

Animism and the Philosophy of Everyday Life

Le Tour de Tiergarten

November 15, 2009



I am cycling through the Tiergarten in Berlin behind Britta and followed by Thomas. It is a cold and rainy day in November. Yellow leaves lie thick on the ground. The way we sit upright but relaxed, breathing easy with our hats of different colors and angles, we are more like machines than people, a collection of levers and joints like the bike itself. Where does the bike bit stop and the human bit begin? We are unified, this machine and I, like the Incan Indians in the Andes of South America were supposed to think of the Spaniards mounted on their horses not as a man on a horse but as a man-horse.

I see some elegant cassowaries and then a zebra with its incredible stripes to one side of the path. I think; Well, we too are a zoo, me and Britta and Thomas and our bicycles. What might these wonderful beasts think of us and our bicycles as we ride past?

Do they distinguish between animals and things? What is the bicycle to them as it spins along, the spokes of the wheels catching the fading light of the afternoon?

The wheels of the bike turn effortlessly, not like in New York where people hunch over the handlebars and with a grim look on their face push furiously at the pedals racing against time. The man-horse combination of bicycle-and-rider is different in Berlin to New York and if the zebra and the cassowaries were taken to New York I am sure they would see that difference too. So where does the bike bit end and the human bit begin? And what is this “racing against time”? Is time a thing too, standing over and against us? Or is it part of an activity, like the wind on one’s face while freewheeling over the yellow leaves in the Tiergarten?

Those stripes of the zebra dazzle me. The stripes are things in themselves that have come alive. It is impossible to domesticate zebras and use them like horses, Thomas tells me as we ride along. Might that have something to do with those dazzling stripes? I wonder, and then I think of the stripes on Genet’s convicts in the opening pages of *The Thief’s Journal*. Those stripes are the sign of a brutal domestication turning people into things.

Was there ever an animal more surreal than this zebra standing stock-still as we ride past? The stripes however do not stand still. Not at all.

But then aren’t all animals surreal, from earthworms to the snail and the domestic dog. It’s a question of how you look. Like the bicycles on the move, those stripes of the zebra hover between the thing world and the animate world. It is this hovering, neither one thing nor the other, that makes for what we call *animism*, just as it makes for surrealism.

It also makes for chemistry and for capitalism based on the factory production of the modern world. The big breakthrough was in mid-nineteenth century Germany with August Kekule inventing what is called “organic chemistry”—organic as opposed to “inorganic,” organic as in a chemistry of life, the symbol and working tool of which was the hexagonal-shaped benzene ring derived from the carbon in coal.

Primo Levi ends his book, *The Periodic Table*, with this benzene ring. In that book he picks a small number of elements from the Periodic Table and writes a story about each one. The last element he chooses is carbon. “To carbon, the element of life,” he writes, “my first literary dream was turned, insistently dreamed in an hour and a place when my life was not worth much: yes, I wanted to tell the story of an atom of carbon.”

But the way this works it can seem like it is not him telling the story but that the elements themselves are telling their story. This seems to me a great achievement. Things speak on their own, so to speak. But when I think more about it I see this is not nature speaking to us but what could be called “second nature,” meaning nature elaborated by human history such that, like the man-bike, the story comes from the join.

What makes organic chemistry the chemistry of “life”? Isn’t all chemistry “organic”? What sort of word chemistry is involved when we talk of “biochemistry” and now of “biopower”? Surely all these constructions are vivid instances of *animism* meaning a quality of being that is uncertainly alive with a mind and even a soul of its own when, from another point of view it is merely inert matter? And just as surely can’t we say that the core of the modern world is therefore animistic? It is astonishing how we so easily encompass such confusion and contradiction in our everyday philosophy and get on with life as on this bicycle ride through the Tiergarten. Only now and again does the animism of it all confront us and make us laugh and wonder or feel frightened and wonder, as with those stripes and the easy movement of our bicycles through space and time as our legs move up and down and the spokes on the wheels catch the rays of the dying sun.

The stakes are pretty high. Without this organic chemistry there could be no modern world. Most of that which we live by and think by comes from it in one grand mimesis of nature, playing with the benzene ring. And now the stakes are really high, now that carbon fuels global warming and potentially the end of life. The domination of nature has tuned full circle.

A little further along the path where we cross the winter-brown waters of the canal we come across an open field surrounded by pines. The field is full of mounds of earth, little mountains about fifteen centimeters high. These are made by moles, blind creatures that burrow deep in the earth, like the revolution coming into being, said Marx. The mole is certainly an animal. But what of these mounds? Are they animate or inanimate? And what of the revolution? Is it still animated or animating? Has the “old mole” lost its way?

The revolution would be surreal, too. And that means animistic. Neither thing nor nothing it would be a movement that took into account all these wonderful confusions that Western culture has created and upon which it depends—confusions between animate and inanimate made all the more confusing because in the everyday philosophy of life we use these confusions as if they were not confusing at all. As long as I am on my bicycle cycling through the Tiergarten behind Britta and followed by Thomas breathing easy with our hats of different colors and angles, more like machines than people, it really does not matter where the bike bit stops and the human bit begins. We are unified, this machine and I, not as a man on a horse but as a man-horse eyeing a zebra.