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Feral and Isolated Children from Herodotus to Akbar to Hesse: Heroes, Thinkers, and Friends of Wolves

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Thank you to Kári Driscoll for the inviting me to give this talk. It's a delight to visit Utrecht for the first time. The material I will be sharing with you is the basis of a chapter of my next book, *How Not to Make a Human: Sympathy, Edibility, and Helplessness*. *How Not to Make a Human* will follow sets of medieval texts, about pets, feral children, burial practice, and oysters, that present increasingly severe challenges to the common ideas that agency, free will, and rationality are the key characteristics of the human experience. It will contribute to the fields of critical animal studies, ecocriticism, and speculative realism, all of which are subsets of the field of posthumanism.

Today's talk will counter the common notion that stories of feral and isolated children are stories of isolation, masculine ferocity, and wildness. My examples will be the ancient legend of the language deprivation experiment, equally ancient stories of feral founders and culture heroes, and finally a set of late medieval stories from German religious writing about children raised by wolves. I will propose that what all these stories have in common is a concern with vulnerability and care and, of course, children.

PART ONE: The myth of the existence of a single originary language dates at least to the Biblical story of Babel. From very early on, many commentators held that this first language was Hebrew, although a few outliers in both Christian and Muslim communities proposed that it was actually Syriac; in the sixteenth century, Jan van Gorp argued that it might in fact have been Flemish; while the first-century exegete Philo of Alexandria records a tradition that held that animals too once had a common language, before suffering their own fall into mutual incoherence.

For those who really wanted to know, more than speculation was needed. There had to be

a test, and this test naturally focused on children, because they routinely demonstrate the transition from speechlessness to language. You may know that the Latin *infans*, from which the word infant derives, combines the negating prefix “in” and the present participle “fans” of the deponent verb “fari,” to speak. How did this speechless creature acquire language to become *homo loquens*, speaking man, and what did this acquisition say about our origins, both individual and even ethnic?

The first record of such a practical investigation dates to the fifth century BCE, in Herodotus’s account of the Pharaoh Psamtik I’s attempt to discover who could boast of being the oldest people. He commanded that two newborns be taken from the common people and raised in isolation by a herdsman who was never to speak in their presence. After two years — and here I quote from an English translation of 1584 — “both the little brats, sprawling at his feete, and stretching forth their handds, cryed thus: *Beccos, Beccos,*” which Psamtik and his advisors understood as the Phrygian word for break.

The story has always had its doubters, Herodotus included. Anyone familiar with ancient and medieval historiography would never take it at face value, and they would note, as I am doing right now, that other, equally grandiose claims clustered around this Pharaoh, just as they do for any powerful leader: in this case, for example, he was widely held to be the inventor of the labyrinth. No one would take that literally either. The story’s truth is a true record of an interest in a problem, rather than a simply true record of historical facts.

This interest in this problem stretches across nearly two millennia, in accounts that I insist you recognize as at once fabulous and real records of real, philosophical and cultural interests. I will sum up that tradition *very* quickly: by the first century of our era, most readers knew Herodotus’ story only second hand, and medieval Europe had close to no knowledge of the

story, with its few, second-century points of possible transmission—in works by Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian—falling into almost total obscurity until the modern era. The story next appears in the thirteenth century, in chronicle about the Sicilian deeds of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, who wanted to know whether language-isolated children would, at the age children typically start speaking, produce Greek, Latin, Arabic, or perhaps even their parental language, whatever that might be. Again, let me stress that this is probably fiction: the chronicle includes this story amid a set of other imperial crimes: for example, Frederick has a scribe's hand cut off for spelling his name "Fredericus," with an "e," rather than his preferred "Fridericus," with an "i." The story *next* appears in the early sixteenth century, in a Scottish history of their king James IV, who had two children raised in isolation by a mute nurse on a barren island just north of Edinburgh. Finally, the story is included in a great many records of the sixteenth-century court of the Mughal emperor Akbar, in chronicles kept in Persian by both Akbar's allies and enemies, and in Italian and Latin by Jesuit missionaries, whose letters and memoirs helped spread the story throughout European early modern and Enlightenment philosophical, medical, and travel writing.

