

Animal Studies

An Introduction

Paul Waldau

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For Judith,
who so often provides the wings

Great ideas, whether insights illuminating one of the communities amid which we live, introducing specific living beings in our larger community, or helping us recognize the frontiers of our hearts and minds, often slip into the world as gently as doves. If we quietly, lovingly observe our neighbors, listening to them as fully as we can, we hear a faint flutter of wings amid the daily uproar of greed, the attempts to engineer our consent, the building of personal empires—on these wings fly gentle stirrings of life and hope.

Such life and hope offer us much, although some will take this to mean only that through the marketing of such ideas, we can make a profit.

But believe differently—ideas, insights, hopes, and profound stirrings of life-for-life are, rather, more personal. They are awakened, revived, nourished by billions of us, solitary individuals or small groups whose caring about others, made real through our deeds and generosities, every day crosses frontiers of caring, and thereby pushes back the stark, crude implications of our species' ugly history of harm to others.

When one patiently seeks and, yes, finds such aspirations and visions so widespread, there emerges the ever-threatened truth that each and every human, on the foundation of her or his own sufferings and joys, builds for all living beings. When we notice such possibilities, we can soar and thereby join our larger community even as we arrive at our fullest selves.

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Introduction

A book introducing Animal Studies should increase everyone's abilities to achieve three aims. Most obviously, such a book should foreground the nonhumans with whom we share this planet—these are sometimes friendly, more often elusive and mysterious beings. Their realities as individuals and members of nonhuman communities have had a deep allure for many humans and have motivated different forms of Animal Studies no matter how one defines it. Meeting this aim of foregrounding the beings outside our own species is challenging for profoundly important reasons to be explained throughout this book.

As a second aim, an introduction to Animal Studies necessarily must engage the many different dimensions of humans' interactions with animals of all kinds (that is, both non-human and human). This second aim shares some features with the humanities and social sciences, which have traditionally and overwhelmingly focused on human abilities and human-to-human interactions. Animal Studies inevitably expands this focus by keeping other living beings in the foreground (the first aim) even as human-to-human interactions that involve other-than-human animals are also brought into the foreground. The human-to-human interactions to be studied in this way include not only past and present traditions but future possibilities as well.

This second aim of introducing human-level issues to Animal Studies may initially seem easy to achieve because it includes a focus on ourselves, but achieving this aim requires one to meet formidable challenges that rival those of foregrounding other-than-human animals. A principal problem in meeting this second aim stems directly from our wonderfully capacious but-ever-so-complex human language capabilities. The existence of multiple languages and dialects has, from time immemorial, complicated humans' sharing and transmission of views of other living beings; moreover, peculiarly modern forms of this problem today continue to create challenges for all forms of Animal Studies. The result has been the existence of stratum after stratum of differences among the humans who discuss other living beings.

Animal Studies can, accordingly, seem bafflingly layered. Not only are there layers to be identified and worked through because scholars studying animals used different languages (such as Latin versus Sanskrit) in the past; there are also layers produced by

evolving languages (such as ancient Greek versus modern Greek, or early English versus today's globalized English). There are more layers yet, for even if one chooses to work within only a single modern language, one will still encounter multiple discourse traditions (such as science versus literature versus law, and on and on). Finally, in each of the languages or discourses one encounters in seeking to communicate about other living beings, one will assuredly find abstractions coined and advanced by the uninformed; generalizations, practices, and stories that carry familial and cultural freight; and myriad claims and overtones anchored in innumerable theoretical ruminations that humans have constructed to describe what the perceptive William James in the late nineteenth century called the "buzzing, blooming confusion" that a human experiences in looking about the world.¹

It might seem that addressing the layered world of humans' views regarding other living beings, so unduly complicated by these features of language, could not possibly be more challenging. Yet one more major challenge remains, for humans' attempt to understand the living beings beyond our species is carried out, as is the entire project of Animal Studies, in a world where virtually every nook and cranny is full of unbelievably diverse beings, only the tiniest fraction of which can be seen by the unaided human eye.

Buried within these layers of complexity, however, is good news. Engaging other living beings is possible because our species has substantial, even if sometimes unrealized, skills of self-reflection and communication. This good news leads directly to a third aim that any introduction to Animal Studies needs to meet—prompting each student to explore humans' possibilities with other animals in personally relevant ways. Individual students need permission to explore their own reactions and abilities regarding the nonhuman living beings they meet. Further, they benefit greatly from exploring how their own familial background impacts what they already have experienced of the more-than-human world. Students also need to explore the histories of their social and cultural heritages.

