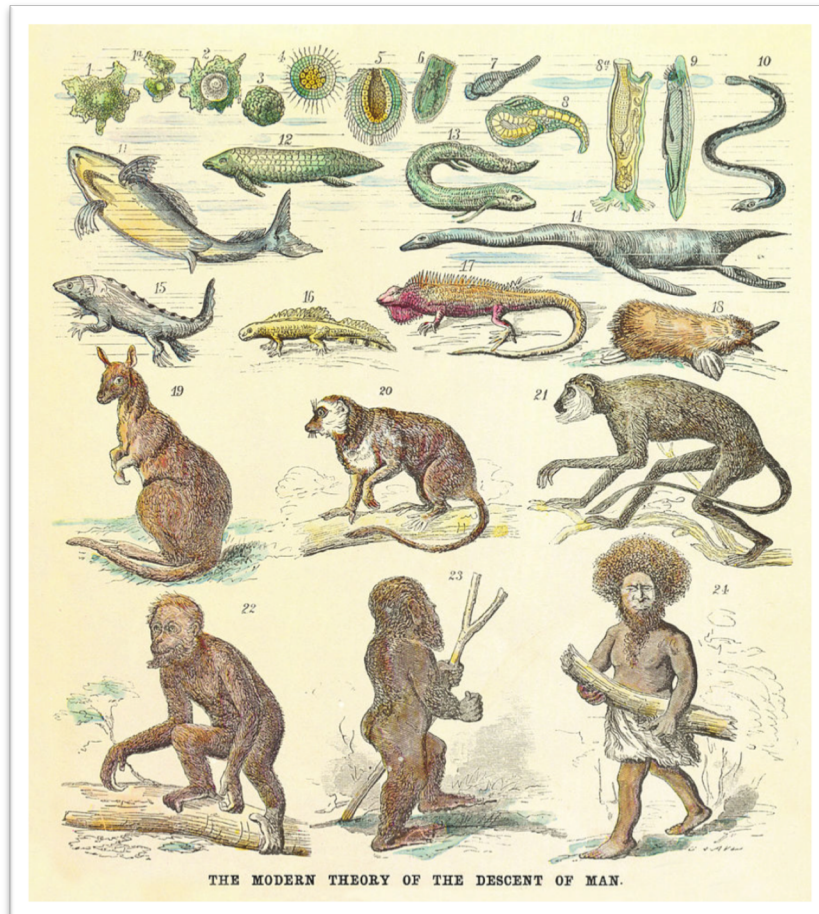


Figure 1: The human pedigree interpreted chain of being with living and fossil animals. Ernst Haeckel, *Anthropogenie oder Entwicklungsgeschichte des Menschen* (The Evolution of Man), 1874, posted by Petter Bøckman, [Wikipedia](#), Public Domain.

