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On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Alliance Politics for Animal Liberation: A Response to Paola Cavalieri

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Abstract

Paola Cavalieri's article provides an incisive account of the current state of affairs in pro-animal discourse and activism. Taking her bearings from a radical pro-animal commitment to interspecies egalitarianism, Cavalieri expertly describes the shift that has taken place over the past decade from a focus on an ethics of personal purity to a politics of structural change. She correctly underscores the point that an individualistic ethic that prioritizes changes in personal consumption is ultimately unable to effect the kinds of widespread institutional change necessary to address and ameliorate the currently intolerable situation faced by billions of domesticated and wild animals. The shortcomings of this sort of individualistic animal ethics have opened the door to a variety of sophisticated and refined versions of pro-animal politics aimed at structural transformation, ranging from extensions of classical liberalism to modified forms of anarchism. Cavalieri's critical analysis of the promises and pitfalls of the liberal approach to pro-animal politics – which boldly raises the question of the political standing of animals only to surrender (in many cases) the ideal of species egalitarianism that motivates the radical position – is persuasively presented. Likewise, she helpfully pinpoints important advances and limitations among the more explicitly radical political strategies of key critical animal studies theorists and activists, who share her radical and unyielding commitment to animal equality but have thus far not articulated a convincing account of how their ideals might be realized at the political level.

On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Alliance Politics for Animal Liberation: A Response to Paola Cavalieri¹

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Paola Cavalieri's article provides an incisive account of the current state of affairs in pro-animal discourse and activism. Taking her bearings from a radical pro-animal commitment to interspecies egalitarianism, Cavalieri expertly describes the shift that has taken place over the past decade from a focus on an ethics of personal purity to a politics of structural change. She correctly underscores the point that an individualistic ethic that prioritizes changes in personal consumption is ultimately unable to effect the kinds of widespread institutional change necessary to address and ameliorate the currently intolerable situation faced by billions of domesticated and wild animals. The shortcomings of this sort of individualistic animal ethics have opened the door to a variety of sophisticated and refined versions of pro-animal politics aimed at structural transformation, ranging from extensions of classical liberalism to modified forms of anarchism. Cavalieri's critical analysis of the promises and pitfalls of the liberal approach to pro-animal politics – which boldly raises the question of the political standing of animals only to surrender (in many cases) the ideal of species egalitarianism that motivates the radical position – is persuasively presented. Likewise, she helpfully pinpoints important advances and limitations among the more explicitly radical political strategies of key critical animal studies theorists and activists, who share her radical and unyielding commitment to animal equality but have thus far not articulated a convincing account of how their ideals might be realized at the political level.

Cavalieri herself has advocated a 'critico-dialectical' approach to pro-animal politics, which is premised on the notion that small but important advances in the political and legal standing of certain animal species can lead, through a kind of domino effect, to broader changes for related species. She characterizes this approach as being relatively autonomous in relation to

other struggles for human and more-than-human justice. The key idea here is that pro-animal discourse and activism have their own irreducibly singular concerns that, for the most part, do not strongly overlap with other justice struggles and tend not to find much support among such movements. It is in view of this tension between pro-animal politics and other radical justice struggles that Cavalieri poses what is perhaps the central question of her piece: Should pro-animal politics ‘actively look for alliances with progressive human causes’?

Cavalieri does not try to offer a definitive answer to this question, but it is clear from her remarks defending the relative autonomy of pro-animal politics in this essay and several of her other writings that she is somewhat skeptical of the promise of alliance politics. She goes on to suggest that even if the answer to this question about alliance politics is affirmative, ‘considerable work’ still remains to be done if such an approach ‘is to become effective and consequential’. On this latter point, I agree with Cavalieri – which is to say, I agree that considerable work remains to be done if effective alliances are to be formed between the animal liberation movement and other radical and progressive movements for change. In the space available to me here, I can only offer one suggestion for how such work might proceed.

The chief suggestion I wish to make is that, for such an approach to become more effective and consequential, the critical focus of pro-animal politics must move away from speciesism and human supremacy to *anthropocentrism*. The former concepts are often defined by pro-animal theorists and activists as illogical prejudices that give exclusive consideration to human beings on the basis of species membership alone. The corrective to such prejudices is thought to lie in adopting a rational and internally consistent normative framework based on extending full consideration to all beings – whether human or animal – who are sentient, subjects-of-a-life, and so on. The problem with this approach as it concerns our discussion here is that it presents the mistreatment of animals as resulting from the privileged standing that is supposedly granted in a uniform and universal manner to all members of the human species. But most movements for radical social change stem from marginalized groups of people who have never been granted such status by the established order and who have, as a result, suffered the brutal effects of various practices of sub- and de-humanization.

What this means is that the established order (and here I am referring to dominant economic, legal, and political institutions) cannot be said to be speciesist in any meaningful way;

it has never extended full standing to all members of the species *Homo sapiens*. Rather, the established order is better understood as *anthropocentric*, insofar as it extends full legal, political, and economic standing chiefly to those who are considered to be paradigm instances of *anthrōpos*, which is to say, those who are considered to be *full* human beings. From this perspective, animals are often on the receiving end of violence and exclusion not because they are members of a different biological *species*, but because they are perceived to be *sub-human* and fall outside the scope of *anthrōpos* – that is, outside the boundaries of those deemed to be fully human. And marginalized human beings are often on the receiving end of violence, dispossession, and exploitation *for the exact same reason*.²

This overlapping ‘logic’ of sub- and de-humanization, along with its concomitant systems and structures, form the critical conceptual and material linkages that bind the animal liberation movement both with radical movements for social change and with movements that seek to establish more respectful relations with the more-than-human world. But in order for these linkages to be fully appreciated and for productive forms of resistance to emerge, both the animal liberation movement and radical justice movements of various stripes must learn to dialogue and form points of solidarity at this particular intersection. Such is the task that lies in wait for those of us who believe that the flourishing of animals, human beings, and the more-than-human world as a whole depends on the displacement of anthropocentrism and the resurgence of more sustainable and respectful forms of life.

Notes

¹ This commentary was part of an ‘Open Peer Commentary’ process. This involved sending a lead essay (in this issue see Cavalieri) in identified form to two high-standing scholars in the field for their feedback on suitability for publication, and for their short commentaries which would be published alongside the lead essay (aside from this commentary see also Donaldson in this issue). This approach was undertaken with the consent of the author and peer reviewers. The Guest Editors, with the consent of the Chief Editor of the *Animal Studies Journal*, pursued this approach because of the high probability that the essay would be identifiable to reviewers in the conventional double blind review process, particularly as the author responds to and builds on their own theoretical work. In addition, the guest editors were attracted to emerging open models of peer review which put an emphasis on public debate, an approach that was deemed relevant for this special issue.

² For a fuller articulation of this point, see Smith 51-2.

Works Cited

Smith, David Livingstone. ‘Indexically Yours: Why Being Human is More like Being Here than like Being Water.’ *The Politics of Species: Reshaping Our Relationships with Other Animals*, edited by Raymond Corbey and Annette Lanjouw, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp.40-52.