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Editor’s Introduction

It is my pleasure to present the fall/winter 2016 volume of Cutting Edge, on the theme of “Human and Animal”. This meaty topic has captured a lot of my own energies over the years, and I am clearly not alone in this interest. The myriad of relationships that we find ourselves involved in with fellow animal inhabitants of the earth, has proven an enduring source of fascination for scientists, artists, and intellectuals alike.

That is not to say, however, that the alliance is free of challenges. While some of the relationships that exist between humans and others are forged on a basis of harmony and reciprocity, others are less enthusiastically endured, and sadly many provoke fatal conflict. Equally as there are many shapes and forms to these bonds, so too are there almost limitless ways to explore and observe the relationship. Within this volume we include various contributions that demonstrate just a few of the wide-ranging and interdisciplinary ways in which the subject may be approached.

The first article in the volume, “Researching the Human-Canine Relationship Using Focus Groups” by Nandini Maharaj and Arminee Kazanjian, describes the use of focus groups as a methodology for collecting information on people’s experiences of relationships with their canine companions.

The second piece, “The Precarious Art of Interspecies Conservation” by Justin Morris, addresses some of the philosophical challenges that encumber our attempts to meaningfully interact with other creatures.

The third article, “Dogs and Us”, by Caroline Kilsdonk, takes a look at the human-canine bond from a veterinarian ethics of care perspective, and discusses how the longstanding relationship between these two species has shaped the cognitive and social abilities of dogs.
The final article in this issue is a photographic essay by Allison Boyrer. “Have you Herd” documents equine-assisted interventions as a form of therapy that is now being made available to military veterans and other individuals dealing with mental health challenges.

The book review section of this volume features an impressive, perspicacious analysis by Justin Morris of Matthew Calarco’s book Thinking Through Animals.

I hope you enjoy sampling the work in this volume. In closing, I have two final comments. Firstly I would like to issue a reminder to scholars that the journal is open for submissions for 2017. The main theme for the next volume is “Culture and Community”, however submissions on any subject are always accepted and will be carefully reviewed. Please contact the editorial board directly for more details, or send us a short abstract for consideration. Secondly I would like to acknowledge the work of others in the production of this journal; Noel Kreuz who has been instrumental in getting each copy to press, all of the ISGP department who have continued to offer valuable support to the journal, and lastly my co-editor, Kyle Farquharson, without which the last two volumes would simply not have been possible. Thank you all!

Cluny South
Co-Editor, Cutting Edge
Abstracts and Bios

Researching the Human-Canine Relationship using Focus Groups

Authors: Nandini Maharaj and Arminée Kazanjian

Abstract: In this case study, we describe the use of focus groups to collect information about people’s relationships with their companion dogs. Wood, Giles-Corti, Bulsara, and Bosch (2007), in their mixed methods research, have described dogs as “social catalysts,” facilitating interactions between people. To study the experiences of dog owners, the use of focus groups was intended to create a research environment in which participants would feel comfortable with sharing their experiences similar to when dog owners interact with each other in real-world settings such as neighbourhoods, parks, and beaches. Although data collection and analysis tend to operate in parallel throughout qualitative research, this case is focused primarily on the steps undertaken during data collection. We begin by describing the purpose and epistemological framework of the study. We provide a rationale for the use of focus groups, detailing the recruitment process, the development of the focus group questions, and the role of group facilitators. Following a step-by-step description of the method in action, we offer practical suggestions for how to cope with some of the challenges of conducting focus groups. We conclude by highlighting some unique rewards of using qualitative methods in health research.

Bios:

Nandini Maharaj is a PhD candidate in the Interdisciplinary Studies Graduate Program with the School of Population and Public Health as her home department. Extending her Master’s work, her research explores how coping strategies among cancer survivors may be enhanced through the human-companion animal relationship. This work is inspired by and dedicated to her dog, Dally.

Arminée Kazanjian is Professor, School of Population and Public Health, Faculty of Medicine. A Sociologist by training and a recognized health services researcher, Dr. Kazanjian’s most recent work is in cross-cultural cancer care, from prevention to palliation, and psychosocial oncology. Her work aims to increase access to supportive care for cancer survivors and their families.

The Precarious Art of Interspecies Conversation

Author: Justin Morris

Abstract: Josephine Donovan’s (2006) “dialogical ethic of care” is meant to steer our one-way interactions with animals in the direction of meaningful dialogue. Two key claims underpin her approach. First, we ought to “shift the epistemological source of theorizing about animals to animals themselves” (305). Second, we “must respect their wishes in any human decision making about their condition” (315). In this paper, I suggest there is little hope of making good on these claims and that aspiring interspecies conversationalists might better serve other species in silence.
Bio: Justin Morris is a 4th year Ph.D. Candidate in Philosophy at McMaster University. His research focuses on the ethical interrelations between anthropogenic climate change, the globally impoverished, and our treatment of animals. Currently he is employed as a researcher at the Institute on Ethics and Policy for Innovation (IEPI).

Dogs and Us

Author: Dr. Caroline Kilsdonk

Abstract: Dogs have evolved in proximity to human populations for at least 15 000 years and this has shaped their cognitive and social abilities. They share a common ancestor with wolves and as gregarious animals, they have various pro-social behaviors. Behavioral social and affective neuroscience explore the brain functions and processes. We now know dogs recognize faces, react to human emotions and even adopt consoling behaviors. It has also been demonstrated that dogs can develop attachment bonds for other dogs and also for humans. Many hormones are involved in the biology of human-canine interactions and bonds, both for the dog and the human involved. In the case of positive relationships, these can be contributive to human well-being in a similar way to relationships between humans.

Bio: Dr. Caroline Kilsdonk is a M.A. candidate in the Bioethics program at École de santé publique de l’Université de Montréal. She is also a veterinarian and previously studied human gerontology. Her research explores the human-animal bond and the ethics of care. She dedicates this work to all the geriatric patients she visits with her standard poodles.

Have you Herd?

Author: Allison Boyrer

Abstract: Many military veterans are returning from war with physical and mental health needs, as well as complex reintegration requirements. Equine-Assisted Interventions (EAI) are practiced at the Colorado Therapy Horses (CTH) and the Wounded Human Project in Greeley, Colorado, where various therapy options are available including the unique equine therapy of "Natural Humanship Training" or NHT. This photographic article contains photographs of the animals involved in EAI at the STEPS Sanctuary and Foundation for Horses and Humans in Longmont, Colorado, as well as the herd at CTH.

Bio: Allison E. Boyrer, MA, BSN, RN received her nursing degree from Syracuse University and her Master of Art in Physical Education from University of South Florida-Tampa. Allison recently moved from Florida, where she managed and owned a holistic healthcare clinic. She is currently a faculty member and student studying towards her Master of Science in nursing degree, with a concentration on Veteran & Military Healthcare at the University of Colorado, Anschutz Medical Campus. Her devotion and dedication to animals is profound, and acts as a community ambassador for Canines Providing Assistance to Wounded Warriors (C-P.A.W.W.)- whose mission is to comprehensively advance interdisciplinary research, education and practice protocols for wounded warriors and veterans through the development of evidence-based and restorative interventions, to
support military-related health initiatives by building community partnerships, to investigate therapeutic interventions--particularly those involving canine assistance--that positively influence health outcomes, and to emphasize system planning, innovative public policymaking, and thorough protocols of care development for the armed forces.

**Book Review: Thinking through Animals**

Author: Justin Morris
Researching the Human-Canine Relationship Using Focus Groups

Background to the Research

Some of our experiences have a lasting significance. They can stir something within us, propelling us to new sources of meaning and insight. We may marvel at the unexpected warmth we feel when reading a story that is similar to our own or, pertinent to the present study, when petting a beloved companion dog.

In previous studies, researchers have conventionally imposed their own interpretation of the kinds of relationships (e.g. parent-child, friendship) that people have with their dogs or have ignored this relationship altogether (Cohen, 2002; McNicholas & Collis, 2000; Ryan & Ziebland, 2015). Moreover, surveys that make simple comparisons between dog owners and non-dog owners have done little to capture the meaning and significance of the human-canine bond (Campo & Uchino, 2013; Walsh, 2009a). An examination of the potential health benefits of dogs would be incomplete without an adequate understanding of the qualitative aspects of the relationship and the practices that potentially underlie these benefits (McNicholas & Collis, 2000).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore people’s perceptions of their companion dogs in the context of home and family life. Twenty-seven dog owners (aged 17 to 74) were invited to take part in focus group discussions. We made an exception to the age requirement (at least 19 years old). One participant, under the age of 19, was accompanied by a parent. The term “companion dog” was used to reflect the sense of psychological accompaniment that dogs can provide (Blazina, 2011).

Approaching Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative approaches offer health researchers concrete methods to engage with a variety of research questions. This is not to say that the methods are fixed or rigid, but rather that they can be carried out in a systematic way and modified during the research process (Cresswell, 2007; Morrow, 2007). Researchers can explore the nuances of a particular topic, thereby gaining novel insights and building upon the extant literature. In the Canadian cultural context where dogs tend to be described as providing unconditional
love and companionship, it is important to understand the complexity of the human-canine bond, including both its positive and negative aspects (Ryan & Ziebland, 2015). For some people, having a dog enhances their mood, whereas other people experience loneliness and poorer health (Chur-Hansen, Stern, & Winefield, 2010). Much scholarly research on the relationship between human-canine interactions and human health relies principally on quantitative measurement and detached observation (Fraser, 2009; Shen-Miller, 2011). Such methods are appropriate when seeking objective answers but are out-of-place when attempting to study people’s subjective experiences. In-depth analysis of the experiences of people and their dogs warrants an epistemological framework that enables the researcher to study the meanings people attribute to their experiences. One such framework is the theory of social constructionism (Flick, 2014).

According to Pascale (2011), social constructionists begin with a belief that the ways in which people experience the world are socially constructed through shared meanings. In the context of the human-canine relationship, epistemological questions (e.g. how do I know?) may arise when considering the absence of a shared (i.e. verbal or non-verbal) language of the kind that is observed between members of the same species. People don’t really know what their dogs are thinking, yet they attempt to make meaning from their experiences with their dogs. The ways in which people describe their experiences and the meaning they attribute to them represent knowledge that is grounded in empirical evidence (e.g. an excerpt from an interview) (Pascale, 2011). Along with eliciting information that is relevant to the research question, researchers should also remain open and attentive to topics that are raised by the participants. In this study, focus groups were chosen as a vehicle to explore these meaning-making processes as they unfold when people gather together to talk about their relationship with their dogs.

