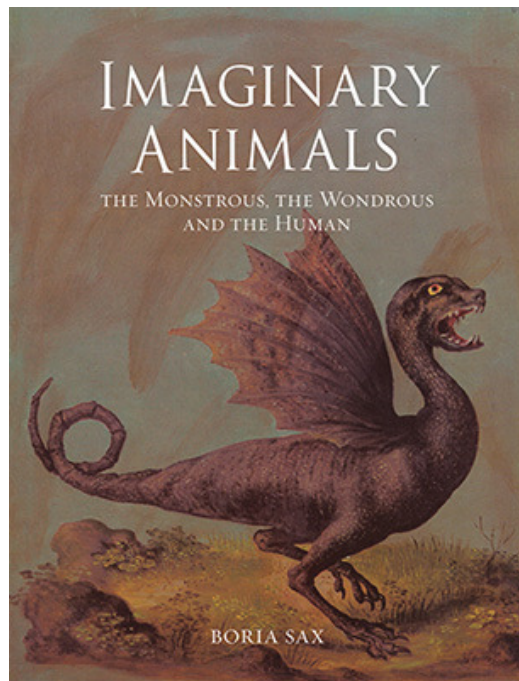


**Richard Iveson**

## Toward an Imaginary **A**nimal Studies

Boria Sax, *Imaginary Animals: The Monstrous, the Wondrous, and the Human*. London: Reaktion Books, 2013. 278pp. \$39.00 hb.



**Introduction.** In common with both its subject and the sub-discipline of animal studies generally, Boria Sax's latest book, *Imaginary Animals: The Monstrous, the Wondrous, and the Human*, cannot be easily assigned a convenient niche within the traditional segregation of genre and discipline. Sax, meanwhile, is very clear as to his aim: the founding of a brand new sub-field of study organized along the lines of animal studies but dealing solely with the realm of *imaginary* animals (25). While the success or otherwise of Sax's project remains to be determined, at the very least *Imaginary Animals* is an exhaustive but in no way exhausting scholarly account of fantastic creatures and wondrous hybrids that are as diverse as the cultures within which they emerged.

Populated throughout with beautifully reproduced illustrations, *Imaginary Animals* is clearly aimed at both academic and popular readerships. Such a dual focus is always incredibly difficult to achieve, however, and results here in a text that is itself something

of a hybrid, composed as it is of two distinct parts. The first six chapters plus the brief conclusion make up one part, with the second part consisting of chapters seven through twelve. Where the second part tends largely toward an exercise in cataloguing, the first will undoubtedly appeal more to both the academic and the general reader. It is by far the more exegetical and critical, without ever becoming dense or difficult. This is not to take anything away from the sheer breadth of research and scholarship that is, if anything, even more in evidence throughout the later chapters. I will consider this second part first, before engaging with the theoretical sections of part one, sections that make *Imaginary Animals* much more than simply an encyclopedic listing of fantastic beings.

**First, the Second Part.** In the later chapters, various “imaginary animals” are categorized according to six basic classifications: wonders; creatures of water; of earth; of fire and air; shape-shifters; and mechanical animals. Here, one finds many fascinating stories ranging from Yahweh’s relationship with the Leviathan to the rise of the mermaid as a major modern mythic figure. At the same time, however, one must also undergo the chore of wading through lists that, because of their comparative nature, are at times somewhat repetitive. Moreover, and unlike in the first part, these lists are seldom relieved by provocative passages of analysis and speculation. That said, Sax does slip in some very interesting claims, such as, for example, that insofar as moral consideration in traditional Indian culture “is not greatly contingent on human form,” the treatment of other animals is thus “generally better than it is in Western countries, but the treatment of people with low status is worse” (143). On the basis of such claims, the potential for rigorously contextualized accounts of a given culture’s mythology — including our own — to challenge ingrained and seemingly immutable habits of thinking about other animals seems very great. While Sax does not pursue this argument, the potential is clearly indicated in the strong sense of estrangement produced by the hugely diverse accounts of what “counts” as human across various cultural traditions.

