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Creature Consciousness

Animal studies tests the boundary between human and animal—and between academic and advocate



Vincent Musi, Aurora Photos

By Jennifer Howard

Critics of zoos usually compare them to prisons. Ralph R. Acampora, an associate professor of philosophy at Hofstra University, thinks zoo confinement is closer to pornography. "Both participants in pornography and inhabitants of zoos are slaves to other people's desire for viewing, for sight," he explains. All "have their real nature concealed through their exposure," with zoo animals "reduced to their shapes or colors or stereotypical behaviors."

Acampora's line of thought blends theoretical inquiry with strongly held ethical concerns about how we humans interact with nonhuman animals. He and other philosophers devoted to applied ethics—traditionally a marginalized enterprise, at least in American philosophy departments—are part of a growing number of humanities and social-science scholars involved in the field of animal studies. Bringing together many different species of academic research, animal studies has become a force to be reckoned with in philosophy, literary and cultural studies, history, and other fields with a traditionally humanistic bent.

"All too human": For these scholars, the phrase sums up the limitations of their disciplines. Why, they ask, should it be all about us, when we are only one link in the great chain of being?

"Humans are animals, too, and a lot of our existence is shaped by our evolutionary history, our biology, our circadian rhythms, the very narrow climate bandwidth in which we flourish," says Cary Wolfe, a professor of English at Rice University and one of the leading theorists in animal studies.

Spurred on by a shift in consciousness that has been going on for several decades, beginning with the environmental and social-justice movements of the 1960s and 70s, scholars like Wolfe and Acampora are finding new ways to tackle "the question of the animal"—or, more accurately, the flock of questions that circle around the term "animal." These scholars want to break down the categories and distinctions that have defined how we think about our relationship to everything that is not us. Some of them see it as nothing less than a revolution in how to think and how to live.

"What you have is a whole new set of theoretical paradigms that cut across what were previously separate and discrete ontological domains," Wolfe says. "The question is, How does the nature of thought itself have to change? How does the nature of reading have to change in the face of this new object of study?"

Taken far enough, animal studies demolishes what Wolfe calls "the fundamental mechanism of humanism": the insistence on putting the human subject at the center of things. Humans' pride of place is reinforced by the separation of "human" and "animal" into separate, even opposed, categories. That model has prevailed, at least in the West, since the Enlightenment.

Dismantling that model takes animal-studies scholars in different directions depending on their home disciplines and the mix of theory and advocacy that they bring to their work. For historians and sociologists, it might mean investigating the roles assigned to animals in 19th-century Britain, for instance, or the use of canines as forced labor in today's dogfighting rings. For scholars with literary, cultural-studies, or philosophy pedigrees, animal-studies work clusters around questions of category and subjectivity—how to move beyond the anthropocentric outlook and anthropomorphizing tendencies of humanism in theory and in practice. Environmentalists and legal scholars have their own ecological or ethical or jurisprudential agendas focused on animals. (For scientists, of course, the phrase "animal studies" usually invokes laboratory experiments involving animals.) If there's one thread that ties together practitioners of animal studies, it's that the old ways of thinking about humans and (other) animals must be discarded or transcended.

Some animal-focused scholars in the humanities and social sciences describe what they do as "human-animal studies," but that term preserves the idea of a divide between "us" (humans) and "them" (all other beings). One school of thought considers animal studies a subset of posthumanism, a movement associated with Donna Haraway's 1985 essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto," which used the metaphor of the human-machine hybrid to push feminism away from its reliance on essentialist arguments.

From a posthumanist perspective, there's no reason that the questions raised by animal studies "have to be limited to carbon-based life forms," says Wolfe, whose forthcoming book, *What Is Posthumanism?* (University of Minnesota Press, December), explores what might be achieved by

rejecting such "classic humanist divisions of self and other, mind and body, society and nature, human and animal, organic and technological," according to the publisher's description.

The book is part of the Posthumanities series Wolfe edits for the University of Minnesota Press, which in 2007 published Haraway's book *When Species Meet*. (Read an interview with Haraway, Page B12.)

Such boundary crossing is characteristic of animal studies. Many of its scholars, especially in philosophy and literary and cultural studies, feel a debt to Jacques Derrida. The French philosopher's essay "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" is "arguably the single most important event in the brief history of animal studies," Wolfe wrote in a 2009 article for the journal *PMLA*. In the essay, Derrida writes: "There is no animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single indivisible limit. We have to envisage the existence of 'living creatures' whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity." (Based on lectures given by Derrida in France in 1997, the article appeared in *Critical Inquiry* in 2002, translated by David Wills, who has also contributed a book, *Dorsality*, to Wolfe's Posthumanities series.)