Let me observe that, from the perspective of the emperor, most of the experiments fail. Psamtik's children produce Phrygian, James IV's Hebrew, but the rest produce no spoken language at all. Note that *spoken language*, as I'll be coming back to it. The children of Frederick II's experiment all die, because they have been denied emotional care: for it is not possible, as the historian observes, for a baby to thrive without being played with. And Akbar's children, in all versions of this story, are heard to produce nothing but noise, thus proving, as one writer observed, that "letters and language are not natural to man," but only the result of instruction and conversation.

The record of Akbar's experiment changes frequently in its retelling, especially in one of its later versions, in 1708, in the *General History of the Mughal Empire* by François Catrou. Catrou says that Akbar has heard that Hebrew was a "natural language," so he shuts up twelve children with twelve mute nurses, and a male porter, also mute, who is never to open the doors of the "château" in which they have all been confined. Twelve years later, to witness and deliver the verdict, Akbar has filled his court with judges, led by a Jew who will question the children in Hebrew. Another "failure": all are astonished that they speak no language. But in this version, for the first time in the entire history of the experiment, the children acquire a language, one that no emperor had ever expected: they have sign language, taught to them by their nurse; as Catrou writes, "they express their thoughts only by gestures, which they use in place of words." Care has found a way.

These emperors are hunting for origins, and like many such hunts for what "just happens naturally," the existence of things as they "really are," they want culture without responsibility. They want the benefits of language, ethnicity, and religion, without having to own up to their choice to live through these particular manifestations of these categories. And like all attempts to find the pure thing, this hunt can only fail.

What emperors discover instead is that the speaking child is not the origin of some authentic culture, but rather secondary to it, an ongoing effect within a feedback structure rather than a single cause. And in one version, what they especially discover is the surprising presence of care and community, of what escaped their attempts to close the children off from the world. What they discover is what the experiment already silently knows, for it is always an experiment with *multiple* children: between two and thirty, but never just one, always provided with at least one dedicated caregiver, always given a place of their own to live in. They recognize that

language originates not in the self relating to its true, inner nature, but within interpersonal communication. Thus what they find instead, even in the silence of the children, is always the necessity of care.

Ultimately, I am interested in what I can do with Agamben's own use of the word *infancy* as a key critical term. He insists that speechlessness is both the necessary condition and the hope of communication. Agamben follows Walter Benjamin in arguing that the basic thing language communicates is communication itself. Communication requires the transmission of silence as well; it cannot *be* communication without some inbuilt inadequacy, for inadequacy preserves the possibility of communication being something more than just a mere exchange of basic needs, desires, and aims, of being more than what Benjamin derided as "the bourgeois conception of language." Thus this inadequacy, figured as a silence or mystery within speech, holds open possibility, keeping a space clear for more communication to occur. We might take this inevitable silence as a figure of Agamben's Messianic suspension of the relation between sovereignty and life, so key to his *homo sacer* project; but I prefer to take it, more humbly, as a figure of the preservation of need within any social encounter, and a preservation, as well, of an extra-linguistic referentiality in any communication.

What is always present in communication is the "here I am" of speech, an unsaid "here I am" whose present silence is the preexistent, inescapable vulnerability that accompanies our basic having to be somewhere, of needing to be cared for, heard, and to take up attention that might be bestowed elsewhere. This here I am has none of the pretensions to immateriality that so often accompany claims to have the *logos*. I am really struck by the fact that one of the latest witnesses to this experiment finds a language that cannot pretend to be free of bodies. This account, especially, show that the "here I am" is necessarily also a "here we are." But even in the

other accounts, in their supposed failures, we can hear a silence as calling for a circuit of mutual interest, mutual caring, mutual presence for each other, which cannot ever be done without. Infancy is always within communication and community. Infancy is always waiting in any attempt to get to the bottom of language, culture, and our civilization, whatever it may be.

