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Animals in Enlightenment Historiography

Nathaniel Wolloch

ABSTRACT This essay examines the interest in animals expressed by late Enlightenment historians, including particularly the views of Johann Gottfried Herder, Guillaume Thomas François Raynal, William Robertson, and Edward Gibbon. These historians, the first to emphasize the way the use of animals contributed to human progress, were influenced by the Comte de Buffon and by Enlightenment conjectural history and stadial theory. Where animals are discussed in their writings, these thinkers made a significant contribution to the transition from early modern perspectives to a more historical view of the role of animals in human culture. **KEYWORDS:** theriophily; the use of animals and human progress; eighteenth-century historiography; Scottish Enlightenment; Great Chain of Being

☞ **RECENT SCHOLARSHIP** has accorded increasing attention to the history of human attitudes toward animals.¹ During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, crucial changes occurred in these attitudes, but the exact nature of this shift is still under debate. Historians began devoting serious attention to the human-animal relationship only in the late eighteenth century. As they did so they tended to focus less on the traditional debates about the mental capacities of animals and the nature of moral obligations toward them, and more on the instrumental role that animals played in human progress.

Some early modern intellectuals revived the classical philosophical view of animals known, following George Boas's seminal study of this topic, as "theriophily," literally "love of animals." Boas has shown that in the early modern era the main attribute thought to differentiate animals from human beings was rationality. Animals were portrayed in general as either inferior to human beings (a position that theriophiles, however, connected with criticism of the value of reason in itself), equal to them, or,

1. See the general discussions in Erica Fudge, "A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals," in *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington, Ind., 2002), 3–18; and Harriet Ritvo, "Animal Planet," *Environmental History* 9 (2004): 204–20.

rarely, as superior to them.² Early modern theriophily, in any event, was part of a general critique of human pride that advanced favorable claims about the characteristics of animals essentially in order to ameliorate human conduct. This objective was evinced by the most prominent contemporaneous theriophile, Montaigne, who in “An Apology for Raymond Sebond” and “On Cruelty,” alongside criticism of human cruelty toward animals, also admitted his own predilection for hunting.³ This acknowledged anthropocentric exception to the awareness of animal suffering remained evident even in the thought of later prominent intellectuals who were ethically sensitive to animals. Rousseau, for example, despite consistently advocating vegetarianism, endorses hunting in *Emile* as a means to quell adolescent sexual passions.⁴

Of course, much more common was the outright claim for human superiority over animals. In the seventeenth century this was famously evinced in the Cartesian theory known as the “beast machine,” which regarded animals as automata devoid of the higher mental capabilities of humans. While this theory lost credence by the eighteenth century, the anthropocentric cosmology from which it stemmed remained extremely potent.⁵ Erica Fudge has presented a compelling case for the importance of the Cartesian position as a watershed in the attitude toward animals, a moment in which animals were first excluded from the discourse about the nature of reason, and from the evolving notion of the human. She also claims, however, that the seemingly simple differentiation between human and animal rational abilities underwrote a “messy” categorization that ultimately forced early modern individuals to recognize the possibility of animal rationality and sentience. According to Fudge, furthermore, by imposing the Cartesian notion of the distinctly non-animal human on pre-Cartesian culture, scholars have mistakenly disregarded the predominance of animals in earlier debates about reason.⁶ Whether one agrees with her or not, this analysis demonstrates how in early modern philosophical discussions of animals, pride of place was given to ascertaining what, if any, were their cognitive and emotional characteristics; ethical perspectives were almost always consequent on these matters. This precedence, however, changed in the late eighteenth century, most discernibly in the field of historiography.

The history of Western attitudes toward animals has been dominated by a broad and rarely challenged anthropocentric *Weltanschauung*, one so firmly in-

2. See George Boas, *The Happy Beast in French Thought of the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1933; repr., 1966).

3. Michel de Montaigne, “On Cruelty,” and “An Apology for Raymond Sebond,” in *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (Harmondsworth, U.K., 1993), 472–88, 489–683. On the limits of Montaigne’s theriophily, see Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy* (Pittsburgh, 2005), 137–38; Nathaniel Wolloch, *Subjugated Animals: Animals and Anthropocentrism in Early Modern European Culture* (Amherst, N.Y., 2006), 31–35.

4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. and ed. Allan Bloom (New York, 1979), 320–21.

5. See Leonora Cohen Rosenfield, *From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine: Animal Soul in French Letters from Descartes to La Mettrie* (New York, 1940; repr., 1968).

6. See Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2006).

grained that it withstood profound and relevant developments in the debates about animals. Despite changes in outlook consequent on the Scientific Revolution and later the Enlightenment, traditional biblical anthropocentric cosmology in particular remained influential, and it, too, subscribed to the more modern view endorsing the use of animals to serve human welfare.⁷

When a change in Enlightenment attitudes toward animals has been acknowledged, historians have often described it as a growing ethical sensitivity to animal suffering. I suggest, however, that the greater concern for animals was more a reaction to their exploitation than a demand for real improvements in their situation. As industrialization spread, animals increasingly served human needs, and in fact nascent modern civilization developed an ideological substratum that enabled the use of animals to advance human welfare—despite evident recognition of animal suffering. If anything, ethical concerns were influenced by a new claim, unprecedented in its force, that the use of animals was a *sine qua non* for the progress of human civilization. Modern industrial society, as it began taking shape from the late eighteenth century, brought a greater reliance on the use of animals and at the same time created an increasing alienation from them. Keith Thomas has claimed that “there was thus a growing conflict between the new sensibilities and the material foundations of human society. . . . It is one of the contradictions upon which modern civilization may be said to rest. About its ultimate consequences we can only speculate.”⁸

