

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*

Edited by Lori Gruen

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In this weighty volume – weighty in both senses – Lori Gruen has assembled a notable cast of scholars to expound on key terms in the cross-disciplinary field of Animal Studies. In Gruen’s words, “Critical terms might be thought of as tools to help solve the conceptual problems that are raised within Animal Studies, they provide a framework for helping us think more methodically about animals as subjects, and they are resources for analyzing our relationships with other animals.” Twenty-nine terms, from Abolition, Activism, and Anthropocentrism to Vegan, Vulnerability, and Welfare are held up to the light and discussed, each from one contributor’s perspective.

This is not an encyclopedia, nor is it intended to be. Each writer has been encouraged to engage with their critical term as they see fit. For example, while an encyclopedia entry on animal ethics would cover a very broad area, Alice Crary (“Ethics”) focuses on what she sees as a substantive difference between “traditional” and “alternative” approaches to animal ethics: between those who maintain that “the empirical world is as such devoid of moral values” – among whom she includes Peter Singer and Christine Korsgaard – and those, like Cora Diamond and ethic-of-care philosophers, for whom “the worldly texture of human and animal lives is suffused with such values”. The alternative approach – the one she favours – argues for a wider notion of objectivity that recognizes the existence of empirically discoverable moral qualities in humans and animals and that requires us to look at their lives from an ethically non-neutral perspective. (Along the way, she seems to get the wrong end of the stick when she denounces the argument from species overlap for allegedly implying that cognitively impaired humans merit diminished respect.) Whatever one’s assessment of Crary’s distinction between “traditional” and “alternative” approaches, her insistence that appropriate moral

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response involves imaginatively trying to understand what a flourishing life would be from the standpoint of the human or animal is surely important.

Christine Korsgaard helpfully explores in some detail the various meanings of “reason” and “rational” as applied to human and non-human life. She ends her piece by asking whether the distinctive way in which humans may be said to be rational can justify our current treatment of non-human animals – a subject she leaves for her recent book *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*. In a similar vein, Gary Varner takes us through the range of meanings attached to “sentience”. He discusses why the capacity for experiencing pain is crucially linked to sentience, what sort of evidence can be used to attribute sentience to different sorts of creatures, and why sentience matters, morally speaking. Meanwhile, Harriet Ritvo expounds on longstanding and frustrating attempts to pin down the concept of a “species”.

Some chapters have less to do with defining/refining concepts than with surveying approaches to Animal Studies. Dinesh Wadiwel (“Biopolitics”) makes the point that “biopolitical approaches differ from classical proanimal theory at least insofar as scholars are less concerned with demonstrating that the human treatment of animals is in *contradiction* with prevailing and agreed ethical norms. Instead, they are interested in demonstrating that the treatment of animals is in *conformity* with prevailing rationalities of power” In particular, efficient control and regulation of the reproduction of animal life in the food industry is mirrored in the logic of control of the human labour force under capitalism, as well as providing means of subsistence for the reproduction of that human labour force.

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Wadiwel contends that a biopolitical perspective can illuminate the logic of all political violence.

Maneesha Deckha (“Postcolonial”) looks at how the inquiry into problematic cultural and racial representations of non-Western peoples – representations that operate as unquestioned “truths” – might be productively employed in Animal Studies. Thus, though postcolonial scholars have recognized that “representations of race and culture are deeply mediated by constructs of animality and species,” most have not recognized animals themselves as colonized subjects. Deckha also addresses critiques that label calls for universal veganism a form of cultural imperialism. Such critiques commonly ignore the ancient ideals of non-violence toward animals in various non-Western cultures and their influence on Western pro-animal movements, plus the fact that the dominant Western influence here is the globalization of industrialized animal agriculture. Traditional hunting and dietary practices in aboriginal cultures are particularly contested and difficult terrain, though even here the case for a vegan ethic is not necessarily without merit. Deckha concludes by calling for greater openness to non-Western epistemologies in a search for ways of living harmoniously and non-violently with animals.

Will Kymlicka and Sue Donaldson (“Rights”) offer a strong defence of the rights approach in academic and public debate. They respond to common objections – that the rights approach is inherently anthropocentric, evaluating the moral worth of animals according to their similarities to humans; that it focuses on negative duties to the exclusion of relational obligations; that it perpetuates relations of indifference or antagonism among individuals to the exclusion of caring and reconciliation; that rights by themselves are ineffective and ignore the realities of

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power that must be confronted with political struggle. While sympathetic to some aspects of these critiques, Kymlicka and Donaldson find none of them unanswerable; they argue, for example, that the rights approach need not be antagonistic to a relationship approach and that, on the contrary, the two approaches must supplement each other. They conclude by insisting that “rights, understood as inviolability [of the most basic interests of individuals] are an essential requirement of justice.”

Perhaps this brief look gives an intimation of the enticing diversity of this volume. If there is a notable absence, from my point of view, it is the term *nature*, or *natural*. As Fiona Probyn-Rapsey says of anthropocentrism, the idea of nature is at once everywhere and nowhere. It is embedded in all our assumptions and values and thus invisible. Nonhuman animals are embodiments of the natural world. They are everywhere (in our homes, our fields, our food, our art, our language) and yet most of the time we fail to see them. They are the world’s animate furniture, lacking the rational, cultural, technological, and moral qualities by which we supposedly transcend the natural. “Nature” is always understood from a historically and culturally specific perspective. And now, as an increasingly dysfunctional industrial-capitalist civilization eats the natural foundations of its own existence, we are forced to reconceptualize the human relationship to nature. But that new relationship is contested. If the old ideology of nature justified the exploitation of animals on the basis of human exceptionalism, a new ideology of nature is being configured to justify continued exploitation on the basis of ecological imperatives – everything from land-ethic rejections of animal liberation and philosophical defences of hunting to Allan Savory’s holistic cattle grazing and “nose to tail” restaurants.

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Gruen is the first to say that the list of terms covered in this volume is not exhaustive. That does not stop *Critical Terms for Animal Studies* from being an impressive and useful work.