The Gilgamesh Complex: The Quest for Death Transcendence and the Killing of Animals

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Abstract
Because the fauna of the world possess a blood-driven vitality so comparable to that of people, they serve as an unwitting resource in the anthropocentric quest to ward off the ravages of death and decay, to create a cornucopia of human life amid the caprices of the cosmos. Fueled by the human fear of the grave, the “Gilgamesh complex” is the ensemble of beliefs and desires underlying a spectrum of zooidal practices ranging from religious immolation to scientific experimentation. The name of the complex draws its textual inspiration from the Babylonian epic of the warrior-king Gilgamesh, who lays waste to beasts of forest and field in his quest for immortality. From a psychological perspective, the epic of Gilgamesh pierces the veil of submerged desires and muddled behaviors that most people in modern society are loath to recognize. The Gilgamesh complex is also among the most culturally and historically encompassing of psychological complexes, penetrating to the barest of human existential concerns—the pre-occupation with death.

Keywords
death denial, zoocide, blood rites, animal vitality

Introduction
Of the fears that pervade human existence, thanatophobia—the fear of death—is the most fundamental. As the interdisciplinary intellectual Becker (1973) recognized, people tend to possess an often unconscious desire to transcend mortality, to defy through cultural practices the forces of decay intrinsic to the cycles of nature. Although Becker explored a dizzying array of “cultural heroics” designed to ensure a measure of immortality for their practitioners, he unfortunately gave little weight to one of the most widespread mechanisms of death transcendence, a mechanism that this article will attempt to analyze in depth: the killing of nonhuman animals. The zooidal mode of death
defiance has a relatively simple objective: the transfer of vitality from the animal to the human domain.

Because animals seem so gravid with vitality, they occupy a privileged place in human rites, ranging from shamanism to sadomasochism, whose purpose is to harness the powers of nature. Religious sacrifice is the best-studied of these rites, but a host of other death-dealing practices—hunting, meat-eating, and scientific experimentation, to name a few—spring from the paradoxical desire for the spirit of life at the expense of life itself.

The Gilgamesh Complex: Death Anxiety and Animal Vitality

No protagonist in epic literature embodies the zoocidal ramifications of thanatophobia more than Gilgamesh, the Babylonian king. Gilgamesh’s quest for immortality is the subject of one of the earliest written narratives. Though he leaves a trail of vanquished animals behind him in his attempt to master life and death, Gilgamesh fails to transcend his own mortality. Given the profound nexus in the Gilgamesh epic between thanatophobia and zoocide, I have chosen the term “Gilgamesh complex” to designate the cluster of psychological traits that undergird the methodical killing of animals in cultures around the globe. The twin loci of this psychic cluster are death anxiety and the compensatory desire for the vitality of animal life. Put another way, animal vitality succors the primal psychic need for death transcendence. The general definition of transcendence utilized in this article is phenomenological, a la Becker (1973) and Levinas (1999)—the systematic creation of a perceptual state of radical alterity or otherness through the exercise of cultural protocols.

Death transcendence, therefore, is the culturally-prescribed enactment of the abject otherness of “time . . . in its very dia-chrony” (Levinas, p. 173)—in short, human alienation from the frangible conditions of temporal existence. In the call to transcend atemporal modes of being by heeding the alterity of all forms of phenomenological discontinuity, the Levinasian copula of transcendence and alterity fosters an ethical outlook that is deconstructive by virtue of its reflexivity. My hope is that the reader of this essay, in reflecting upon the implications of the Gilgamesh complex, will perceive echoes of the same ethical call and thereby register a self-transcending movement of alterity toward alienation within—and ultimately from—cultural contexts of thanatophobic zoocide.

So far as my analysis of animal killing is concerned, ethics begin with the ethnographic soundings of the phenomenological origins of Gilgamesh’s worldview. For people with a penchant for animistic cosmology or an other-
wise sacred conception of animals, the transcendental contours of the Gilgamesh complex are brought into greater relief than for people with a modern mechanical understanding of animals; however, the sanctification of animal killing makes the fear of death no less deeply-rooted in the minds of the participants. As a textual bridge between both worlds—the pre-modern precinct of theriomorphic spirituality and the modern realm of animal objectification—the Gilgamesh epic deserves pride of place in the naming of a psychological complex focused on zoocidal customs. The appropriateness of this text for the elucidation of animal killing goes even deeper: despite the centrality of zoocide in the pantheon of epic literature, the tale of Gilgamesh revolves around the thematic coupling of death anxiety and animal immolation to a singular degree. Indeed, only a small handful of stories from any era can vie with the Gilgamesh epic in its discriminating depiction of the existential bases of the protagonist’s violent, vitality-engorging proclivities.