Important aspects of modern attitudes toward nature and animals crystallized into their more recognizable contemporary forms during the late Enlightenment, as intellectuals developed a new conception of their own culture and how it differed from that of earlier eras. Norbert Elias, in *The Civilizing Process*, views the late eighteenth century as precisely the time when the civilizing process became manifest, when human beings in the West became consciously aware of “civilization” and their place in it.⁹ This entailed a distinctly *historical* sense that humanity was undertaking a long mission of advancement, and this new awareness accorded an important place to the human domination of nature, including animals, for the sake of such progress.¹⁰ As I show in this essay, late eighteenth-century historiography, in a manner unprecedented

7. The classic treatment of this issue remains Lynn White Jr.’s famous article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (10 March 1967): 1203–7. For an important corrective, see Peter Harrison, “Subduing the Earth: Genesis 1, Early Modern Science, and the Exploitation of Nature,” *Journal of Religion* 79 (1999): 86–109.

8. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (Harmondsworth, U.K., 1984), 303, and generally 181–83, 300–303.

9. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 3–41.

10. Of course, the Darwinian revolution later added an essential component to the understanding of humanity’s place in nature, but one based on views elaborated in the preceding century, enhancing rather than replacing them. While an evolutionary perspective could increase ethical sensitivity to animals, it could also serve to justify their subjugation, as it could the subjugation of human beings to each other, regardless of the democratic nature of Darwin’s own views and perspectives. For varying interpretations of Darwin’s influence on the ethical debate about animals, see James Rachels, *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism* (Oxford and New York, 1990); and Rod Preece, “Darwinism, Christianity, and the Great Vivisection Debate,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (2003): 399–419.

in Western historical literature, began addressing the importance of the human use of animals as an essential part of the tale of human progress.

That animals received growing attention from historians was in large measure also owing to the Enlightenment ideal of *l'historien philosophe*. Eighteenth-century historiography consisted mainly of three components—erudition, narrative, and philosophy.¹¹ Of these, the latter was most typical of the era, referring to the expectation that historians would address the Enlightenment battle with superstition and despotism, while also opening the door for more modern subjects such as social and cultural history.¹² In what follows I shall concentrate particularly on the works of Herder, Raynal, Robertson, and Gibbon, taking into account both philosophical and historical approaches, and a shift in emphasis from the former to the latter.



Late Enlightenment historiographical views of animals were significantly influenced by the emergence of new approaches to the question of the origins of human civilization, in effect the beginning of what would become modern theoretical anthropology. In this context the famous naturalist the Comte de Buffon was particularly influential. In “De la nature: première vue,” Buffon emphasized the unique position of human beings in nature and their power to alter their natural surroundings for the better.¹³ Like many philosophers since antiquity Buffon was aware of the influence of climate on human culture, but in contrast to Montesquieu’s comparable theory, he also emphasized human power to alter and improve these natural surroundings.¹⁴ His most thorough expression of this outlook appears in the final chapter of *Des époques de la nature*, titled “Septième et dernière époque: Lorsque la puissance de l’homme a secondé celle de la nature,” where he detailed the rise of human societies, which he linked to the gradual achievement of control over nature. This mastery was evidenced by such things as the introduction of new species of plants and animals, and even the

11. See J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, *Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge, 1999); Arnaldo Momigliano, “Gibbon’s Contribution to Historical Method,” in *Studies in Historiography* (London, 1966), 40–55.

12. See Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton, N.J., 2000). On Enlightenment historiography in general, see, for example, Karen O’Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge, 1997). For attitudes toward nature in Enlightenment historical literature, see Nathaniel Wolloch, *History and Nature in the Enlightenment: Praise of the Mastery of Nature in Eighteenth-Century Historical Literature* (Farnham, U.K., and Burlington, Vt., 2011).

13. See [Georges-Louis Leclerc,] Comte de Buffon, “De la nature: première vue,” in *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*, vol. 12 (Paris, 1764), i–xvi.

14. On this and other relevant aspects of Buffon’s thought, see Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, Calif., 1967), 565–81, 587–91, 655, 663–81, 704–5; Jacques Roger, *Buffon: A Life in Natural History*, trans. Sarah Lucille Bonnefoi, ed. L. Pearce Williams (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1997), 228–67, 418–21; Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières: Buffon, Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvétius, Diderot* (Paris, 1971), 229–80.

warming of the climate.¹⁵ Buffon's highly influential account clearly showed the way that the mastery of nature fueled the progress of civilization.

Eighteenth-century depictions of the rise of human societies were later designated "conjectural history." Rousseau's two famous discourses were examples of this type of discussion, although he was untypical for the era when he used conjectural history to critique unhampered cultural progress. The outlook of most other contemporary Enlightenment intellectuals was quite different. The Scottish Enlightenment in particular established conjectural history as a truly rigorous intellectual tradition, in the process celebrating cultural progress. The most influential variant of Scottish conjectural history was stadial theory, which proposed that there were various stages in the development of human civilization. The number of stages varied, but the most popular version had four, propounded most clearly by Adam Smith.¹⁶ The four-stage theory outlined how human societies advanced according to their modes of subsistence, from hunting, through shepherding, then agriculture, and finally commerce. As is evident, each of the stages required new forms of cultivating nature and utilizing animals. Even the commercial stage, which the Scottish philosophers considered the most advanced form of social and economic civilization, relied on animals and animal products. Together with Buffon's theories, stadial history constituted a firm intellectual underpinning for the late Enlightenment commendation of the use of nature and animals for human progress.¹⁷ Historians in particular incorporated these views of the rise of civilization emphasizing the mastery of nature, and by the late eighteenth century it became virtually impossible to consider the history of human civilization without acknowledging the harnessing of natural resources as a precondition for higher