**Research Design**

**Rationale for Focus Groups**

Through systematic and verifiable procedures, the purpose of focus groups is to explore participants’ views rather than to reach consensus on an issue (Krueger & Casey, 2009). As Krueger and Casey (2009) suggest, although larger groups (i.e. 5 to 10 people)
are desirable in some cases, smaller groups (i.e. 3 or 4) allow members greater opportunity to share their ideas. Participants are typically homogenous (for example, all dog owners) with respect to the phenomenon under study. Researchers may conceive of homogeneity in a relatively broad or narrow sense depending on their objectives (Flick, 2014). To use the example of health care providers, a focus group comprising only nurses may yield richer insights than a group featuring both nurses and doctors. In the latter case, participants may have a more limited understanding of each other’s experiences. Nurses and doctors share similar work environments, yet their accompanying roles and responsibilities differ such as the time spent with patients and the way in which they interact with patients and families. When participants are able to relate to each other’s experiences, they are more likely to share with other group members and expand upon each other’s stories and recollections—a particular strength of focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

The less directive nature of focus groups makes it possible to derive more information compared to individual interviews or surveys. Compared to interviews, which may seem artificial or contrived, focus groups can mirror natural conversation patterns between people (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Participants are invited to discuss their views with minimal direction from the researcher. Focus groups can capture a range of opinions. A unique feature of focus groups is the interactive and reciprocal nature of the discussions (Vogt, King, & King, 2004). Focus groups allow participants to comment and build upon each other’s ideas, and can illuminate people’s perceptions within their unique social settings.

As with any kind of self-reported data, participants’ responses may be influenced by the social desirability bias—in other words, some group participants may feel pressured to conform to the views held by other participants. There are various reasons for this bias. For instance, some people may be reluctant to discuss challenging aspects of dog ownership such as financial pressures. It is also not uncommon to see reports in the mainstream media about the benefits of dog ownership, and these portrayals may influence the participants’ views. We attempted to minimize these concerns by attending to divergent viewpoints and remaining neutral in response to participants’ comments (Krueger & Casey, 2009).
Eligibility Criteria

Prior to data collection, we obtained ethical approval from the University of British Columbia. Dog owners (n=27) volunteered to participate in one of seven focus group discussions. Those eligible to participate were 19 years of age and older, currently residing with at least one dog, and fluent in English. The criteria were based on the goal of capturing the experiences of dog owners at various stages of adulthood.

Recruitment Process

Flyers were posted in community settings such as coffee shops and pet stores. Word-of-mouth recommendations from previous participants in the study were a valuable driver of further recruitment. The groups were arranged through contact by email or phone. Scheduling the groups at different times and on different days of the week enabled a range of people to participate, including students, homemakers, workers, and retirees. One participant took part on Skype. All but one of the group sessions were conducted in person at the first author’s home.

While focus groups conducted by phone or online can permit people in different geographic locations to take part in the discussion, missing is the ability to read and respond to other participants’ non-verbal behaviour and facial expressions (Flick, 2014). Online communication can provide a sense of anonymity, thus potentially enhancing self-disclosure. However, one downside is that participants may become distracted by doing other tasks online (e.g. email, social media).

Developing Questions for Focus Groups

Based on a literature review, we developed a set of open-ended focus group questions, called the interview guide. Designed to promote consistency across the groups, the interview guide followed a semi-structured format. The first question was intended to stimulate discussion: “Let’s hear about what your dog is like and your relationship with him or her?” More general questions followed, such as “Can you tell us what having a dog means for you in your everyday life?” The introductory portion of the interview guide helped to provide some context for the discussion of key questions: “What are some things that you and your dog do that are meaningful to you?” The last question encouraged participants to consider the perceptions of other people: “What do you think your dog
means to other people in your family?”

The Role of Group Facilitators

A graduate student with experience in facilitating groups served as the interviewer and facilitator. Two aspects of the interviewer’s role were to allow sufficient time for the discussion of key questions and to probe for clarification, explanation, and illustrative examples. The first author’s role during the discussions was largely limited to recording summary statements and process notes (for example, observations about group dynamics) on flip charts. The purpose of the flip charts was to record participant feedback during the discussions. In addition to promoting accuracy, this strategy encouraged the participants to reflect upon each other’s comments and draw connections to their own experiences.

Focus Groups in Action

Size, Number, and Composition of Focus Groups

Most groups consisted of three or four members. The groups were homogenous (i.e. all dog owners), yet had sufficient diversity (in terms of factors like age, occupational status, parenting status, duration of dog ownership) to permit contrasting viewpoints. The sessions lasted 1.5 hours on average. We conducted four group sessions and then determined that additional sessions were needed to ensure sufficient coverage of the topic. This decision was based on the goal of achieving theoretical saturation, which Morgan (1996) describes as the point at which no new information arises from subsequent sessions. Information that is redundant or that replicates content which has been discussed previously by participants is considered to be evidence of theoretical saturation (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Opening the Discussion

We began each session by welcoming the participants and explaining the purpose of the study. We also reminded them of the intended use of the results and the manner in which they would be reported. Next, the participants were asked to review and complete the informed consent form. After discussing group norms and the subject of confidentiality, our aim was to create an atmosphere of safety in which participants could feel comfortable sharing their experiences.
Developing Norms

The interviewer invited the participants to spend five to 10 minutes developing some guidelines or norms for participation which were recorded on a flip chart. The norms were intended to help ensure that the interviews proceeded in a respectful manner (for instance, each member had a chance to speak, all views were respected). Few participants raised the issue of confidentiality, except for the topic of animal abuse. More often, participants seemed surprised by our emphasis on confidentiality. Consequently, it is important to be aware of the balance between relational ethics (i.e. how we interact with participants) and our ethical duty to obtain informed consent and maintain confidentiality (Tracy, 2010).

Facilitating the Discussion

After the participants introduced themselves and their dog(s), the tape began recording. When the discussions veered away from the purpose of the study, the interviewer would pose questions to help the group stay on topic. Keeping track of time and consulting with participants, the interviewer determined when it was appropriate to move on to the next question. Although the interview guide was predetermined, some participants brought up ideas early in the discussion that had stronger relevance to the key questions. In such cases, the interviewer allowed the participants to continue discussing a particular topic and then returned to any questions that were missed. Overall, the participants required minimal prompting.

Closing the Discussion

At the end of each discussion, the interviewer asked the participants to review the statements recorded on the flip charts. The participants had an opportunity to confirm or disconfirm the accuracy of the statements. Some participants brought up ideas not mentioned previously or provided additional clarification on a specific topic. After obtaining the participants’ agreement, the interviewer closed the discussion. At this time, the tape stopped recording. Debriefing involved thanking the participants for their time and inviting them to share any lasting impressions about the discussion. For data analysis, our intention was to use content analysis to develop themes by systematically coding and categorizing the data (Krueger & Casey, 2009). In this approach, the group is considered
the main unit of analysis, and themes are derived by analyzing the participants’ responses within and across the focus group sessions.

Practical Lessons Learned

Expect the Unexpected

Focus groups entail a number of practical considerations. One of the lessons the authors gleaned from this study is to expect the unexpected. While most groups consisted of three or four members, there was a group with only two members and another with seven members. In the former case, two participants did not show up to the group and we went ahead with two people. In the latter case, two additional participants arrived unexpectedly who had been informed about the study by a previous participant. We allowed these participants more time to review the consent form and extended the length of the discussion to ensure that everyone had a chance to speak.

Dealing with Group Composition

A few participants reported being moderately or closely acquainted with other people who took part in the study. For example, one couple attended a group together, and a parent and adult child asked to attend separate groups. Accordingly, it is useful to consider the issue of prior contact between participants, and, if needed, offer them an opportunity to attend different groups.

Warming Up to Each Other

The participants initially directed their comments toward the group facilitators rather than each other. As the discussions unfolded, participants began asking each other direct questions or expressing their agreement or disagreement. Taking on a relaxed and conversational tone, these exchanges promoted spontaneity. Humour appeared to enhance self-disclosure as participants laughed in response to each other’s comments or at the antics of the dogs who were present.

Managing Group Dynamics
In a few groups, participants openly disagreed with comments made by other group members. Areas of disagreement were veterinary care, dog food, pet care during work or travel, and coping with the loss of a pet. Participants responded by offering support and comfort to other group members. While it may be necessary for the facilitators to intervene at times, allowing the participants to work through areas of disagreement is also a valuable part of the process. Compared to the preparation involved in conducting one-on-one interviews, focus groups are not simply a matter of adding more people to an interview. In focus groups, a considerable amount of the dialogue and interaction takes place between the participants rather than just between the researcher and participant. In managing group dynamics, it is essential to keep in mind that each participant’s safety and well-being is of the utmost importance. As researchers, we can engage in self-reflection through journaling or discussing our reactions and experiences with our supervisors and colleagues.

**Conclusion**

We began this case study with a statement about experiences that have a lasting significance. A participant in one group commented: “I'm a person of value because my dog wants to be with me.” These words have endured in my memory (first author) and perhaps exemplify one of the benefits of researching the human-canine relationship using qualitative methods. Namely, such methods permit the researcher to understand the meaning of people's experiences and how these meanings come about through the research process (Pascale, 2011).

Without being asked directly, many participants discussed the impact of dog ownership on their physical and emotional health. Studying people’s experiences can reveal aspects of health that we may not have anticipated, such as our finding that some people viewed their relationships with their dogs as having a spiritual dimension. Another unanticipated finding was that dogs both enhanced people’s social networks and made it more difficult for them to maintain particular friendships and relationships.

It is not uncommon for health researchers to treat dogs and pets, in general, as a distraction during data collection (Ryan & Ziebland, 2015). Nonetheless, even if pets are
not the focus of a study, underestimating their importance for a person’s health and well-being is a serious omission. From a social constructionist view, language and text may not always do justice to the experiences we wish to capture, yet we ask people questions and we write up our results. We can use other methods (e.g. photography, videos) of course. Regardless, these are precisely the kinds of issues and uncertainties with which qualitative researchers must grapple (van Manen, 2014).