Such personal explorations can deepen each human's ability to engage the larger issues of what our species has been doing generally at the human-nonhuman intersection. And here is more good news—meeting the third aim is possible because while Animal Studies can indeed be a bewildering world, what saves the day (and night) is that the world each of us shares with other living beings is by any measure an astonishing world. This in particular makes Animal Studies a joy. Indeed, work pursued in Animal Studies can enable both scholars and students to recognize their own abilities to explore and develop our species' intersection with other living beings precisely because it underscores the basic fact that humans have choices in the way they interact with other living beings. An introduction to Animal Studies, then, needs to make clear the inevitable personal, ethical, and communal dimensions of Animal Studies, for it is the collection of individual human responses that determines how our communities act today and thereby shapes our species' future possibilities with other-than-human animals.

The aims of this introductory text—introducing other animals' realities, unpacking the complexities of the human side of Animal Studies, and calling out the personal dimensions of our responses to other living beings—coincide with the driving forces that make Animal Studies an inherently challenging exploration requiring the full range of individual

and communal human skills. In 1928, Henry Beston movingly described why this exploration is needed:

We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Remote from universal nature and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate for having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein do we err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings: they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.²

This book argues that in the coming decades and centuries, our species has prospects of realizing such a vision only if each of these aims is met—in other words, we must seek out and factor in other animals' realities as we consider our own views, practices, and possibilities. Each of us must also take personal responsibility for our responses to other living beings as we notice them and take seriously our present and future possibilities with them. It is, in fact, the actual, local world that each person inhabits that sparked both Beston's hope and other surpassing visions of humans' community with the rest of life.

Any form of Animal Studies that aspires to such breadth can be attempted only through investigations that interrelate a variety of approaches. Such work must be both open ended and humble, for developments in individual fields, disciplines, and arts potentially enrich each other. Work done in many cooperating precincts, then, gives Animal Studies the best prospects of developing suitably multifaceted approaches that can meet the many-layered challenges which the field faces.

Today, the emergence of extraordinarily democratic and cost-effective communication capabilities opens up possibilities of information exchange that have produced the animal-related developments referred to in chapter 1 as "ferment." These diverse worldwide developments not only allow but actually prompt students of Animal Studies to see the ubiquity and diversity of other animals, to learn of research developments, and to encounter the astonishing range of humans' cultural attitudes toward other living beings. Such developments thereby renew humans' long-standing interest in other living beings even as they nurture the growth of awareness of animal issues in high-profile circles such as law, education, public policy debates, popular artistic expression, and much more. Thus, as explained in the following chapters, one easily finds diverse discussions and materials from a great variety of contexts where researchers, active citizens, students, and leaders of organizations notice the presence of nonhuman animals as important factors to be considered directly or indirectly.

All of these developments have stimulated awareness in many influential circles of previously unnoticed connection possibilities. For example, humans' intelligence-driven grasp of the universe, which is what has prompted so much research into other animals' realities and our own cultures' diverse thinking about other-than-human animals, combines

in a special way with humans' capacity for self-reflection. When one examines the views of other-than-human animals now widely held in principal institutions of industrialized societies—law, education establishments, businesses, government, and public policy think tanks—one often finds that mere caricatures dominate. Established views may at first seem superficially reasonable but, upon reflection, they are revealed to be uninformed guesses, dismissive generalizations, or biased accounts that have failed to take any and all nonhuman animals seriously. The result has been the prevalence in many circles of self-inflicted ignorance about other-than-human animals.

A willingness to inquire, especially when one is presented with responsibly developed and verifiable information, is mandated by the special skills referred to in this book as critical thinking (discussed in chapter 2). When such skills are employed, they make only too apparent that the radical dismissals of nonhuman animals that prevail in so many influential institutions have been underdetermined by actual facts easily discerned by those who choose to look carefully.

This is one reason that enabling each student's exploration of Animal Studies is part of good education. As Animal Studies unpacks and describes the past, present, and future dimensions of humans' intersection with other living beings, it necessarily prompts each of us to employ key forms of thinking that help us become more fully aware of our encounters with both nonhumans and humans.

There is, then, a certain timelessness and timeliness to Animal Studies that invest it with great potential. Further, the confluence of certain factors undergirding contemporary ferment on animal issues—the affluence of certain countries, the availability of science, the breadth of globalized communication, the deepening of critical thinking, the availability of traditions of academic freedom—are producing Animal Studies programs of unparalleled power and range. Thus, with the kinds of humility and cross-disciplinary cooperation needed to pursue the three aims listed above, the present era can be the most auspicious time ever for exploring the realities and mysteries of other animals and human animals.

A corollary of these possibilities is that the future of Animal Studies lies with individual humans who will, with imagination and attention, push Animal Studies to forms of understanding that do not today prevail in many circles. Such forms of understanding may have previously prevailed, in one guise or another, in unfamiliar cultures or even in subcultures of the industrialized world. But most citizens and educational institutions in the industrialized sectors of society have had to reimagine such visions—so have many impoverished people whose daily lives require focus on survival rather than the important challenges laid out in this book. But Animal Studies has a remarkable heritage—in a surprising range of cultures, people have achieved deep understanding of both the local nonhuman animals and ways of coexisting with them. It is true, of course, that in the societies today widely held to be the most “advanced,” such awareness has often been forgotten or simply repudiated.