Two related issues are considered in some detail in this part, namely those of *plants* and of *consciousness* — issues that, given their importance within animal studies and beyond, demonstrate a clear understanding of the larger stakes in play. Anyone working in the field of animal studies will doubtless have faced the following question in one form or another (and most likely in tones of mock incredulity): “So, if we must

extend the ethical realm to include other living beings, are you suggesting that we should include *plants* as well!?”<sup>1</sup> As Sax argues, such questions in fact depend upon a baseless yet powerfully normative assumption that human *consciousness* is ontologically distinct and superior. Such is the apparently self-evident “fact” one finds throughout the West today that “animals have some sort of *incipient* consciousness, while plants do not” (211; my emphasis). One can see how potentially important ethical debates around the issue of caring for plants are blocked by forever being reduced to a question of consciousness that appears long since resolved. Similarly, the apparently absurd question of “plant ethics” can be seen as raising the possibility of breaking down just such normative and reductive assumptions that so often organize our thinking.

To this end, Sax begins by demonstrating why the notion of consciousness in plants is anything but absurd. Viewed over an appropriate timescale, he writes, plants can be seen to act “with an apparent deliberation that rivals that of any mammal” (211). Plants explore territories, battle competitors, and surmount barriers between them and the sunlight that sustains them; they “recruit” various other animals through bribery, coercion, deceit, and self-sacrifice, and some even launch deadly preemptive attacks against other plants (Ibid.). Even the slowness of response thought to characterize plant life can no longer be considered certain: leaves and stems, writes Sax, “may immediately emit poisons or even alter their chemistry when insects lay eggs on their leaves” (213).

Shifting to focus more generally on the often vexed — and just as often irrelevant — question of consciousness and its attribution to another, Sax argues that it is primarily a question of *dominance*. Given that there are quite simply no conditions or criteria by which consciousness can be either awarded or withheld, he writes, the human’s justification for domination is rather an illusion based principally upon “a trick of perspective” (247). Hence, we need only shift that perspective just a little in order to disclose its fundamental bias. Consider, writes Sax, the crows of Sendai, who place walnuts under the wheels of cars stopped at traffic lights, nuts which are then cracked open as the cars move forward on green. “Quite possibly,” he continues, “these crows believe that cars and trucks exist for the express purpose of crushing shells” (247). Displacing the anthropocentric bias in this manner opens the way to a far more nuanced understanding of the various ways in which human and nonhuman beings co-exist and co-evolve within symbiotic relationships, and not as a result of domestication (from the Latin *dominus*) conceived as synonymous with domination.

That said, writes Sax, it is in fact *technology*, rather than other animals, which today more than ever renders the illusion of human dominance impossible to maintain. Indeed, he argues, an alien newly-arrived on Earth “might well think that computers were the dominant form of life, with human beings only present to build and service them” (248). And how, the alien may well ask herself, might these human animals have come to be so utterly dominated in this fashion? Sax suggests the alien might very well conclude that humans must simply have been programmed that way, most likely set in motion by a series of automatic triggers of the most basic stimulus-response type (248).

**Second, the First Part.** While retaining both brevity and simplicity of telling, the first part of *Imaginary Animals* concerns itself with the rather different task of responding in depth to a number of provocations that give each chapter its heading: “Animal Encounters”; “What is an ‘Imaginary Animal?’”; “Every Real Animal is Imaginary”; “Every Imaginary Animal is Real”; and “Monsters.”

In the first chapter Sax focuses on the paradoxical figure of the “true unicorn,” clearly demonstrating why, should unicorns be discovered, no captured unicorn could ever be judged “authentic” according to its species classification. From this we can infer that it will be impossible ever adequately to define and delimit any species; if no newly emerging species can be defined, neither can any existing or now-extinct species, including human beings. Sax dwells in some detail on this latter point and, while parts of the argument regarding human beings are interesting, some are nonetheless problematic. He begins by arguing that producing an adequate definition of the human species is, and always will be, impossible, simply because “the boundaries of what is considered human vary enormously by culture, by historical era and even in the course of an individual’s day-to-day experience” (23). A bear in one place and time is thought to be capable of coupling with a human to produce a child; in another, apes are assumed to be human while certain of tribespeople are not, or again, in another place and time, that the large cassowary bird is a human being is blindingly obvious to all concerned. By any account, this is an important point to make.