**Authors: Nandini Maharaj and Arminée Kazanjian**

**Further Readings**


**References**

The Precarious Art of Interspecies Conversation

Many things that human words have harmed are restored again by the silence of animals.
— Joy Williams

ABSTRACT. Josephine Donovan (2006) intends to displace our monological treatment of animals with a “dialogical ethic of care.” Two claims are central to her approach. First, we ought to “shift the epistemological source of theorizing about animals to animals themselves” (305). Second, we “must respect their wishes in any human decision making about their condition” (315). The purpose of this paper is accordingly twofold: To show there is little hope of making good on these claims, and to argue that our silence and humility better serve the dialogical interests of other species.

* 

Josephine Donovan (2006) believes animals\(^1\) can speak. Maybe not in the form of complete sentences, mind you. But it might not seem so farfetched to care about “what they are telling us” (305) if only humans were willing to hear them out.\(^2\) So why aren’t we listening? For one thing, Donovan thinks we are more eager to eat animals than go through the trouble of valuing their communicative presence.\(^3\) For another, philosophers mistakenly

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\(^1\) I am aware that “animals” serves as a clumsy catchall term that runs the representational gamut from honeybees to ring-tailed lemurs, banana slugs to magpies, and so on. But I don’t find “nonhuman animals” very appealing given that it defines other beings in terms of what they are not (namely human). Marti Kheel’s (2008) preference for “individual other-than-human beings” (16) is also too much of a mouthful for my liking. So I’m stuck with “animals” until something better comes along.

\(^2\) You might wonder if an “unwillingness to listen” applies to predatory animals. After all, aren't they guilty of ignoring the cries of their prey? I doubt it. Predators aren’t capable of waltzing down to the street to the nearest grocery store to satisfy their nutritional requirements. Nor do they have the ability to imbue their eating habits with any moral significance. As a result, they cannot be expected to engage in the kind of deliberation required to consider alternative courses of action. Most humans—at least the ones reading fine academic journals like this one—have these abilities and can, at least in theory, make good on Donovan’s injunction to seriously consider what animals are telling us. So the question becomes what, exactly, are they telling us, and whether Donovan’s answer is compelling. (For reasons to be discussed in the pages ahead, I think it’s fairly implausible.)

\(^3\) The idea is to broaden the notion of meaningful dialogue—or conversation as I’ve put it—to make room for the communicative presence of other species. So, to meet me and Donovan halfway, it’s important to resist the image of humans and animals gathered around a table, chatting it up with one another—which, if she’s right, is an image that merely illuminates the kind of problematic anthropocentric thinking which prevents one from respecting the desires and wishes of other species.
argue that if animals “don’t count as rational agents” (Carruthers, 2010, 2), then whatever they might “tell us” is devoid of substantive content and merely the product of human projection. These views cater to the monological treatment of animals and Donovan believes they need a dialogical solution. Two key claims underpin her approach. First, we ought to “shift the epistemological source of theorizing about animals to animals themselves” (305). Second, we “must respect their wishes in any human decision making about their condition” (315). In what’s ahead, I suggest there is little hope of making good on these claims and argue that our silence and humility better serve the dialogical interests of other species.

I.

Donovan’s dialogical approach pivots around the idea that we “should not kill, eat, torture, and exploit animals because they do not want to be so treated, and we know that” (Donovan, 1990, 375). Her analysis takes after other feminist care theorists who eschew “abstract, rule-based principles in favor of situational, contextual ethics, allowing for a narrative understanding of the particulars of a situation or an issue” (Donovan & Adams, 2007, 2). Sympathy, compassion, and care—which some philosophers regard as

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4 Donovan’s dialogical ambitions aren’t sui generis. Val Plumwood (2002) similarly argued that “perhaps the most important task for human beings is not to search the stars to converse with cosmic beings but to learn to communicate with other species that share this planet with us” (189). To meet this need, Plumwood devised a “dialogical interspecies ethic” where one becomes receptive to the “unanticipated possibilities and aspects of the non-human other” by “reconceiving and re-encountering them as potentially communicative” (195). Donovan (2006), however, distances herself from Plumwood’s position inasmuch as “she inconsistently argues that it is ethically permissible to kill and eat nonhumans under this ethic” (321). For Donovan, this “would seem to defeat the purpose of a dialogical ethic, which is to respond ethically to what the ‘communicative other’ is telling one, namely, and invariably, that he does not want to be killed and eaten” (321). But, as we’ll see shortly, there are culturally specific ways of ontologizing animals as food that complicate Donovan’s criticism of Plumwood.

5 Within the context of feminist care theory, this claim isn’t unique to Donovan. Marti Kheel, Deane Curtin, Greta Gaard, Christine Cuomo, Lori Gruen, Carol J. Adams, and other (eco)feminist theorists have made academic careers out of insisting that “empathetic imagination is more critically important than conscious reasoning or choice” (Kheel, 2008, 224). Their message runs contrary to the popular trend in animal ethics—largely influenced by the works of Peter Singer (2002) and Tom Regan (2004)—which establishes a profound discontinuity between reason and emotion. Aside from having very little to do with our actual neurophysiological makeup (see, for example, Chisholm 1999 and Damasio 2005; 2010), an emphasis on the power of reason overlooks how speciesism operates as a “social structure and ideology [that] intersects with other modalities of oppression and domination” (Sabonmatsu, 2011, 19). Naturally I side with the feminist care theorists on this issue. Disavowing reason from emotion is too high a theoretical premium to pay for the false reassurance of logical rigour.
incompatible with rationality\textsuperscript{6}—are Donovan’s privileged sources for stimulating ethical interspecies interaction. Given the more traditional approaches in animal ethics invariably privilege reason over emotion, there is much to recommend this position.\textsuperscript{7} Yet the problem is some individuals possess all the qualities favored by care theorists and still find it difficult to pick up the signal of the animal voice. So we must consider where the interference is coming from to understand why those ideally suited to the task are unable to hear what animals are telling them.

Here Donovan closely follows in Carol Adams’ footsteps and argues that countless animals are unnamed, numbered, and purposefully silenced as \textit{absent referents}. Let me explain. By the time animals are in the presence of humans, it’s already too late to hear them: They’re on the dinner plate, wrapped under cellophane, or literally objectified in some other way. Any indicators of the animal as a living being are scrubbed clean in the process. A cow wails; the Big Mac doesn’t. The former (subject) inside the latter (object) never appears; the referent is “rendered” absent as a result. Hence numerous animals are put on the same ontological footing as inanimate objects; and in this reified form, they are about as capable of conversation as the grocery shelves they are stocked on.

Given this, restoring animals to discourse is the first step toward opening up “the possibility of [having] dialogue with them” (322). Donovan believes this means redirecting “the epistemological source of theorizing about animals to animals themselves” (305) which results in a paradigm shift of sorts. Rather than morally assess animals from the

\textsuperscript{6} Singer (2002) openly advertises his anxiety about being portrayed as a sentimental, overly emotional animal lover, which he believes risks taking “the entire issue of our treatment of nonhumans [away] from serious political and moral discussion” (6). In fact, in the original preface to \textit{Animal Liberation}, Singer recounts an episode where he and his wife were asked if they have any companion animals. They don’t. “We tried to explain that we were interested in the prevention of suffering and misery,” Singer says. “Neither of us had ever been inordinately fond of dogs, cats, or horses in the way that many people are. We didn’t ‘love’ animals. We simply wanted them treated as independent sentient beings that they are, and not as a means to human ends” (xxii). Singer goes on to say that nowhere “in this book . . . do I appeal to the reader’s emotions where they cannot be supported by reason” (ibid.). Tom Regan (2004) echoes Singer’s sentiments in \textit{The Case for Animal Rights} and makes a “concerted effort not to indulge our emotions or parade our sentiments” (ii). Essentially, we are supposed to set aside any hints of compassion we might feel for animals and let untrammeled reason guide us to their airtight conclusions. (Obviously there are other, more forgiving approaches concerning animal ethics in philosophical circles that aren’t so emotionally stunted. But it’s worth dwelling on these particular points given that Singer and Regan have both garnered mainstream appeal.)

\textsuperscript{7} For a more extensive treatment of the competing alternatives and their many irredeemable flaws (over and above what I’ve provided in footnote no. 6), see: Cathryn Bailey (2005) “On the Backs of Animals: The Valorization of Reason in Contemporary Animal Ethics.”
outside in, we need to build an empathetic bridge into their world and do our moral decision-making from that marginalized perspective (à la feminist standpoint theory). For this delicate operation, attentiveness is of the essence. With new and keener eyes, Donovan hopes we can nurture “attitudes and aptitudes such as openness, receptivity, empathy, sensitivity, and imagination” (Jaggar as cited in Donovan, 2006, 322), which, if everything goes according to plan, “may lead to an ontological reconception of their place in the world, so that they will no longer be commodified, used, and abused for human purposes” (Donovan, 2011, 214).

Anyone familiar with the “problem of other minds” will likely scoff at Donovan’s ambitions and cite Thomas Nagel’s (1974) “What’s it like to be a bat?” as sufficient proof of their implausibility. As for the question about bats implied by Nagel’s article, he doesn’t think we have a clue: “What it is for such a thing to be the case remains a mystery” (5). Indeed, for Nagel and other philosophers like him, the problems associated with accessing the interior lives of bats are generalizable to species of all stripes. Simply put, the experiences of other beings are phenomenologically inaccessible from the outside. Naturally humans and animals are no different on this score. But animals are unique inasmuch as they lack the necessary cognitive capabilities for articulating the what-it-is-like-to-be-me-ness (i.e., qualia) of a given experience. Of course, one can take a scientifically educated guess about what it might be like to be a bat (or any animal for that matter). Experientially speaking, however, we don’t really know what’s it like to be a bat; what we know is that bat-experiences look like such-and-such to human beings. At bottom, then, the standpoint of other species can only be approximated, and it’s not something we could ever view from the inside out.

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8 Elsewhere Donovan (2011) refers to this approach as “animal-standpoint criticism” which starts “from the premise that animals are seats of consciousness-subjects, not objects; that they are individuals with stories/biographies of their own, not undifferentiated masses; that they dislike pain, enjoy pleasure; that they want to live and thrive; that in short they have identifiable desires and needs, many of which we human animals share with them” (204). The problem is Donovan stretches the range of these “identifiable desires and needs” to the point of straining credulity.

