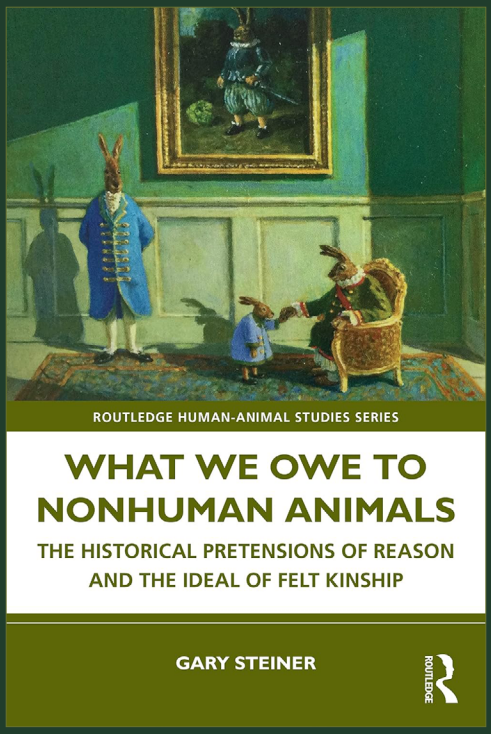
BOOK REVIEW

Letting Beings Be

Angie Pepper



Review of:
Gary Steiner, *What We Owe to Nonhuman Animals: The Historical Pretensions of Reason and The Ideal of Felt Kinship*. Routledge Human–Animal Studies Series. London: Routledge, 2024. x + 269 pp. £36.99 (pb), £135.00 (hb).

Angie Pepper is a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Roehampton, London.

Email: angie.pepper@roehampton.ac.uk

In *What We Owe to Nonhuman Animals*, Gary Steiner presents an ambitious and challenging analysis of the history of Western philosophy and contemporary animal ethics as a successor to that history. Not content with charting the origins and ascendency of human exceptionalism in Western thought, Steiner lays the foundations for an alternative path, one in which we "open ourselves to the essential continuity that we share with the experience of nonhuman animals" (234). This alternative path, the ideal of felt kinship, takes emotion as essential to moral life and seeks to expand the horizons of the moral community to encompass all sentient creatures as genuine equals.

For Steiner, the Western philosophical tradition is underpinned by a foundational anthropocentrism "according to which human beings are both unique and superior to all other sublunary beings" (4–5). Importantly, this foundation permeates all aspects of our lives and thinking and constitutes what Steiner calls the *anthropocentric background ideal of living* (Chapter 1). This ideal, Steiner suggests, is both the product and the cause of a pathos of fear: a deep-rooted fear of vulnerability, uncertainty, and, ultimately, death.

While all sentient animals are embodied, vulnerable, and mortal, these facts have driven humans, as a species, to find ways to distinguish ourselves from all other creatures. We have come to see nonhuman animal life as, to borrow from Thomas Hobbes, "nasty, brutish, and short" and we have sought, through the exercise of our capacity for reason to liberate ourselves (or so we believe) from the challenges that face mere beasts. This attempt to separate ourselves from the other animals, Steiner reasons, is motivated by fear of our own fragility and has led to humans having an "inflated sense of our own nature and worth" (3). Moreover, our fear of change and the unknown serves to reinforce and stabilize the anthropocentric ideal, making it not just difficult for us to want to do things differently but to even conceive of a non-anthropocentric orientation (14).

According to Steiner's analysis, the elevation of reason and the denigration of emotion have been central to the establishment and maintenance of the anthropocentric ideal (Chapter 2). From Seneca

Humanimalia 15, no. 1 (2024): 187–196. DOI: 10.52537/humanimalia.19619

to Kant to Descartes, our emotions have been viewed with deep suspicion for their tendency to breed irrationality and compromise the integrity of moral judgement. As a consequence, successive thinkers in the Western tradition have sought to cleave reason from emotion. This has produced a commitment to what Steiner calls the "Eleatic conception" of reason, which requires detached abstraction from our lived experience as embodied, vulnerable creatures and "[purports] to take the human mind beyond its own purview and disclose something *essential* about the reality with which we find ourselves in contention" (109). Crucially, by elevating reason in this way, we humans have drawn a hard line between ourselves and the other animals who, we have judged, are forever trapped in a world of immediacy, passion, and instinct. This ideological picture installs humans at the top of the moral hierarchy and reinforces the belief that we are the legitimate masters of all other animals and the natural world.