Yet again, however, there is good news. Contemporary developments in Animal Studies reveal that many people today desire to learn about nonhuman animals—some seek to recover lost perspectives; others work to ignite creative thinking and artistic sensibilities regarding other living beings; and many work through one or more of the impressive sciences that our species has nurtured. The upshot is that today a great variety of people who think

other animals are important in and of themselves now share their unique vision of how best to study other living beings.

One possibility, then, is that people alive today will develop convincing insights about our relationships with other animals. Another is that those to be born in the coming decades will shift paradigms by standing on the shoulders of those who pursue Animal Studies today, offering undreamed-of insights and options that move human understanding of other living beings ever further beyond what we now think and feel and guess.

Thus Animal Studies has much potential for a different kind of education—it suggests the humbling possibility that, from the vantage point of the future, present-day practices may well seem those of uneducated, uncaring, self-absorbed consumers. In this, Animal Studies has a kind of negative potential to reveal that many of the people we today call educated are the most serious vandals of the earth. Far more positively, however, Animal Studies makes obvious why studying the nonhumans with whom we share this planet is valuable to humans in a great variety of ways.

Chapter 1 provides a definition of Animal Studies that focuses on the ways human individuals and cultures are now interacting with other-than-human animals, have in the past interacted with living beings beyond our own species, and in the future might interact with them. Topics that fall easily and fully under this definition are found in so many different areas of human life, however, that it is helpful to think of Animal Studies as an umbrella term that goes beyond the common notion of a single, discrete discipline. Even a little reflection will reveal, then, that Animal Studies will have great breadth. Humans live amid an astonishing array of lives that are so diverse they defy description. Any one society will have developed its view of “animals” in relationship to only some of these nonhumans. Some individuals and societies have grown up amid complex, cognitively capable nonhumans, such as elephants, chimpanzees, and coastal dolphins. But other individuals and societies came to maturity in parts of the earth dominated by altogether different and far simpler living beings. So the views found in any one culture (such as one's birth culture) are by no means likely to inform one about the full range of life beyond the species line.

Chapter 1 elaborates on these themes as it answers the question, what is Animal Studies? This answer discusses four basic tasks that Animal Studies attempts to achieve. The first of these tasks will seem human-centered to some, for it requires telling a full history of humans' interactions with other living beings. The second task is other animal-centered, providing fundamental questions about how we generate meaningful perspectives on other living beings' individual and communal lives.

The third task is animal-centered in the broadest sense, that is, centered on both nonhumans and humans, for its focus is exploration of future possibilities of a shared, more-than-human world. The fourth task for Animal Studies returns to an issue centered solely on human animals, though in a humble form—how can we recognize the nature of, and accept, the obvious limits as to what humans might know about other living beings?

Chapter 1 then opens three doors—who and what “animals” are, why Animal Studies is important, and how meeting other animals creates fundamentally personal connections. Chapters 2 and 3 then go through these open doors to explore fundamental challenges raised in the central human endeavors of history, culture, education, science,

and politics. Chapter 4 uses the work of chapters 2 and 3 to introduce three areas of inquiry about other-than-human animals that today are the cutting edges of contemporary Animal Studies. As pointed out in chapter 4, however, these areas are themselves developing so quickly that they also prompt questions about the limits and future of Animal Studies.

This sets the stage for chapters 5 through 9 as they explore the human-nonhuman intersection in additional areas. Chapter 5 looks at how nonhuman animal issues appear throughout the creative arts. Chapter 6 explores philosophical reflection on our engagement with other lives. Chapter 7 turns to important comparative endeavors that look at legal systems, religious traditions, and our many human cultures. Chapter 8 engages the multifaceted problems and limits grounded in humans' rich social natures. Chapter 9 looks at the fields of geography, anthropology, and archaeology.

Chapters 10 and 11 turn to two very different challenges. The first is telling the whole story, that is, getting beyond histories that are merely human-centered and therefore dysfunctional for us as we attempt to thrive in a multispecies universe. Chapter 11 argues that Animal Studies needs to explore connections between, on the one hand, the marginalization of certain humans and, on the other hand, interwoven forms of violence and oppression that impact both these humans and nonhuman animals.

Chapter 12 examines questions of leadership and vision. Our species' self-image reflects pride in the level of rich individuality so evident in each human person even as we tout the unity of the human species. The chapter asks how individuals, private and public institutions, societies in general, and our species as a whole might come home to our own animality and the inevitability of our encounter with other animals.

Chapter 13 concludes this book by posing questions about the future of Animal Studies even as we admit that it is still to be chosen. Does the fact that, amid our working out of the details, we can now see the outline of Animal Studies in the near future help us in any way in guessing at the longer-term futures that are coming?

Animal Studies