9 Donovan (2006) explicitly addresses Nagel’s concerns (albeit in a footnote): “I believe more effort can be made to decipher animal communications and that while we may never fully understand what it feels like to be a bat, we can understand certain pertinent basics of his or her experience, sufficient for the formulation of an ethical response” (321). As I’ll make clear below, the “pertinent basics” of a bat’s experience—or any animal for that matter—are susceptible to a range of discordant interpretations.
The Nagelian objection to interspecies communication doesn’t move Donovan to surrender her cause. In fact, we employ “the same mental and emotional activities in reading an animal as we do in reading a human” (321). Familiar expressions like “[b]ody language, eye movement, facial expression, [and] tone of voice” provide nonverbal cues for grasping an animal’s “unique needs and wishes” (321). In this way, a heightened awareness of biological continuities expands our moral imagination. Suddenly the task of imagining how an animal—even a bat—feels about something is only as difficult as understanding “how one would feel in a similar situation” (322). Indeed, by Donovan’s (2013) lights, this interspecies communicative stance—or so that’s what I’ll call it—is open to any and all comers. “We humans,” she says, “can hear the ‘different voice’ of the animal . . . if we listen and pay attention” (11). She adds that “in seeing and hearing their nonverbal communications—and because we give ethical weight to those communications, we deem them significant—we also are led to see, to ‘unveil,’ and to resist and subvert the oppressive systems, ideologies, and institutions that cause these animals needless suffering and death” (19). All told, the homologous nature of human-animal experiences not only makes empathetic engagement with “what they are telling us” both philosophically plausible and possible, it also comes prepackaged with the normative force of a moral obligation: We ought to start listening to them and respecting their wishes.

II.

Stressing our commonalities with other animals remains the most popular way of generating empathy for them. Many individuals rebel against the ungodly amount of suffering produced by industrialized animal agriculture because they know the neurological mechanisms for pain are virtually identical across all vertebrates (including some invertebrates like octopuses). The great majority of us, however, are adept at plugging our ears and pretending that cows, chickens, pigs, and other animals are incapable of asking their human tormentors a simple question: Does it have to be this way? So it’s unsurprising that Donovan encourages us to adopt “a point of reference to which the reactions of remote others may be compared and analogized on the principle of homology” (310). If one takes her advice to heart, then she can come to appreciate that complex
symbolic interaction via linguistic utterances isn’t the only way of getting one’s message across.

Employing this strategy to make inroads in the arena of interspecies communication isn’t necessarily wrongheaded. However, Donovan leans so heavily on the idea that “one of the principal ways we know is by means of analogy based on homology” (322) that it threatens to collapse the dialogical foundation of her approach. To see what I mean, we’ll have to consider the complex relationship between the social construction of human identities and the cultural significance of eating practices. Specifically, I am referring to the study of alimentary identities—a theoretically snazzy way of saying “you are what you eat”—which examines the powerful influence socio-cultural markers have over various foodways. In lieu of an in-depth analysis of this topic, I merely want to prove that one and the same animal utterance is bound to produce a hodgepodge of discordant interpretations.

How might said discordances impact the prospects of a dialogical care ethic? Allow me to volunteer myself as an example. Given the various idiosyncrasies of my background and upbringing, I am inclined to interpret a factory-farmed cow’s heartfelt and mournful mooing as saying, “For heaven’s sake, tell your fellow humans that veggie burgers have come a long way!” Someone brought up in relevantly dissimilar circumstances, however,

Foodways are generally understood as the “whole interrelated system of food conceptualization and evaluation, procurement, distribution, preservation, preparation, consumption, and nutrition shared by all members of a particular society” (Anderson, 1971, 157). This definition will suffice for our purposes, but it isn’t perfect. I think it’s more accurate to say that foodways are “shared by certain [but not ‘all’] members of a particular society.”

Donovan (2006) apparently thinks we receive “mixed messages from animals” when, for example, “a lion is communicating a desire to eat the zebra, whereas the zebra is communicating a desire not to be eaten” (317). Her solution is to adopt a policy of “noninterference in the wild”—after all no one wants to get between a lion and his lunch—and suggests “that a human should attempt to protect weaker animals within her immediate entourage; that is, if one’s companion animals are attempting to kill another animal, one should try to prevent it” (ibid.). Yet what about the possibility of conflicting interpretations among human beings about what animals are saying (as I’ve discussed here)? Suppose I see an animal communicating such and such desire, and you see it communicating something quite different. What then? Moreover, how do we adjudicate between the desires and preferences of those animals in our midst? Say I view a spider communicating the desire not to be killed by my cat. What reason do I have to side with the spider? Is the pain and suffering it feels more significant than the pleasure my cat derives from killing it? Assuming it is, then what lengths must I go through to ensure the spider’s survival? And what about the fact that my cat is known to brutalize the odd ant here and there—am I to act on the ant’s desire not to be killed as well? Or do ant-desires count for less than spider-desires? Does any being that qualifies as a “weaker animal” in comparison to my cat fall under my protection? That so many questions remain unanswered is typical of someone who hastily sketches an outline of a position and expects the reader to fill in the nitty-gritty details.
might hear the exact same moo as issuing a warning with grave metaphysical implications: “The fiend who smears himself with flesh of cattle, with flesh of horses and of human bodies, Who steals the milch-cow’s milk away, O Agni,— tear off the heads of such with fiery fury” (Griffith, 2003, 102). These differences matter because even if the cow’s message *qua message* (or moo) elicit an identical response from both listeners—for example, abstaining from meat and dairy consumption—we still haven’t found our way around the following predicament: Who gets to decide which interpretation is more faithful to the cow’s *actual wishes* (or what one assumes her wishes might be)?

To figure this out, let’s consider the example of deer hunting and how Donovan views it as a “matter of incorporating the deer’s position and wishes dialogically in the human ethical-decision-making process (317).” She says,

If one reads and pays attention to the body language of the deer who is fleeing from the hunter, taking seriously the communication from the deer that she does not want to be injured or killed, one would have to conclude the hunter should lay down his gun. (316)

Donovan’s conclusion seems painfully obvious to me. So what if the deer cannot know in a strong epistemic sense that buckshot shells are designed to fatally wound? This doesn’t mean she is incapable of meaningful communication (as some philosophers would suggest). Like Donovan, I suspect the hunter’s general attitude toward other animals is what prevents the nonverbal force of the deer’s response from claiming any moral significance.\(^\text{12}\) What’s more, I am disturbed by the “erasure of the animal’s true identity in favor of the abuser’s image” (Davis, 2011, 46) that occurs whenever the hunter reassures himself with the thought: “Hell, it’s *just* an animal—not anything above being summarily executed.” In short, the reason why the hunter failed to consider the desires and wishes of

\(^{12}\) I added “in this case” because there are certain scenarios—although not as glamorous or common as they’re made out to be—when hunting operates as a means of subsistence and is therefore conducted out of necessity rather than sportsmanlike capriciousness. The latter activity treats the deer as a trophy—a corpse to prop up and pose with for the camera—while the former regards it as source of nutrition for a complete lack of alternative options (possibly due to economic or geographical constraints). Of course, the line between the two perspectives is easily blurred. Even if a deer was hunted and killed for reasons of subsistence, it’s possible for the hunter to treat the deer in a manner that is morally blameworthy all the same. Purposefully causing the deer to suffer as much as possible is but one example of what I have in mind.
the deer is simple: He isn’t convinced that it is the kind of being that is capable of possessing morally compelling desires and wishes in the first place. As a result, the hunter naturally failed to hear what the deer might have “said” (I imagine something like “don’t shoot!” as topping the list of nonverbal rejoinders).

As much as I think I’m right, I would never suggest my (or Donovan’s) interpretation of the deer’s behavior is unproblematically universalizable. Some individuals come from a cultural setting that inculcates a view of animals (like deer) as communicative beings, and admonishes its members to respect their desires and wishes for that reason. Might they nevertheless come to jarringly different conclusions about what animals like deer are trying to tell us? Moreover, what if they listen with sympathy, compassion, and care, yet still pull the trigger or release the bow? Are they not listening to the deer, or just not listening in the right way?13

To prove there are no easy answers to these tough questions, I want to briefly consider the meticulous dialogical process the Huichol14 (“wē-chōl”) people undertake when hunting deer:

First, the spirit of the deer is called in by the shaman. It [sic passim] is thanked for past gifts and honored in song and dance at ceremonial gatherings. Then it is told why the people need it to sacrifice itself on their behalf. The spirit of the deer listens to this, to the hearts of the people, to the shaman speaking of how the deer spirit will be honored in future ceremonies, how there will be prayers for the spirit, for the life of its family. It listens to how its tail, antlers, and skin will be used in a sacred way, its flesh will be eaten for the life of the Huichol to continue on, its blood will be sprinkled on the prayer arrows and other offerings left at the holy places along the

13 Donovan (2006) is aware that understanding an “animal is in pain or distress—even empathizing or sympathizing with him—doesn’t ensure ... that the human will act ethically toward the animal” (322-3).” To this end, she believes “the originary emotional empathetic response must be supplemented with an ethical and political perspective (acquired through training and education) that enables the human to analyze the situation critically so as to determine who is responsible for the animal suffering and how that suffering may be best alleviated” (323). The advice is so vague and generally stated that it’s bound to be useless in practice. Hence my example in the following paragraph makes it clear that discussing “the human” in the abstract—as Donovan is wont to do—invites more problems than it solves.

14 To be clear, I’m not suggesting these practices are somehow unique to the Huichol people; other indigenous tribes are known to employ similar approaches. It’s merely an example that I’ve selected for illustrative purposes. Anyone who desires an exhaustive account of indigenous hunting practices should look elsewhere for that reason.
pilgrimage trail. Then it makes a final decision based on its feeling about the prayers of the people requesting its aid. (Tom Pinkson, 2010, 206)

Against this backdrop, Donovan’s (2006) all-encompassing claim that “humans” are *equally capable* of “learning to read and attend to their language” (324) appears myopic to a fault. Remember, the driving force behind Donovan’s (2013) approach to interspecies dialogue is that “one hears the voice of the [animal] who undoubtedly does not wish to be killed and eaten” (12). Yet, even if their reading of the deer’s behavior tells them a profoundly different story than the one Donovan wants to impart (i.e., to refrain from killing and eating the deer), I think it’s safe to say the Huichol hunters believe they are hearing that voice.