With the historical analysis of the anthropocentric ideal complete, Steiner offers an alternative driven by a pathos of humility. Humility, he says, proceeds from a stance of openness, generosity, and modesty about what we do not and cannot know about other animals. More specifically, it demands that we embrace "letting beings be" (48) and resist the temptation to assume that we know what is in their best interests when in fact "the lives and capacities of nonhuman animals are a bit of a mystery" (46). Importantly, this shift to a stance of openness and epistemic humility ushers in the rejection of the Eleatic conception of reason. In its place, Steiner offers us *historical reason* (Chapter 3). Inspired by José Ortega y Gasset and John William Miller, he posits that for historical reason "truth is not timeless but instead is inherently timebound" (207). Though he thinks we should prefer historical reason to the Eleatic conception, Steiner suggests that previous advocates of historical reason have overlooked the importance of emotion. Consequently, he argues (Chapter 4) that "embodied, affective constitution is essential for providing reason with the *orientation* needed to ground and guide moral judgment" (105).

To my mind, one of the virtues of Steiner's account is that while he is keen to stress "*the extensive commonalities between human and*

nonhuman animals, rather than their apparent differences" (217), he does not pretend (as some do) that there are *no* cognitive differences between some humans and other animals or that those differences don't matter in normatively significant ways. For Steiner, this recognition of sameness and difference comes together in the form of a well-tempered humanism (Chapter 5); a kind of humanism that recognizes that we are perhaps the only creatures capable of evaluating our actions in terms of moral permissibility (223). Crucially, well-tempered humanism differs from *ill*-tempered humanism in that it does not take the capacity for moral agency to be grounds for moral superiority and is guided by the pathos of humility over that of fear.

Even so, I found the tenor of the book decidedly gloomy. The careful and persuasive tracing of how and why anthropocentrism has dominated for "several millennia" (4), and the suggestion that "[a]lmost without exception" (206) contemporary animal advocates continue to be in its grip, leaves one with the depressing sense that shifting from the pathos of fear to a pathos of humility is a Herculean task not suited to mere mortals. For if "very few people writing about the moral status of nonhuman animals today have taken any really effective measures to challenge [the anthropocentric] prejudice" (9), what hope is there? Indeed, it is hard not to conclude that the desire to dominate is a permanent feature of human nature; a blemish that cannot be righted by the efforts of the exceptionally rare well-tempered humanist.

Maybe this is right—I'll confess to sometimes succumbing to this bleak outlook. But this hopelessness should be resisted since it will only breed despair and apathy, neither of which will help the billions of animals who continue to be used and killed by us each year. Contra Steiner, I believe there are grounds for a quiet optimism, and I am not persuaded that contemporary animal ethics, and animal studies more broadly, are fundamentally in the grips of the anthropocentric ideal (though, of course, no one would doubt that a great many thinkers continue to be). These are relatively young disciplines, but they are emerging as urgent areas of philosophical enquiry and the work being done is robust, novel, and sophisticated.

Animal ethics has traditionally been concerned with what duties individuals have to prevent nonhuman animal suffering, but the last twenty years have seen the emergence of the "political turn"[1] and more recently the "agency turn".[2] While the political turn saw a shift in focus to considerations of justice and the structural and institutional dimensions of nonhuman animal exploitation, the agency turn demands that the capacity for self-willed action is recognized as normatively significant both in terms of what animals can do and what they are owed. With their sensitivity to the formal and informal ways that power conditions our relations to nonhuman animals, their emphasis on nonhuman self-determination, and the importance of including nonhuman voices, these disciplinary developments represent important departures from the anthropocentric ideal that Steiner carefully elaborates.

Regrettably, Steiner's representation of contemporary animal ethics does not admit the full richness and variety of work being done. His limited discussion of the current literature is devoted chiefly to Martha Nussbaum and Christine Korsgaard. To be sure, Nussbaum and Korsgaard are both brilliant and esteemed philosophers who provide interesting frameworks for thinking about what we owe to nonhuman animals; frameworks that should not be dismissed out of hand. And their forays into animal ethics have made a significant contribution to legitimating the subfield as an area of serious philosophical enquiry. Moreover, both authors are deeply inspired by Aristotle and Kant, and thus their positive views are intimately bound up with the intellectual traditions that Steiner is rightly critical of.

1 For works discussing the political turn in animal ethics, see Tony Milligan, "The Political Turn in Animal Rights", *Politics and Animals* 1 (2015): 6–15; Robert Garner and Siobhan O'Sullivan, eds., *The Political Turn in Animal Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); and Alasdair Cochrane, Robert Garner, and Siobhan O'Sullivan, "Animal Ethics and the Political", *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (2018): 261–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2016.1194583.