However, writing of the innumerable doomed attempts to define the human on the basis of an apparently unique property, be it tools, language, consciousness, death, etc., Sax seems to locate in this *lack* of a uniquely definitive property the very property it claims that humans lack. Human animals, in short, are “*uniquely elusive*” insofar as they

lack any uniquely human characteristic; rather, they are always “disguised, airbrushed, rethought, hidden, exaggerated or otherwise altered” (24). Given the inference that *no* species can ever be adequately defined and delimited, this is a puzzling move. Human animals, Sax insists, are unique because they elude definition, while at the same time unicorns, for example, *also* elude definition. Sax’s definition of the properly human is almost as old as time, having been reiterated over and over again in myth and fable, most notably for us perhaps in the Greek myth of Epimetheus. Western philosophy has depended for millennia upon just this notion of constitutive lack as proper to the human, before finally being taken to task by poststructuralist philosophy.

After making his claim for a properly human lack, Sax states his desire to extend “the academic area called ‘anthrozoology’ or ‘animal studies’ ... to the imagination, to myth and legend” — a realm which, according to Sax at least, “has seldom been very anthropocentric” (25). He attempts this in order to “finally reveal our human claims to dominance to be illusory” (25). The claim that myth and legend are largely non-anthropocentric seems to me extraordinary, and the suggestion that in “folktales throughout the world, all forms of life, from human beings to foxes and trees, interact with something close to equality” (25) seems to fall prey both to a universalization of myth (which Sax rightly argues strenuously against throughout) and to a forgetting of that trick of perspectival bias that ultimately sustains an illusory belief in a global human dominance. Just such an anthropocentrism, precisely because it remains invisible and thus unquestioned, threatens to stall Sax’s project before it can even begin, potentially risking a silent extension of anthropocentrism — in the guise of its very expulsion — throughout the realm of animal studies. Instead, I would argue, it is necessary to engage adequately and repeatedly with anthropocentrism at every level, because it is something that can never be expelled, only ignored.

Despite Sax’s acknowledgment of the importance of replacing dominance with symbiotic co-evolution, equally problematic here is a nostalgic regression of other animals to an illusory “primordial” realm of “nonhuman cyclic time” that, in typically Hegelian fashion, Sax imagines predating the human world of names, categories, and concepts (31-32). Readers of animal studies will doubtless be familiar with this argument. Philosophical as much as physical engagements, however, have long shown the necessity of understanding the various controversies concerning temporality that mark it as a hugely complex and profoundly nuanced area of study. Such a simplistic opposition that pits an unexplored conception of linear time understood as properly human, against some equally unspecified kind of cyclic time said universally to characterize the massively divergent ways of being of all other animals, offers nothing.

It serves only to obscure questions of temporality, the answers to which will inevitably bear heavily on the future directions of animal studies, be it an imaginary variant or not.

One might object to the reading being made here, pointing out that Sax is not, nor does he claim to be, a philosopher, and as such it is unfair to reproach his work for its lack of philosophical rigor. We should not, however, forget that Sax's explicitly stated aim with this book is to construct, or perhaps to extend, animal studies to include imaginary animals of myth and fable within its remit. If we are reasonably to judge the project's potential for success — and whether such an endeavor is necessary or even advisable — it is necessary to engage with the work on the ground of contemporary animal studies, an area in which rigorous philosophical and theoretical critique constitutes the primary component. Moreover, in this first part Sax himself explicitly intervenes in a number of currently prominent philosophical controversies in animal studies, an engagement which makes this section of *Imaginary Animals* by far the more interesting of the two.

In this vein, Sax evokes the famous bathroom encounter between Jacques Derrida and his “little cat” as related by Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2006) — a passage that, having been read both intensively and extensively, has rapidly established itself as a theoretical touchstone within animal studies. Sax's own reading would doubtless have benefitted from being clearly situated within this broader context. Without this wider engagement, what appears as an initially promising reading ends up veering off dramatically, ultimately losing itself. Sax thoroughly misreads Derrida's analysis of the shared gaze. Entirely contrary to Derrida's account, Sax interprets the encounter with the alien gaze of an (other) animal as being simply “an experience that takes us back to something pre-cultural,” which awakens “primal responses” that remind those exceptional beings that are human of the arbitrariness of “civilization” in which such pride is taken. It perhaps goes without saying that Sax's Christianized conception of Nature — as a previously Edenic realm from which all other animals were subsequently expelled as a consequence of the Fall announced by the arrival of the time-bound and thus historical human — is anathema to Derrida's thought. In positing the existence of a mythic and timeless animal realm, particularly one that reserves for human animals alone the possibility of experiencing an authentic “primordial response,” Sax suggests that the primary function of “Nature” is in fact to humble a self-aggrandizing humanity that would otherwise be consumed by arrogance and hubris.<sup>2</sup>

