BOOK REVIEW

In Pursuit of Animal Justice

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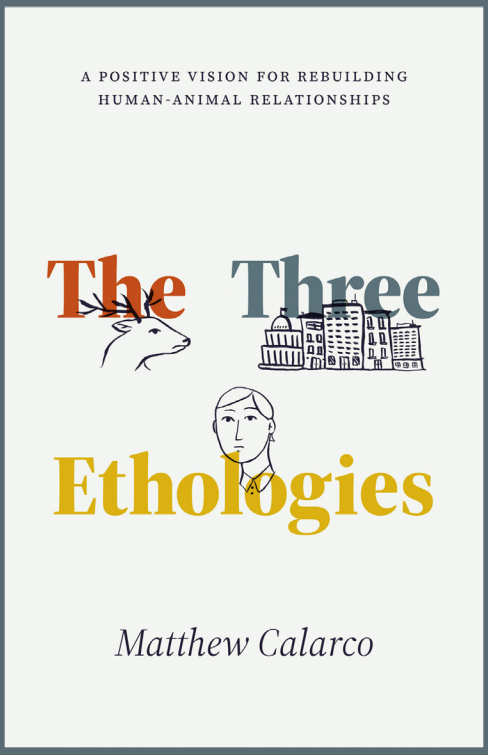

Review of:
Matthew Calarco, *The Three Ethologies: A Positive Vision for Rebuilding Human–Animal Relationships*. Animal Lives. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024. 135 pp. $24.00 (pb).

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Matthew Calarco's *The Three Ethologies* offers a new vision for human–animal relationships. One of the key aims of this book is to provide both a novel conception of what it means to lead a good life and, importantly, how to live it. In other words, Calarco's book gives readers not only a normative compass by which to make moral judgements and decisions, but also practical tools to lead just lives and become the kinds of subjects who can pursue such lives. *The Three Ethologies* is a must-read for anyone interested in questions related to what it means to forge just and good human–animal relationships.

Calarco's main argument is that leading these kinds of lives requires undertaking ethology at three levels: mental, social, and environmental. The term "ethology", and especially what Calarco conceives as ethological practice — decisively influenced by the Greek notion of *askesis* [ἄσκησις], or disciplined practice — plays a pivotal role in the book. Its etymology combines the Greek words *ethos* [ἦθος] and *logos* [λόγος]. Where the latter denotes "the study of", the former points in three directions: "the formed character or habituated dispositions of an individual"; the "shared practices and relations that constitute a given social order"; and finally, the "dwelling places of animals and human beings" (5). From this, Calarco derives his three ethologies, and divides the book's chapters up accordingly.

In what follows, I begin by summarizing the three central chapters of *The Three Ethologies* in order to extract how the book can help us to become more animal-oriented subjects. I suggest that it pushes us to develop an attunement to the social and environmental relations that constitute the fabric of our human–animal socio-political lives. I then provide a modest correction of Calarco's reading of the literature regarding social ethology. I conclude by discussing a crucial notion of Calarco's philosophy that brings the three ethologies together: *syn-theoria*, or seeing-with others.

Humanimalia 15, no. 2 (2025): 257–268. DOI: 10.52537/humanimalia.22629

Mental Ethology

Calarco's first chapter meticulously analyses Joe Hutto's seven-year study of mule-deers in Wyoming.[1] One of this chapter's most important contributions is its ability to bring forth practical and methodological tools for turning anthropocentric human subjectivities into more animal-like subjectivities. This means that, as most humans are not subjectively equipped to understand nonhuman animals' own points of views, their voices, and forms of life, a process of re-subjectification is necessary to attend to animals' lives.

To grasp the significance of Calarco's intervention, we need to first learn about Hutto's remarkable research and how he conducted it. Hutto did not move to a ranch in the American West intending to conduct an ethological study. He saw himself as a land manager, a meat eater, and a hunter. Yet things would change when a doe started appearing at his kitchen window. Soon after this first visit, the doe—who Hutto and his partner, Leslye, would come to call Rayme—returned every afternoon with her family members. Hutto describes how Rayme sought them out, was curious about them, and tried to be close to them. Encounters of this kind continued to occur for about two years. One day, one of the deers, whom they called Raggedy Ann, began to trust Hutto completely, effectively accepting him as a member of the deer herd. As Calarco recounts the story: "[Hutto] describes this as a 'profound' and 'amazing' moment in which Raggedy Ann's body relaxed, her eyes softened, and she walked straight up and touched him" (17).