2 The agency turn in animal ethics is a recent development. For some key works in this area see Natalie Thomas, *Animal Ethics and the Autonomous Animal Self* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Marc G. Wilcox, "Animals and the Agency Account of Moral Status", *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 177, no. 7 (2020): 1879–99; Charlotte E. Blattner, Sue Donaldson, and Ryan Wilcox. "Animal Agency in Community", *Politics and Animals* 6 (2020): 1–22; and Richard Healey and Angie Pepper, "Interspecies Justice: Agency, Self-Determination, and Assent", *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 178 (2020): 1223–43.

However, Steiner's decision to focus on Nussbaum and Korsgaard is likely to raise a few eyebrows among those working in animal ethics. Both authors are notorious for citing very few works in animal ethics, or animal studies more broadly, which problematizes their inclusion as representative of the field. It is quite unfair to judge the entirety of the work being done in animal ethics based on the missteps of two philosophers who are seemingly operating outside of that literature. Worse still, for Steiner's analysis of contemporary animal ethics, Nussbaum and Korsgaard will seem to many like low-hanging fruit because the inconsistencies and anthropocentric flaws in their views are well-documented. This means that Steiner's critique holds no surprises for the reader already immersed in the current literature.

What does come as a surprise, however, is that Steiner repeatedly asserts that Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka's influential work *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (2011) is also anthropocentric. Unlike Nussbaum and Korsgaard, Donaldson and Kymlicka are very much representative of the discipline and few others have influenced the scholarship being done in this area as they have. Indeed, their work has been at the forefront of both the political and agency turns and their meticulous engagement with advocates and critics of their work has shaped a whole generation of thinkers. Given this, Steiner's rejection of their work is striking and, if his analysis is correct, it would have significant implications for the current state of the discipline.

To understand Steiner's accusation of anthropocentric bias in Donaldson and Kymlicka's work, we need to take a few steps back. Early on in the book, he proposes that a philosopher's view on pet-keeping offers us a "very simple litmus test" (13) of whether they are committed to an anthropocentric background ideal of living, and he suggests that philosophers who claim that "pet ownership is (or can in principle be) to the advantage of nonhuman animals [are], if only unwittingly, succumbing to an anthropocentric prejudice" (13). For Steiner, the practice of pet keeping is inherently unjust because it denies animals their freedom and entails a commitment to a moral hierarchy in which humans are assumed to have superiority over other animals.

Accordingly, Steiner accuses Donaldson and Kymlicka of "proceeding from a place of fear" (49) since their work calls for the inclusion of domesticated animals as full members of the political community as opposed to "letting beings be" (49). He further suggests that their fear of a future without domesticated animals leads them to "operate within an essentially anthropocentric worldview" (252). The basic thought seems to be that Donaldson and Kymlicka's model of interspecies justice, which regards domesticated animals as already members of the political community and advocates for the formal recognition of that fact, is nonetheless underpinned by a moral hierarchy that privileges humans over other animals.

To my mind, this challenge is ill-founded and underdefended. Unlike most of the other authors he entertains, Steiner does not offer a detailed summary of Donaldson and Kymlicka's position—a position they have developed and defended in numerous works beyond *Zoopolis*—and there is no close engagement with their theoretical commitments or motivations. This is problematic because Donaldson and Kymlicka are quite clear that they are not concerned about keeping domesticated animals with us for *our* sake but rather in recognition that those animals have, like human citizens, a right to remain in and shape their political communities.

Moreover, the zoopolitical vision developed by Donaldson and Kymlicka is clearly guided by the kind of humility expounded by Steiner. Recall that the pathos of humility is characterized by openness, generosity, and modesty with regard to what we know of other animals, and to what we can know about them given our own limited epistemic capacities. Now consider the following:

> [T]o know what justice requires in our relations with [domesticated animals], we need to know whether and how they want to relate to us. But we do not yet know this, and we *cannot* know it without the direct participation of animals themselves. […] Our knowledge of [domesticated animals]—their needs, interests, or potential ways of flourishing—is deeply impoverished by bias, self-interest and failure to recognize how their ways of being are profoundly shaped by the ways we stunt their

> opportunities. […] *They* are the experts on many dimensions of their individual subjective good, and we can only access this knowledge if they are able to engage in processes of exploration, contestation, and self-representation.[3]

In this passage, Donaldson makes it clear that her and Kymlicka's zoopolitical vision starts with humility about what we know of the animals with whom we share our homes and societies. We have very little idea about what domesticated animals want or what they would opt for were they given a genuine choice. Importantly, for Donaldson and Kymlicka's project, we have to accept that we cannot know the answer to the question of how we should live with domesticated animals in advance. That question can only be answered by the other animals themselves and we must find ways of enabling their agency so that those animals may choose for themselves.