Now I might find it hard to believe that a deer—or any animal for that matter—would eagerly volunteer to be served up for tonight’s dinner.\(^\text{15}\) Frankly, I am absolutely certain the metaphysical commitments underpinning the hunting practices of the Huichol people are misguided and predicated on false beliefs. Moreover, I suspect the dialogical currency of their hunting practices might very well be counterfeit. After all, before the first arrow lands, the Huichol hunter has already dictated what’s possible for the deer to communicate. Put otherwise, the range of the deer’s desires or wishes, whatever those might be, are circumscribed within the narrow parameters of a willing sacrifice.

But I certainly know better than to be dogmatic about my conclusions. For how does one begin to tell the Huichol people—who believe their interactions with the deer are dialogically informed— that, in actual fact, they have not properly incorporated “the deer’s position and wishes dialogically in the human ethical-decision-making process” (Donovan,

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\(^{15}\) An anonymous reviewer suggested that, strictly speaking, a deer might be unable to “eagerly volunteer” for any particular course of action (even when it’s in the deer’s best interest to do so). This includes life-saving treatment from wildlife veterinarians, biologists’ tagging deer populations to conduct important studies, and so on and so forth. However, it’s obviously our job to interpret their responses accordingly and to know whether the benefits of a given procedure outweigh the stress and pain it involves. As Donovan (2006) puts it: One decides to “override the animal’s immediate wishes because one sees that the animal’s suffering is likely to be minimal and temporary and that the long-term result is likely to be beneficial to the animal, saving her from worse pain and suffering” (317). Indeed, it’s no different than administering vaccinations to an infant who cannot understand that being pricked by a needle is necessary to offset a host of preventable diseases. Naturally she cannot eagerly volunteer for the treatment, but this doesn’t prevent us from taking action on her behalf to ensure her wellbeing. For the same reason, it wouldn’t be justifiable to inject a perfectly healthy child with poison simply because she’s incapable of consent. Sub poison with buckshot (or whatever other lethal weapons are favored by hunters), and you can begin to understand why it doesn’t make sense to think any differently about deer and other animals in general.
2006, 317)? If anything, it appears Donovan’s (2013) blanket statement that "were communication from animals honored, meat-eating would not be an option" (11) doesn’t always ring true—even when the lines of interspecies communication are open and the animals in question are both heard and duly honored.

I should take a moment to clarify my motives. I am not terribly interested in exoticizing the spiritual beliefs or traditions of the Huichol people, nor am I about to perpetuate some jejune form of cultural relativism that exempts their hunting practices from critical moral scrutiny. What I am saying is that Donovan’s one-dimensional picture of human-animal communication assumes the existence of a transcultural space in which “we humans” are equally situated to hear “the animal voice.” To Donovan’s (2006) ear, it’s a voice that speaks univocally to anyone capable of “taking seriously—caring about—what [it is] telling [her]” (305). As I said earlier, I have no doubt the Huichol hunters take seriously and care about the deer’s wishes. So if Donovan wants to maintain her position, then she must admit the Huichol people are not properly attuned to hear the deer’s true message. But that is a bitter pill to swallow, and it would leave behind a brutally ethnocentric aftertaste. I know I can’t stomach it, and I don’t imagine it would sit well with Donovan either.

Perhaps this explains why she draws on examples that are much easier to sell. In one case, she considers the disturbing Japanese phenomenon of pornographic “crush videos” whereby “stiletto-heeled women crush live small animals to death to provide sexual titillation for the viewer” (318). She argues, quite rightly to my mind, that no one “asked the animals if they consented [to their videotaped murder, which of course they would not” (ibid). Yet Donovan (2013) takes this and other clear-cut instances of animal abuse as license to simplify the discussion and use broad-brush strokes to argue that “humans” systematically fail to incorporate “the different voice of animals” (8) into their

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16 To those who think we should emulate the hunting practices of the Huichol people, let me present with you with Marti Kheel’s (2008) knockdown argument against that idea: “[D]efenders of meat eating often point to indigenous peoples who said prayers before killing animals. If native people killed and consumed animals in a spirit of gratitude, it is contended, others can emulate their example and eat meat too. In this argument, native cultures are treated as if they are a monolithic block, overlooking the differences that exist among particular tribes. But some tribes of native peoples killed animals indiscriminately, with little or no regard for either conservation or animals’ suffering. In addition, wrenching a narrative out of the context of one culture and grafting it onto another is not only disrespectful and self-serving, it is an act of violence in its own right” (237).
ethical deliberations. This makes it seem as if the Huichol people are no different from the men and women who take sexual pleasure in crush videos. And we’re supposed to interpret the “ideological rationalizations that legitimate animal exploitation and suffering” (Donovan, 2006, 324) as relevantly similar in both cases.

However, if my brief analysis of Huichol hunting practices is good for anything, it’s that socio-cultural markers are made to count for a whole lot in this discussion. Despite any misgivings we might have about their methods, at least the Huichol people managed to see the deer as a communicative presence. Doesn’t that count as being more dialogically informed than whatever is going on in the dilapidated minds of those who get off on crush videos? I think so. But Donovan spills precious little ink on making these distinctions. Thus one is left with the impression that anyone on the planet is capable of deciphering the wishes and desires of animals so long as everyone listens to what other species are telling her—the chosen messenger of animal kind—more carefully.

With that said, I have to give Donovan credit for stressing the importance of keeping a steady eye on the political, ethical, and economic contextualities that might otherwise prevent us from “learning to hear ... what animals are telling us” (324). Along these lines, she argues that

human advocates are necessary to articulate the standpoint of animals—gleaned ... in dialogue with them—to wit, that they do not wish to be slaughtered and treated in painful and exploitative ways. And human advocates are necessary as well to defend and organize against practices that reify and commodify animal subjects. (320)

Surely these human advocates would span the globe and offer invaluable insights organically grown from their respective cultural traditions, right? Well, one can't say for certain. Once again, the importance of context-sensitivity is swept aside to make room for overarching generalizations about “humans” and “humanity.” Proclamations like “humans must cease imposing their voice on that of animals” (324), and “humans need to learn to read the languages of the natural world” (321) are peppered throughout her discussion with a heavy hand. Needless to say, boldly stated overgeneralizations are no substitute for confronting the practical messiness involved in summoning “human advocates” to defend
and organize against animal exploitation. What steps should one take when addressing the deeply cherished values, beliefs, and cultural traditions of a community that might cease to exist without them? Does anything change when contesting the sexual gratification and bizarre fetishes of a select group of individuals in a morally deplorable subculture? As the values in question cannot be synonymized so easily, it doesn’t seem reasonable to think we should criticize them as though they are part and parcel of a shared human experience that ignores the “communicated desires of the animal” (310).

Up to this point, my objections to Donovan’s Esperanto-esque dialogical ethic of care have landed squarely on the human side of the interspecies equation. So let’s turn our attention to Donovan’s representation of animals, and consider whether their desires and wishes are as transparently obvious as she makes them out to be.

III.

We needn’t always “look through a glass darkly” to grasp an animal’s communicative presence. For instance, no one requires direct phenomenological access to the inner lives of factory-farmed animals to know their lives are nightmarishly awful. Their methods of communicating a desire for a better life are immediately recognizable even if we choose to ignore them. Watching a disgruntled factory farm worker smack a cow’s leg with a blunt object makes us wince, and no amount philosophical sophistry can explain away the pain behind her limping gait. Or, to use Donovan’s (2006) example, when one sees a dog “yelping, whining, leaping about” with an open wound, it’s not hard to imagine oneself “crying and moving about anxiously because of the pain”; indeed, “the animal is experiencing the same kind of pain as [we] would and is expressing distress about it” (322). Knowing firsthand that, like humans, animals “feel pain and don’t like it” (ibid.) provides Donovan with a moral baseline for establishing interspecies communication.

Even when the homologues in question aren’t as decipherable as the suffering of animals on factory farms, dogs yelping on account of an open wound, or deer fleeing from hunters, Donovan stays the course and argues that we can and should dialogize our encounters with “remote beings” like snakes and spiders. Despite the myriad incongruities between humans, deer, snakes, spiders, and other species “with whom one has little in
common and who may not appear to feel as we do” (ibid.), she remains confident that “we can see by their body language (which is homologous to ours) that they experience terror and anxiety, that they shrink away from sources of pain, that they want to live” (315). The same dialogical conclusion therefore applies to all nonhuman species: “We must respect their wishes in any human decision making about their condition” (ibid).

There’s no denying that snakes and spiders are apt to shrink away from pain. And recognizing those motions for what they say about their condition might call for an ethical response. Even so, their lives, wishes, and whatever else they might experience, aren’t reducible to the immediately recognizable gestures of pain avoidance. So when Donovan claims we “must respect their wishes in any human decision making about their condition” (315), there are times when I am truly at a loss for what she means. What do spider or snake wishes look like? Do they harbor anything outside of the standard utilitarian dualism of pain and pleasure that could reasonably be called “wishes”? If they do, are we therefore entitled to portray the whole teeming variety of remote beings on the planet and their panoply of bodily movements as “homologous to ours”? Unless we are willing to enlist an army of unseemly anthropomorphisms for the job, then I’d have to answer in the negative.

The broad category of “the animal” isn’t always subsumable to the familiar structures of human subjectivity. To think otherwise is epistemically intrusive. It implies the communicative presence of other species is never so complex that it will defy our best attempts to grasp it. Now I’m not saying we ought to erect an unbridgeable ontological gulf between human beings and other species (Heidegger’s talk about an “abyssal gulf” turns me off). Remaining stubbornly agnostic about the tenor of their desires and wishes isn’t part of the plan either. I am simply reluctant to treat animals and their various experiences—which, in many cases, seem incongruent with our own way of being in the world—as though they were a “blank screen for the projection of human meaning” (Armstrong, 2008, 3). Restoring the communicative presence of other species in anthropomorphic terms might work to alleviate their suffering, but it’s a disservice all the same if we don’t “stop short of believing that we can know their experience” (Weil as cited in Boggs, 2013, 7). Stopping short in this way, I would add, invites us to observe epistemic humility in our dialogical encounters with other animals. Let’s call it a respectful silence. Maybe he was no friend of interspecies communication, but Ludwig Wittgenstein’s oft-cited
phrase is à propos here: “Whereof one cannot speak, about that one must be silent” (as cited in Nordmann, 2005, 154).\(^{17}\)

Of course, the kind of silence I’m describing doesn’t mean standing slack-jawed and stupefied every time we encounter an animal that overshadows the twin peaks of our epistemic and empathetic horizons. That wouldn’t do us much good. What I have in mind is more akin to Bernard Dauenhauer’s (1980) four-pronged definition of silence:

1. Silence is a founded, active intentional performance which is required for the concrete clarification of the sense of intersubjectivity. In its pure occurrences, 
2. it does not directly intend an already fully determinate object of any sort. Rather, motivated by finitude and awe, 
3. silence interrupts an “and so forth” of some particular stream of intentional performances which intend determinate objects of some already specified sort. As such, 
4. silence is not the correlative opposite of discourse, but rather establishes and maintains an oscillation or tension among the several levels of discourse and between the domain of discourse and the domains of nonpredicative experience. (82)

Along Dauenhauerian lines, then, if animals are considered “fully determinate subjects” with transparently obvious messages, then we can kiss the feelings of finitude and awe that generate a respectful silence goodbye. And I think it would be a great loss to see it go. After all, it could prevent humans from dominating the interspecies discussion, so to speak, with their garbled attempts at translating the untranslatable.