15. See "Septième et dernière époque: Lorsque la puissance de l'homme a secondé celle de la nature," in Buffon, *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*, Supplément, vol. 5 (Paris, 1778), 225–54. On Buffon's influence, see Peter Hanns Reill, "Buffon and Historical Thought in Germany and Great Britain," in *Buffon 88, Actes du colloque international pour le bicentenaire de la mort de Buffon* (Paris, Montbard, Dijon, 14–22 juin 1988), ed. Michel Delsol (Paris, 1992), 667–79. On the Scottish Enlightenment in this context, see P. B. Wood, "Buffon's Reception in Scotland: The Aberdeen Connection," *Annals of Science* 44 (1987): 169–90.

16. See H. M. Höpfl, "From Savage to Scotsman: Conjectural History in the Scottish Enlightenment," *Journal of British Studies* 17 (1978): 19–40; Christopher J. Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 2001), 61–71; Aaron Garrett, "Anthropology: The 'Original' of Human Nature," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Cambridge, 2003), 79–93; Roger L. Emerson, "Conjectural History and Scottish Philosophers," *Historical Papers / Communications Historiques* (1984): 63–90; Frank Palmeri, "Conjectural History and the Origins of Sociology," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 37 (2008): 1–21. For stadial theory more particularly, see Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, 1976); J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 4, *Barbarians, Savages, and Empires* (Cambridge, 2005); Istvan Hont, "The Language of Sociability and Commerce: Samuel Pufendorf and the Theoretical Foundations of the 'Four-Stages Theory,'" in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge, 1987), 253–76; Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 93–99. Adam Smith's clearest exposition of the four-stage theory can be found in *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, and P. G. Stein (Indianapolis, 1982), 14–16.

17. On the role of nature in eighteenth-century conceptions of progress, see David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1990), 56–58, 284, 287–88.

cultural development. In this light, it was all but inevitable that historians would come to incorporate animals in their views of this broad historical process.

Most contemporary historians demonstrated a consistent interest in animals that was unprecedented in earlier historiography, but two major figures prove to be exceptions. As a philosopher David Hume was quite interested in the nature and role of animals, but in his *History of England* veritably ignored the question.¹⁸ Voltaire was only slightly more prone to express his ethical sensitivity to animals in his historical work.¹⁹ Both may have considered that they had devoted sufficient attention to this issue in their philosophical works; second, and more important, they were both less influenced by stadial theory than most other late Enlightenment historians, though Hume of course played a vital role in developing the Scottish Enlightenment views of political economy and economic history.²⁰ This in fact helps to clarify the connection between stadial theory (and conjectural history in general) and the late Enlightenment emphasis on the importance of utilizing animals. Other contemporary historians demonstrated a consistent interest in animals unprecedented in earlier historiography.

Herder's views on animals, specifically in *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, have received little scholarly attention.²¹ More than treatments by any other Enlightenment historian, his discussions of animals combined philosophical discourse with historical comments. Herder is thus a kind of transitional figure, who can show some of the ways the Enlightenment historiographical outlook on animals was influenced by, yet departed from, traditional debates about them. Although most of his French and British contemporaries, particularly some prominent historians, seem to have been unfamiliar with his work, he himself was quite familiar with contemporaneous intellectual discourses in other countries, such as Raynal's work, and in particular the works of the Scottish Enlightenment, including those of William Robertson. It is therefore not surprising that he was also influenced by stadial theory.²² Compared to

18. See mainly his remarks on animals in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford, 2000), 118–20, 169, 176, 211–13, 255–56, 286, 301, 311–12, 389; *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford, 1999), 165–68. In his historical work he came closest to addressing this issue in *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis, 1983), 6:142.

19. See mainly the cursory treatments in Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à Louis XIII*, ed. René Pomeau, 2 vols. (Paris, 1963), 1:23–25, 60–61, 247–48, 818; 2:314. Voltaire's positive views of animals were more consistently elaborated in his philosophical works. See, for example, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, ed. Christiane Mervaud et al., in *The Complete Works of Voltaire* (Oxford, 1994), 1:411–15, s.v. "Bêtes."

20. See David Wootton, "David Hume, 'the historian,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge, 1993), 292–93.

21. But see the discussion in Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents*, 180–84. Also see Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford, 2003), 232–34, 240–41; and Kelly Oliver, "Animal Pedagogy: The Origin of 'Man' in Rousseau and Herder," *Culture, Theory, and Critique* 47 (2006): 107–31. For Herder's general cosmological ideas, see Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, 537–43, 569–70; Robert T. Clark Jr., *Herder: His Life and Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), 308–47.

22. On Herder's familiarity with Raynal's work, see Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain, and France c. 1500–c. 1800* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1995), 162–63. Particularly on Herder's familiarity with Diderot's contributions to Raynal's work, see Muthu,

some other eighteenth-century historians I shall examine, he was less original, and less emphatic, in assessing the use of animals from a material perspective.