This brings us to something of an impasse: on the one hand, we have Steiner telling us that since we cannot know the minds of other animals and what is good for them, we should let them be. This entails discontinuing all uses of animals and thereby ending the practices and processes of domestication, including the practice of keeping animals as companions (49). On the other hand, we have Donaldson and Kymlicka telling us that since we do not yet know the minds of domesticated animals, we must enable their political agency. This means that we cannot simply assume that domesticated animals have no interest in or preference to live with humans. Rather, we must educate and socialize domesticated animals so they can make an informed choice about their future with us.

As it happens, I agree with Steiner's conclusion that animals are owed more than being "subsumed under human administration" (252). However, the assertion that it is unjust because animals might have chosen otherwise is insufficient to show what is wrong with Donaldson and Kymlicka's view. This is because, as we have seen, they will respond that animals might choose to live with us under our administration (and indeed the forebears of many domesticated

3 Sue Donaldson, "Animal Agora: Animal Citizens and the Democratic Challenge", *Social Theory and Practice* 46, no. 4 (2020), 717–18.

species did!). To claim we know otherwise is to arrogantly assume the authority to speak on behalf of animals, thereby disregarding the very ethos of humility that Steiner is advocating. So, a more compelling critique will require a careful elaboration and evaluation of their argument. Specifically, we must take the zoopolitical account on its own terms and show how multispecies citizenship cannot transform human tyranny into legitimate political authority as they suggest.

To help us with that task, Steiner does offer some provocative remarks that might be developed to motivate an alternative abolitionist path to the zoopolitical vision set out by Donaldson and Kymlicka. For one, he is keen to emphasize that *social* justice, which has been the preoccupation of contemporary political philosophy, must be distinguished from *cosmic* justice (47). In *Animals and the Moral Community* (2008), where he develops this distinction more fully, Steiner argues that the liberal paradigm of social justice involves rational agents entering a social contract and is fundamentally anthropocentric.[4] Thus, social justice is the justice of human affairs and pertains only to inter-human relations. Cosmic justice, by contrast, is wider in scope and independent of human artifice. "To affirm cosmic justice", he argues, "is to abandon our fantasy of being 'the masters and possessors of nature.' It is to let animals be in such a way that we no longer project upon them a diminished reflection of our own image but instead value their mortality as we value our own."[5] What matters for cosmic justice is that humans take their place as equal to other species in the cosmic community and orient themselves accordingly. While social justice—the justice of human affairs—is important, it must ultimately be incorporated within the wider cosmos of being.

Though he doesn't say so explicitly, I take Steiner's commitment to cosmic justice to suggest that, for him, the paradigm of *social* justice cannot be revised through a non-anthropocentric lens (which implies that much of the writing in the political turn has gone awry). This is because *our* institutional arrangements, the ones that *we* impose upon other animals, are inherently hierarchical. In these

4 Gary Steiner, *Animals and the Moral Community: Mental Life, Moral Status, and Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 120–21.

5 Steiner, *Animals and the Moral Community*, 163.

institutions, animals are systematically subordinate to humans in terms of their social status, their power, and their vulnerability. One important implication of this is that what we owe to other animals is cosmic, not social, justice. Though this suggestion seems at odds with much of the work that has come out of the political turn in animal ethics, I think Steiner is on to something.

If we couple Steiner's suggestion that animals are not owed social justice, with his admission that robust moral agency seems peculiar to some human beings, we have good reason to be suspicious about attempts to legitimate our existing institutional arrangements involving nonhuman animals—no matter how many reforms we make to those institutions. If only some humans have access to, and understanding of, a level of social organization that most, if not all, other animals do not, this makes our *institutional* relationships with other animals inherently asymmetrical. It is we who evaluate the institutional structures that organize our collective life, we who have the power to determine how those structures will be in the future, and we who are responsible for bringing about institutional change.

With this last point in mind, Steiner's concerns about our "self-serving prejudice" (239) take on a special weight. Even if we find ways to enable domesticated animal agency, create mechanisms that allow their voice to shape law and policy, and foster meaningful opportunities for them to exit their relations with us, none of these steps fully mitigate the fundamental asymmetry that exists between us and the other animals who are subject to institutionalized relations of power. All of this gives us a reason to prefer Steiner's commitment "to letting beings be" over seeking justice for them within human–nonhuman animal polities.

In closing, Steiner presents us with a compelling account of how the anthropocentric ideal came to dominate thinking in the Western philosophical tradition. While his critical remarks about the state of contemporary animal ethics don't always hit their mark, the book is nonetheless an important contribution that must be reckoned with by all those thinking about what we owe to nonhuman animals.