The significance of the Gilgamesh epic for a theory of human behavior is such that the term “Gilgamesh complex” is not without precedent in the psychological literature. In particular, I would like to pay homage to San Roque (2004), who mentions the term in his essay in a Jungian-themed anthology. The central trope of his metaphor-laden article is that of Gilgamesh sitting in a broken-down Ford Cortina with a dead dog on the seat—a clear allusion to the psychic trauma caused by the demise of Gilgamesh’s friend Enkidu, as well as an oblique acknowledgment of Gilgamesh’s zoocidal mien.

San Roque’s (2004) three-sentence discussion of the Gilgamesh complex, which does not broach the killing of animals, is at once analytically mendicant and symbolically rich. On the one hand, his truncated description is rather geographically narrow and conceptually cursory: He yokes the Gilgameshian plot elements of “hubris, confrontation, catastrophe, lament, and the reparative quest for immortality” to the psycho-cultural development of Iraq, asking, “Might Iraq still be caught in the Gilgamesh complex?” (p. 51). On the other hand, San Roque’s article as a whole is replete with literal and metaphorical references to zoocide: the aforementioned “three-day-deceased animal body” (p. 50), an aboriginal stone tool “sharp enough to cut the sinews and skin of a kangaroo” (p. 51), “hunting for porcupine or lizard or honey ant” (p. 57), “dismemberment” (p. 58), “two forms of meat dragged onto the same cooking fire” (p. 59). In the light of this zoocidal context, San Roque’s remarks on Gilgamesh assume a figurative profundity belied by their literal parochialism. Although my formulation of the Gilgamesh complex is independent of San Roque’s, my theory nevertheless lays bare the subliminal latticework of his lyrically-wrought essay, unveiling its web of latent associations between zoocide and the quest for death transcendence.
Just as the Gilgamesh epic aptly facilitates the development of a comprehensive paradigm of ritual animal killing, so too does the theory of the Gilgamesh complex contribute trenchantly to the interdisciplinary discourse of human-animal studies. The framework presented in this article partakes of the methods and materials of seven orthodox fields: anthropology, history, literary criticism, philosophy, psychology, religious studies, and sociology. As such, it embodies the discursive model of the analysis of zoocide laid out by the Animal Studies Group (2006) in its seminal text:

Given that the killing of animals is implicated in almost every aspect of human life, a cross-disciplinary approach has been adopted as the best way of illuminating some of its dimensions. (p. 5)

At the same time, the Animal Studies Group (2006) concedes that the nascent state of human-animal studies dictates a relatively circumscribed exposition from each of the anthology’s contributors: “different disciplines, we have come to realize, require different modes of representation, different languages, and different assumptions about both the focus and the function of the essay as a form” (p. vii). In devising the theory of the Gilgamesh complex, I have tried to adhere to a truly multifaceted approach to the killing of animals, of the sort that ought to become more commonplace as human-animal studies gains institutional footing as a field in its own right. My discussion of the Gilgamesh complex, far from claiming to be the last word in the scholarly investigation of zoocidal practices, is intended to serve rather as a single drop of interdisciplinary discernment in a rapidly expanding intellectual cascade.

In order to understand the sanguinary nuances of the Gilgamesh complex, it behooves us to return first of all to its textual distillation. The epic (Leonard, 1934) is a poetic rumination on the paradoxes of mortal existence, examined through the dramatic prism of the human search for immortality. For Gilgamesh, one-third human and the rest divine, the immediacy of his mortality is first brought to the fore through the death of his soul-mate Enkidu, who is struck down for his role in affronting the gods. Both Gilgamesh and Enkidu are guilty of killing sacred creatures, the forest guardian Khumbaba and the Bull of Heaven, but Gilgamesh is spared the full measure of divine retribution.

Jung (1977, p. 107) construes this selective punishment as the dissipation of the forces of the unconscious mind—Enkidu, after all, emerges from an uninhibited animalistic milieu—though the quietus of his friend does little to make Gilgamesh aware of the primal link between his fear of death and his zoocidal predilections. Once Enkidu's worm-ridden fate propels Gilgamesh
on an arduous quest for death transcendence, he continues to flaunt his penchant for vanquishing creatures whose ferocity he fears might rival his own. When he finally gains an audience with Utnapishtim, the sole man to have attained immortality, Gilgamesh rattles off a list of his and Enkidu's blood-sportive exploits and expresses his dismay that death would dare to extinguish his conquest-laden vitality, just as it has felled his alter ego—"my friend, who with me laid lions low" (Leonard, 1934, p. 57). Throughout his eponymous epic, Gilgamesh relies on his predatory dexterity to sustain his death-defying sensibilities, striving to spite death by smiting living creatures.