PART TWO: Herodotus again provides the first witness of the genre of story that interests me: he tells the story of the childhood of Cyrus of Persia, whom his uncle rightly fears will supplant him. His uncle orders one of his men to kill the newborn Cyrus; the man instead delivers the child to two slaves, a man, Mitrdates, and a woman, Spako, whose name, Herodotus explains, is the Median word for “dog.” His foster parents raise him, in his adolescence Cyrus reveals his natural qualities of leadership by bossing around his playmates, and in adulthood he supplants his uncle and founds a great empire.

In Herodotus’s source, Cyrus must have been first nurtured by a dog: this is evident in accounts that insist that the dog was really the woman, Spako; in others, like the twelfth-century version of Peter Comestor — that is, Peter the Eater — who speaks of an actual dog offering Cyrus her teat, and defending “him from wild beasts and birds”; and especially in stories that flowed from the same source as Herodotus drew his, in which animals feed and protect deliberately abandoned children.

The most famous of these is of course the story of Rome’s foundation. Here the wicked paternal figure is an uncle, Amulius; the mother herself, variously named Ilia, Rhea, or Rhea Silva, is a temple priestess, and tends to quickly disappear from the story; the father of Romulus and Remus is either Mars, an unnamed suitor, or even Amulius himself, dressed up like a god, incestuous and conniving. Rationalizations rush in here as well; like others, Livy proposes that

the story's *lupa*, a female wolf, is really just country slang for a prostitute or a loose woman.

It has taken nothing but dogged research to pack this story with others about wild founding fathers, who all draw their outsized potency from the teats of some convenient canid. These stories in turn join with a swath of rampaging *männerbünde*, from Central Asia to Ireland, from the Dacians, Scythians, and Thracians, from Lombards to the Whelfs to the Guelphs, groups whose young men donned the names of wolves or wolf masks or who were styled in narrative or war propaganda as cynocphali - dog-headed humans — or even as werewolves.

These stories, and often the scholarship too, imagine the canid as at once the figure of authority and its enemy, incarnations of wildness, power, cruelty, and even a kind of rough justice, inimical to women. Agamben's discussion of Marie de France's werewolf lai, "Bisclavret," is probably the most famous treatment of this theme outside medievalist circles. The dogman as sovereign and as hero is isolated from mundane interconnections with the people he rules, or terrorizes, and even from the cultures he establishes. While he might make laws, he follows none of the petty rules that bind petty people. For the law at its heart is a wolf; it does what it wants. The sovereign is therefore also the outlaw, the figure who neither needs the law's rules (because he decides what the law is) nor its protections. Notably, Romulus — the victorious, city-founding twin — recruits his first citizens from outcasts, bandits, and escaped slaves, as a clear demonstration as we could want that the wild founder is an analog to the outlaw, the *homo sacer*, hounded by the law, and the hound of the law. Revolutionaries and the ordinary dispossessed already know this as well as cynics claim to, while academics tend to get the idea at greater length from Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," or Derrida's "Mystical Foundation of Authority" or from Agamben, who alternately despairs at and hopes for some Messianic overcoming of the persistently, inevitably cruel relations between sovereign and his

subjects, public life and private life.

This story is what we get if we fall in wholly with the myth of the canid's wild carnivorousness and all that follows. The tangle of fascinations includes the dog being "man's best friend," with emphasis on the *man*, and the notion that *true* dogs are big dogs; the wolf being Europe's most feared carnivore, ruled only by a logic of "might makes right"; and the Oedipal rivalry between patriarch and son over desire and satisfaction, incarnated by the mother, where the aim is to claim control of a paternal law that can never empty itself of its obscene core. A supposedly "disruptive" retelling of this story, with these actors, no matter how suspiciously it recasts the primal horde of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*, will end up reinforcing rather than undoing the supposedly central importance of the story of sovereignty, the law, and its violence. Telling the story like this is a good way to stir up a keen sense of justice, or to assume a tone of anguished disapproval and "anxiety," but not a good way to get us something other than yet another "discovery" of the omnipresence of the beast of the law.

