

# **Is Animal Studies Good for Animals?**

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## **1. Prologomenon**

What is called animal studies is a broad area of investigation, diverse and fragmented, with islands of synergistic activity. It is a field constituted to a great extent by self-identification, and participation in collective practices and rituals (e.g., participating in various conferences, engaging in various dietary and other practices).

Despite the diversity and fragmentation, there is often a lack of sensitivity to context. For example, many of the papers presented at various high-profile animal studies conferences seem to me to be addressed to people in North America and Europe, even when the conference is in India (for example). This is not all bad, unjustified, or inexcusable, but it is worth noticing; and when it goes too far, it inhibits the kind of synergistic discussions that characterize the field at its best.

Having noted this, I am now going to discuss the academic literature of animal studies as I understand it, most of which is located in the placeless place to which I have referred. No doubt my own contribution is to a great extent located there as well. My only defense is epistemological humility. I will do my best to sketch the animal turn, readily acknowledging in advance that I am describing the world as it appears to me from my own little corner of the academic universe. I don't claim that what I say here is exhaustive or complete or true to anyone's experience but my own (though I hope it is). Nor am I trying to lay down the law or to be normative. This is my attempt to map the terrain of animals studies as I have experienced it, and wonder aloud about its relevance to eating, breathing, shitting animals.

## **2. The Animal Turn**

Academic fields have experienced many “turns” in the last few decades (“linguistic,” “environmental,” and more besides). It is clear that an “animal turn” is now underway in the humanities and social sciences. In recent year scholars such as Ritvo and Weil have published papers in which this expression appears prominently. The Pufendorf Institute at Lund University in Sweden has an “Exploring the Animal Turn” research group, the University of Basel Law School in Switzerland sponsored a conference in 2014 on the “Animal Turn in the Law,” and the Michigan State University Press in the United States has a book series devoted to “The Animal Turn.” The list could go on.

In this paper I am interested in a series of questions that are in some ways in tension with each other: What provoked the animal turn? Why has its influence been felt at different times and in different degrees in different disciplines? What relevance does it have for improving the lives of animals?

### **3. What provoked the animal turn?**

Relations between humans and animals are an ancient topic of discussion. Aristotle’s characterization of humans as “rational animals” was in sharp contrast to some views in the ancient world and to dominant tendencies in early modern philosophy (e.g., Descartes). There is interesting scholarship in these areas (e.g., Sorabji) but the discussion takes an important turn with the work of Darwin and especially the publication of the *The Expression of Emotion in Humans and Animals* and *The Descent of Man*.

While there were philosophical naturalists in the ancient world, in the early modern period (e.g., Hobbes), and in the Enlightenment tradition (e.g., Voltaire), naturalism takes a different form in the post-Darwinian world. While early naturalists tended towards machine or mechanical views of living things, with Darwin comes the idea of biological continuity. While Darwin’s immediate followers (e.g., Romanes) worked on revealing the mental life of non-human animals, the major impact of the Darwinian revolution was slow to make itself felt. Some would say that it has not yet been entirely assimilated in the natural sciences, even in biology (e.g., Dupre). What is clear is that the humanities and social sciences have taken even longer to assimilate its influence. Part of the reason for this is the

repugnance that many humanists and social scientists felt for early twentieth century eugenicist and environmental determinist views that claimed to be inspired by Darwin. These debates and their offspring have a way of wearily reoccurring in humanistic discourse (e.g., over evolutionary psychology, the “new materialism” in feminist studies, and so on).

While the development of genetics is important to the unfolding of this story (because it provides a mechanism for expressing the commonalities between humans and other animals and because it freaks out some humanists and social scientists who associate it (not completely unjustly) with the old eugenicism and determinism), it was the rise of ethology, first in the work of Konrad Lorenz and Niko Tinbergen, and then with “the Leaky girls” (Jane Goodall, Birute Galdaikas, and Diane Fossey) that was a proximate influence on the animal turn in the humanities and social sciences. Not only did they make remarkable discoveries about the mental and social lives of non-human animals, but Goodall in particular personified the objects of her study by giving them names. They produced a significant body of science and its findings were disseminated in popular books and films of the sort that even science-phobic humanists and social scientists could appreciate.

A parallel development was the rise of cognitive science, founded on the work of Turing, Von Neumann and others in the 1930s and 1940s, that began to be influential in the humanities and social sciences in the early 1960s. While this work initially focused on human and artificial intelligence, by separating cognition from its implementation, it invited questions about animal cognition. By the late 1970s cognitive science was beginning to interact with developments in animal behavior and philosophy. Donald Griffin’s *The Question of Animal Awareness* was a landmark work in the development of cognitive ethology, though he himself thought that the mental processes studied by cognitive science were quite different from the consciousness that is characteristic of humans and other animals (a view that continues to persist among many animal behaviorists (e.g., Braithwaite). By the late 1980s mainstream cognitive science and Griffin-inspired investigations began to come together in the development of

cognitive ethology (Bekoff & Allen, *Species of Mind* and *The Cognitive Animal* were foundational texts).