Herder did consider human and animal life in a philosophical and ethical register. He claimed that animals were not machines and regarding them as such was “a sin against Nature.”²³ Every creature had a place in the world (50). Human mental superiority was more a matter of degree than kind. For example, all highly developed animals love their offspring. This love was greater the more a creature was advanced, and therefore most conspicuous in human beings; consequently, maternal love was the basis for the inborn sociability of humanity (48, 101). Even animals obeyed the laws of justice, and human beings who did not do so were “the most inhuman of all creatures, even if they be the kings and monarchs of the Earth” (102). Only human beings, however, had speech, which made human cultural development possible (43, 233–37, 240). Also unique to humanity was the capacity for religion, “the highest humanity of mankind” (103–5, 251–56). The ability to walk on two legs was particularly important, freeing the hands and even enabling speech (69–89, 95–98). Presenting his version of a common early modern argument for human superiority, Herder noted that humans did not have any one characteristic in perfection as did other creatures, but a combination of all their characteristics, achieved to a certain level (40–41). Rationality and the capacity for liberty were qualities that made human beings unique (89–94).²⁴ Animals did not harm each other like human beings, yet only humans had speech, religion, laws, and various traditions. He saw the manner in which humanity acquired its uniqueness as a historical issue, connected to the peculiar human capacity for perfectibility or corruptibility (67). Herder also noted the ethical aspect of the treatment of animals (34). Human beings became wild as a result of contact with the blood of animals, hunting, war, and other human mischief (282).²⁵ Human moral capacity was superior to that of animals, and human compassion extended to the feelings of other creatures: “He must possess rigid nerves, who can open a living creature and watch its convulsive movements: nothing but an insatiate thirst for fame and science can gradually deaden his organic sensibility.” Humans were even sensitive to worms and plants (99–100).

Nevertheless, there were clear limits to this view of the ethical sensitivity to animals. The Great Chain of Being, the theory that saw material creation rising from the most basic life forms up to human beings, which enjoyed wide credence in the eighteenth century, took idiosyncratic form in Herder’s thinking.²⁶ According to Herder,

Enlightenment against Empire, 72, 121, 211; for Herder’s cautious use of stadial theory, see 238–46; and for his familiarity with William Robertson’s works, 217. For the general influence of Scottish Enlightenment ideas on Herder, see Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment: Scottish Civic Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1995), 19–20, 22, 30, 34, 57, 65, 70–73, 103, 130, 135, 152, 184, 315, 318.

23. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, trans. T. Churchill (London, 1800), 66. The original work was published in 1784–91; page references are given henceforward in the text.

24. See also *ibid.*, 229–30, 282.

25. See also the remarks on metempsychosis, *ibid.*, 304, 309.

26. Herder’s version of this theory is outlined mainly in *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, 107–31. He utilized it as a proof for the possibility of human immortality as a higher form of existence. For the claim that Herder did not in fact agree with the Great Chain of Being theory, see

the ability to adapt to different conditions varied directly with position on the scale of living creatures—the higher, the greater: “Of all these changeable, modifiable, adaptable creatures, man is the most adaptable: the whole Earth is made for him; he for the whole Earth” (11). “Adapt” here did not mean simple accommodation; on the contrary, it signified an active human endeavor to overcome natural limitations. The natural environment changed owing to the actions of human beings, not the other way around. Human superiority stemmed above all from the distinctly *historical* process of gradually mastering nature.

Herder emphasized the plenitude of creation, the view that in nature everything that might exist did in fact exist.²⁷ But in a dialectical twist to this perception, he urged that while nature endeavored to create the maximum number of creatures who could co-exist peacefully, such peace was consequent on a violent struggle that led to equilibrium. In this dialectical view, human struggle with other creatures was therefore part of the natural order (35–38). Human dominion was not absolute, and necessitated a constant battle with animals (35). Like most philosophers who were ethically sensitive to animals, Herder nonetheless retained an anthropocentric outlook overall, asserting that without humanity the earth would lack its “supreme ornament and crown” (70). Human dominion over the earth was “the most ancient philosophy of the history of man” (278).

Most of these views were stock items in the early modern philosophical repertoire. Where Herder expresses the novel outlook of late Enlightenment historiography was in his view of human capacity for change: human superiority was not just a result of a preordained religiously based cosmological order, it was also a construction, resulting from the developmental capacity of human beings (129). Propounding a version of stadial theory, he claimed that each area and period of the earth enabled a different state of human culture: such cultural states were the inevitable consequences, given the plenitude of nature (18–19). Geography, for example, directly influenced human nature in various regions (35–38; 173–74 and *passim*). The most perfectly formed humanity was in the Mediterranean, specifically ancient Greek culture, which constituted the basis for European supremacy (144–45).²⁸ Probably influenced by Buffon, Herder claimed that human beings could, however, control nature and even improve the climate, in a process that might continue to an unforeseeable extent (176). Retaining traditional notions of human superiority rooted in religion, Herder, in a way consistent with early Romantic views, also emphasized the essentially violent underpinning of the human interaction with nature.²⁹ The novel aspects of Herder’s discus-

Peter Hanns Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005), 186–91; Reill claims that Buffon also disagreed with the Great Chain of Being theory (49–50, 164).

27. Furthermore, man was superior because he could understand the language of creation, and was therefore made in the image of God; *History of Man*, 463–65.

28. Herder was more of a European chauvinist than a racist; see esp. *History of Man*, 132–62. This of course did not preclude the abuses that his philosophy later gave rise to. The important and unresolved issue of Herder’s “counter-Enlightenment” outlook lies outside the scope of our discussion.

29. Compare the remarks in Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge, 1995), 7, 10–11, 16–17, 35–36, 48–50, 207.

sions of animals, then, were still predominantly couched within the traditional debate about animal sentience and rationality. Herder's views thus form a conceptual bridge; on the other side are some of the most prominent historians of the late Enlightenment, who situated considerations of animals within their broader historical analyses in a much more pronounced manner than did Herder. This was amply evident, for example, in the Abbé Raynal's great historical work on the European colonies, one of the most widely read works of the late eighteenth century.³⁰ Much more than Herder's, his outlook exemplified the essential difference between traditional philosophical discussions of animals and the new distinctly historiographical appreciation of their role.