Calarco identifies in Hutto's predisposition to be led by the deers a key aspect of *The Three Ethologies*' methodology. Hutto carefully observed deers' behaviour, their movements, vocal communications, and gestures, learning how to behave in a more deer-like manner. Moreover, he met the deers in their home, in their territory, and on their terms. By assimilating himself to mule deer behaviour, Hutto

1 I speak of "mule deers" because, as Jonathan Balcombe argues in relation to fishes (as opposed to fish), the term "mule deer" masks the idea that mule deers are individuals. See Jonathan Balcombe, *What a Fish Knows: The Inner Lives of Our Underwater Cousins* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017).

began to move in a "gentler, humbler, more patient" manner, for "[a]rrogance or swagger" was simply intolerable in the herd (19). By becoming a member of the herd, Hutto learned to see each deer "as a distinct individual, with its own body markings, disposition, and personality" (17). His attentiveness to each deer's uniqueness enables him to forge different relationships with those members of the herd who wish to interact with him, for Hutto respects the deers' agency and does not interact with those who do not eagerly seek to interact with him. These profound relationships enable him to "get a feel for the lived experience of the deer themselves" (19). Hutto's ethological practice can serve as an example for ethnographers, ethologists, and philosophers of ethology of how to conduct ethically good research.

Yet Calarco also points out that Hutto's humble disposition and openness to change enabled a process of subjective transformation that would have profound normative and practical consequences. When one of the deers passed away, for instance, Hutto experienced this loss as "not just *akin* to the death of a family member" but rather *as* "the death of a family member. And when the herd is in the crosshairs of a gunsight, Hutto sees it not from the perspective of the human hunter but from the perspective of the deer who are under threat" (21). All of this matters because, as Calarco argues elsewhere, most humans' subjectivities are anthropocentric.[2] Hutto's ethology, however, illustrates how such anthropocentric subjectivities can change. Indeed, what Calarco takes from Hutto's ethology is that good human–animal relationships emerge as processes of resubjectification that not only expand our understanding of who belongs to our families, but also open us to reconsidering to which families we belong.

Environmental Ethology

Calarco begins the second chapter by turning to Linda Hogan's poetry. The aim of this chapter is to explore the concept of land, and

2 See Matthew Calarco, *Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015) and *The Boundaries of Human Nature: The Philosophical Animal from Plato to Haraway* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

how our animal relations and existence are inextricably tied to it. To do this, Calarco draws on Indigenous scholarship. More specifically, he explores Hogan's *The Radiant Lives of Animals* in order to illuminate how human–animal relationships might be grounded not on mastery but a "kind of deep seeing in which we gradually catch fuller sight of the underlying fabric of our surrounding world and the patterns and connections that bind and loosen relations" (73).

Here, Calarco argues that an environmental ethology entails developing an ethical sensibility that acknowledges the historical colonization of most land, as well as "coming to grips with the colonial wound" (97). Calarco's analysis finds two reasons that explain why animal ethics and animal studies scholarship have not been sufficiently attentive to addressing colonialism and its impact on both human and nonhuman peoples. First, his diagnosis identifies a "methodological individualism" that prioritizes the welfare of individual animals, placing environmental concerns on a secondary plane. Second, when pro-animal scholars seek to address environmental problems for animals, they usually focus on "intentionalism", a term Calarco uses to refer to "people's intentions when making decisions" (93). He suggests that this is a problem because environmental harms are often the result of "indirect and unintentional acts" and "the beings or systems suffering harm can be challenging to delimit and are often transindividual" (93). For this reason, he proposes that a more systemic and structural approach is needed.

Thus, Calarco perceptively draws attention to how climate change, colonization, and the destruction of our human and nonhuman environments are co-constituted. For example, Calarco notes the West's tendency to dominate other life forms has had a profound impact on wild animal habitats and our shared planet more generally. Oceans have been progressively acidified, which impacts trophic chains. A significant number of animals are forced to migrate due to rapid shifts in the climate and food availability, which leads many of them to encounter new predators and diseases. This has led, and is going to lead, to the death and extinction of countless animals and animal species.