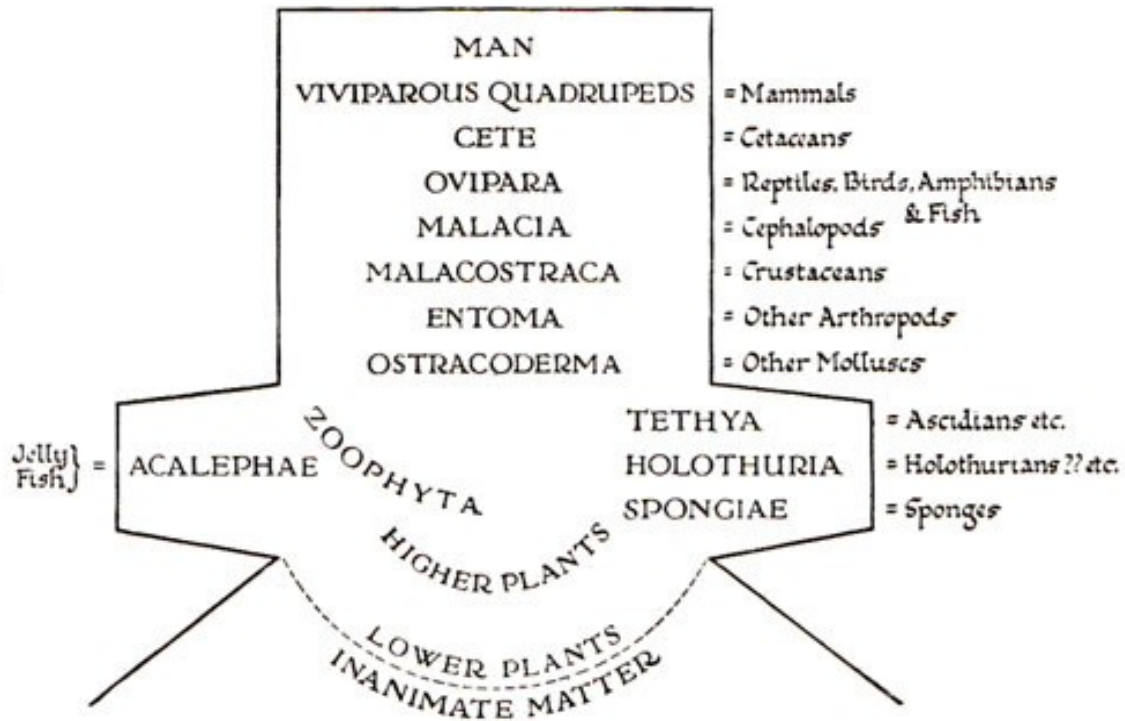


FIG. 18. The *Scala Naturae* or 'Ladder of Life' according to the descriptions of Aristotle.

Figure 2: The *Scala Naturae* or 'Ladder of Life' according to the descriptions of Aristotle [digitized from Charles Singer, *A Short History of Biology*, via [Roger Wotton Blog](http://rwotton.blogspot.com.au/2013/01/aristotle-natural-history-and-evolution_7.htm) (http://rwotton.blogspot.com.au/2013/01/aristotle-natural-history-and-evolution_7.htm)]

Darwin's or Haeckel's trees of life remind us in too many ways of Plato's and Aristotle's *scala naturae* or Jean Baptiste Lamarck's great Chain of Beings to be called original. The persistence of these metaphorical distinctions seems to suggest that there are fundamental species-related human-animal distinctions that transcend social and cultural contingencies. Does the scientific employment of the tree metaphor to represent evolution and the hierarchical order of the species not suggest that science often relies on anthropomorphic imagery? And does this not mean that scientific theories are frequently informed by figments of the human imagination or sensual impressions? In other words, scientific knowledge seems to be intrinsically tied to sensory perceptions and ideas.

Certainly, it would not be difficult to point out the countless scientific discoveries that have successfully corrected irrational and flawed fabrications of the human imagination, such as the pre-Galilean theories of the genesis of the earth and its solar system. Yet, the development and continual correction of scientific knowledge throughout history suggests that scientific knowledge cannot transcend its anthropocentric limitations and, what is more, their particular socio-cultural contexts. For instance, who could seriously doubt that a human being who lived a few hundred years ago in central Africa had a different understanding of time, distance, and ethical conduct from a human being living in the U.S. today? In light of such differing sensations, emotions, and perceptions, it should be hardly a surprise that the human-animal border is continuously redefined, and yet intrinsically tied to projections of the human imagination. Scientific research is often based on such projections or must be transformed into metaphors to obtain palpability. For instance, human states of emotion, like fear or love, can be subject to scientific scrutiny. However, their sensory experience can be much more effectively communicated in poetic or even everyday language than in scientific prose. Mere scientific abstraction, albeit rationally understandable, remains distant and intangible. Without relating scientific data to phenomena of the human experience through metaphorical representations, science would be incomprehensible, as Goethe's dictum "Gray is all science, and green is the golden tree of life" so vividly expresses (Goethe, *Faust*). In other words, just as Faust is inseparably tied to that creaturely Mephisto, so are our rational capacities grounded in our sensory, pre-reflexive experiences.