Raynal was sensitive to the feelings and virtues of animals, and furthermore claimed that human beings' cruelty toward each other demonstrated that they were the most wicked and unfortunate of animals.³¹ The most theriophilic discussion in all of eighteenth-century historiography was probably his depiction of the effects of widespread hunting on the animals of America (5:163–64). In this context the beaver received the most extensive treatment: “[T]his harmless animal, who never hurts any living creature, neither carnivorous nor sanguinary, is become the object of man's most earnest pursuit, and the one which the savages hunt after with the greatest eagerness and cruelty: a circumstance owing to the unmerciful rapaciousness of the most polished nations of Europe” (5:164–77; quotation at 167). The beaver evinced sociability—Raynal extolled their monogamy and parental devotion—gentleness, and particularly intelligence, reflected in the ability to build dams (5:171–72, 167–69). The beaver was “[h]appy, if his coat did not tempt merciless and savage man to destroy his buildings and his race.” Despite the superiority of human mental faculties the beaver proved itself superior in social attainments (5:173–75; quotation at 173). Man's superiority was simply due to his free hands; he “marks his dominion . . . over the earth, by destroying and ravaging the face of the globe” (5:175–76).³²

Yet these assertions are conspicuous precisely because they are untypical for Raynal, perhaps as a result of the number of authors who contributed to his work. But the expression of great sympathy for animals was in fact limited in scope; ultimately, he regarded advanced human civilization in its European form as the best possible course for human progress. The inconsistency can be interpreted as an inherent tension in the attempt to accommodate awareness of the needs of animals to the cultural requirement to utilize them. Cruelty toward animals required amelioration, yet using them

30. See *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies . . . By the Abbé Raynal*, trans. J. O. Justamond, 6 vols., 2nd ed. (London, 1798; repr., New York, 1969). In what follows I set aside the complicated issue of the authorship of this work; Raynal included the contributions of others, most notably Diderot. The first edition was published in 1770, the second in 1774, and the third in 1780.

31. *Philosophical and Political History*, 5:150; 6:140–41; see also 149. Page references are given henceforward in the text.

32. Elsewhere, however, he claimed that reason was the only advantage human beings had over other animals (*ibid.*, 3:155). On the beaver, see the discussion of Raynal's attitude toward nature in William R. Womack, “Eighteenth-Century Themes in the *Histoire philosophique et politique des deux Indes* of Guillaume Raynal,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 96 (1972): 129–265 at 249–59.

remained vital for human advancement. Thus he claimed that carnivorous human beings were more robust and healthy than vegetarians. Raynal noted cases of kindness to animals, but condemned despots who put the welfare of their pets above that of their human subjects (2:31, 46–47; 5:32–33, 126).³³ He criticized the theory of the Great Chain of Being, asserting that there was a great interval between superior man and all other animals (3:352–53). Unlike animals, for example, man was able to accommodate himself to every type of natural environment: “[H]e therefore feeds upon the spoils of the chase, upon the produce of the waters, or upon the fruits of the earth; and becomes either a shepherd or a husbandman, according to the fertility or barrenness of the soil he inhabits” (1:72–73). Despite his appreciation of the beaver, Raynal was uncritical of hunting (3:170–71).³⁴ He associated hunting with courage and a martial spirit, but admittedly also with cruelty, though mainly toward other human beings (5:113, 141, 149).

Most significantly, Raynal viewed the instrumental role of animals as essential for the progress of civilization. For instance, he noted the importance of the camel and horse for Arabian culture (1:333–35), as of the llama for South American cultures (3:106–9). When human beings failed to control nature both they and nature itself deteriorated. Voicing a common early modern observation about the degeneracy of America compared to Europe, Raynal noted the inferior quadruped animals in the New World, many initially imported from Europe, which would not have degenerated given sufficient attention by the settlers (4:132–35).³⁵ Any notion of preferring pristine to cultivated nature had no place in his outlook, and animals, like nature in general in this quintessentially Enlightenment view, were meant for human use. Raynal depicts the transformational impact of European settlers on the North American continent:

... man appeared, and immediately changed the face of North America. He introduced symmetry by the assistance of all the instruments of art. The impenetrable woods were instantly cleared, and made room for commodious dwellings. The wild beasts were driven away, and flocks of domestic animals supplied their place; while thorns and briars made way for rich harvests. The waters forsook part of their domain, and were drained off into the interior parts of the land, or into the sea by deep canals. The coasts were covered with towns, and the bays with ships; and thus the New World, like the Old, became subject to man. (5:302–3)

Clearly evincing Buffon’s influence, Raynal (or perhaps Diderot) here expresses the essence of late Enlightenment advocacy of the human mastery of nature and animals

33. See also the critical remarks on metempsychosis at 1:51, 66–67; 2:325, and the remark on kindness to animals in India at 6:478.

34. On the hunting and use of seals, see *Philosophical and Political History*, 5:251–52.

35. See also 6:87. On the heated Enlightenment debate about the purported degenerative qualities of America, see Antonello Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750–1900* (Pittsburgh, 1973); and Gilbert Chinard, “Eighteenth Century Theories on America as a Human Habitat,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 91 (1947): 27–57.

as a prerequisite for cultural progress. While Raynal based his sanction of the human mastery of nature on rational scientific argumentation, he was, like many other early modern intellectuals, transmuting, rather than replacing, religious anthropocentric cosmology, thus creating an even more potent sanction for the utilization of nature. It was this combination of the old and the new that gave rise to an unprecedented emphasis on authority over nature.



