

Can Animals Play?

Geroges Bataille interpreted by Mitchell & Winfree, in:

THE OBSESSIONS OF
GEORGES BATAILLE

Community and Communication

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The edge between human and animal, too, is at stake, visibly so in the manifest identity of the images themselves. In the text of “The Birth of Eros,” Bataille returns again and again to the theme of the animal/human distinction. He is not concerned with the visible differences between the two (or rather, several) species but with what activity sets humans apart from animals. His first answer is that this activity is a form of *work*: “[I]f it is true that work is our origin, if it is true that work is the key to humanity, human beings, through work, ended up distancing themselves completely from animality” (OC 10: 591/TE 42).² The distancing, then, is not only from animals per se, those “other” living beings with whom we share the earth, but from *our own* animality, as Bataille makes clear in this passage: “Of course, it is work that separated man from his initial animality. It is through work that the animal became human. Work was, above all else, the foundation for knowledge and reason” (OC 10: 591/TE 41).

In addition to work, human beings also play, and Bataille does not hesitate to invoke play in his efforts to hold animals and humans apart. In fact, play is even more crucial than work in establishing this apartness—especially when it is allied with the creation of art: “In the end, it is not work, but *play*, that marked the advent of art and the moment when work became in part, in genuine masterpieces, something other than a response to the concern for utility. Indeed, man is essentially an animal who works. But he also knows how to change work into play.