Tracing the border between the human and the animal means reflecting on human attempts to come to grips with our inescapable yet desirable animal existence. And here lies the irony, which Jacques Derrida so lucidly evinced when he undressed in front of his cat and felt ashamed: it is the non-human animal that makes us human (*The Animal That Therefore I am*). By exploring the borders between human and animal in historical, philosophical, and literary contexts, this volume is focusing on a topic that is central to the humanities: namely the examination of attempts to create versions of the human subject by

comparing it to a pre-historic, unfathomable, creaturely life, which is both familiar and alien to us. Although such explorations of what is human will never be able to tell us what the human subject is, they will give us the opportunity to ponder both preconceptions and ideological implications of the incessant transformations of the human-animal border.

In the first chapter of this volume, entitled “The Time of Animal Voices,” Ted Toadvine focuses on Maurice Merleau Ponty’s fundamental distinction between animal and human from a phenomenological point of view. Toadvine delineates how Merleau-Ponty was able to overcome the anthropo-logic of his early work by tracing his development and comparing it to Heidegger’s and Scheler’s essentialist human-animal distinctions. He shows how the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty allows for fundamental species distinctions without reverting to an anthropocentric essentialism based on the distinction of body and spirit. Rather than separating the animal from the human through narcissistic misrecognition, Merleau-Ponty follows in the footsteps of phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, who recognized “the Darwinian story of our common animal origins.” While Merleau-Ponty assumed in his early philosophy (*The Structure of Behaviour*, 1942) that life could be integrated into spirit, he asserts in his later *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) that the “final integration of matter and life into spirit is unattainable.” Nevertheless, the imprint of our animal past continues to influence how we perceive the world on a pre-conscious level.

The time factor comes into play in the description of the perceptual experience. What structures our perception is precisely this pre-reflective imprint of our animal past that can never be grasped in the present because it always precedes our conscious perception and transforms the structure of our consciousness with each new sensation. There is no stable *I* or *self*, but rather an “assemblage of natural selves” that has always already been synchronized with the world before one consciously perceives it. Consequently, the *I* is represented in concert with “the immemorial prehistory, the voices of the animals that we will have been” (Toadvine). Yet while the perceiving *I* is always

synchronized with the pre-conscious animal past, the present acting subject is always belated in its attempts to regain synchronicity through reflection. Thus the chapter ties in with current posthumanist debates that radically question human self-determination by recognizing animality as an intrinsic and inseparable feature of being human.

Joseph Fracchia's "Organisms and Objectifications: A historical-materialist inquiry into the Human as Animal" emphasizes Karl Marx's significance for a substantially new way of conceptualizing the rethinking of history "up from the body" rather than grounding it in the human mind. The essay dovetails with chapter one as it emphasizes the importance of Darwin's materialist conception of natural history for modern views on human phylogeny. By situating historical materialism in relation to the mainstream of Western philosophical tradition, Fracchia not only illuminates the affinities between Feuerbach, Darwin, and Marx but also the latter's anticipation of modern views on human phylogeny, including those by Konrad Lorenz and Richard Lewontin. The connecting link here is material objectification (*Vergegenständlichung*), a process that synchronizes subjective sensory perception with the encounter with the world and is inherent in all living beings. According to Lorenz, this process of synchronization depends on a *species-specific set of mechanisms* that allows each member of a particular species to adapt to the outer world through its cognitive apparatus. In other words, each species distinguishes itself through the corporeal manifestation of its cognitive apparatus. Since the cognitive apparatus of each species is shaped phylogenetically, one could say that the history of a species is embodied in its corporeal organization. In this sense Marx justifiably posits corporal organization as the foundation of human history and anticipates the post-Darwinian realization that humans are "mindful bodies" rather than "embodied minds" (Fracchia). Similar to Merleau-Ponty's preconscious animalistic process of perception discussed in the previous chapter, Fracchia's essay stresses the body's dominant involvement in the evolution of human cognition. In contrast to Merleau-Ponty, who focuses on the perceptual aspects of the human experience, Marx is also interested in the productive aspects of objectification. It

is in this capacity of deliberate human production where Marx introduces an essential difference between animal and human. While humans can produce “in freedom” (Fracchia), that is, create something that they imagine, animals are much more limited in the range of their productive capacities.