As you no doubt recognize by now, this is not the way I want my story to go. I'll first stress that wolves are not the only nurturing animals in these stories. Other spurned child stories feature goats and cows, animals more expected as milk-givers; we have mares, deer, leopards, and bears. Samiramis is fed by birds, and Hieron, wonderfully, by bees. Wolves might be common, and connect these children with bands of totemic canids from the Caspian Sea to Ireland, but goats are commoner. By remembering them, and the bees too, *we can recognize that the story of the wild founder is also a story of the wild foundling*. The commonality here is not the canid, with all its supposed wildness and danger, but rather the need to be fed, and its satisfaction.

We can dissolve the arrogance and grandeur of the wild founder by doing more to

remember them as happy babies. Almost always, they are taken care of. The servant commanded to kill the children never quite does it; sometimes the men who should be killers are reminded of their own children, or they are struck by the child's beauty, or its need. If we start the story here, not with the competition between father and son, and not with a boy's alliance with the presumptive unruly beast that intimates the sovereign or warband, the story becomes one about care, sympathy, and weakness, but *not* about helplessness, except insofar as everything is helpless in itself, with some kind support.

In short, the salvation for this material can be sought in a feminist ethics of care, which counters the rights-based and contractual ethics of the liberal humanist subject with attention to the inevitable mutual dependency of subjects, which all require care to thrive, at all stages of their life, but particularly in infancy and old age. In this framework, sovereignty and wildness, and the mystery of isolation in which they operate, cease to become the central problem of thinking community and relations. In this framework, we can better recognize what these stories might be doing other than simply retelling another myth of the supposed paternal origin of the law. Susan Dodds puts it neatly: "A vulnerability-centered view of the self and of persons is better able to capture many of our moral motivations and intuitions than can be captured by an autonomy-focussed approach."

Here we have not the illusion of autonomy, but the necessity of mutual aid. I draw this last term from a cluster of anarchist ecologists and geographers, such society is the natural law we should be thinking with, not the Malthusian "struggle of all against all." Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, published a little more than a century ago, observes that "science loudly proclaims that the struggle of all against all is the leading principle of nature, and of human societies as well. To that struggle, Biology ascribes the progressive evolution of the

animal world. History takes the same line of argument,” and against this clot of arguments, in a posthumanist story that stretches from the protozoa to nineteenth-century Russia, Kropotkin argues for the primacy of “mutual aid,” driven not by love, nor even by sympathy, but more simply, by the need for community.

The law of all against all explains the wild men, founders and lawbreakers, enjoying the unregulated pleasures from which they issue their regulations. And if this is all one wants to explain, it works. But this law hardly accounts for the babies found and rescued, denied the society of the patriarch, yet still finding succor in the supposed wilderness. This is not the Lacanian baby, dangling at the cusp of a law and identity it can never satisfy; it is not even the Butlerian baby, perhaps to-be-mourned-for, hailed as a member of the community by our anticipating its social vulnerability and future death; it is a baby found and helped, the baby whose entanglement in community attests to law of mutual aid.

PART THREE, AND LAST: Whatever their differences in the futures they offer their children, and whatever the fundamental contradictions in their projects, stories of language deprivation and feral founders each aim at isolation. The former deliberately isolate their children from communication, to see what paradigmatically human qualities will emerge from them spontaneously, and thereby give witness to the “natural” core of human qualities; the latter ultimately try to isolate the founder from mundane human upbringing, to give their hero the aura of the supernatural, and his authority an air of mystery.

A new kind of story emerged briefly in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Germany, and then faded away. These stories stand apart from those of *deprived* children, as well as from those of heroic feral founders. After them, certainly from the seventeenth century on, we find no more

heroic feral founders. Instead, stories of children raised by animals become functionally equivalent to stories of children who suffer extreme social deprivation. The story of my small medieval archive therefore may well be unique in the long tradition of feral children stories.