Facing the riddles of the grave, the poem's protagonists navigate the polymorphic worlds of human, animal, and god. "Thus in the epic," reveals literary critic Wolff (1969), "animal merges with man and god with animal; and these combinations sometimes reverse direction or exchange terms" (p. 394). The problem for Gilgamesh is that he navigates these categories with a bearing of transgressive violence, a truculent disposition he not only confers upon his ill-fated comrade but invites from the gods as well. Enkidu lives as a beast of prey, detesting the hunter, before he is enticed into the human world; on his deathbed, sick of the escapade of death in which he and Gilgamesh have partaken, Enkidu offers a guilt-ridden lament to the god Shamash: "So curses he the hunter;/The fullness of his heart goads him" (Leonard, 1934, p. 34). The gods have visited the same mortal violence upon Enkidu that he and Gilgamesh have heaped upon Khumbaba and the Bull of Heaven, and only in the twilight of death does Enkidu appreciate the tragic hubris of his desire to glorify his own vitality at the expense of that of other living creatures.

Unfortunately, Gilgamesh is temperamentally ill-equipped to traverse the same bridge between mortality salience and existential edification. Utnapishtim tries to show the warrior-king the majesty of his fragile, all-too-human frame, shorn of the wretched trappings of animal vitality in which Gilgamesh has enveloped himself: "Let him cast off his skins/That the sea bear them away!/His body shall again show beautiful!" (p. 71). Rather than reflecting on the fecundity of his mortal essence, its unadulterated sacredness, Gilgamesh continues on his quest for death transcendence as though he had never doffed the symbols of his hubris. At the ends of the earth, the lord of Uruk still fails to fathom the harrowing ramifications of his "tragic plundering of the wilderness and assault on animal life" (Barron, 2002, p. 388).

According to the standard, Jungian-derived psychological interpretation of the epic, Gilgamesh's exploits signify the archetypal progression toward a "union between consciousness and the unconscious" (Kluger, 1991, p. 76). For all of its aperçus into the symbolic layers of the text, this interpretation neglects one of the epic's most pressing questions: Why does Gilgamesh, in realizing
the putative individuation of the ego, not relinquish his thanatophobically-driven urge to arrogate the vitality of animals? The answer lies outside the Jungian account, in a reading of the epic that does not observe a radical psychological rift between the first and second halves of the narrative. Gilgamesh becomes painfully conscious of his fear of death after the demise of his alter ego—a fear that had been blithely sublimated into his brazen conquests earlier in the narrative—but he remains unable to resolve the deleterious import of his death anxiety.

Hence, the irony of Jung’s (1977) insistence that Enkidu stands for “the inferior part of ourselves” (p. 106), when Enkidu achieves in the midst of death anxiety a psychological breakthrough that eludes Gilgamesh. Nor can the Jungian interpretation compellingly unveil the meaning of the peculiar configuration of Gilgamesh’s selfhood into human and divine elements, beyond the dismissive assertion that “the level of developed consciousness was lower” (Kluger, 1991, p. 23) in the cultural milieu from which the epic arose. Quite the contrary: By making Gilgamesh two-thirds divine, the author of the epic revealed a psychologically robust conception of the ethereal ambitions of thanatophobic mortals. Gilgamesh’s is a petulant, presumptuous divinity even before he grasps the transience of his human form; he is an archetype not of the successful integration of the psychic contradictions of mortal existence, but of the identity-developmental pitfalls of the desire for immortality.

The Gilgamesh Complex: Major Zoocidal Practices

One could easily write a book-length psychological exegesis of the thanatophobic lineaments of the Gilgamesh epic, but the primary ambition of this article is instead the exegesis of the major zoocidal practices actuated by the Gilgamesh complex. When Gilgamesh dispatches the Bull of Heaven, for instance, his deed bears the hallmarks of zoocidal sacrifice, suffused with the conquest of the hunt and the sangfroid of domestic slaughter. “Gilgamesh, like a huntsman,/Thrusts his sword between nape and horns” (Leonard, 1934, p. 31). This bloody effrontery, more than any other, is responsible for the death of Enkidu at the hands of the gods; the slaughter of the bull is a mutinous sacrifice that draws ill will to its human performers rather than divine munificence (Hiltebeitel, 1980).

Sacrifice

Certainly, the most transparent rendering of the Gilgamesh complex lies in sacrifice. Out of the substance of animal life, sacrifice can engender an endless
variety of gifts, from viands for the gods to psychopomps for the recently departed, but the rite invariably aims to confer upon the most sentient of the animals the power over life that seems beyond the reach of sentience. Girard (1979) is quite correct when he avers that the sacrificial victim is a scapegoat for the mimetic violence within the community, and that the sacrifice restores a semblance of collective immortality to its sponsors. Dissecting the lethal animal rites of the Northern Lio people of the Flores Islands, anthropologist Howell (1996) likewise informs us that “sacrificial rituals are all perceived as life-promoting in a kind of circular manner” (p. 106). More often than not, the circle of life conjured in animal sacrifice is an anthropocentric one. Even sacrificial rituals that purport to benefit animals, such as the Mongolian aman khuzuu, target the prosperity of creatures with direct utility for people. Domestic animals are slaughtered in aman khuzuu as catalysts of regeneration, so that the death of a small number of animals can be exchanged for the lives of legions (Konagaya, 1997).

