

Chapter 6

Human Beings, Animality and Morality

6.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings:

1. Gould, *The mismeasure of Man*, excerpt
2. Rheinberger, "Gene" SEP

- Study Questions:

1. What was Lombroso's theory of the "born criminal"?
2. Did Lombroso follow a proper scientific method for his research? Explain.
3. Given the state of play in genetics today, can we say that we are "pre-programmed" by our DNA?
4. Do you think that Zola reduces his characters to animals? Are animals capable of morality?
5. Do you think that there is a moral lesson in *Therese Raquin*? Why? Why not?

6.2 Reductionism

Does Zola recognize the animal part in human beings or does he reduce humans to beasts?

- **Positivism and reductionism in science**
- **Physicalism and Determinism**
 - The mechanistic model of the universe
 - The mechanistic model of the animal
 - The mechanistic model of the human being?

Pb: can we reduce human beings to animals?

6.2.1 Dangers of reductionism

- **Is the reduction well founded?**
 - “Scientific Criminology”: Lombroso.
 - Intelligence testing: can we put the human being in numbers?
 - The notion of gene in the XXth century
 - * The notion of gene from its inception to now. Since the 60’s, scientists have given up on the big dream of the “genetic program” and the reduction of all what you are to what your “genetic code” contains.

See H-J. Rheinberger, “Gene” in SEP:

With molecular biology, the classical gene “went molecular” (Waters 1994). Ironically, the initial idea of genes as simple stretches of DNA coding for a protein was dissolved in this process. Together with the material structure, which the classical gene acquired through molecular biology, biochemical mechanisms accounting for the transmission and expression of genes proliferated. The development of molecular biology itself, that enterprise so often described as an utterly reductionist conquest, has made it impossible to think of the genome any longer simply as a set of pieces of

contiguous DNA co-linear with the proteins derived from them and each of them endowed with a specific function. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the results of the Human Genome Project were timely presented on the fiftieth anniversary of the double helix, molecular genetics seems to have accomplished a full circle, readdressing reproduction and inheritance no longer from a purely genetic, but from an evolution cum development perspective. (Rheinberger, 9)

- * Public discourse, and even scientists's intuitions, are still along the falsified lines of thinking though. The concept of gene has mostly become formal and instrumental again, just as at the time of its inception. Here like in many other domain, the reductionist way of talking about genes, and in particular, about "genes for", is an heuristic principle.

Waters provides a surprising but altogether plausible epistemological answer to this apparent conundrum (Waters, in press). He reminds us forcefully that in the context of scientific work and research, genes are first and foremost handled as entities of epistemological rather than ontological value. It is on the grounds of their epistemic function in research that they appear so privileged. Waters deliberately goes beyond the question of reductionism or anti-reductionism that has structured so much philosophical work on modern biology, especially on genetics and molecular biology over the past decades. He stresses that the successes of a gene-centered view on the organism are not due to the fact that genes are the major determinants of the main processes in living beings. Rather, they figure so prominently because they provide highly successful entry points for the investigation of these processes. The success of gene-centrism, according to this view, is not ontologically, but first and foremost epistemologically grounded. ([?], 12)

- A way out:

- Reductionism and Physicalism as heuristic methodological principle
 - Good for sciences
 - No inference to the reality behind
- Non-reductive physicalism: the notion of supervenience
From SEP: Brian McLaughlin and Karen Bennett, “Supervenience”

A set of properties A supervenes upon another set B just in case no two things can differ with respect to A-properties without also differing with respect to their B-properties. In slogan form, there cannot be an A-difference without a B-difference.[?]

- **Is the reduction desirable?**

Obviously: Deny free will, and you’ll deny the responsibility, and hence, morality.

Do we want to claim that we are not responsible agents, not responsible of our acts, that whatever we do is determined not by our free choice but by “nature and circumstances”?

6.2.2 Zola and Morality

A paradox of the Naturalist project

There is a tension between the aim to describe the determinism and the profound humanism that pervades the naturalist literature.

- Determinism of:

1. Nature
2. Historical and social circumstances

- Humanism: describe the hard life of real people, often taking a clear position over who are the villains and who is the good people in the various relations of power that pervade the modern society: the boss over the workers, the men over the women, the rich over the poor.

Zola, in his theoretical works, writes that he is the one who is on the side of moral, doing what he does. See *The Experimental Novel*:

Let me sum up our role as experimental moralists. We show the mechanism of what is useful and harmful, we uncover the

deterministic aspects of human and social phenomena, so that one can master and control these phenomena one day. In a word, we join those in this century who contribute to the important task of conquering nature, and enhancing the power of man. And look, next to ours, the tedious work of these idealist writers, who rely on the irrational and the supernatural, and whose each leap forward is followed by a great fall in the depths of metaphysical chaos. We are the ones who possess the force, we are the ones who possess morality.

6.2.3 Two final notes: Madame and the cat

Madame on power?

The study of Madame is interesting as far as the issue of free will vs. determinism is concerned.

Healthy but blind – Chapter 19

- Madame is apparently in power (she has the money), she is really manipulated by the two murderers of her beloved little boy. Thérèse is playing depression, Laurent is playing the perfect son-in-law. She believes she decides the wedding, not only by herself, but also out of egoistic reasons. Note also that she was worried about Thérèse's illness, not for Thérèse, but for her own confront when getting old...(99) So she believes she is deciding for her best: see the motivations p.100:
 - gets over the second death of her kid quite quickly
 - because she does not like to be bored at the shop! "unconscious desires"
 - and again p103: when she takes the decision.
- But really, the masters of the play here are Laurent and Thérèse
 - 101-102 (uses Camille's name to soften her!)
 - victory is theirs 103
 - Comedy even to accept Laurent with Michaud and Thérèse with Madame.

- “Dear Mother speech” 105
- Laurent appealing to Camille’s ”last demand” to protect his wife as a reason to accept!!
- Notice though that the lovers are themselves mistakenly thinking they are in power: they are still blind to the fact that the presence of the other is going to be unbearable (105, .

Paralyzed but awake – Chapter 26

She loses all her physical abilities, but she is more awake than ever. Her stare. Her victory.

This might be the eye of the moral. Just like the cat...

Madame on power? – Chapter 32

The final scene and the victorious stare.

6.2.4 The cat is on the mat

What can we do with this cat? Who is this?

NOTE THAT “FRANCOIS” IS A HUMAN NAME: Not a cat’s!

- Always where it is important to be to follow the evolution of the story: three important scenes: first sex, wedding night, stare with Madam.
- Who is he?
 - more human than the human-animals there,
 - consciousness,
 - maybe Zola himself: observing, weighing, assessing – but is he moralizing?