At this point, Sax cites Donna Haraway's equally well-known critique of the Derrida passage, in which she justifiably takes Derrida to task for failing to consider the actuality of the cat — that is, her singular, nonsubstitutable existence and specific ways of being — as being relevant to the encounter. Sax argues that by the end of his lecture Derrida ultimately reduces his “actual” cat to a mere philosophical cipher, further suggesting that, regarding the bathroom scene at least, Derrida had perhaps “been writing as a poet when he suddenly remembered that he was really a philosopher” (35). Again, the opposition of poet and philosopher put forward by Sax sounds an odd note, particularly given its application to Derrida, who must take a large part of the credit for the thoroughgoing deconstruction of just this pairing. Despite this, Sax finds in Derrida's lecture the constant battle of poet and philosopher, the former demonstrating a longing for transcendence in his repeated attempt to reach out toward the cat's “alien presence” while, with at least an equal persistence, the latter insists upon an understanding that transcendence remains forever impossible (35). Moreover, for Sax this internal conflict can be discerned by way of the “simple contradiction” to which Derrida is said to fall prey. This contradiction is for Sax a rather obvious one, in that Derrida insists that the being who gazes upon him “cannot be classified or named,” while at the same time he continues “to call it [*sic*] a ‘cat’” (35). Sax's would-be *coup* reveals, however, only a lack of full engagement with Derrida's philosophy, particularly as regards the notion of the trace and its implication for traditional conceptions of language.

This absence of engagement is further highlighted by Sax's suggestion that Derrida could in fact have very easily avoided the contradictory application of the concept “cat” to a being who refuses conceptualization by way of a simple expedient, namely that, instead of employing the *word* “cat,” he could have simply drawn a *picture* of the inconceivable cat. What Sax fails to acknowledge, however, is that pictures too take place only as a result of habitually acquired and unthinkingly deployed concepts; drawings of cats serve as labels and names just as well as might those attributed in word form or in a poetic fragment or algebraic equation. Imagining otherwise would be to assume that pictograms are wholly idiomatic, and thus immune to the delays and difference that condition every making of sense or production of meaning.

Sax concludes his reading by arguing that philosopher-Derrida ultimately silences poet-Derrida by forcing him “to read a huge book” (35). At the last second, however, poet-Derrida forces out a last-gasp claim that “an animal transcends all attempts at conceptualization, even by learned academics” (35). Sax, it should be noted, is not

claiming a direct citation. Nonetheless, this apparently objective summation constitutes a further misreading. Derrida's actual statement reads: "Nothing can ever take away from me the certainty that what we have here [in reference to the specific little cat gazing upon his nakedness] is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized."<sup>3</sup> There is nothing here to support Sax's reading that any given nonhuman animal necessarily *transcends* conceptualization, as what appears to be both consequence and property of a common animality from which humanity is excluded. To say that a given existence *refuses* conceptualization is very different from saying that that same existence *transcends* conceptualization. In one case, such an existence *refuses* absolutely to be subjugated by the shackles of conceptual control, instead forever exceeding externally imposed boundaries and, in so doing, disrupting every attempt to impose upon it a dominant univocal sense. In the other, however, every organism currently contained within the commonly accepted concept of "animal" always already *transcends* not just this very conceptualization by which such transcendental beings are identified, but every such conceptualization, insofar as actual nonhuman animals therefore exist upon some plane of being both higher and superior than that upon which humans, as sole possessors of language and thus concepts, are thus condemned to remain.