The sacralization of animal killing offsets the underlying anthropocentrism of ritual bloodshed with the belief in animal transcendence. The conviction that animals themselves transcend death, that animals possess immortal spirits and actively defy the confines of corporeal existence, incorporates zoocidal sacrifice seamlessly into the eternal cycles of the cosmos. In the Rock Cree ethos of animal killing, “the animal does not fear or resent the death” because “the soul survives the killing to be reborn or regenerated” (Brightman, 1993, p. 187)—so long, that is, as Rock Cree hunter-sacrificers follow the procedures of prestation that govern the predatory-prey relationship, like the mortuary deposition of spiritually significant bones on the limbs of trees. For these believers in animal transcendence, animals are “grateful prey” who subjugate themselves to the utilitarian concerns of humans in order to receive veneration and a sanctified means of physical regeneration. Brightman’s ethnographic survey of Rock Cree sacrificial rites demonstrates, however, that the ideology of animal-as-benefactor cannot completely efface the native attitude of predatory guile toward animals: “The respect and gratitude the [ritual] forms express are as real as the exploitation they conceal” (p. 211). A sacred ontology of animal vitality may not be exclusive of the exercise of human predatory prerogatives, but at least such an ontology avoids the commodified austerity of modern animal killing, in which animal transcendence tends to go no further than the guts of consumers.

The principal purpose of sacrifice, therefore, is the midwifery of the parturition of transcendence—both human and animal—of which actual childbirth is the corporeal analog (Meyer, 2005). Bloch (1992) speaks of the “rebounding violence” of sacrifice, of the brute-force procreation of transcendent vigor;
in this zoocidal ritual, the death of the animal victim is the centerpiece of the sacred alchemy of “conquered vitality obtained from outside beings” (p. 5). The need to heal the phenomenological schism between regeneration and killing frequently leads to further sacrifice within a hierarchy of victims, as if one death could ameliorate the guilt over another. Guilt can even be passed to inanimate objects: for example, the sacrificial knife in the Apollonian charnel temple, burdened with the shame of zoocide and tossed into the sea (Detienne, 1986). The same guilt drives Gilgamesh to clothe himself in the vestiges of his leonine prey, though his doing so is a death-denying renunciation of guilt rather than an earnest reckoning with remorse. Rebounding guilt is just as important a feature of sacrifice as rebounding violence—and no less difficult to erase. Repressed to varying degrees in those who strive to benefit from the deaths of animals, the guilt that flows from zoocide is a constitutive element of the Gilgamesh complex, a testament to the psychic scope of the conundrum of thanatophobic violence.

Blood

Within the annals of sacrifice, the substance most emblematic of the life force of animals is blood. Blood gives fauna an advantage over flora in the apportionment of biological vigor, at least as significant as autonomy of movement. The avoidance of blood in sacrificial ritual, which is much less common than energetic blood-letting, proceeds from a belief that to spill such a sacred fluid is sacrilegious, not from a dismissive attitude toward blood’s cosmic potency. The sacredness of blood also explains the religious slaughter practices of shechita and dhabiha, according to which the bodies of the slaughtered animals must be thoroughly drained of their blood lest the consumers of their flesh transgress upon the divine medium (Milgrom, 1997; Benkheira, 2000). Those repulsed by contact with animal blood are nonetheless frequently refreshed by the singular sense of plenitude that animal products seem to confer: the potency of blood without the sheen of mortality. Not that people necessarily shy away from direct exposure to blood’s scarlet mysteries: Red meat would hardly be so appealing for so many if it did not burgeon with evidence of sanguine vigor. Whether laced with incarnadine or not, animal products derive their distinctive desirability in a Gilgamesh-hued world from their association with the vascular juice of life.

Body Parts

In addition to their mystique as bearers of the aura of blood, the body parts of animals have the powers of clairvoyance locked within their labyrinthine lin-
eaments, powers that the rites of divination are designed to unleash. In scapulimancy, the reading of shoulder blades and turtle shells, or in haruspication, the reading of entrails, the human purveyors of divination peer into the hidden dimensions of time and space that shape the fates of human lives. In either case, the lives of animals are exchanged for human contact with transcendence, thereby bestowing upon people what Derrida (1995) calls “the gift of death.”

The parts of animals’ bodies typically selected for divinatory interpretation are telling: bone, the most amaranthine of faunal remains, and viscera, the most anatomically central of the mechanisms of zoological life. Bone is an intermediary between the unchanging substrate of inorganic creation—the stuff of the firmament—and the transient dynamism of organic creation. As such, it possesses special zones of access to the timeless supernatural processes that belie the capriciousness of human existence. When the scapulimantic diviners of the Shang Dynasty of China carved—and then heated—the plastrons of turtles, reading the resulting cracks as cartographic inscriptions of oracular truths, these Neolithic sages concerned themselves with pressing questions of human prosperity: whether a noblewoman would bear a child; whether a clan would emerge victorious from a conflict; or whether the climate would be amenable to a robust harvest (Chou, 1979). Analogously, the arts of haruspication take advantage of the innermost sanctity of the visceral organs in offering insight into the preternatural groundwork of human affairs. The liver in particular is a potentate of clairvoyance, honored by diviners from myriad cultures as the body’s repository of ethereal substance. Kodi diviners, for instance, construe hepatic morphology and coloration as earmarks of divine disposition or communal harmony (Hoskins, 1993). Rendered as receptacles of the empyrean discourses of cosmic design, the parts of animals are often ready-made resources in the human struggle against the uncertainties of temporal existence.