Derrida's work "has almost single-handedly made the question interesting for people in lots of disciplines," says Matthew Calarco, an assistant professor of philosophy at California State University at Fullerton and the author of *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal From Heidegger to Derrida* (Columbia University Press, 2008).

Animal studies holds a special appeal for philosophers, like Calarco, who want to pursue ethics. Even with Derrida in his corner, a philosopher with an ethical bent begins at a professional disadvantage. "In the United States, the most powerful departments with the most prestige focus on M&E—metaphysics and epistemology," says Calarco. Subfields of applied ethics such as animal ethics or environmental ethics are considered minor subspecialties, he says. "If you want to write about anything hands-on, it's just considered weak."

So a philosopher like Calarco often looks to scholars in other fields as interlocutors. "If you're going in the animal direction, there's been a rich set of conversations going on throughout the humanities," he says. "Sociology, anthropology, comparative literature, religious studies—those are the ones where I see the most overlap."

Even in philosophy, though, the climate for such investigations is warming. Calarco has noted a new tendency within both the analytic and the Continental traditions, the two big strands of the field, "to start questioning a certain anthropocentric bias." In the past five or six years, for instance, people including Graham Harman, a professor of philosophy at the American University in Cairo, and Ray Brassier, a professor of philosophy at the American University of Beirut, have gotten interested in object-oriented philosophy and what Calarco calls object-object relationships. Harman, for instance, is engaged in what is sometimes referred to as speculative realism. In his book *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (re.press, 2009), he writes that he "would even propose a new philosophical discipline called 'speculative psychology' devoted to ferreting out the specific psychic reality of earthworms, dust, armies,

chalk, and stone." Such thinking (or rethinking) is congenial to animal-studies scholars who want to break apart the idea of the human subject as the center of things.

Thinkers on both the analytic and Continental sides "are beginning to say that this primacy we give to the human-mind relationship to the world needs to be displaced," Calarco says. "There's a kind of implicit anthropomorphism that dominates philosophy, and that is being attacked from different angles."

For Hofstra's Ralph Acampora, the goal is "trying to build a bigger sense of 'we.'" Instead of anthropomorphizing animals, he wants "to zoomorphize humans." He's interested in "a philosophy of body, what it means to be the sort of creature that's vulnerable to sickness and disease and death." Thinking about how we share such fundamental circumstances with other animals, Acampora says, is "where people's moral intuitions kick in."

Acampora is the author of *Corporal Compassion: Animal Ethics and Philosophy of Body* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), and he has edited a collection of essays, *Zootopian Visions of Animal Encounter: Farewell to Noah* (Lexington Books, forthcoming in 2010), which focuses on the issues that zoos raise.

Like many scholars who feel the pull of animal studies, Acampora sees it as a way to combine an interest in theoretical questions with personal principles about how to live. As a child, he recalls, he grew up with many animals in the house. In college, he became involved in animal-rights advocacy. That intensified during his time as a graduate student at Emory University, where he protested research on primates. He helped organize a national animal-rights march on Washington in 1990.

"A good portion of animal studies does have an advocacy background," Acampora says. That can create tensions between scholars who embrace advocacy and those who believe in more dispassionate intellectual inquiry.

Acampora feels comfortable among the advocates. "I no longer feel embarrassed or apologetic about having commitments," he says. "Scholarship is not just concept chess." He says he remains open to opposing arguments but points out that "nobody puts a child psychologist in the doghouse for being a child advocate."

Leaving aside the problem of advocacy, there's no agreement on how to approach "the animal question" intellectually, either. For a scholar like Harriet Ritvo, a professor of history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, animal studies means different things to different disciplines.

"There really is a difference between the way historians tend to approach this kind of topic and the way people in literary and cultural studies and philosophy do," she says. "Animal studies is more in the province of literary-cultural studies. Historians, myself included, participate in it, but we don't own the label in quite the same way."

A philosopher or a cultural-studies scholar might be more inclined to tackle categories: what "the animal" means. "Grouping all animals as one kind of 'other' in a sense reifies the stark division between people and everything else," Ritvo says. "Historians are addicted to particulars." Her book *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Harvard University Press, 1987), was an early example of a historian delving into "the animal question" as it played out in a multitude of ways in a specific time and place.

In the book, Ritvo connects Victorian Britons' concerns about social roles and status to their thinking about animals, including rhetoric about stock-breeding, hunting, the humane treatment of animals, and menageries and zoos. "In each case she demonstrates the ways in which animals produced and reinforced the boundaries between social classes and racial groups," according to a review in the journal *Environmental History*. Hence the breeding of prize cattle "reinforced the traditional hierarchies of rural society," while anti-cruelty legislation "was used to define and control working- and lower-class behavior," the review said.