One of the most striking similarities between Marx’s notion of *Objectification* and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of human perception is their acknowledgment of a preconscious cognitive disposition that shapes our human consciousness. Thus both Marx and Merleau-Ponty seem to espouse *a priori* categories of human understanding, in the vein of Kant, without referring to the eighteenth-century philosopher. In chapter three, “Rationality, Animality, and Human Nature,” David Craig reconsiders Immanuel Kant’s view of the Human/Animal relation. As the subtitle suggests, Kant’s position on the Human/Animal distinction has already been discussed extensively in scholarship. In contrast to most traditional Kant scholars who emphasize Kant’s strict separation of rational humanity and irrational animality, Craig points out that Kant regards animality as an inherent part of human nature that is not to be dismissed. Whereas most scholars who have dealt with this topic focused on Kant’s ethical writings, Craig includes the philosopher’s less well-known anthropological and pedagogical essays to shed new light on his view of the Human/Animal relation. While Kant maintains in his *Lectures on Ethics* that animals, unlike humans, lack moral judgment and therefore do not deserve to be judged according to moral principles that apply to all fellow human beings, they nevertheless deserve to be treated with respect. In his essay on *Religion within the Boundaries of Religion*, Kant asserts that animality is an inherent part of our human nature and it is up to our faculty of reason to keep our instincts in check and direct them toward a good purpose. Both in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* and in his *Lectures on Pedagogy* Kant attributes evil rather to the misuse of Reason than to the instincts themselves. Accordingly, the task of Reason is to discipline and refine our instincts in such a way that they complement our rational faculties and enable us to live up to the potential of a fully formed human being. Craig illustrates his assertion about Kant’s differentiated anthropological views by

pointing out discrepancies between the linear progress toward civilization in Kant's description of the phylogenetic history of humankind and his more complex depiction of the process of individual education, which attempts to account for the full spectrum of human nature and challenges a one-dimensional Enlightenment optimism.

Kenneth Calhoon's essay engages with similar concerns but from modernist and post-structuralist perspectives. "Of Non-Vital Interest: Art, Mimicry, and the Phenomenon of Life," interweaves and interrogates discourses by Lacan, Freud, French philosopher Roger Caillois, and German philosophers Hans Jonas and Theodor Adorno on the topic of seeing and being seen. It encourages us to rethink animism, anthropomorphism, mimicry, and mimesis in view of twentieth-century attempts to "dispel the subject's felt affinity with its natural surroundings." Referring to a key passage in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* on the mimicry of butterflies, the essay discusses the self-awareness of being watched and the attempt to escape the gaze through self-effacing blending with the environment. In an intricate web of literary and aesthetic connotations, including a wide ranging spectrum of allusions to Greek mythology and the German philosophical and literary tradition from the Baroque to the twentieth century, the author challenges anthropomorphic speculations that view mimicry as nature's meaningful device for protecting vulnerable species from predators. While the essay can be read as a critique of such utilitarian projections onto nature as they limit our view and ignore nature's "ostentatious outpouring of resources" (Calhoon), it also deliberates on the historical shift from the early stages of humanity that regarded nature as animated to the modern tendency to view the world as neutral, nonliving matter. The essay ponders the shortcomings and contradictions in scientific attempts to distance the subject from its objects through visual observation. Such efforts to subject nature to scientific scrutiny are prone to be parochial as they neglect nature's vital aspects that are still alive in so-called primitive cultures and the pre-Enlightenment era.