**Talismanic and Medicinal Powers**

Beyond their efficacy as cosmic texts, the bodies of animals can be invested with the talismanic tincture of good and evil. Like Prometheus, the user of the animal talisman is playing with fire, but of a much more sublunary sort, the holocaust of the grave. Both for the casual user of the talisman, the bearer of the rabbit’s foot keychain, and for the professional practitioner of the talismanic arts, the witch or the shaman, the charm carries the key to the cryptographic language of iniquity. Unraveling the secrets of the rabbit’s foot talisman, Ellis (2002) reveals it has historical roots as a “metonym for ritual murder.” In addition, some people in the Deep South in nineteenth-century
America thought that “the rabbit had to be shot at night in a graveyard as part of a prescribed ritual” (pp. 59, 60).

Believers in the talismanic power of animals dip vicariously into the evil of the grave in order to defy its dominion over their lives and the lives of those they wish to protect. The choreography of shamanism, employing the parts of animals in a dance of cosmic morality, is the most pervasive illustration of this plunge by proxy into the netherworld. Honoring their origins, some talismanic rituals harness evil in the malicious exaltation of self-interest; others eschew evil intent.

The ritual slaying of the brown wren, an annual festivity in the British Isles into the early twentieth century, transformed the daintiest of avian species into a bulwark against the sea’s most prodigious tempests—not to mention against a host of other misfortunes. Plucked from the crucified bird, the feathers of the wren could be preserved from one St. Stephen’s Day to the next in order to contravene all manner of cosmic connivance against human prosperity (Lawrence, 1997). From feathers to feet, animal talismans channel the ravages of perdition away from human plenitude. In doing so, however, they beg the question of the indelibility of evil, its embeddedness in whatever it touches, a question that lurks at the heart of the Gilgamesh complex.

While it is grappling with the grave, this complex transfigures the animal anatomy into a vast pharmacopoeia. What distinguishes the medicinal from the talismanic potency of prized faunal parts is their intimacy of interaction with human physiology, not simply with the mores of the beyond. The medicinal use of animals is also the most analogical of the manifestations of the Gilgamesh complex: many faunally derived folk pharmaceuticals are underlain by a theory of association between the animal and human forms.

These medicinal preparations take advantage of a perceived affinity between the attributes of the rendered animal and the nature of the patient’s malady. In many cases of zootherapy, the nexus between the animal’s attributes and the patient’s disorder is anatomical. Practitioners of folk medicine in Brazil commend the centipede as a tonic against leg ailments; apparently, the slithering arthropod has such a profusion of legs that the creature’s curative essence is distilled in this particular appendage (Costa-Neto, 2004). There is likewise no better remedy against male impotence in traditional Chinese medicine than the phallus of the tiger (Low & Tan, 2007). As do so many other medicinally treasured animal parts, this priapic organ conjoins the qualities of anatomy and behavior: The ferocity and virility of the tiger bestow upon its sexual anatomy a medicinal merit that the comparable parts of other animals possess less stupendously. Whatever the therapeutic associations between animal and human, the fragments and fluids of animal bodies offer a veritable apothecary of life-distilled elixirs for the afflicted human frame.
People in the clutches of infirmity, skimming the boundary between life and death, are all too eager to fortify themselves with the life force of animals, conveniently condensed into pharmacological form. So are people whose reproductive capacities have been compromised, imperiling their ability to transcend death through the propagation of future generations; this procreative imperative explains the slew of animal substances devoted to human sexual health.

The same urge for death transcendence inspires the scientific institution of animal sacrifice: the lethal oblation of laboratory specimens to the lords of life and death. That the white-coated priests of science themselves resort to the term “sacrifice” reveals more than fondness for euphemism: it exhumes the sacrificial principle of metempsychosis by proxy, of the divinely-mediated migration of the life force of animals into the sanctum of the human body. Of the modern incarnations of the Gilgamesh complex, zoocidal research evokes the dicest questions of practical merit, but pragmatism alone can hardly account for the rush to animal death in the pursuit of human betterment. Laboratory animals so often meet death in the name of science because the reaper of human lives seems impervious to any other kind of attack. Birke (2003) pinpoints the epic stakes in the scientific battle against human mortality:

...the place of rodents as key players in our salvation from illness symbolizes the ultimate triumph of good over evil—a process in which the rodents themselves are transformed from evil, disease-full vermin into sanitized, germ-free angels of mercy. (p. 214)

Science murmurs its shamanistic pretensions in its lethal preoccupation with the talismanic power of animals. The life-and-death etymology of the traditional term for experimentation on animals, “vivisection,” mirrors these pretensions. Inspired by their newfound contrivances against the vagaries of the grave, some early vivisectionists sought in their experiments a transfer of vitality that added mysticism to anatomy.