In a more positive and affirmative tone, an environmental ethology involves putting land at the centre. Following Glen Sean Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene), Calarco conceives land not as "an object to be owned but [as] a complex field of relations and processes by which a people is formed and sustained" (85). Land includes both the physical area usually associated with the notion of land, as well as "people and animals, rocks and trees, lakes and rivers, and so on".[3] Calarco advises his readers to be cautious and not to confuse this list with the full apprehension of what land means, for "the key ontological category in considering this Indigenous conception of land is *relation*" (85–86). This means that attending to the land involves paying attention to the relations that form specific territories, "the complex web of individual and extra-individual forces, systems, and assemblages that constitute the world of a given people or community" (86).

Note that Calarco's emphasis on the notion of relation goes beyond the kinds of individualist frameworks that have characterized much animal studies and animal rights scholarship, aligning instead with ecofeminist and Indigenous scholars who have long argued for relational ontological frameworks.[4] This chapter also leaves us with a set of questions for further reflection that speak to both the work of animal rights theorists as well as animal activists: "How might animal studies be transformed if it took on board this sort of vision of being responsible to the land? What kind of questions would come to the fore? How might current campaigns and struggles at the heart of the animal rights movement be reassessed and reconfigured?" (89)

Social Ethology

Calarco begins his third chapter by describing his encounter with an American crow. As Calarco routinely put out water for squirrels every morning, he began to realize that he was being watched by a group of crows. One of the crows would follow his movements

3 Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 61.

4 See Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993); Margaret Robinson, "Veganism and Mi'kmaq Legends", *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 33, no. 1 (2013): 189–96; and Lori Gruen, *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for our Relationships with Animals* (New York: Lantern Books, 2015).

intently, flying closer to him "than other birds dared to, and seeming to find [him] and [his] family of great interest" (41). Calarco and his family reciprocated and started to observe the crow with similar interest. They named the crow Patches due to his singular white markings. One day, Patches did something that none of the other birds had done before. He perched on the porch railing of Calarco's home, which, Calarco explains, is a "vulnerable place for a large bird, since it is just a few feet from [their] living room window and the front door" (42).

Calarco and his family thought that perhaps Patches was thirsty. But as the water bowl remained full, it then occurred to them that perhaps he was hungry. Or, because it was nesting season, perhaps Patches's mate and nestlings were in need of food. They "put some peanuts out beyond the porch and waited to see what would happen" (42). Patches did not eat the nuts but, rather, took a fair number of them in his beak and left. Patches, along with Calarco and his family, established this new routine that Patches had requested. Calarco and his family tracked Patches and found out that he was "indeed feeding a mate and nestlings high in a pine tree about fifty yards from [their] house" (42).

After a few weeks, Patches, his mate, and the nestlings showed up in front of Calarco's home. The nestlings grew up and other crows joined the family to form a murder of seven crows or so. It quickly became part of their social lives—the crows, Calarco and his family—to engage with each other. Patches requests food every day by perching on the porch railing; Calarco and his family gladly acquiesce to these requests. The crows also care for Calarco and his family by telling them, for example, when a coyote is close to their home. Further, Patches "occasionally leaves small items—gifts, perhaps—on [their] porch" (43). Calarco explains that for him and his family: "these crows are now kin; they play a prominent role in our lives, as we do in theirs" (43).

For Calarco, this opening vignette exemplifies the ways that human and nonhuman animals are socially entangled. A few aspects of this encounter resonate with Calarco's previous work, where he

impels readers to be "like" animals.[5] The way this story begins also has strong resonances with Hutto's ethological project. Patches, like Raggedy Anne, is the one who initiates this relationship by making a request. Both Calarco and his family see Patches as a being who deserves recognition and who is owed responsivity. In doing so, Calarco and his family are displacing themselves from the centre, and creating the social conditions for Patches to establish the terms of their relationship.