Moving on to a consideration of the obscure ontological status of "Imaginary Animals" in the next chapter, Sax refers to recent research in a number of fields, including cognitive psychology, in order to demonstrate that in our "postmodern era" experience and imagination can no longer be considered opposites. This is because perception is never immediate, but is rather a largely imaginative process of construction, at once biological and cultural, built upon "conceptual frameworks, visual stimuli, sounds, memories, and so on" (40). Perception, in other words, is always already *apperception*, from which Sax concludes that experience therefore "does much to determine what stimuli we notice, and prior beliefs affect how we implicitly classify and interpret them" (40-41). Such a conclusion does not go far enough, however, even despite the important critiques of Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism that follow it; it leaves itself open to a reinscription of the humanist Kantian *subject* — a reinscription this reconfiguration of perception as mediated process renders impossible.

Putting this aside for a moment, Sax makes the point here that the experience of perceiving another animal is always in large part the process of constructing an *imaginary* animal.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore,



animals are the major templates used in the construction of human identity, whether universal, tribal or individual. Imaginary ones in particular are a record of the changes in humankind, as we absorb, lay claim or try to disown features that we discover in other creatures. And because people constantly not only appropriate aspects of the appearance, habits and abilities of other animals but draw on their identities as well, in ways that are almost as various as the animals themselves, there is a great diversity among human cultures and individuals. (46)

Sax is making a big claim here: that cultural *difference* — and thus culture “itself” — is either largely or entirely reducible to the result and record of the humanity’s arrogation of the appearance, habits, abilities, and even identities of other animals.

This raises a whole series of questions, not least of which is that, if the construction of “culture” and thus “human identity” (or vice versa) depends upon the appropriation of (other) animals, then is culture- and identity-construction an entirely human province? If so, then the animal “identities” thus arrogated must be entirely imaginary and, if not, other animals must thus *also* take part in culture- and identity-construction. Sax seems at no point to entertain the notion that nonhuman animals also possess culture, despite empirical evidence to the contrary. Rather, it seems as if human *metaphoricity* at this point overwhelms and erases the existential specificity common to *every* animal, human and nonhuman, reinstating the privileged liberal Kantian subject as it goes. Only humans, in other words, are both biological *and* cultural, in contrast to all other, “merely” biological animals. But what happens in that case to perception-as-apperception? The simplest perception, we recall, is a largely imaginative process of construction that is at once biological and cultural. What becomes of nonhuman perception? It does not seem likely that Sax is suggesting that all other animals are incapable of experiencing their environment through their senses. This problem, I would argue, is a result of not working through further implications of the “postmodern” understanding of perception, in particular as regards the possibility of traditional biology-culture and nature-culture dualisms.

This also is a concern I have with the notion of an *imaginary* animal studies such as Sax articulates here: namely, that it risks detracting from *actual* animals. No doubt Sax himself would abhor such an outcome and, indeed, such an outcome is in no way necessary. What is perhaps necessary, however, is a reconsideration of the notion of the “imaginary animal” which, according to Sax,

is a creature that seems to belong to a realm fundamentally different from, yet somehow allied with, our own.... An imaginary animal is a sort of “second self” for an individual human being, an association of people or even the entire human race — something we might have been, might become, fear turning into or aspire to. (47)

Such an argument has merit. In terms of a proposed new area of study, Sax could easily have strengthened his argument by attending to the specific construction of contemporary monsters beyond Sasquatch and the occasional brief reference to biotechnology. As it stands in its admittedly speculative and provisional form, however, it is difficult to see how such a conception answers to anything other than a desire to find an academic home for the collection and collation of whatever might constitute the postmodern equivalent of the mediaeval bestiary. This is not to say that such an equivalent would be without interest — on the contrary, a postmodern bestiary would doubtless prove fascinating. My point is simply that, if the remit of Imaginary Animal Studies is to be something *other* than this, as Sax himself clearly imagines, then it must seek its grounding elsewhere than in the hubris of the Kantian subject.

No doubt part of the problem here results from the constraints imposed by the attempt to appeal to academic and popular readerships simultaneously. Even with these constraints, Sax nonetheless still manages to display his undeniable critical acumen to devastating effect, most notably in his rebuttal of both the humanism and universality of Steven Mithen’s theory of cognitive fluidity, and again in his engagement with Paul A. Trout’s argument that the fear of being consumed by predators constitutes the foundation of religious awe and thus worship.