My stories are all from Latin, clerical sources; and they have barely captured the attention of scholars or storytellers. In comparison to the story of the Pharaoh Psamtik, or to Romulus and Remus, or to the many stories of “wild children” of the modern era, these stories are failures; but from the perspective of a critical animal studies and ecocritical perspective, they may be the most interesting of all.

I'll offer you three examples, reserving the fourth for further discussion later if that's the direction our conversation goes. One of Jacques de Vitry's sermon collections includes this story: “A she-wolf stole and suckled some children; when, however, one of the children attempted to stand upright and walk, the wolf struck him on the head with her paw, and would not allow him to walk otherwise than like the beasts, on his hands and feet,” in the Latin, *cum pedibus ac manibus bestialiter*.

Next, we have Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialog on Miracles*, structured like many medieval works as a conversation between a teacher and his student. When the master tells a story about a girl kidnapped by a wolf to act as a dentist to another wolf, suffering from a branch stuck in its mouth, the student tops his teacher with this story: “I saw a certain youth who was snatched up by wolves as an infant” — the Latin is *in infantia* — and was raised by them into adolescence, and he knew how to run on hands and feet in the manner of wolves, and how to howl.”

Finally, and most substantially, we have the account I'm calling the Wolf Child of Hesse: “A certain boy in the region of Hesse was seized. This boy, as was known afterwards, and just as

the boy told it himself, was taken by wolves when he was three years old and raised up wondrously. For, whatever pray the wolves snatched for food, they would take the better part and allot it to him to eat while they lay around a tree. In the time of winter and cold, they made a pit, and they put the leaves of trees and other plants in it, and placed them on the boy, surrounding him to protect him from the cold; they also compelled him to creep on hands and feet and to run with them for a long time, from which practice he imitated their speed and was able to make the greatest leaps. When he was seized, he was bound with wood to compel him to go erect in a human likeness. However, this boy often said that if it were up to him, he much preferred to live among wolves than among men. The boy was conveyed to the court of Henry, Prince of Hesse, for a spectacle.”

The two key things to observe in these several late medieval stories are their keen interest in posture and their tendency not to be much concerned with human reason. The “homo erectus” topos stretches at least from Plato to Freud. This is the assertion that the stereotypically upright human form allows, reminds, and even demands that humans direct themselves away from mundane desires and towards heaven, or, in its supposedly less theocentric, modern forms, that this form functions as a kind of *incarnated superego* or that it otherwise attests to our supposedly unique ability to abstract ourselves from our merely local surroundings. A relationship of touch, taste, and smell gives way to one where sight dominates; this is the sense that pretends to be able only to observe, without being involved. On the one hand, such interpretations of the upright form rescue humans from worldly entanglement; on the other, they lodge humans in a position of authority over other worldly life, for, as Robert of Melun’s twelfth-century doctrinal commentary observes, human bipedality shows that humankind “has rulership over other living things.”

This insistence on human mastery found itself particularly required when faced with the

wolf. A belief as old as Plato's *Republic* and repeated throughout the Middle Ages held that a human would be rendered speechless if a wolf saw them first. To put this in modern terms, the human captured by the gaze of a wolf has lost out in a zero-sum game of reason, in which only one party can ever have the *logos* and all that implies. Some of you may be familiar with Derrida's now famous observation that, by and large, the main body of western philosophy has looked *at* animals — held them up as examples, sadly regarded their supposed innocence, and so on — without ever letting itself be “seen seen” by animals, without ever, that is, imagining that the animal could look back. The fear of the gaze of the wolf, this other widespread meateater, attests to this fear of being *seen seen*, and of losing our human privilege.