That kind of work has really taken off among historians in the last 10 to 15 years, Ritvo says. "When I started writing this kind of thing, people thought it was funny. Now they don't. It has become, in many disciplines, one of a range of subjects that you can take up."

At the curricular level, courses with some kind of animal-studies emphasis are popping up almost everywhere, in law schools and in literature departments. But students cannot yet get a Ph.D. in animal studies.

Michigan State University is edging closer. It has had an animal-studies graduate specialization for about a year now. Linda Kalof, a professor of sociology, founded and directs the program. "We are the first doctoral specialization in animal studies anywhere in the world," she says. "We focus primarily on the question of how animals figure in human lives and how humans figure in animal lives, from a social-science and humanities perspective." The program attracts faculty members and students from beyond those areas, too. Professors from the school of veterinary medicine and from the law school take part, as do students from zoology and animal science as well as sociology, anthropology, and American studies.

From the outset, Kalof wanted the program to include a range of disciplines and politics. The toughest part, she says, was convincing people from the agricultural school that the program wasn't all about animal-rights advocacy.

"We have all ideologies represented," Kalof observes: scholars who support experimentation on animals and those who lobby against it, for instance. "We advocate all views because we think that conversation needs to be held in an intellectual environment and not on the blogs of particular individuals railing against PETA or against factory farming."

That leads to some complex conversations in the classroom. One of Kalof's research topics is the exploitation of dogs as labor—in dogfighting rings, for instance. But she remembers one student who grew up around cockfighting in Mexico and who was able to give his classmates a sense of a cultural tradition that supports such uses of animals.

Kalof may have succeeded in achieving a balance among advocacy and other perspectives in her program, but she thinks that any attempt to define animal studies more formally—through a scholarly society, for instance—runs the risk of excluding those who are not animal advocates. "I would very much like to see a professional society that is truly interdisciplinary and would not exclude folks on ideological preferences or eating preferences," she says. "The advocacy component may be the very thing that ghettoizes animal studies in the end."

Special sections or program committees within scholarly societies have been one means by which animal studies has been developing as a discipline. The American Sociological Association, for instance, has an Animals and Society section, whose mission is "to encourage and support the development of theory, research, and teaching about the complex relationships that exist between humans and other animals." Here, too, one hears a note of advocacy: "In the process, it is anticipated that the light we shed on these issues will increase the well-being of both humans and other animals."

As animals studies draws more scholars, the question of where to house it—what kind of institutional presence it ought to have—becomes more pressing. Measured by research activity, including book series and journals that explore human-nonhuman interactions from different angles, animal studies "is doing quite well," says Kenneth Shapiro, editor of the journal *Society and Animals*, which has been published since the early 1990s. "Where we're not doing so well," he says, is in developing "an institutional structure or an institutional presence for the field." Shapiro is executive director of the Animals and Society Institute, an independent organization whose mission is "advancing the status of animals in public policy and promoting the study of human-animal relationships."

The group has been talking with a handful of universities about setting up a more academic-focused institute where scholars interested in animal studies could find resources and support. Once established, the center "could spawn some kind of professional organization that's a resource for these scholars," says Shapiro.

One of the field's strengths—its truly interdisciplinary nature—is a double-edged sword, institutionally and intellectually. Its appeal relies in part on transcending disciplines, but universities are traditionally organized by discipline.

"Certainly the game would be easier if we were in, say, sociology," Shapiro says. "This is more creative, more challenging. That's what the field is. You could search for one field that would be the best home for it, but you'd lose a great deal." He hopes that animal studies will follow the path to acceptance taken by women's studies and black studies.

Other scholars, though, see risks along that road. "There's a danger of a kind of genericization and a kind of ghettoization," says Cary Wolfe. He would not like to see animal studies become "just another flavor of the month."

Matthew Calarco also believes that the risk of being sidelined is real. In a sense, the field still "doesn't know if it exists," he says. "There certainly are no jobs in it, and there are no full-blown

departments." Calarco worries that "there's a general trend for it to become another one of these minority studies. I hate that phrase, but I don't know what else to call it."

The idea of finding a comfortable home within academe does not really fit with the most revolutionary goals of animal studies anyway. Take the "question of the animal" seriously, and "it starts to destabilize traditional boundaries of consideration—who counts and why we think they count," Calarco explains. "When you start thinking along these lines and you push and you push and you push, ethics is going to explode."

Taken far enough, animal studies ultimately points to "a revision of our most basic social institutions and our most fundamental intellectual assumptions," Calarco says. "There are no guideposts. You're on very experimental terrain."

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