Sander Gilboff's essay on scholarly writings by three prominent biologists, Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), Charles Darwin (1809-1882), and Alfred Russel

Wallace (1823-1913), complements the above mentioned chapters by providing insights into germane discussions in the life sciences in the 1860s and 1870s. During that time these scientists attempted to explain how the species evolved and diversified into races. They tackled the problem of whether the different races diverged already at a pre-human stage (polygenism) or whether our ancestors had already evolved into humans before they diversified into different races (monogenism). Gliboff analyzes the writings and the tree-diagrams of Haeckel, Darwin, and Wallace with the aim of clarifying their views on the origins of humans and their races. His essay points out that nineteenth-century scientific accounts were influenced by pre-Darwinian narratives and left a wide margin for speculative reasoning with far-reaching ideological implications. By comparing Haeckel's family trees to the paleontologies of Darwin and Wallace, Gliboff is able to repudiate prevailing accounts that characterize Haeckel's theories as antiquated derivatives of Romantic *Naturphilosophie* and as sources of Nazi racial ideology. In contrast to these claims Gliboff places Haeckel's paleontology between Darwin's polygenism and Wallace's compromise between polygenism and monogenism. Both Darwin and Haeckel were proponents of common descent and therefore rejected the idea that races diverged before they reached the human stage of evolution. By revealing the political and cultural underpinnings of the monogenism-polygenism debate, the essay demonstrates how hermeneutics can contextualize and complement scientific theories. The chapter is ultimately an example for why the textual analysis practiced in the humanities is invaluable for an understanding of the ideological, cultural, and historical dimensions of scientific knowledge.

The last three chapters of this volume focus on literary analyses of animal/human delineations, however in the broader context of German cultural history and philosophy. They address the potential of blurred human-animal distinctions to create spaces for imagining alternatives to dominant views of social and ethical relations. All these chapters can be linked to the tradition of German idealism beginning with the Enlightenment and the emancipation of the German educated middle class, commonly known as *Bürgertum*. Gail Hart's essay, "The Humanity of Children from *Sandmann* to *Struwwelpeter*," focuses on

the unwanted side-effects of the disciplining of children in nineteenth-century bourgeois education. The essay complements the Kantian idea of disciplining the instincts in the civilizing of human beings in so far as the two texts under consideration – E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* (1816) and Heinrich Hoffmann's *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845) – present children as “abjected pre-humans” (Hart) who are exposed to very drastic, traumatic shock-treatments as a disciplinary tool. In line with the Kantian imperative that whoever violates the law must face the consequences, the books depict the inevitable and immediate punishment for the transgression of bourgeois civility and freedom in very dramatic fashion. While the two texts are of different genres – a novella for adults and “a children’s picture book in verse” – “they both consider and confirm the basic assumption that children are a species of non-humans” who need to be taught the norms of *human* decency (Hart). Domesticated animals, on the other hand, are in some of the stories “a step ahead of the children in the matter of humanlike-ness” and capable of teaching the unreasonable children (Hart). While *Der Sandmann* does not include any child characters, the story’s protagonist is a young adult who refuses to grow up, rejects the norms of bourgeois society, and “remains in a world of nursery horrors,” according to Hart’s argument. In an interesting twist, Hart reveals the inherent contradictions of nineteenth-century childhood pedagogy. While the children are treated as inferior, unreasonable creatures, who need to be socialized, they are held responsible for their bad decisions by ultimately bringing their punishments on themselves. In Hart’s words, “each *Struwwelpeter* child makes a free decision [...] illustrating that freedom prevails even under the attempts to enforce norms.” The argument of the subversive dimension of these novels receives additional support through Hoffmann’s politically anti-authoritarian inclinations as a member of the *Vorparlament* in 1848 and supporter of the democratization of German society. In fact, Hart points out that the grossly exaggerated punishment for the transgressing children undermines with humor the straightforward pedagogical message and inspires the children’s respect for those who resist the civilizing norms of bourgeois society.