Since the 1975 publication of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, concerns about the ethical treatment of animals have been central to the academic interest in animals. In addition to being a work of moral philosophy, *Animal Liberation* provides a reading of the history of human attitudes towards animals and draws on scientific work related to animal sentience. Subsequently, concerns about animal minds and ethics have grown together into a productive field that has given rise to many further important questions including questions about animal agency. More than forty years after its publication there is much more to say about its influence.

Environmental philosophy began to develop as an academic field in the Anglophone world in the 1970s, building on texts that had been published decades earlier (e.g., by Muir, Leopold, and others). Over the years environmental philosophy has become increasingly sensitive to issues about animals, despite a brief attempt in 1980 to ban the publication of papers relating to the moral status of individual animals in the flagship journal of the field, *Environmental Ethics*.

Early contributions by historians and historians of ideas such as Thomas, Ritvo, and Passmore were also important, and later contributions in the post-humanist tradition have also had significant influence.

#### **4. Why has the influence of animal studies been felt at different times and in different degrees in different disciplines?**

The animal turn came later to literary studies than to philosophy and related fields. This is surprising since, as Susan Crane and others have shown, animals are deeply embedded in our earliest literary traditions. Perhaps what was missing was "theory," and when Derrida underwent his own animal turn the Kool-Aid became safe to drink.

There is much to say about Derrida and what influenced him to make the animal turn. Beatrice Longuenesse has mentioned Condillac, Rousseau, Diderot, Merleau-Ponty and Lacan as predecessors in the French

philosophical tradition who had things to say about animals and were influential on Derrida. Nicolas Delon has emphasized to me how well the animal turn comports with Derrida's general skepticism about reason and language (at least as conventionally understood). I myself have wondered about the influence of Sartre and Levinas on Derrida's animal turn.

One interesting consequence of the Francophone influence on literary studies is this. Compared with Anglophone philosophy, French philosophy does not have a well-developed tradition of moral theory (it is not surprising that Peter Singer is from Melbourne rather than Montpellier). What one would expect then is that the interest in animals would be less morally driven in Anglophone literary studies than philosophy, and indeed I believe this is the case. The literary interest in animals is often in animals as symbols rather than as actual living creatures.

Sociocultural anthropology seemed impervious to the animal turn until the rise of the "ontologies" movement (associated with such figures as Descola, de Castro, and Kohn), and the related but somewhat distinct turn towards "multi-species ethnography." Now phrases such as "thinking like a mountain," reminiscent of environmental philosophers such as Aldo Leopold, are gaining currency in anthropology. Indeed, there is reason to worry about excessive anthropomorphism and the promiscuous attribution of agency in some of this work. For some of these writers (e.g., de Castro) the ontologies movement seems to be a way of bringing back the exotic to anthropology. For others (e.g., Descola) it seems to be a way of reigniting various theoretical debates (e.g., structuralism vs. post-structuralism). BUT SEE [https://www.animalsandsociety.org/assets/library/477\\_s1049.pdf](https://www.animalsandsociety.org/assets/library/477_s1049.pdf) AND *Where the Wild Things are Now*)

Here are two reasons that might help to explain why the animal turn arrived relatively late in anthropology. First, in recent years socio-cultural anthropology has been dominated to a great extent by extreme constructivist views which sometimes seem to hold that there is nothing to experience beyond the anthropologist's account of an informant's words. On such a view, animals have only a secondary, ablated existence. Second, socio-cultural anthropology has in recent years been characterized by disciplinary anxiety. This has often led to a kind of self-referential thinking

and writing which reinforces what is supposed to be at the core of the discipline—humans, their cultures, and those who write about them. This has led to fraying relationships between socio-cultural and biological anthropology. Indeed, it seems to me that animal studies relates better to both of these areas than they do to each other.

It is well-known that religious traditions vary radically in their friendliness to animals (e.g., compare Jainism with Middle Eastern religious tradition). It is also clear that within each religious tradition there are the seeds of animal-friendly views that are or have been worked out by scholars and practitioners (e.g., Andrew Linzey in Christianity). Religious studies as an area of scholarly inquiry is better defined by its focus than by its disciplinary trappings (e.g., shared methodology, scholarly canon etc.). The American Academy of Religion, the world's largest association of religious studies scholars has an "Animals and Religion Group" in which several participants in this conference are active, and from whom I hope to learn more about this field.

There is much more to say about the animal turn in various other disciplines and fields including sociology, political science, feminist theory and so on. But I now want to turn to the general question of what makes a discourse "academic."

### **5. What is the difference between two people conversing and an academic lecturing to an audience?**

There are probably many differences but the one I am interested in is this: academic discourse is mediated in a way that ordinary conversation is not. Well brought up academics do not tell you what they think, at least when they're on duty. They tell you what's in the text or the data, the results of their experiments, what their model predicts, what their informants say, or sometimes floridly, "what nature is saying." The speaker in an academic lecture purports to be voicing the deliverances of the instrument of mediation. He is a kind of ventriloquist (Charley McCarthy to Edward Bergen). The academic lecturer's attitudes and opinions are supposed to be irrelevant. What matters are the "findings," even if they are viewed as "readings" or interpretations.

Mediation in academic discourse takes different forms. Most physical and biological scientists use physical devices to actively intervene in the world. They run experiments, make observations, and report the results. Some physicists, such as string theorists, do not have experimental results to report. Instead they expound theories. These theories, like the mathematics in which they are expressed, are regarded as discovered, not created. Even ethologists and animal behaviorists, whose job is to watch animals, are in the business of reporting data. Animal behaviorists, who are sometimes distinguished from ethologists on this and other grounds, have statistical models and sometimes do experiments. Quantitative sociologists and some psychologists resemble them in these respects. For qualitative sociologists and cultural anthropologists, ethnographies are the mediator. Physical anthropologists have bones, archeologists have shards, and philosophers have arguments. Literature professors have texts or even “theories” or “analytics.” For mathematicians it is proofs.

Mediating devices are important for many reasons. First, as already noted, they help to demarcate academic discourse from mere (?) conversation. Second, they protect an academic from the charge of moralizing, pontificating, or otherwise engaging in forbidden normative practices. (A cynic might say they protect the professor from the charge of professing.) Mediating devices also help to close the gap between is’s and oughts. An ethnographer does not tell her audience that a culture is being destroyed by modernity; her informant says, implies, or suggests it, and she reports it (often with an insinuation). Philosophers do not tell audiences what to believe; they present and evaluate arguments, and some arguments are demonstrably better than others. These ethnographers and philosophers conform to the highest standards of academic discourse while still perturbing the normative outlook of their audiences. They have the best of both worlds. It is important to see the mediation that is central to academic discourse, because it is this that sets up the tension between developing an academic field such as animal studies and making the world better.

## **6. What Relevance Does Animal Studies Have For Making the World Better?**

Academics are very good at finding new playgrounds for themselves. There is nothing wrong with this: playgrounds are fun, they keep people out of

trouble, and can sometimes give the impression that something serious is going on. But in a world in which billions of animals are treated in horrific ways it is worth asking whether this emerging academic playground—animal studies--can hope to contribute to making things better.

I have conflicting thoughts about this. As a child of the Enlightenment, I believe that knowledge is power: Mobilizing academic resources can be central to addressing important moral problems. Indeed, that's part of why I do what I do whether this is teaching, writing, or sitting through department meetings. On the other hand I've just published a book on climate change and in this case it is clear that the growth of knowledge has not led to addressing the problem. I also note that apartheid was outlawed in America before the creation of African-American Studies programs in universities, and racism does not seem to have appreciably declined since their creation. Of course areas of academic inquiry are not to be evaluated solely on the basis of their immediate consequences for making the world better. But should this be a consideration at all, and if so, how much? I sense that there are very different views about this among people who work in animal studies, and it is a discussion worth having.

I close with some confession that may resonate with some of you. It seems to me that there is a kind of glorious self-indulgence that is undeniably part of having a secure academic life. Not all self-indulgence is bad (think chocolate or wine or what have you), but it often sets up difficult psychological dynamics directed towards evading, escaping, repressing or otherwise managing the associations that self-indulgence sets off. For some it leads to an impulse to close the gap between one's everyday life and the world. It leads to a thirst to reconcile theory and practice, life and politics, and to live seamlessly in accord with our values. While this can be an admirable impulse, it is important to appreciate how difficult it is to fully satisfy and the risks that it may present. Some of the difficulties are intrinsic to the reconciliation project however and where it manifests; others have to do with the fact that an academic succeeds and functions through the adroit use of the mediating devices that this impulse seeks to push away. The risks are all too obvious to anyone who is outside of what we might call "movement academia." There is often a tendency to mistake academic politics for real politics, writing about animals for helping animals,

and generally mistaking the playground for the real world. Smugness and self-righteousness often follows from these failures.

Is animal studies good for animals? I believe that at least some of it is, though it is too early to provide a definitive answer to this question. What I do know is this. Animal studies is more likely to be good for animals if we struggle to appreciate the larger academic and worldly context in which we act, our own motivations and psychological dynamics, and the opportunities and temptations afforded by work in this area--then couple this with humility about what we think we may be accomplishing, and gratitude for the privilege and opportunity to try to accomplish something through academic labor.