Recall that one of the meanings of *ethos* is "custom, in the sense of the shared practices and relations that constitute a given social order" (48). Calarco's account of social ethology shows that:

> at stake in the practice of social ethology [. . .] is a reconsideration of the very nature of the *social bond*—a term that should be understood to include, among other links and ties, companionship, kinship, friendship, association, alliance, assemblage, family, and community—as it is enacted and transformed among animals and between and among human beings and animals. (49)

Calarco's account of the social bond thus seeks to disrupt the dominant conception of social life, troubling "boundaries and fixed territorial markers such as the family unit and the state" (49). In this vein, he asks a set of forward-looking questions such as: "What if, instead of taking the extant social order and its governing principles and categories largely for granted, we sought to conceive of the social bond as something that is inherently open-ended—as something that emerges in and through experimenting with new relations that undo old configurations and open up different potentials and possibilities?" (50).

A Modest Correction

Before concluding, I offer one modest correction to the reading of the literature on social ethology presented in *The Three Ethologies*. I do so because I believe critical theorists and critical animal studies scholars are sometimes biased against work framed as "liberal".

5 Calarco, *Thinking through Animals*.

By dismissing the work of certain liberal theorists, the critical traditions are missing a great opportunity to learn with and from liberal authors who have made crucial contributions to understand the political and normative import of agency, community, and the strong attachments of animals to their territories. To be more specific, the conceptualization of social ethology in *The Three Ethologies* engages the political turn, which is a subfield of animal rights theory seeking to build just political institutions and processes for human and nonhuman animals alike.[6] Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka's *Zoopolis* has been pivotal in shaping the political turn, which Calarco's book (55–59) engages at some length.

Donaldson and Kymlicka argue that domesticated animals should have citizenship rights because they are members of human–animal mixed communities: they contribute to reproducing the socio-political fabric of political communities through their emotional support, forced labour, and by complying with social norms. *Zoopolis*'s differentiated theory of animal rights also contends that wild animal peoples should have a collective right to self-determination because wild animal communities have their own forms of social organization, cultures, and are attached to their familiar territories.

The reading we get in *The Three Ethologies* of Donaldson and Kymlicka's work suggests that *Zoopolis* offers crucial ideas for making "thoroughgoing changes to a wide range of structures and institutions" (57). However, Calarco also depicts Donaldson and Kymlicka's work as being committed to liberalism's "emphasis on the sociopolitical significance of individuals" which "is ill-suited to deal with the complex issues that surround animal collectives and assemblages" (58). This representation of *Zoopolis*, and liberalism more generally, is widespread within certain circles of critical animal studies, but requires revision on at least three fronts.

First, by drawing on relational accounts of the self in feminist and disability studies, *Zoopolis* conceptualizes an interdependent subject shaped by the relationships, communities, cultures, and material

6 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.

environments in which they are enmeshed.[7] This kind of rationale has led Donaldson and Kymlicka in more recent work to draw on distributed accounts of agency, considering how socio-political, intersubjective, and infrastructural factors can act as a "holding environment".[8] Their argument is that our holding environments can enable individuals and peoples' agency or, they can, instead, suppress it.

Second, Donaldson and Kymlicka are likely to be the authors within animal rights theory who put more weight on the notion of community, and the importance of community to political life.[9] As mentioned earlier, Donaldson and Kymlicka argue that one of the key rights that should be recognized for wild animals is their collective right to self-determination and sovereignty. Crucially, the holder of such a right is not an individual, but a people. As Donaldson and Kymlicka themselves put it: "Where peoples have an 'independent existence', 'place value upon it', and 'resist' alien rule, and where they have 'recognisable interests' in their 'social organisation', then we have the moral purposes that call for sovereignty".[10]

Third, Calarco's environmental ethology is, in fact, much closer to Donaldson and Kymlicka's zoopolitical project than Calarco himself concedes, for Donaldson and Kymlicka argue that the "collective forms of life [of wild animal communities are] anchored to specific territories and ecological niches".[11] They also demonstrate "how the social and material context holds [animal] people's identities and subjectivities" and how wild animal territories act as "the durable repositories of collective identities and aspirations," reminding

7 Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 83–84.

8 Donaldson and Kymlicka, "Doing Politics with Animals", *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (2023): 621–47 (639).