In the historiography of the second half of the eighteenth century, the treatment of animals was important only to the extent that it furthered human interests. The French historian Antoine-Yves Goguet might approvingly note kindness to animals, as he does the Athenian handling of laboring beasts, but he also expressed the traditional notion of human superiority to them as well as the view that treating them well might improve human inter-relationships.³⁶ Thus, Goguet claimed that ancient legislators ruled over ferocious people who had just emerged from barbarism, and he had “no doubt therefore, but those legislators had a view of inspiring their people with gentleness and compassion toward each other, by inspiring them with these sentiments towards animals” (1:35–36).³⁷

Not surprisingly, a similar outlook was evinced by Goguet’s English translator, the Scottish historian Robert Henry, who treats animals primarily in terms of their functions for humans. About the ancient British laws protecting domestic animals, Henry observes that such regulations were motivated by economic considerations.³⁸ The history of animal domestication afforded various examples of amelioration of human life: in Roman Britain dogs were useful companions, and at a higher cultural stage they also provided entertainment (1:390–91). Henry was uncritical of hunting, treating it as a preparation for war—in a Romantic vein based on the Ossianic poems (1:487–88). He observed how the tenth-century king, Edgar, had imposed an uncommon form of tribute on the Welsh princes—instead of money and cattle as formerly, he required three hundred wolves’ heads annually. This resulted in keen hunting of “these destructive animals,” whose numbers rapidly declined in a few years (2:76).³⁹ Henry did note William the Conqueror’s “horrid cruelties” in his excessive passion for hunting (3:27), but whether he meant cruelty toward animals or the humans involved in hunting was unclear. More typically, he mentioned animal baiting without noting its

36. Antoine-Yves Goguet, *The Origin of Laws, Arts, and Sciences, and Their Progress among the Most Ancient Nations*, trans. Robert Henry[?], 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1761; repr., New York, 1976), 3:232; 1:71. Page references are given henceforward in the text.

37. For Goguet’s stadial notions, see *ibid.*, 1:84–85, 277.

38. Robert Henry, *The History of Great Britain, from the Invasion of it by the Romans under Julius Caesar, written on a new plan*, 6 vols. (London [vols. 1–6]; also Edinburgh [vol. 5], 1771–93), 215–16. Henry’s responsibility for translating Goguet is commonly accepted but not certain. Page references are given henceforward in the text.

39. Henry’s positive view of the extirpation by hunting of “these destructive animals” was also clearly evinced at *ibid.*, 5:563.

cruelty, and when he did note the cruelty involved in the various rituals surrounding hunting, it was toward socially inferior human beings, not toward animals (3:595–96).

Like most Scottish Enlightenment intellectuals, Hume notwithstanding, Henry was influenced by stadial theory, as was the most prominent contemporary Scottish historian, William Robertson. Robertson was particularly interested in the way the human use of animals furthered cultural progress—exhibiting almost no interest in the traditional debate about their sentient and cognitive qualities. Recounting the beneficial uses of the horses that the Spaniards under Columbus had brought to the New World, Robertson wrote of “that vast accession of power, which man hath acquired by subjecting them to his dominion.”⁴⁰ He saw this subjection of animals as one of the most important foundations of human progress: “As the people of the East appear soon to have acquired complete dominion over the useful animals, they could early undertake the long and toilsome journies which it was necessary to make, in order to maintain this intercourse [between different countries]; and by the provident bounty of Heaven, they were furnished with a beast of burden [the camel], without whose aid it would have been impossible to accomplish them.”⁴¹ Typically for a Scottish Enlightenment thinker, Robertson stressed the importance of commerce. Therefore, the camel’s role in trade added to its significance for cultural progress. More generally, Robertson noted:

The greatest operations of man in changing and improving the face of nature, as well as his most considerable efforts in cultivating the earth, are accomplished by means of the aid which he receives from the animals whom he has tamed and employs in labour . . . But man, in his civilized state, is so accustomed to the service of the domestic animals, that he seldom reflects upon the vast benefits which he derives from it. If we were to suppose him, even when most improved, to be deprived of their useful ministry, his empire over nature must in some measure cease, and he would remain a feeble animal, at a loss how to subsist, and incapable of attempting such arduous undertakings as their assistance enables him to execute with ease.⁴²

Robertson’s recognition of the importance of animals for human progress was repeatedly expressed in his denigration of the indigenous Americans; this view, however,

40. William Robertson, *The History of America*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (London and Edinburgh, 1792; repr., London, 1996), 1:171. The first edition appeared in 1777.

41. William Robertson, *An Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge Which the Ancients Had of India* (London and Edinburgh, 1794; repr., London, 1996), 3. For more on the importance of the camel for transportation and trade in desert regions, see 400–402.

42. Robertson, *History of America*, 2:124–25. See also 2:35–36: “Whenever any people have experienced the advantages which men enjoy, by their dominion over the inferior animals, they can neither subsist without the nourishment which these afford, nor carry on any considerable operation independent of their ministry and labour.” Page references are given henceforward in the text.

incorporated a concern for the feelings of animals.⁴³ He claimed that indigenous Americans were insensible both to animal suffering and to that of other human beings, including their own family members. They treated domestic animals harshly, “never employ[ing] any method either for breaking or managing them, but force and cruelty” (2:216–17). It should be noted that Robertson was not the only eighteenth-century writer who presented a picture of primitive cruelty, which runs counter to contemporary notions of primitive innocence.⁴⁴