Jean Denis, a French transfusion-specialist in the seventeenth century, perceived in the blood of animals a super-human hardiness that could miraculously reverse the enervation of people in need of sanguinary sustenance. “Curiously,” Guerrini (1989) explains, “Denis believed that animal blood would have superior therapeutic value to the blood of a healthy human” (p. 403). This belief becomes less curious when we recall that the lives of animals appear closer to the cosmic fountainhead of death and regeneration than those of people. It is not so much instructive that Denis tried to push the boundaries of science toward novel remedies for the most refractory of human
maladies as it is that he relied quite literally on the lifeblood of animals in his enterprise.

**A Contemporary Picture**

**Scientific Researchers**

Following in Denis’s footsteps, many contemporary researchers rebuff the non-lethal alternatives to animal experimentation, disregarding the efficacy of these non-traditional methods, because the lethally distilled data seem more suffused with the ever-alluring elixir of immortality. The most analytical people ever to have walked the earth, modern scientists, have not lost the ancient conviction that nature is a zero-sum game in which humans are active players, that people can prompt the emergence of new life through the annulment of the old. If anything, researchers have raised the stakes of the game in the sheer magnitude of the scientific sacrifice of animals, erecting a veritable zoological necropolis in the pursuit of their craft.

**Regalia**

The hecatombs of animals sacrificed upon the altars of hominid exaltation have not only impregnated the human body with the fruits of salvation, but have also enveloped it in the accoutrements of splendor. Shorn of any regalia, the human body is remarkably impotent for a creature of such relentless appetites; therefore, those under the spell of the Gilgamesh complex surround themselves with the corporeal emblems of animal puissance.

Because social status is tantamount to cosmic benefaction, individuals blessed with prosperity regularly express their success in the trappings of animals, thereby seeming somehow less susceptible to the cruel ironies of terrestrial existence. Enshrouding oneself in the frippery of rendered animals is the most unequivocal expression of death-denying materialism—what several psychologists have called “a frenzied effort to use deception and illusion to acquire magic power over death” (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004, p. 135). Fur and leather in particular are common tokens of material abundance for the doraphilic shopper, the lover of animal skins who yearns for womb-like protection from the frailty of the human frame. Were it not for such a wellspring of doraphilic sentiment in modern consumer culture, marketing strategists would hardly be able to churn out trade publications with titles like “The Smell of Success—Exploiting the Leather Aroma” (Lente & Herman, 2001).
Fetishism

Inside the libidinal repository of the remnants of animals, we delve most deeply into the fetishism of the ornamental faunal talisman. The fur coat hanging enticingly over the frame of a contemporary woman, Emberley (1997) contends, exudes an amalgam of “female human sexuality and a bestial, carnal, carnivorous, and carnival-like sexuality” (p. 144).

Ironically, the allure of carnal sexuality, which spurs the erotic metamorphosis of the vestigial animal, lies more in the rapture of transcendence than in the groveling of the beast. From an evolutionary standpoint, sexual transcendence holds the promise of immortality through procreation. In many traditional societies, erotically endowed animal objects further the biological prosperity of the group through the burgeoning of family ties. By creating gifts of embroidered reindeer-skin handicrafts for the men they fancy, Rekinniki women of the northern Kamchatka peninsula facilitate family-building relationships with potential mates. Embodying the women's aptitudes and the animals’ attributes, these skin objects are talismans of reproductive power: The women offer themselves as kinship-engendering gifts within a system of patriarchal exchange (Rethmann, 2000).

Even if the underlying pursuit of transcendence is the same, however, human sexuality serves purposes other than reproductive success. The performance of gender roles in patriarchal society, especially masculinity, molds sexual behavior into social power, and the lives of animals are only so much fodder for these theatrical displays of identity. How much clout women can achieve by clothing themselves in carnal finery is dubious to say the least, but, leather-clad men are the epitome of prowess in societies that place a premium on machismo.

Convergence of Sexuality and Power

Where sexuality and power converge most implacably, the integuments of animals figure most prominently. Hence, the skins of animals are often indispensable tools in the rites of sadomasochism, adding an all-pervading element of dominion over life and death. Most tellingly of all, the term “masochism” comes eponymously from von Sacher-Masoch (2000). The doraphilic liturgies of sadomasochism, in the bedroom or in the fascist amphitheater, purport to dissolve the participants in a microcosm of divinity, fashioning the milieu of predatory mastery they need to stamp out their fear of futility. Wreathed in animal remains, the sadist has already vanquished the vitality of natural life, the first step in the subjugation of people. The masochist, on the other hand, finds method in the malice of autocratic authority, delegating responsibility
for victory over death to the powers that be. Either way, sadomasochists wallow in the skins of animals in order to neutralize their “sense of vital impotence” (Fromm, 1973, p. 326), of an endless ebbing of purpose in a world of boundless putrescence. People who resort so eagerly to the lifeblood of animals to stave off the vicissitudes of their own lives can easily become inured to truculence—if they are not already predisposed to it.

**Blood-Sports**

The shadow of sadism often casts its pall over animal blood-sports, the ultimate carnal syntheses of pleasure and predation. In blood sports, the primeval tables are turned: Once prey in the antediluvian landscape, people have evolved into choreographers of lethal play. The semblance of struggle in blood sports reminds the human participants of the strife of natural existence, while prolonging the satisfaction of human predatory triumph. What Ehrenreich (1997) labels “the rebellion against the beast” (p. 77) is the cornerstone of blood sports as varied as sword-fishing and bullfighting: sovereignty over the menace of restive animal life. Even Paleolithic hunters in biotically rich environments probably fulfilled more than nutritional needs in their exhausting, and often unsuccessful, pursuits of prey. For these ancient stalkers of game, although hardly recreational hunters in the modern sense, the lethal capture of animals in the wild was a cosmic gift of human endurance in a bloody and fickle universe. Noting the depletion of megafauna by Paleolithic hunters, Ehrenreich insists that such “overkill … must have been, to those humans who engaged in it, a dramatic proof of human predatory prowess” (p. 119).

For present-day blood-sport enthusiasts, animal bloodshed serves purposes far outside the bounds of nutritional exigency, nourishing these people instead with the pabulum of death transcendence. The bow-hunter releasing his arrow into the heart of his antler-festooned quarry, or the angler wrestling with the scaly denizen of the deep, feels the frisson of his own fitness for survival, his seeming immunity to death, in the throes of his prey. So too do the aficionados of the Spanish bullfight, who jeer at death in the raucous cheers with which they greet each flesh-piercing maneuver of the matador. Hardly gifted with the physical attributes of consummate predators, the devotees of blood sports fight tooth and nail to overcome their sense of corporeal vulnerability in a precarious universe, setting their existential sights on the “out-animaling of the animal” (Marvin, 2007, p. 63).
Human Carnivory

No expression of the Gilgamesh complex is more indelibly inscribed in the lexicon of blood than human carnivory. For members of affluent modern societies, within easy economic reach of nature’s cornucopia, indulging in carnivory may rank among the most banal forms of material consumption, but the flesh of animals has a long pedigree as a talismanic foodstuff par excellence. If the gargantuan charnel houses of the meat industry are any indication, modern human carnivores have gained a fathomless fondness for animal flesh even as they have grown oblivious to the roots of their voracity. Those in the thrall of meat’s carnal piquancy seek the visceral ingestion of nature’s regenerative essence, even if all evidence of the blood-drenched provenance of meat has been removed from the final shrink-wrapped product. Divorcing blood from meat does not diminish the human appetite for transcendent invigoration; nor do the nutritional pitfalls of animal flesh deter most people from relishing the mystical fortifying power of blood-fed tissue. Taking a cue from Douglas (1966), anthropologist Fiddes (1991) describes meat as a “natural symbol” that “provides perhaps the ultimate authentication of human superiority over the rest of nature” (p. 65). More than a mere symbol of conquest, meat is the only widespread food purported to operate talismanically within the human body, exorcising from our very marrow the taint of the grave.

The carnivory of the evolutionary antecedents of Homo sapiens, or the prevalence of carnivory in human evolutionary history, is not nearly as revealing as the ensemble of death-denying beliefs surrounding meat consumption, for it is clear that human adaptive flexibility trumps compulsory carnivory. Those scientists who invoke evolutionary necessity in explanations of human carnivory have fallen prey to the carnal seductions of meat, allowing their gustatory proclivity for the carnivorous status quo to color their scientific analysis the shade of gushing crimson. They render flimsy evidence into “extreme statements touting animal protein as a magical food of which human beings can never get enough” (Diener, Moore, & Mutaw, 1980, p. 178).

Ironically, meat would hardly be so desirable, for fillet-loving scientists or for less analytical carnivores, were it not for the magical qualities ascribed to animal flesh. Aside from the time-worn practice of the rapturous consumption of the consecrated remnants of the sacrificial beast, the strongest ethnological evidence for the talismanic texture of meat lies in the numerous taboos in cultures and religions around the globe against the ingestion of the flesh of certain animals. As Douglas (1966) and others have shown, which animals become the subjects of gastronomic taboos largely depends on the liminal spaces in the cosmic classification schemes of the social groups in question; the tissue of tabooed animals is threatening to human welfare because its
consumption would violate sacrosanct gradations in the ordering of the universe. Across a wide swath of cultural and religious customs, faunal taboos so dramatically outweigh floral taboos because animals throb more electrifyingly with the pulse of celestial life than does vegetable matter. Notwithstanding the Judeo-Christian story of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, the taboo-minded gourmand tampers more readily with good and evil in a smorgasbord of animal remains than in a garden-variety feast. Stamped with the scarlet letter of death and rebirth, meat glistens with the allure of transcendence over bestial mortality, enticing carnivorously inclined people the world over to gorge themselves on the very fiber of animal vitality.