Modern stories of feral children of course, and understandably, tend to speak of child who have lost or never gained the ability to talk. They insist that one party has to be effectively mute. One rare outlier is a girl from the Siberian city of Chita, never allowed outside the apartment, but — per the 2009 police report — conversant in the language or languages of the dogs and cats who raised her. Countering this tendency, one of these medieval feral children *knows how* to howl. He has gained a certain canine knack while among the wolves, but has otherwise lost nothing. As for the Hesse child, he loses nothing as a result of his peculiar upbringing except his ability, or desire, to walk upright. The child has no problem with human language; he assimilates poorly to human society not because he became irreparably animalized, but because he would prefer to be among the wolves. Here as elsewhere, disability is situational. These children become disabled only when the adult humans capture them and compel them to take on what they dictate as the proper human posture.

We can contrast this with medieval werewolf tales, which by and large are *very* concerned with ensuring that we know that the werewolf remains reasonable. I know of only

one, Marie de France's "Bisclavret," that imagines that some new form of reason might emerge from the melding of human and lupine forms. We can imagine that this *quadrupedal reason* would be prone to the ground rather than endeavoring to maintain the illusion of uprightnes, separation, abstraction, all the pretensions that travel under the rubric of "instrumental reason." Down on all fours, leaping like a wolf, yet--or, even better, *and*--speaking, the Hesse child refuses the logics of dominant humanist traditions, medieval and otherwise, in which someone gets to be the human subject and someone has to be the animal object, there to be dominated, used, and observed by the one subject that presumes itself to have a rational, studious posture, the one that presumes itself able to do something more than simply replicate its instinct.

Finally, in all this talk about care, it would be irresponsible to omit what it means to care for this boy. He has to be warmed and taught to run, but he also has to be fed, raising the question of what it means to be a messmate with wolves. The *meliozem partem*, the best part, that the wolves give the boy might describe not the portion size or the cut but the quality, so that *meliozem partem* is better than the usual cut of meat. It's not just that the rare medieval references to the gustatory quality of human flesh invariably refer to it as the most delicious, most tender, and most restorative of meats, but also that we find such references even in the natural history of wolves: Albert the Great observes that if a wolf has eaten a human, it will seek out more "because of the sweetness of their flesh," which a fifteenth-century hunting manual expands upon by saying that a wolf, having once tasted human flesh, will never again want to eat anything else. As I have argued elsewhere, this is the "best part" because anthropocentrism requires that humans retain their superiority, even while being eaten, by imagining themselves to be the particular object of desire of the other. But this form of human attachment takes a form in the story of the Hessian boy that suggests an attachment beyond anthropocentrism, a point we

might take up in discussion.

A key background idea for this talk has been Derrida's observation about the "nonpower at the heart of power" from his posthumous collection *The Animal that Therefore I am*. You might know that Jeremy Bentham argued that the key question about animals is not whether they can reason or speak but whether they can *suffer*. Derrida says that this changes everything: *nonpower*, the *incapacity* of any existing subject, now becomes the central question for thinking ethics and community, and becomes key to rethinking splits between animal and human life, or any other hierarchical relation that justifies itself on the basis of varying degrees of autonomy and powers. What I have also realized, perhaps very late, is that feminist ethicists have, for decades, been talking about exactly these issues, and that many critical animal theorists, including me, have only inadequately acknowledged their work.

A secondary goal for this talk has been to suggest what premodern works have to offer to thinking in posthumanism. Nothing I have said here should be understood as an attempt to identify a kind of medieval "proto posthumanism;" rather I have illustrated that any systematized humanism — including the disguised humanisms that travel within stories of sovereignty — will always fissure under its own efforts at coherence. Posthumanism does not follow humanism, but is rather inherent to it.

Modernity tends to believe that real history begins with it, and that the medieval is just the past, mostly homogeneous. Intellectual histories tend to skip from the classics to the early moderns, replicating the self-regard of the so-called Renaissance; for them, the medieval is incurious, instinctual, irrational; *the medieval is the animal in relation to the human of the modern*. Thus a posthumanism that plays with medieval materials may go a long way towards

upsetting the often unthought humanism of modernity.