More important for Robertson, however, were the specifically material-cultural advantages afforded by animals. These were conspicuously lacking among the South Americans, consequent on a general failure to cultivate nature. The indigenous Americans, including the advanced civilizations of Mexico and Peru, lacked not only the advantages conferred by metal tools but also the benefits of laboring animals, with the exception of the llama.⁴⁵ Because America was uncultivated, animals were mostly wild and dangerous, while animals of the sort humans could rely on were inferior in size and robustness compared with those of other continents (2:18–23). Robertson claimed, furthermore, that America originally did not have domesticated animals. The use of animals was an important indicator of cultural progress, yet the people of America, in contrast even with the Tartars, had not risen to that level (2:122–25). The authority over inferior creatures is “one of the noblest prerogatives of man, and among the greatest efforts of his wisdom and power. Without this, his dominion is incomplete. He is a monarch, who has no subjects; a master, without servants, and must perform every operation by the strength of his own arm” (2:122–23). Even the accomplishments of the advanced Mexican and Peruvian cultures did not shake Robertson’s views (3:12). He claimed that their domestication of animals was only of a basic kind and applied mainly to the llama, though even it was not sufficiently exploited. This was a prime reason why both these nations were only at the most basic stage of human progress when the Spaniards arrived (3:152–54).⁴⁶

43. Robertson’s and others’ denigration of America and its inhabitants was countered by the Mexican-born Jesuit historian Francisco Clavigero. Clavigero, however, was not particularly interested in animals, making only casual remarks about them in a rather anthropocentric vein. See his *History of Mexico*, trans. Charles Cullen, 2 vols. (London, 1787; repr., New York and London, 1979), 1:48, 242–43, 380–81. For Clavigero and his criticism of Robertson, see Pocock, *Barbarians, Savages, and Empires*, 205–26.

44. See James Adair, *The History of the American Indians*, ed. Kathryn E. Holland Braund (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 2005), 405; Adair, whose work was in Gibbon’s library, claimed that North American Indians killed too many buffalo and in a wasteful manner, leaving most of the carcass and keeping only the tongue and marrow-bones. For criticism of the modern notion of the innocence of primitive people’s treatment of animals and nature, see Rod Preece, *Animals and Nature: Cultural Myths, Cultural Realities* (Vancouver, 1999).

45. Robertson, *An Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge Which the Ancients Had of India*, 214.

46. See also *ibid.*, 217–18. At 3:11–12, Robertson noted the proliferation of domesticated European animals once they were brought to America. For Robertson’s criticism of the Mexicans and Peruvians, see Neil Hargraves, “Beyond the Savage Character: Mexicans, Peruvians, and the ‘Imperfectly Civilized’ in William Robertson’s ‘History of America,’” in *The Anthropology of the Enlightenment*, ed. Larry Wolff and Marco Cipolloni (Stanford, Calif., 2007), 103–18.



Gibbon's work, specifically *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, presented a summa of Enlightenment historiography's philosophical outlook. Gibbon was highly influenced by Buffon,⁴⁷ and by stadial theory.⁴⁸ The importance of the human command of nature and animals for cultural progress was repeatedly evident in *The Decline and Fall*.⁴⁹ Though he vacillated about the medical and moral consequences of a carnivorous diet, Gibbon regarded the advocacy of vegetarianism as more emotional than rational (1:1026–27).⁵⁰ He was much closer on this issue to Buffon than to Rousseau: Buffon opposed unnecessary harm to animals but regarded consumption of animal flesh as part of the natural order.⁵¹ If there was a connection between cruelty and a carnivorous diet in Gibbon's view, it was most emphatic in barbaric Tartar society, where the “unfeeling murderer” slaughtered animals openly, while “the horrid objects” [animal carcasses] were “exhibited in their naked and most disgusting simplicity, in the tent of a Tartarian shepherd.” The killing of animals elsewhere could be “disguised by the arts of European refinement” (1:1026–27).

Gibbon, like many of his contemporaries, was very fond of pets.⁵² A story, perhaps apocryphal, related his reaction, as a young man, to the cries of a dog one of the servants was beating: he intervened on behalf of the dog by beating the servant.⁵³ Nevertheless, his attitude toward animals was far from sentimental, and in *The Decline and Fall* he related how the emperor Honorius, alarmed by the news that Rome was lost, regained his composure only on realizing that this marked the end not of a beloved chicken, but only of the capital of the world (2:218n149).⁵⁴ One is reminded here of the earlier views of Richard Steele, who despite condemning unnecessary harm to animals—which he regarded as “a great piece of cruelty, if not a kind of murder,”—nevertheless criticized ostentatious displays of affection toward pets, which he implic-

47. J. G. A. Pocock has observed: “A door to the future was opened, in Gibbon's mind, by Buffon's decision to treat the human as an animal species like any other.” See Pocock, *Narratives of Civil Government*, 362; also Pocock, *Barbarians, Savages, and Empires*, 44.

48. See J. G. A. Pocock, “Gibbon and the Shepherds: The Stages of Society in the *Decline and Fall*,” *History of European Ideas* 2 (1981): 193–202. For examples of Gibbon's stadial observations, see Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley, 3 vols. (Harmondsworth, U.K., 1995), 1:238–39, 996–99, 1027–29; 2:819–20; 3:156, 449. Page references are given henceforward in the text.

49. On the importance of cultivating nature, see particularly “General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West,” *Decline and Fall*, 2:508–16.

50. See esp. *ibid.*, 1026n9, where Gibbon quotes Rousseau's *Emile* and also mentions Plutarch and Ovid in relation to vegetarianism.

51. “Les animaux carnassiers,” in Buffon, *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*, vol. 7 (Paris, 1758), 4–9, 25–31.