If filthy lucre is the root of all evil, the most insidious form of cultural pollution, then meat is the hallowed currency of cultural regeneration. Drawing its talismanic fire from the fountainhead of natural fruitfulness, meat promises to breathe new life into the blood ties of the social body. At the communal feast, with its menagerie of animal carcasses, the bonds between the flesh-devouring diners are cemented in blood, regardless of the actual degree of consanguinity between particular individuals. The blood of animals, in other words, transforms human consanguinity from social fiction into natural fact. Dealings with strangers might demand crude tokens of material value, lifeless trinkets of paper and metal; however, the commerce of kinship feeds upon the vital materialism of which meat is the carnal currency.

Among the Napo Runa people of Ecuadorian Amazonia, the meat of game animals is an invaluable ingredient in rituals of social integration, bestowing the blessing of animate nature upon human intercourse. Animal flesh turns Napo Runa friends into siblings, neighbors into parents, and in-laws into blood relatives. Uzendoski (2004), who performed a decade of field work among the Napo Runa, found that sharers of the currency of meat “become related to one another in a way not possible outside of ritual context” (p. 895). No doubt the same desire to write the social contract in blood inspired a small group of well-to-do Englishmen to form “The Sublime Society of Beef Steaks,” a morbidly venerable institution that sated the appetites of blue-blooded carnivores from 1735 until 1866 (Lincoln, 1985).

**Collective Immortality**

With nothing less at stake than collective immortality, groups of all stripes traffic in the somatic proceeds of animal dismemberment in order to nourish the solidarity of their members in the crusade against death. In many traditional societies, the bodies of animals—once-living assemblages of harmoniously aligned parts—are construed as maps of the variegated anatomy of the social body; the ritual apportionment of faunal remains at communal feasts is
a catalyst for the cultural assimilation of the ineffable equilibrium of the animal form. When the Kodi of Indonesia prepare to dine upon the sacrificial buffalo, the parts of the animal are disseminated “according to an elaborate protocol based on seniority, clan membership, and participation in earlier feasts” (Hoskins, 1993, p. 161). Such ceremonial dismemberment evokes the paradox of the Gilgamesh complex, of the transfiguration of the corporeal fragments of the animal into the unity of the community and the cosmos. In industrial societies, the dictates of efficiency have propelled animal dismemberment to extremes of infinitesimal exactness: the unmitigated subdivision of the animal frame, even to the molecular level, mirrors the relentless social atomization wrought by capitalism.

How indefinitely such a finely grained social order can perpetuate itself remains to be seen, but the industrialized collective has undoubtedly mastered the art of the dispersal of the puissance of the animal frame to the farthest reaches of the social body and beyond the most febrile dreams of the progenitors of the sacrificial feast. Only a drive-thru away from as much meat as their stomachs desire, capitalist consumers have nature’s blood-drenched bullion at their fingertips, no matter their disposable incomes or real-estate holdings. Dwarfting the greenback or gold ingot with its talismanic exchange rate, meat is the world’s most vital currency, an instrument of transcendent enrichment in societies that value liquid assets with a crimson hue.

**Conclusion**

In his quest for death transcendence, Gilgamesh may not dine upon hamburgers or dissect laboratory specimens, but his attitude toward animal life is one that most people in the modern industrial world share to some degree. Embroiled in the contradictions of mortal existence, we often follow the path of Gilgamesh in relying upon the lifeblood of animals to protect us from the whims of the cosmos. Rarely is our fear of death as all-consuming as Gilgamesh’s thanatophobia, for we employ a legion of psychic stratagems to keep our existential anxiety in check.

Like Gilgamesh, however, we hardly heed the import of the violence we heap upon our animal kin, preferring to chase the ever-retreating mirage of blood redemption. We would do well instead to heed the immortal words of Becker (1975): “…the unfolding of history is precisely the saga of the succession of new and different ideologies of organismic self-perpetuation—and the new injustices and heightened destructiveness of historical man” (p. 25).

Standing firm in the midst of this saga of cultural evolution is the ideology of blood redemption in its many zoocidal guises. As we face the cataclysmic
violence that the Gilgamesh complex has unleashed on the fauna of our planet, it is high time that we redeem ourselves in a manner fitting our species: not with our powers to inflict death, but with our noble gifts of compassion and creativity, however fleetingly we may possess them.

References