At times, what an animal might desire or wish at a given moment is anyone’s guess. I do not make this claim flippantly. Anyone familiar with Harlan B. Miller’s (2009) assessment of the computational and neuroscientific limits of animal cognition will understand my trepidation to make confident pronouncements about their forms of communication: “In April 2007 a massive supercomputer with 4,096 powerful processors in parallel managed to simulate, at one-tenth speed, one half of the brain of a mouse for one second. And that was possible only with such simplifying assumptions as that all neuronal

\(^{17}\)Wittgenstein’s follow-up to this popular injunction doesn’t get nearly as much airtime as it should: “Don’t by any means shy away from talking nonsense! It’s just that you must listen closely to your nonsense” (as cited in Nordmann, 2005, 154).
connections were initially random" (66.). Who wouldn’t be astonished to discover that respected neuroscientists are outsmarted by the cognitive complexity of mice minds? Think about it. Simulating a mouse’s brain—or half of it for one measly second—currently outpaces our most sophisticated computational technologies; the whole conglomeration of human ingenuity just isn’t up to the task.

So I wouldn’t want the dialogical project of constructing a “human ethic in conversation with animals” (Donovan, 2006, 306) to succeed if it means trading away the dazzling complexity of other species. In many cases, they offer a damning indictment of our frail epistemological grasp, and acknowledging our ignorance in this regard means letting them be as they are without our intellectual meddling. Giving them wide berth is better than constantly matching their experiences up against whatever “falls within the range of physical, cognitive, and epistemic possibility” of a “bipedal, color vision equipped, big-brained, sentient [mammal]” (Lee, 2009, 33). At the very least, it isn’t worth running the risk of overshadowing the truth that we “really do not know how complex the experience of understanding of other animals may be” (Miller, 2009, 66).

To be sure, the principle of homology has its virtues, but Donovan abuses it to the point where cows, deer, dogs, snakes, spiders—you name it—appear as if a dim reflection of our sorry species. Naturally I can appreciate how the right to remain silent never seems like a privilege to anyone compelled to exercise it. Yet witnessing the breathtaking ways in which “the animal voice” refuses to be captured by our inadequate descriptions should leave us at a loss for words.

IV.

I will have been misunderstood if I’ve left the reader with the impression that I am entirely unsympathetic to Donovan’s dialogical aspirations. Some fifty-four billion animals are brutally slaughtered each year strictly for the purposes of satisfying our palette. Not one of them had a “say” in our ethical deliberations. Failing to listen carefully to their desires and wishes doesn’t even begin to describe the unmitigated moral catastrophe that is industrialized animal agriculture (to say nothing of the ecological havoc it wreaks on the planet). It would be no small achievement if opening the lines of interspecies
communication softened a few speciesist-hardened hearts. And I would applaud Donovan for accomplishing that much if it did.

Moreover, I think Donovan is right to stress the significance of seeing what human ideological constructions elide; to understand and comprehend what is not identified and recognized in these constructions; to, in short, attempt to reach out emotionally as well as intellectually to what is different from oneself rather than shaping (in the same case of animals) that difference to conform to one's own human-based preconceptions. (307)

However, if this is true, then I believe Donovan has failed to meet her own standards. As I have shown, her claim that “one of the principal ways we know is by means of analogy based on homology” (322) eventually outpaces its worth; moreover, it remains unclear when the aspiring interspecies conversationalist should ease up on the search for homologies and channel an appreciation for zoological differences instead. Obviously it would’ve been ideal if I had provided a cut and dry explanation that magically filled the gaps that Donovan left behind. But I’m honest enough to admit that I don’t. As a matter of fact, I remain deeply skeptical that a dialogical care ethic has a realistic chance of gaining widespread adoption, much less improving the lot of the animals destined to be hard-done by human caprice.

It all boils down to Donovan’s belief that “the ‘other has a ‘nature of her own that needs to be respected and with which one must enter into conversation” (Ruether as cited in Donovan, 2006, 324), and my nagging suspicions that leave me wondering: Must we enter it? Who’s to say humans aren’t personae non grata with other species at this point? Not me. So I’m reluctant to follow in Donovan’s footsteps. I can’t confidently assert that animals like “lions do speak, and it is not impossible to understand much of what they are saying” (320). The issue isn’t so much if they can speak; it’s more about the apparent ease in which Donovan thinks we can understand what they are telling us. I suppose I might console myself in knowing that an eagerness to interpret their messages will throw the value of what’s been lost in translation into sharp relief.
In the end, Donovan reminds us that all "communication is imperfect, and there remain many mysteries in animal ... behaviour (322). My hope is that we learn to value their mysteries enough to leave them intact.

Author: Justin Morris

References


Dogs and us: The natural bond between two social species.

People who share their daily life with dogs often report feeling a strong emotional bond with their canine companions, and sometimes even compare it to the relationship between parent and child. But what is the nature of this bond? Is it reciprocal? Dog lovers often attribute to their canine companions a great sensitivity to human emotions. Are they right? Interest in this topic is growing within the affective and social neurosciences. New research continues to shed light on the extent of understanding dogs have of human verbal and non-verbal language, and the complexity of the relationship between masters and their faithful friends.

The role of dogs in human society has changed over time. In the distant past, dogs almost exclusively fulfilled utilitarian functions. But in recent centuries, they have increasingly been bred as companion animals. In Quebec, one in four households has at least one dog, and pets are often regarded as members of the family.

What happens when dogs and humans interact?

In the room of a care center, an elderly lady receives a pet therapy treatment. She pets the dog under the ears. They peer into each other's eyes. Her visitor seems to be asking for more. She smiles.

Outside, a boy takes a break from playing ball with his dog. He offers a hand to his companion, palm facing up. The dog returns his gaze, and hesitates for a moment before resting its paw in the offered hand.
Social interactions are made up of myriad gestures and vocalizations, often very subtle. These communicative signals induce physiological effects in our loved ones, and vice versa. The same holds true for our interactions with our pets.

**From dog to wolf: refinement of human-canine communication**

The history of human-canine cohabitation dates back more than 15,000 years. Some researchers believe that the proximity of humans to dogs has influenced human evolution, and all agree that it has shaped that of the canine species.ii The wolf and the dog are believed to share a common ancestor, which would explain their many resemblances. But the dog, through natural and artificial selection, has developed social and technical abilities more conducive to life among humans.iii

The concepts of hierarchy and dominance have long been invoked to explain the internal dynamics of the wolf pack. However, those concepts cannot fully capture the complexity of relations within the wolf pack, since group life always demands a certain degree of pro-social behavior that allows communication and collaboration between members. This behavioural trait, which was evidently already present in the common ancestor of wolves and dogs, has been deliberately accentuated by breeders and transmitted over generations, and today helps explain why affectionate relationships between humans and dogs are so common.iv

To adjust to their domestic surroundings, puppies must be socialized to humans during their first months of life. They learn to identify and distinguish facial expressions very early, and can even recognize an image of their master.v Moreover, without prior learning, and therefore innately, they understand the meaning of the pointed finger gesture. With a little training, they can acquire an expansive vocabulary.
Numerous mammals have a demonstrated capacity to experience the same emotions felt by other members of their own species (emotional contagion and emotional empathy).\textsuperscript{vi} We have demonstrated that dogs show humans the same empathy that they show other dogs. Indeed, research confirms that dogs will adjust their own behaviour to attempt to console humans who are crying or experiencing visible distress.* In the presence of both a calm master and crying stranger, dogs often choose to interact with the distressed stranger instead of gravitating toward the security and familiarity of the master. This shows the readiness of dogs to try to relieve a stranger’s distress and not only seek their own reassurance.\textsuperscript{vii}

**A Biology of Attachment**

A caress, a kind look, soothing words...Any positive, consensual interaction will trigger salutary physiological effects in its participants. Research suggests that the same neuroendocrine mechanisms are at play not only in interpersonal interactions, but in interspecies interactions too.

Oxytocin is the most commonly studied hormone. It is produced in great quantity in female mammals while they are giving birth and nursing. Often called the "love and attachment hormone," it facilitates the cementing of bonds, notably between lovers and close family members. Many of its effects are opposite to those of cortisol, the stress hormone. In social psychology and neuroscience research, oxytocin often serves as an indicator of positive social emotions.\textsuperscript{viii} Other hormone composites with similar effects, like prolactine and vasopressine, arise during positive interactions in both male and female mammals, including dogs and humans. Activation of the oxytocin system is also believed to contribute to the pleasurability of social exchanges by inducing a decrease in cardiac rhythm and arterial tension.

Humans and dogs both experience a release of oxytocin during their positive interactions. In the human party to the interaction, the release of oxytocin is greatest when eye contact
is initiated by the dog.\textsuperscript{ix} Dogs experience a greater release of oxytocin in the company of a person they know and care for than in the company of a stranger.

Given that a single enjoyable interaction can cause such salubrious effects, it follows that the benefits of affectionate interactions will be greatest within a harmonious relationship, or, even better, if strong ties of attachment unite the partners. The best example of attachment is that of the young child to her mother, as described by psychologist John Bowlby in 1969.\textsuperscript{x} Since then, the definition of attachment in scientific literature has widened to include other affectionate interactions. It recently has been demonstrated that the affection of a dog for its owner corresponds to all the criteria for attachment identified by neuroscientists.\textsuperscript{xi} One functional brain scan study also showed a very similar pattern of neural activity whenever a woman thought of her child or...her dog!\textsuperscript{xii}

**A Mutual Influence**

In some cases, the canine-human relationship reveals itself to be unsatisfying, and no mutual emotional attachment takes shape. The type of interaction and the personality of the master affect the well-being of the companion animal. For example, a master’s distant or avoidant style may cause the onset of separation anxiety in a dog.\textsuperscript{xiii} Educational methods that are punishment-oriented (as opposed to positive reinforcement-oriented) can also negatively influence the canine-human relationship and increase the risk of behavioural problems.\textsuperscript{xiv} In any relationship, each participant’s actions and demeanour influence the behaviour and emotional state of the other(s).

Male and female dogs react differently depending on whether they are facing a man or a woman.\textsuperscript{xv} Men and women both show affection for dogs through physical contact, but women tend to be more verbal than men in their interactions with their dogs.\textsuperscript{xvi} Dogs also
quickly learn to judge character. If a person deceives a dog many times, that dog will stop showing interest toward the offender; the animal appears to infer that such individuals are unreliable and undeserving of their attention. In stressful or unfamiliar circumstances, dogs look to their master or a familiar and trusted individual for guidance, and draw emotional inferences about the situation by observing that person’s behaviour. Dogs are also capable of learning through imitation. Finally, dogs can of course form emotional attachments to other dogs.

**Is it love?**

The relationship between humans and dogs is sure to persist for the foreseeable future, affording researchers ample opportunity to deepen their understanding of its mechanisms. Neuroscience is headed toward the study of protagonists of a social interaction, thanks to the advancement of imagery technology, which now allows the simultaneous study of the effects of the actions of a person on the brain of another, and vice-versa. The next step could very well be the study of interactions between a person and her pet. The richness and complexity of the bond uniting dogs and human beings will not soon cease to interest scientists, and is sure to reveal ever more about the social nature and the emotional needs of each participant. Already, neuroscientists have begun to identify parallels in the mechanisms and benefits of interpersonal relationships as compared to human-canine relationships. We now know that human-canine emotional attachment is reciprocal—in other words, that the love between dogs and their owners is mutual.

*Author: Dr. Caroline Kilsdonk*


iv Miklosi et Topal, op. cit.


Have you Herd?

Military veterans are a marginalized population, and the outcomes of military service often have a direct impact on their wellness. Moreover, many have endured high combat stress (Seal, K., Bertenthal, D., Miner, C., & Marmar, C., 2007), and due to an increase in the number of combat operations in recent decades, there has been a surge in the number of veterans reintegrating into civilian life. Sadly, many returning military members are being diagnosed with service-connected injuries such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Veterans have complex reintegration needs, coupled with physical and mental health needs. Common problems that can occur after trauma include depression, anxiety, substance use, and suicide. Consequently, interventions are urgently needed to facilitate re-adjustment and post-deployment health and wellbeing in military veterans.

Equine-assisted Intervention (EAI) has strong healing potential for veterans whose transition from a military culture to civilian society is hampered by physical and mental health challenges. Equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) has been incorporated into the healing process for a wide range of behavioral and mental health disorders (Brandt, 2013).

Veterans reintegrating into civilian life often feel isolated and alone, and that no one understands them. EAI incorporates understanding horses and their distinct personalities, attitudes, and moods. This can be helpful for veterans with PTSD in particular, as it helps them recognize their own moods and attitudes, and how their emotional state affects those around them.
Horses are known to read subtle changes in body language, emotional state, and the basic intentions of others. Each animal perceives and reacts to the emotional state of its handler, whether positive or negative. Working with this large and powerful animal can instill confidence and provide metaphors that veterans may use to cope with intimidating and challenging situations in civilian life. Through equine intervention, veterans may experience Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG): greater appreciation for life, more intimate relationships with others, enhanced personal strength (both physical and emotional), recognition of new possibilities for one’s life path, and spiritual development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Interventions that have a positive impact on health and well-being in military veterans are desperately needed, and farms such as Colorado Therapy Horses, and Steps Sanctuary, also in Colorado, offer programs geared to veteran growth.

The picture titled “Have you Herd” was taken at The Colorado Therapy Horses & the Wounded Human Project in Greeley, CO. The centerpiece of this program is a unique equine therapy called “Natural Humanship Training” (NHT), which was developed by Richard McMahan, who is also the founder of the facility. The belief that using a metaphorical learning approach, in discussion or activity, inspires positive changes in their personal lives is core in NHT. Participants at this farm engage in on-the-ground work such as haltering, grooming, and rope-leading in the middle of the herd.

The Colorado Therapy Horses is a non-profit charitable foundation, dedicated to serving people in need of emotional and social support. The picture includes Dakota Boyrer (left) and Dean Boyrer (right), among several of the Trakehner breed during the farm’s monthly picnic for veterans and first responders.
The other two pictures are from STEPS Sanctuary and Foundation for Horses & Humans in Longmont, Colorado. The objective of STEPS is to provide equine-facilitated therapy sessions to military veterans and survivors of abuse. STEPS provides support, training, empowerment, protection and sustenance to turn victims of trauma into thriving, productive members of society. None of the programs that STEPS offers features riding; all interactions are on the ground, using horses rescued by the organization Colorado Horse Rescue.

Author: Allison Boyrer

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Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction

MATTHEW CALARCO


Reviewed by: Justin Morris, McMaster University

Without risking hyperbole I can say that Matthew Calarco’s Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction is easily the most philosophically significant contribution to the topic of critical animal studies (CAS) to date. Achieving this much in a lissome seventy pages is impressive enough in its own right. But that Calarco does it while effortlessly sailing through the murky depths of Continental philosophy is like the academic equivalent of running a four-minute mile in steel-toe boots. In other words, this unassuming book sits comfortably among the breathtaking “how on Earth is this possible?” variety of human achievement.

As per the title, Calarco breaks down his discussion into three chapters: Identity, Difference, and Indistinction. The first chapter—“Identity”—covers the Western philosophical tradition’s preoccupation with creating an insurmountable barrier between humans and animals. Aristotle singled out logos for the job; René Descartes took recourse

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1 CAS is regrettably difficult to define. As a testament to its nebulous nature, consider the dumbfounding and ungrammatical definition of CAS provided on Wikipedia: “Critical animal studies (CAS) is an interdisciplinary scientific field and theory-to-activism global community, which originated at the beginning of the 21st century, centered on the Institute for Critical Animal Studies.” Now you might think other, perhaps more authoritative sources, could offer a clearer definition. Yet they are mostly hit or miss. For example, in Critical Animal Studies: An Introduction, Dawne McCance (2013) mistakenly claims that CAS “first emerged some forty years ago as a specialization within analytic philosophy, one that set out both to expose, and to offer ethical responses to, today’s unprecedented subjection and exploitation of animals” (4). What McCance is actually describing is the development of “animal ethics” as it emerged out of the early works of Peter Singer and Tom Regan. No doubt CAS draws inspiration from this branch of analytic moral philosophy (just as much as it criticizes it), but it’s misleading to suggest that it’s somehow a direct offshoot of it. There’s another book whose title seems promising for our purposes: Defining Critical Animal Studies: An Intersectional Social Justice Approach for Liberation. Here CAS is defined as “the only area of study that promotes scholarly examination of entangled oppression of human and other animals; places this investigation in the context of historical and social structural forces; recognizes the role of capitalism in promoting systemic oppression of all types; and proposes strategies for purposeful action” (Nocella II et al., 2014, xi). Maybe I’m being too picky, but doesn’t this merely outline what CAS does rather than offer a concrete definition of what it is? In any case, I will embrace it as the standard definition of CAS since it thoroughly outshines the competition.
in the immateriality of the mind; and Immanuel Kant privileged rational autonomy. In each case, humans, unlike the rest of creation, were thought to possess certain attributes that surpass their brute biological makeup. Of course, once Charles Darwin arrived on the scene these hard and fast theoretical distinctions between humans and animals became as irrelevant to philosophy as phlogiston is to chemistry.

Or so you would think. Truth be told, many philosophers to this day apparently never received Darwin's memo and deliberately ignore the presence of “[b]ehaviors and capacities widely believed to be unique among human beings” (6) in various animal populations. But a select group of them—notably Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and Paola Cavalieri—picked up on the ethical implications of our evolutionary history. They are the figureheads of what Calarco calls the “identity approach” and their main claim is condensable to the soundbite: “treat likes alike.”

Consider sentience as an example. In humans, it counts as a morally salient attribute. However, when our ethical deliberations turn to sentient animals its moral purchase—along with the myriad obligations stitched into it—suddenly evaporate. That sentience counts for more in humans than animals is a textbook example of discriminating on the basis of species alone (i.e. speciesism). Moral consistency demands that beings “who are identical or fundamentally similar in ethically relevant ways deserve identical or fundamentally similar considerations” (14). Hence identity thinkers believe a non-speciesist ethic is required to “transform our individual and collective lives in the direction of achieving justice for animals” (20).

Calarco commends the identity approach as a “corrective to the countertendency in the [Western] tradition toward human exceptionalism” (ibid.). Yet he finds their focus on speciesism shortsighted, their emphasis on logos-related capacities conceptually myopic, and their assumption that The Solution to these problems lies in highlighting moral inconsistencies through philosophical argument somewhat naïve. Worse, the identity approach not only fails to “provide us with a framework that would include all human beings [i.e. the cognitively disabled] within its scope, but it is also unable to include vast numbers of animal beings and species” (26) and effectively consigns them to moral limbo. So we need a more inclusive approach; beating the biological continuity drum can only get us so far.
To meet this demand, in Chapter 2 Calarco turns his attention to difference theorists who “seek to develop a pro-animal ethic ... [based] on an appreciation of the manifold differences that exist between and among human beings and animals” (28). The difference approach brings together a number of heavy-hitters in the Continental tradition—Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Lévinas, and others—whose ideas, profound as they might be, are notorious for their “unprecedented incomprehensibility” (Godfrey-Smith, 2015). In Calarco’s mercifully straightforward prose, however, their agenda isn’t altogether impenetrable. Here’s the gist. Rather than hold up a mirror to the rest of creation and single out the moral relevance of those species that closely resemble human beings (à la the identity approach), difference theorists want to peel back the anthropocentric curtain and reveal a space for encountering the panoply of their dissimilarities “in less violent and less hierarchical ways” (35). One advantage of stressing heteronomy as the starting point for ethical inquiry is accepting species “who are fundamentally different from me and to whom I unthinkingly do violence in my daily life” (31). With the emphasis shifted in the direction of difference, we appear to have the makings of a “less exclusionary approach to animal ethics” (27).

Calarco is refreshingly candid about the real-world limitations of the difference approach despite being a faithful devotee of Continental philosophy. The most glaring of them is its perpetual inability to “generate much that is novel in terms of strategy or policy” (45). One wonders how it ever could. I, for one, cannot imagine the navel-gazing pontifications that Derrida entertained while standing naked before his cat adorning the pamphlets of animal activists anytime soon, much less Heideggerian references to Being disclosing itself “in the clearing” or Lévinasian invitations to heed “the call of the Other.” Other problems arise at the theoretical level as well. Even if they mean to dissolve it, the difference approach has an unhealthy fixation with the human/animal distinction. The perceived risk of sweeping the distinction aside, so the difference story goes, is that objects of any kind—ping pong tables, discarded cigarette butts, garden hoses, “Snuggies,” you

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2 For example, conceptually straitjacketing diverse beings—ones that run the gamut from honeybees to ring tailed lemurs—under catchall word “animals” might seem like a harmless taxonomic gesture. But for difference theorists—particularly Derrida—this categorical reduction has violent implications inasmuch as we “learn to group Others into recognizable and repeatable categories, thereby neutralizing their singularity and domesticating their strangeness” (31).
name it—are put on the same ontological footing as humans and animals. But is this slippery ontological slope an inevitable outcome of moving beyond anthropological differences? Calarco thinks not. Rather, he wants to pursue a philosophical strategy that moves beyond the human/animal distinction without it collapsing into a “flat ontology”\(^3\) in the process.

In the final chapter, Calarco puts forward his “indistinction approach” as an ideal candidate for the job. In terms of ink spilled, the star players of Team Indistinction are Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, Donna Haraway, and Val Plumwood. Like difference theorists, they problematize the embattled search for the “properly human” and the series of unjustified exclusions and distinctions it generates. The indistinction approach, however, brackets the emphasis on anthropological differences with the hope of discovering “alternative lines of thought” (51). Suppose our encounters with animals weren’t preemptively mediated through the human graffiti of conceptual description (including talk about difference and continuity). Might we not come closer to seeing animals for themselves? Revising our concepts and descriptions of animality in a more benevolent direction might seem like an obvious solution to this problem. However, for indistinction theorists, this merely reinforces our dominance over the more-than-human world and leaves animals at the mercy of human description.

With this in mind, the indistinction approach “aims to think about human beings and animals in deeply relational terms that permit new groupings and new differences to emerge, such that ‘the human’ is no longer the center or chief point of reference” (56).\(^4\) From this post-anthropocentric space, Calarco suggests we can “create ontologies and ways

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\(^3\) Unlike a hierarchical ontology (where different gradations of being are prioritized in terms of importance: humans first, animals second, plants third, and so on), a flat ontology “claims that all objects are equal insofar as they are objects or that all fields of sense are equal insofar as they are fields of sense” (Gabriel 2015, 252). Much to the chagrin of philosophers who have a tough enough time trying to elevate the status of animals, this idea has caught fire and bred a burgeoning school of thought called “Object-oriented ontology” (OOO). There is nothing I can say about OOO that hasn’t already been covered in Russell Jacoby’s (2015) article in The Chronicle of Higher Education: “The Object as Subject.”

\(^4\) An anonymous reviewer said this is “easier said than done” given that animals cannot participate in discussion “in any meaningful way.” This is an extraordinary claim. Complex symbolic interaction via linguistic utterances is not the only way of getting one’s message across! I could go on an inappropriately long tangent about the perils of defining the parameters of discussion along speciesist lines. But I am vain and would rather take the opportunity to shamelessly plug my forthcoming article in a future volume of *Cutting Edge*: “The Precarious Art of Interspecies Conversation.”
of thinking that challenge the status quo and that lead to new ways of living” (ibid.). Pro-animal theorists and activists working from these premises are tasked with the responsibility of determining “which structures of power are most fundamental in perpetuating violence against animals and how best to resist those structures” (63). Duly informed in the ways of indistinction, their proposals have a better chance at offering “alternative, less violent ways of living with and among animals” (ibid.).

Calarco understands that his ambition to mainstream the indistinction approach faces some major challenges. One of them is supplanting “vegan outreach and pro-animal legislative efforts” in favour of “forming genuine bonds of solidarity with related movements for radical social change” (70). Although Calarco admits there is no “guarantee of success,” I don’t think he’s zeroed in on the main hurdle standing in his way. Environmental philosophers—especially thinkers in the “deep ecology’ movement—have been in the business of creating “new ontologies” for several decades. If we’ve learned anything from their misguided efforts, it’s that most people can’t even comprehend their good intentions. I fear the same holds true for the indistinction approach.

This issue speaks to a larger problem. Calarco wants his book to help “readers gain access to some of the main philosophical themes in critical animal studies so they can

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5 Proposals like Arne Naess’s (1989) “ecosophical outlook” are what I have in mind. Here we’re supposed to expand our sense of self with nature in a manner that runs “so deep that one’s own self is no longer adequately delimited by the personal ego or organism. One experiences oneself to be a genuine part of all life. Each living being is understood as a goal in itself, in principle on an equal footing with one’s own ego” (174). It’s a beautiful vision. But would anyone be surprised to learn that this “holistic relational ontology” never took off? Take a look around. Observing nature is something most people do through their cell phones (with brutally amateurish results). I don’t believe it’s unnaturally pessimistic to think the clichéd ways of seeing nature are here for the long haul. And the same holds true for animals—at least for the ones lucky enough to have a camera pointed at them and not a gun, knife, captive bolt gun, or some other murderous instrument of our making.

6 To test out my suspicion, I tried explaining the virtues of “indistinction-style thinking” to an animal activist with no philosophical training. At around the moment I uttered the phrase “post-anthropocentric terrain” her eyes glazed over and she asked me to stop. Sure, this is one person’s response, and maybe I’m not the right messenger. Would a more forgiving audience of animal activists have been more receptive to it? I doubt it. In fact, I presented a somewhat technical philosophical paper to an audience of academics and animal activists at the 2014 Students for Critical Animal Studies (SCAS) conference. I’m fairly certain the latter group wasn’t particularly interested in anything I had to say. The longer the conference wore on, the clearer it became that I wasn’t imagining things. When other academics presented their papers, those in the “activist” camp showcased the rare ability of being able to roll their eyes into the backs of their heads while simultaneously yawning with unsuppressed exasperation. A more vivid illustration of the uneasy relationship between theory and activism within CAS is beyond my rendering.
eventually take up the original works in more depth on their own” (1). Let’s suppose Calarco accomplishes his goal and a reader of his fine book—one with no philosophical training whatsoever—is moved to confront, say, Agamben head on. Unsure of where to start, he selects The Open: Man and Animal (Calarco cites it if nothing else). After several false starts, he doggedly slogs his way through to page seven without comprehending a single line that preceded it. He reads:

If history is nothing but the patient dialectical work of negation, and man both the subject and the stakes in this negating action, then the completion of history necessarily entails the end of man, and the face of the wise man who, on the threshold of time, contemplates this end with satisfaction necessarily fades, as in the miniature in the Ambrosian, into an animal snout. (7)

Frustrated, he rereads the same lines over and over, growing more helpless at each pass—“did I read that right: into an animal snout?” Dismayed and dispirited, our reader waves the white flag and closes the book. A few months later, a friend who’s a Philosophy major pays him a visit. Surprised to see Agamben on his bookshelf, she picks it up and unleashes a massive cloud of dust. Question marks are stippled across the opening pages. “Did you read this?” she asks, coughing and wheezing. His face twists at the painful memory. “No,” he says, “Non-philosophers like me just aren’t meant to understand that gobbledygook.”

Is our poor reader wrong about this? No, I don’t think so. Sub the name “Agamben” with “Deleuze” or, God forbid, “Derrida” and the results would have been no different: initial curiosity, ensuing befuddlement, and finally the search for the receipt. Would a background in philosophy help matters? Maybe. But even professional philosophers admit that wading through the “unprecedented incomprehensibility” (Godfrey-Smith, 2015) of

7 Richard Rorty (2009) described this sorry situation as the paradox of professional philosophy: “philosophy is unanimously agreed to be very difficult and crucially important, yet the experts in it talk only to themselves” (404). Alas, much of academic philosophy has become an obscene creature: hideous in design and pointless in execution. Lest I give the wrong impression, I don’t think this problem is unique to Continental philosophy. At least here profound philosophical insights are possible even if buried under dense layers of jargon. The question is whether one is capable of unearthing them. Take away the promise of profound insight, substitute the obtuse prose for technical minutiae, and out comes the philosophical chloroform that is contemporary analytic philosophy.
Continental philosophy is a tiresome chore. Don’t get me wrong. Reading *Thinking Through Animals* fills me with “ever-increasing wonder and awe” at Calarco’s unmatched ability to masterfully—I almost said “magically”—translate their impenetrable prose into plainer English. Notice I said “plainer.” Sadly, it just could never be plain enough to garner much attention outside of academia.

Before wrapping up, I should point out that Calarco has a specific audience in mind: “individuals [that] are generally committed to rethinking our attitudes toward ... animals but tend to be relatively new to the wide variety of theoretical frameworks and positions on offer in the field” (1). Thanks to his efforts, pro-animal theorists eager to feign knowledge of Agamben and company no longer have to suffer in vain trying to understand them. But absolutely nothing—I repeat: *absolutely nothing*—could make their work intelligible to the layperson, animal activist or otherwise. Perhaps this means Calarco’s intended audience is far smaller than he anticipated. However, readers capable of comprehending his message can expect their views on animals to undergo a serious makeover. Trust me, this is a *good thing* and not as painful as it sounds. Besides, you’re in good hands with Calarco. Just don’t let him talk you into straying outside of his philosophical reach.⁸

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⁸ Calarco is among a dying breed of academic that doesn’t gratuitously cite his own contributions. So readers might be unaware of Calarco’s (2008) previous book: *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*. Outside of *Thinking Through Animals*, it is the most readable and comprehensive treatment of animal issues in Continental philosophy—bar none.
References