**Conclusion: The Last Part.** In a short conclusion, Sax returns to the limits of human concepts, particularly in relation to what this means for rights discourse in the case of other animals. *All* animals, he reiterates, are “probably impossible” to fit neatly within the categories of human thought. While this might seem rather banal at first glance, it is an absolutely crucial point that so many concerned with other animals would do well to heed. For example, Sax asks are other animals moral? Well, he answers, “which morality did you have in mind? ... A Mafia don, a Viking warrior or a Confucian scholar?” (251). What about a sense of time? Do other animals have that? Again, Sax

answers, which time did you have in mind, linear time or cyclic time, time as conceived “by Buddha, Newton or Einstein?” (251). After dealing in similar fashion with a sense of self, of consciousness, and of death, Sax makes the central point that most research inquiring into such questions “is not only anthropocentric but extremely ethnocentric as well,” and constitutes an obstacle that is “true of all of ... approaches to animal rights” that seek to extend contemporary human concepts to other forms of life (252). As Sax notes, such approaches may — at best — afford some small protection to a very small number of other animals whom humans perceive as sufficiently similar to themselves. At worst, i.e., when elevated to a universal principle, the only possible result is an oppressive imposition of concepts serving only to deny “distinctness and autonomy” (253). Instead of attempting to impose *our* world, writes Sax, we should rather try to enter theirs.

All of this remains timely and important. I am, however, less convinced by the specifics of the alternative proposed by Sax, who maintains that to effect such an entry one needs only a heightened sensitivity and imagination whilst at the same time placing an increased trust upon our “poetic imaginations” (253). Regardless of the degree of imaginative sensitivity, such encounters will always depend upon established patterns of human thought, and as such this would seem to amount to little more than the somewhat trivial suggestion that we humans be more open to other animals. What makes Sax’s approach different from so many others, however, is the priority he gives to *imaginary* animals (in the narrow sense of the word). Such animals are, he writes, “based on real ones,” albeit with their common kinship and strangeness intensified to an uncommon degree and, as such, they constitute a human “mirror test” (253). This, Sax says, makes them both good to think *and* good to dream. They remind us, he writes, of all which we do not know, and thus they warn against arrogance; in Gothic churches, they “caution against fanaticism”; in palaces, they recall us to the temporary limits of power; and in libraries, they provide “a check on both pride and cynicism” (253). Because of *all* of this, he concludes, imaginary animals promise transcendence: “Fantastic animals direct us to, and then beyond, the limitations of normal routines, social conventions, religious dogma and perhaps even cosmic law” (253-254). Perhaps. But perhaps such fantastic human constructions are themselves already mere instances of normal routine and social convention. Moreover, if transcendence is indeed at stake, one cannot help but question where, exactly, other animals are in all this and, indeed, how this alone might offer more than even the limited potential afforded by contemporary rights discourse.

Sax's latest book is perhaps inevitably caught in a double bind, opening itself to criticism precisely in the moment that it dares to go beyond a straightforward cross-referenced encyclopedia to become something different and considerably more interesting. In this sense, a critical response such as this one proves above all that this work does not concern itself with interminable collection collated into terminable lists, but rather reaches toward something entirely other. In this sense, *Imaginary Animals* is indeed exemplary of the field of animal studies at its best.

## Notes

1. The answer, by the way, is yes, of course we should. And considerably further too.
2. It is useful here to counterpoint Sax's exegesis with a brief summary of the text it claims to elucidate. Derrida seeks to take account of a thoroughly disarming encounter with the "bottomless gaze" of a feline companion whilst standing naked in his bathroom one morning. As both border-crossing and absolute limit, Derrida describes the encounter as "an instant of extreme passion" that constructs a vantage from which man might, at long last, finally dare to announce himself to himself. Further, he continues, to encounter the gaze of the absolutely other is to lose one's self in the apocalyptic event of absolute potentiality that, in the very same instant a vantage becomes finally attainable, announces nothing other than the ends of man.
3. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Trans. David Wills (NY: Fordham UP, 2008). 9.
4. Here we discover a particularly interesting overlap of Sax's major concerns with those worked through by Tom Tyler in his *CIFERAE: A Bestiary in Five Fingers* (2012), published by the University of Minnesota Press in the same year as part of their influential "Posthumanities" series.