The dialectics of civilizing moral norms and the resistance to their constraints on individual freedom are also the focus of Dorothee Ostmeier's chapter, "The Feminine Beast: Anti-moral Morality in Early 20th-Century Literature." Based on close readings of passages from Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* and from Frank Wedekind's plays and prose the chapter demonstrates how these writers undermined 19th-century moral conventions under the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche's anti-humanist idealization of the human beast. Modernist writers like Brecht and Wedekind, so the argument goes, not only debunk repressive 19th-century morality, they also challenge the civilizing process. The sense of shame and propriety that individuals acquire during their education is based on the repression of instincts and turns the civilized human being against its own animal nature. The chapter makes use of Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* to demonstrate the alienating effect of moral imperatives. A painting by Ernst Kirchner, entitled *Shame*, as well as the Wedekind plays enact the objectification of Woman as Animal and Other. Yet the close readings of various text passages reveal that women figures are not limited to the victim status in their roles as masculinist projections. On the contrary, Wedekind's Lulu and Brecht's Polly, for instance, exhibit subversive powers by turning the tables and emancipating themselves from patriarchal moral repression. Ironically, their rejections of moral conventions and their inauthenticity, into which the male characters force them, enable them after all to create a new authenticity outside of the dominant patriarchal order. By embracing their Dionysian vitality they resist and undermine patriarchal morality that is based on the gendered mind-body duality.

The rebellion against bourgeois ethics is also a central topic of Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1926). Alexander Mathäs reads the novel in the context of Nietzschean anti-humanist philosophy and more contemporary posthumanist theories. According to Mathäs, Hesse's text displays many posthumanist features. It criticizes the humanist legacy's mind/body hierarchy as no longer justifiable at the beginning of the twentieth century. It contests the premises of humanist ideas that presume the unity and autonomy of the individual and the implications that

are connected to these assumptions, such as the privileging and universalizing of the Western male subject by exposing the logocentrism of humanist ideology as historically, geographically, racially, and socially biased. Moreover, the protagonist's self-interrogation reveals that his personality does not consist of a spiritual essence but dissolves into an accumulation of acquired conventions, habits, cultural and philosophical traditions, and even specific historical events and constellations. Hesse's novel inverts the traditional *Bildungsroman* by turning the protagonist's development into a process of self-dissolution. In contrast to the traditional *Bildungsroman* the protagonist's development is an open-ended process of disillusionment. It does not have a static objective, for the objective is the protagonist's development itself, a process that exposes the illusion of the mind-body dichotomy, embodied in the Steppenwolf-metaphor, as a deceptive hypothesis that both veils and unveils the plethora of intangible possibilities that reside in human existence. In sum, Mathäs's close reading of Hesse's text is an attempt to show how fiction can undermine universalist philosophical claims by disclosing unsolvable contradictions, ambivalences, or dilemmas through a variety of diegetic and non-diegetic devices. These include a multiplicity of narrators that dispute or relativize the actuality of the protagonists and their claims, or self-contradictory accounts by the characters; the dissolution of fixed boundaries between individual characters; i.e., the blending, mixing, and multiplying of characters as, for instance, in doubles or gender-bending fusions of characters; and the disassembling of personalities.

As the chapter on Hesse's novel and the other essays of this volume make clear, the continuously shifting animal/human divide is crucial for our understanding of what it means to be human in a biogenetic and socio-cultural sense. As there is no definitive border between animals and humans, it is ultimately up to scientific and philosophical discourses and literary interpretations to contribute to a heightened awareness of the shifting contours in specific disciplinary contexts. The essays of this volume will hopefully lead to more differentiated views on the animal/human border. In view of the interdisciplinary character of topics, ranging from philosophy, to history, to biology, to psychology,

to literature, to ethics and law, this collection will hopefully inspire cross-disciplinary exchanges among the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences.