

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review
of
Philosophy and Animal Life

Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell,
Ian Hacking, and Cary Wolfe
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This book is not quite what I was expecting. I admit that my main reason for wanting to read it—and perhaps, in hindsight, not an especially good reason—was the intriguing pairing of terms found in the title. Was I wrong to have expected *Philosophy & Animal Life* to contain philosophical arguments about animals? My simplistic assumptions about its contents were challenged from the get go, as I found that this volume is actually a series of dialogical essays on the general theme of what our lived experiences—and, indeed, the experiences of fictional literary characters—can teach us, as humans, about the reality and meaning of *animal*. In keeping with the length and tone of the book, I will keep this review short.

A source much discussed by each author represented here is J. M. Coetzee's novel *The Lives of Animals*, with special attention paid to Coetzee's character Elizabeth Costello, a novelist giving a series of lectures at a college. Costello is severely troubled by the ways humans routinely treat other animals; however, she seems unable to adequately convey her sense of this troubling through language, and especially through conventional philosophical argumentation. Diamond takes Costello to exemplify a "difficulty of reality" that cannot be captured by the practices of philosophical discourse, which is thought to deflect (rather than, I suppose, facilitate the absorption of) this reality. What we have here is what philosophers might call a problem: Philosophy appears for many, in virtue of its very methodology, to be failing not only at the task of enabling a full understanding of an important aspect of human existence—of helping us stay "turned ... towards the life of the animals we are," as Diamond puts it (77)—but also both at the realization of its purported potential as an avenue for apprehending what our current mode of existence means for other kinds of sentient

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beings, and as a guide to the ways in which we might respond to such a realization.

One possible, partial remedy for this is to take a more literary or poetic approach to conveying these difficulties. Perhaps a different style of communication, one that elicits more feelings, will do the trick, or at least help us do it. This approach is suggested, for me, by both the writing styles and stated views of some of the authors of *Philosophy & Animal Life* (namely, Wolfe, Diamond, and Cavell). Hacking, interestingly, suggests that the human ability to deflect reality may not be such a bad thing (for *us*, it might be replied). If we have evolved the ability to insulate or shield ourselves from some potentially painful realities by translating them into the language of philosophy, why not avail ourselves of this ability? My preferred answer, ironically, could have philosophical origins: Because this practice may not always lead us as near to truth about existence as we would hope to get. While *Philosophy & Animal Life* is not quite what I expected, I greatly enjoyed this treatment of how attending to (i.e. not deflecting from) embodiment can help humans both cultivate empathy and, perhaps, come to a settlement with skepticism about what is “out there.”