52. See the stories, particularly regarding his favorite dogs, in *Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton, 3 vols. (London, 1956), 1:374; 2:65, 70, 74, 77, 371.

53. See Patricia B. Craddock, *Young Edward Gibbon: Gentleman of Letters* (Baltimore and London, 1982), 132–33.

54. For the source of this story, see *Procopius*, trans. H. B. Dewing (Loeb Edition), 2:17.

itly connected with insensitivity toward human beings.⁵⁵ Gibbon expressed an apparently similar ambivalence toward hunting and other bloodshed for sport. Although the “bloody spectacles of the Romans” made him shudder, he thought that they had their value for naturalists.⁵⁶ Hunting was also a cruel pastime with beneficial aspects. In the Calydonian boar hunt, “Thirty or forty heroes were leagued against a hog: the brutes (not the hog) quarrelled with a lady for the head” (*Decline and Fall*, 2:656n70).⁵⁷ Yet Gibbon, who occasionally participated in hunting himself,⁵⁸ observed, regarding the Tartars, that hunting was a preparation for war, “and the amusements of the chase serve as a prelude to the conquest of an empire” (1:1029–30).

Gibbon primarily considered animals a natural resource meant for human benefit. About the Arabian horses and camels (two animals also particularly noted by Raynal and Robertson) he observed, “Our toil is lessened, and our wealth is increased, by our dominion over the useful animals; and the Arabian shepherd had acquired the absolute possession of a faithful friend [the horse] and a laborious slave [the camel]” (3:154).⁵⁹ While Tartar animal slaughter may have been cruel, in his view, Gibbon also recognized the logistical advantage of using animals and animal products such as milk during battles, and he elaborated the important uses that animals afforded the vagrant Tartars in labor and food (1:1026–27). By shifting from the advocacy of vegetarianism to the position that animal suffering was necessary for human progress, Gibbon undermined the theriophilic view as in essence historically unrealistic. His critique of medieval hunting laws—which enabled the animals intended for aristocratic hunters to ravage with impunity the fields industriously worked by their vassals—makes the point even more strongly: “The vague dominion, which MAN has assumed over the wild inhabitants of the earth, the air, and the waters, was confined to some fortunate individuals of the human species” (2:481). Progress from the medieval was marked by the expansion of that dominion; the word “vague” should be treated only as a literary flourish. The moment human interests were at stake, any notion of animal worth was only as a resource or commodity. And humanity’s ability to cause animals with discordant natures such as the domestic dog and cat to live together was “proof of the empire of man over the animals.”⁶⁰

Despite Buffon’s influence, purely zoological topics were of no concern to Gibbon, and he was much more interested in how the animal world could contribute to an understanding of humanity.⁶¹ He observed that the more savage a nation, the more

55. See *Tatler*, nos. 134 and 121.

56. Edward Gibbon, *Essai sur l’étude de la littérature* and *An Essay on the Study of Literature*, introduction by John Valdimir Price (Dublin, 1777 [the French edition], London, 1764 [the English translation]; repr., London, 1994), 79–82 (English), 64–66 (French). See also *Decline and Fall*, 1:352–53.

57. See also the more ambiguous criticism of hunting, *Decline and Fall*, 2:185, and the praise of falconry at 2:868; see also *Letters of Gibbon*, 1:352.

58. *Gibbon’s Journal to January 28th, 1763, My Journal, I, II & III and Ephemerides*, ed. D. M. Low (London, 1929), 161–62.

59. See also *Decline and Fall*, 3:186 and 249, for Muslim charity that descended also to animals.

60. *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon*, ed. Patricia B. Craddock (Oxford, 1972), 125 (from “Index Expurgatorius”).

it depended on instinct and not reason; and greater barbarity would render it indistinguishable from other such nations (1:1025).⁶² The ability to change, and therefore to have a unique history, was essential to being truly human. What further made humanity unique was its propensity for mastering nature, and relinquishing this authority jeopardized not only the advantages of human progress but human status more fundamentally.

Nature itself could never be annihilated, and even following the greatest human desolation, including devastating warfare, the resources of nature, and therefore the potential for resuming progress, remained open. Gibbon acknowledged this in his discussion of the barbarian incursions into the Roman provinces toward the end of the fourth century. These perhaps left domesticated animals unprotected, but “the fish of the Danube would have felt more terror and distress, from the approach of a voracious pike, than from the hostile inroad of a Gothic army” (1:1068–69). Progress could not be taken for granted, yet it was an ongoing process with no natural end. Progress required vigilance, in which the harnessing of nature, and specifically the use of animals, played a key role in providing the foundation of culture, the basis for any higher civilization.

Eighteenth-century historians elaborated the Scientific Revolution’s advocacy of the empirical investigation and utilization of nature. They also, however, went beyond this shared outlook. Conjectural history added a distinct component to the previous century’s advocacy of the mastery of nature: the human command of natural resources, including animals, was increasingly viewed as a vital element of the ongoing tale of human progress. Moreover, late Enlightenment historiography was increasingly preoccupied with the general material development of human societies, to which animals clearly made a key contribution. It was all but inevitable that animals would become leading (though passive) protagonists in this new type of historiographical discourse.

It is not the purpose of this article to debate whether this was a positive or a negative development (although I would venture to say that it was a bit of both). Yet it seems clear that late Enlightenment discussions of animals signaled a transition from early modern views of the nature of human culture and society to more modern historiographical views.

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61. Gibbon did, however, comment briefly on the care of progeny by animals, which preoccupied naturalists such as Buffon; see Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 2:808.

62. Gibbon observes an “indolence [which] refuses to cultivate the earth” among the Tartars, together with their military prowess.