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Thinking Animals: Why Animals Studies Now
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Thinking Animals is an exploration of the space between a theoretical rock and a hard place. Kari Weil's project engages the impasse between the modernist understanding of relations between animals and humans (with its attendant humanism) and the postmodern breakdown of categories like "animal" and "human" (and the resulting lack of guidance as to how to conduct relationships between these groups). Because the scope of these essays is so broad and encompasses so many issues, this review attempts to bring to light one of the many narratives encompassed by this book.

The basic problem with which *Thinking Animals* grapples is this: On the one hand, humanism has provided us codes of behavior and ethics but only at the expense of elevating human importance above that of nonhuman animals. Modernism delineated the problem of our relationship to nonhuman animals by reinforcing a category of "we" who must behave ethically, and a category of "the other" to whom we do or do not behave in such a way. Modernism must treat the categories of human and animal as "real" so as to give force to moral requirements. Modernism, in other words, reinforces the idea of human exceptionalism.

On the other hand, postmodern thought questions the reality of categories (including "human" and "animal"), breaking down the barriers erected between the nonhuman and human animal, but at the expense of acknowledging the need for guidance in how humans behave with and toward other animals. In questioning the essentialism that underlies the modernist framework, postmodernism disavows the idea of difference, but simultaneously therefore denies the question of how to behave ethically toward the "other;" there *is* no "other" toward whom we must behave.

How are we to make headway when caught in this impasse between the rejection of categories like "human" and "animal" and the dismantling of standard ethical approaches when these categories are dissolved? Weil's essays explore and dismantle the modern and postmodern approaches to leave room for the delineation of new methods of understanding the human–nonhuman connection. Although she does not provide an answer (and indicates that there may not be *an* answer), Weil guides us to a new understanding of what the relationship between animals, including human animals, could be.

Weil approaches the existing frameworks for understanding the relations between human and nonhuman animals by looking at the benefits and problems of the stances taken by some postmodern artists toward human -- nonhuman relationships. She explores the limitations of "animal observation"---of the so-called objective approaches to understanding other animals around us and of the language with which we speak about those organisms. In the process, she exposes the limitations of language and of what we treat as an objective gaze: neither our gaze nor our language gives us insight into what it is to live as a nonspeaking animal or as an animal that has a body and senses of its own.

To acknowledge that animals have a subjectivity---a gaze of their own---which may be unknowable or indescribable is to begin to grapple with animals as subjects rather than objects. The unidirectionality of the relationship---the human gaze *upon* the animal---gives way to the possibility of two unidirectional processes---the gaze of the human on other animals and their gaze upon us. Establishing the subjectivity of animals allows for expansion of consideration to the events in which humans most regularly encounter the subjectivity of animals: as pets (I will use the term "pet" as a shorthand for "companion animal"). Weil notes that many skeptics do not take the human -- pet relationship to indicate anything about the "real" nature of the human -- nonhuman relationship because they see pets as nothing but animals with ideals and behaviors imposed upon them by humans---in short, as reflections of humans and nothing more. In the process, the critique runs, the actuality of the animal is lost; to see pets as animals that give us insight into other animals is to be mistakenly taken in by ourselves.

Weil is rightly critical of the skeptical view of the pet -- guardian relationship. Her critique takes multiple forms, but her main concern is with the idea that pets are malleable clay upon which the human imprints her needs, desires, and ideas. This description of pet-hood is legitimate only if we've already decided against the possibility of animals as subjects and against the idea that humans can coevolve with other animals. It's interesting to note that evolutionary theory today sometimes defaults to the idea that human evolution can be pushed forward only by things "larger" than ourselves---"nature" writ large---rather than acknowledging the reality of the web of interconnection with individual organisms. It's easy for us to talk about the evolution of aerobic organisms as dependent on and in turn affecting the evolution of oxygen-producing, plant-type life; it's much harder for us to believe that it's not merely that lice have adapted to the consumption of humans but that we ourselves may have changed in response to these organisms. With pets, the relationship cannot be correctly understood as one in which we impose, again and again, our meanings upon these organisms while remaining on our pedestals, untouched. The important take-away is that our relationships with animals are not and cannot be unidirectional; a relationship changes all participants, and humans are not special anchors in a reality that we create.

But Weil goes further than even describing the human -- animal relationship as a bidirectional process (you say "Marco," I say, "Polo" and we slowly get closer to each other in the pool); she describes it rather as a constant motion, with a continuous flow of information, affect, and movement between the two or more organisms that are in relationship. The idea of the continuous engagement, the "entanglement" between a human and her nonhuman companions, indicates the larger nature of the relationship we bear to nonhumans. This complex and

constantly changing movement, almost like dance, illuminates work like that of Barbara Smuts. In describing her developing relationship with a group of baboons, Smuts gives a marvelous example of coming to be accepted by the group. In her initial approach to the group, she watched them, and then over time she entered the group. She notes that although she uses the term "habituation" to describe the baboons' changed relationship to her, the truth was that "[t]he baboons remained themselves, doing what they always did in the world they had always lived in. I, on the other hand, in the process of gaining their trust, changed almost everything about me, including the way I walked and sat, the way I held my body, and the way I used my eyes and voice. I was learning a whole new way of being in the world---the way of the baboon" (Smuts 2001,).

In this entanglement, the ability to cause and respond to dying and death has perhaps the largest impact on those in the relationship. Weil looks to a number of different situations in which we are causal agents, in some sense, of death: in the personal relationships in which we cause or are merely witnesses to death, in being the indirect (in the sense of letting others kill animals so that we may eat them) or the direct causal agent in a relationship that is *about* death (that is, hunting), or in being the person who kills animals for others to eat or wear. She returns, in several ways---through the work of Temple Grandin and J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, among others---the question of how we can continue our sense of mourning for loss---that which in some sense identifies us keenly within this relationship---without continuing to enforce the duality of the "animal that mourns" and the "animal who dies." "Grief," she notes, "can strip us of those very qualities by which we distinguish ourselves as humans---our ability to speak, to reason, to explain---and as individuals" (114), and in this grief we "grieve them not necessarily because they are humanized, but because they do transcend boundaries of kin and kind by becoming integral to our lives as social partners" (115). This grief can be a cornerstone, or perhaps the indicator of a different ethics, which does not presuppose that we are defined in opposition to other animals.

In the final essays, Weil takes the transformation of the perceived relationship of humans and nonhuman animals---the relationship transformed in our comprehension from a unidirectional relationship of imposition through a dual-tracked relationship to one of integration, coevolution, and mutual interdefinition---and asks how we should behave toward those animals with whom we relate. Although the question is raised in the context of human relations with nonhuman animals, the underlying issue is broader, as Weil notes. The ethic of care, brought forward in part to critique standard approaches to ethics that rely on rules rather than individuation of a relationship and the needs within it, may provide, she suggests, a starting point for understanding what our responsibilities are toward others who share our planet, independent of the species of the individuals with whom we interact.

Although this book is intended primarily as a discussion of where we are in our thoughts with and on animals, the application to feminist understanding is clear. Weil points out the similarities, and the evident differences, between the quest to include women in the human world and the quest to include humans in the animal world and vice versa. Moreover, she notes the problems that plague women's studies because of the association of women with nature (vs. the human with culture) and the subsequent enforcement of the essentialist dualism of man/woman and culture/nature. However, her main point, and the point of interest to feminists, comes in the

conclusion she draws, an object lesson from animal studies in what feminism can and should take from postmodern, poststructuralist theory.

Interestingly, despite the ascendancy of belief in evolution, the persistence of the "othering" of animals is part of the scaffolding that bolsters attempts to treat all human persons as equal. Tacit in this description is that it is not only animals that have been "othered," but that, in the struggle to gain equality, those who have been "othered" by virtue of gender, sexuality, or race and ethnicity have gone through the same process as those interested in treating animals as having subjectivity and who may have unwittingly reinforced the idea that animals are the, or an, other (for example, the association of "animal nature" with "feminine nature"---even in the attempt to give primacy to that nature---continues the idea of essential natures associated with "being animal" or "being woman").

Although Weil is overtly critical of modernist theory, she gives us a warning shot about the dangers of embracing postmodernism wholeheartedly. By breaking down the barriers between sexes, species, or organisms, she notes that feminism and parallel projects come into danger in "embracing of post-structuralism's insistence that the material real is produced by discourse or language. Such a view can only promote the kind of anthropocentrism that Ingold calls to our attention because it discounts the 'more than human world' as anything other than a human product" (140). It is the acknowledgment that there are no "products" here---only organisms in the fluidity of interaction---that animal studies have the potential to truly allow for inclusion of all: to move humans out of the realm of actors or recipients and into a world where all living things have the ability to be influenced while being influencers. If the idea that the bidirectionality of effect is inherent in the interaction of any two lives, if it can be taken from the idea of the coevolution (in the literal and metaphorical senses) between humans and other animals and applied to the realm of interactions between members of our species, this is indeed a feminist work in the deepest sense.

The gap in this work is the omission of the nonmammalian (and more generally the nonendothermic) animals. Although a few mentions are made of nonmammalian animals (for example, farmed chickens, fish caught by anglers), the literature and art that Weil focuses on dwell primarily on the mammal. If we are truly to understand other organisms as having a subjectivity, without being prey to the charge of creating relationships in an idealized and anthropomorphic world, we must consider not just the furry beings with cute babies, but the octopus, the mayfly, and the chicken (see, for example Ariel Tsovel's detailed analysis of the ways in which "broilers" and "layers" have been stripped of their status as subjects and thus of their ethical significance [Tsovel 2006]). Our relationships with these animals, our coevolution, is no less profound, and our impact on them and theirs on us no less real for being outside the realm of our daily thought.

References

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