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[Review] Matthew Calarco. *The Boundaries of Human Nature: The Philosophical Animal from Plato to Haraway*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. 170 pp. ISBN9780231194730

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Abstract

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In this lucid, entertaining compendium analysing key philosophers relevant to ‘the animal question’, Matthew Calarco includes both the expected and unexpected. Other philosophical traditions, besides Western, feature, and in most chapters the key philosopher is paired with either a literary or filmic text, or an ethological endeavour. Such deployment of philosophy to varying texts has, of course, been central to the development of Human Animal Studies and Critical Animal Studies. (*Animal Philosophy* edited by Calarco and Peter Atterton (2004) was an Ur-text and a substantial resource.)

Calarco takes a contemporary problem (the burning of the Amazonian rainforest to plant soybeans for cattle feed and to open up grazing land) and compares it with Plato’s ‘ideal city-state’ which is vegetarian, precisely because of the issues surrounding meat production and meat-eating. Even the modern self-improvement industry is contrasted with Socrates’ proposal of caring for one’s soul, in ways which involve caring for the planet and its denizens. Aristotle may impress with his biological observations, but he endorses the violence meted out to animals who lack speech and values. To counter such rigidities, Calarco includes Jane Goodall’s observations on what she calls ‘primate spirituality’ (Calarco 22) when chimpanzees respond with awe and wonder to a waterfall.

In the chapter on the Cynics, Timothy Treadwell, who is the focus of Werner Herzog’s critical documentary *Grizzly Man*, appears. Calarco contextualises Treadwell’s choice to live with bears in the Alaskan wilderness, aligning him with the Cynics whose idea of happiness was

living ‘according to nature’ (30). Their excessiveness, however, meant that that they did not separate themselves from animals but took lessons on how to live from them – not always in the best interests of the animals themselves, as many have argued in Treadwell’s case.

In Jain beliefs vegetarianism and animal welfare are central. Personal salvation and caring for others come together in ‘ahimsa’. But ahimsa or ‘the ideal of nonviolence’ (44) can be ideologically limited. In the documentary *All that Breathes* (directed by Shaunak Sen 2022), two brothers rehabilitate raptors falling from the polluted skies of Delhi – a mission they take on partly because the Jain Charitable Bird Hospital in the city refuses to admit a raptor who eats meat. Calarco’s take on this Jain judgmentalism would have been welcome.

Connections are made between Jainism and Plutarch’s vegetarianism in a chapter which segues between the Circe myth in Homer and Plutarch’s Dialogue, ‘Gryllus’. In Plutarch’s re-imagining of the narrative of Odysseus’s men transformed into pigs, one, permitted to speak, prefers the integrity of being a pig, vilifying humans for lacking in virtue. J.M. Coetzee has Elizabeth Costello, in *The Lives of Animals*, deploy what her son calls ‘The Plutarch Response’ to explain her vegetarianism – a gory statement referring to meat-eating as consuming ‘the corpse of a dead animal . . . chew[ing] hacked flesh and swallow[ing] the juices of death wounds’ (38). Coetzee’s text does not, however, appear in *The Boundaries of Human Nature*, which is a pity.

Speculative connections that Calarco makes are delightful – if Descartes were to meet Koko, the gorilla with rationality and language, adept in American Sign Language, would it shift his judgment of animals as limited? Calarco thinks not: Descartes was too bound by his time and the imperative to justify the instrumentalising of animals. Although Bentham has been celebrated in CAS and HAS for his revolutionary question about whether animals can suffer, Calarco reminds us of the limitations of utilitarian philosophy in which animals are seen to lack an awareness of death.

Contemporary ethologist Joe Hutto’s ongoing engagement with a herd of mule deer is analysed in connection with Nietzsche. In the ‘deep ethology’ of living with the mule deer, the self is transformed in ways that resonate with what Calarco terms ‘Gay Animal Science’ as Hutto

nurtures a ‘social bond’ and connection with nature (96). The ‘task’ of philosophy, according to Nietzsche, is to aid us in our existence, so that we can ‘flourish’ and build a worthwhile way of life (97), a strand that loops through this volume.

The chapter on Derrida’s cat is a lucid examination of the binaries and essentialisms that Derrida critiques, both explicitly and implicitly. Calarco’s unpacking of Derrida’s now-famous encounter with his cat focuses on the nudity of the philosopher and how that, along with the lack of language, reason, and awareness of death, is another criterion in the construction of the ineluctable division between human and animal. The problematic training of killer whales in places like Sea World might seem to deconstruct such divides with a trainer and audience affected by the gaze of this mammal, but the whales’ sanity and freedom are denied, as the documentary *Blackfish* shows.

The examination of Carol Adams’s notion of the absent referent notes the intersectionality of her argument – that feminist activism and animal activism have much in common as both women and animals function as the absent referent. Via the work of Margaret Robinson, a Mi’kmaq scholar, who points out the similarities between pro-animal advocacy and indigenous culture and tradition, Calarco raises the issue of indigenous veganism versus colonial meat-eating. He also refers to the discomfiting question of animal sacrifice and their putative consent; in Mi’kmaq culture an animal, potentially, has the agency to refuse the sacrifice.

For Calarco, Plumwood’s essay ‘Being Prey’ is ‘one of the most compelling pieces of animal philosophy’ (124). Surely, it’s the most terrifying – about escaping a crocodile’s death roll, not once but a number of times. Yet Plumwood maintains, from the jaws of the crocodile as it were, that because human beings can never imagine themselves as food, it follows that we behave without scruples to those animals we label as food. Calarco did not include an additional text in this chapter; *Under the Skin* by Michel Faber, in which humans are kept for consumption by visiting aliens, would have fitted well.

Finally, Calarco considers the controversies surrounding Donna Haraway’s work – her endorsement of conventional connections between humans and other animals, even if that includes animals being instrumentalised, either as food or in laboratories. Still, he values

Haraway for her emphasis on treating animals with more respect and love, even though he critiques her argument as ‘inevitalist and reformist’ (136). The volume ends with an overview on the putative effects of the coronavirus pandemic on human attitudes to the planet and other animals. Calarco was a tad optimistic. The return to ‘normal’ since this book was published has not, tragically, engendered profound changes in such attitudes. All the more reason to promote, like *The Boundaries of Human Nature*, loving, ethical interconnections between humans and nonhuman animals.

Works Cited

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