9 See their extensive discussion on this point beyond *Zoopolis*: Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, "Interspecies Politics: Reply to Hinchcliffe and Ladwig," *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 23, no. 3 (2015): 321–44; Charlotte Blattner, Sue Donaldson, and Ryan Wilcox, "Animal Agency in Community: A Political Multispecies Ethnography of VINE Sanctuary," *Politics and Animals* 6 (2020): 1–22; Sue Donaldson, "Animal Agora: Animal Citizens and the Democratic Challenge," *Social Theory and Practice* 46, no. 4 (2020): 709–35; and Donaldson and Kymlicka, "Doing Politics".

10 Donaldson and Kymlicka, *Zoopolis*, 173.

11 Donaldson and Kymlicka, "Interspecies Politics", 335.

"individuals who they are and how they belong together".[12] All of this is to say that Donaldson and Kymlicka's liberal work is not solely individualist; it also illuminates the normative significance of the relational and communal aspects of animals' lives, how wild animal communities' identities and sense of belonging are attached to their territories, and how their territories act as holding environments.[13] Accounts of social ethology such as Calarco's fail to incorporate the important political and collective dimensions of animal life advanced by authors like Donaldson and Kymlicka. It is my contention that the dominant reading of Donaldson and Kymlicka's work in certain circles of critical animal studies should be corrected. Otherwise, the field will miss the opportunity to enrich itself from projects that have made valuable contributions.

Conclusion: Toward Seeing-with Others

The Three Ethologies' intervention in the literature is of paramount importance, as it provides fundamental conceptual and practical tools to forge good and just human–animal relationships. Calarco masterfully reads a wide range of texts—from Hutto's ethological study of a mule deer herd in Wyoming to Hogan's poetry and ancient Greek philosophy—to engage in what he describes as "deep ethological practices" (107). Calarco's perceptive book is not, or not only, a theoretical text for philosophers to contemplate while sitting on their armchairs at home; *The Three Ethologies* captures a way of life grounded on "the practical ideal" that Calarco calls "*syn-theoria*, or seeing-with others" (108).

Seeing-with other animals is imbued with "an affirmative passion" that seeks to behold the world and see it "with fresh eyes—an activity the ancients called *theoria*" (108). There are two main differences between the ancients' *theoria* [θεωρία], understood as a way of seeing, and Calarco's. First, in contrast to Greek philosophers such

12 Donaldson and Kymlicka, "Doing Politics", 639–640.

13 For an example of how Donaldson and Kymlicka's work can illuminate the social lives of animals, see Pablo P. Castelló, "The Fabric of Zoodemocracy: a Systemic Approach to Deliberative Zoodemocracy," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (2025): 1–26.

as Aristotle, Calarco insightfully argues that "the ideal of *syn-theoria* animating the three ethologies presumes that *animals themselves theorize*" (110). This means that "animals behold the world in modes specific to their subjectivities and communities, and that they do so in ways that are worth trying to understand, respect, and even inhabit" (110). Second, for the ancients, *theoria* was a self-sufficient activity practised by individuals. For Calarco, by contrast, *syn-theoria* is relational at its core and impels us to see communally, "with and through others" (111). Recall here, for example, how Hutto was accepted by the mule deer herd and how his subjectivity was transformed by seeing with and through the deers.

In closing, Calarco acknowledges that *syn-theoria* does not, and cannot, promise happiness and flourishing; neither in the sense of the ancient Greeks, nor in the sense of more modern conceptions of happiness, such as that of utilitarianism. Instead, practising the three ethologies with other animals is a dangerous risk because "the world is not constituted to ensure the happiness and flourishing of either animals or human beings—a point that holds true in any age, but especially in ours, characterized as it is by widespread and rapid degradation of living conditions across several registers" (116–117). This means that seeing-with other animals and being attuned to their ways of life is likely to also make us more attentive to the ways they grieve, suffer, and experience the loss of their territories, habitats, and cultures.

Calarco's book does not hide away from the dire reality of our epoch. Instead, it calls us to face it, "to risk everything", to be exposed to both "the very worst and the very best", and to do our best to lead a good life (116). *The Three Ethologies* does this because it is not written for those who seek to lead a happy life. No, *The Three Ethologies* is a book written "for those of us desiring to pursue a worthwhile life (and death) with animals in the age we find ourselves in, few other paths remain open" (116).