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Animal Geographies III: Ethics

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Abstract

There is no animal geography without ethics. The very coupling of the words gives rise to an ethical endeavor; an acceptance that animals have a geography, a making visible of animals within our human geography and scholarship, an acknowledgement that our relationship with animals has consequences. For some, this ethical endeavor extends to politics and includes engaged activism or to individual commitment such as not to eat meat, not to 'own' a pet, not to visit zoos and so on. This is a personal choice but at a broader level, animal geography, in recognizing animals as co-respondent subjects gives them a moral placing within the academy that, arguably, they rarely enjoyed before. This final report considers the contribution of animal geography and animal geographers to a more informed ethics of human-animal relations, one that increasingly confounds an over simplistic view of animals as merely moral patients to suggest an ethics which guides a broader, more inclusive moral community.

Keywords

Animals, animal geography, ethics, posthumanism, critical animal studies

> 'If she shut the hurting eye and looked with the other, everything was clear and flat; if she used them both, things were blurry and yellowish, but deep' (Le Guin, 1990: 31)

There are various reasons why geographers and other social scientists have recently turned their attention to non-human animals. Some of these (from the draw of posthumanism to the methodological challenge of getting beyond solely human forms of accounting) are considered in earlier reports (Buller, 2013a; 2014). For many people however, academics and otherwise, a driving concern in the investigation and understanding of human-animal relations remains that of ethics. Ethical considerations, both implicit and explicit, are rarely if ever absent in contemporary human-animal studies, whether the authors adopt the (misused) epithet 'critical' or not. It is commonplace, when submitting a paper to a peer-reviewed journal that publishes work in 'human-animal studies', to receive at least one reviewers' report condemning (or supporting) the author's stated (or unstated) ethical position with regards to the forms of human-animal interaction under study. It has become hard to write and not to kill –if only by inference. For some more radical commentators, entire oeuvres can be summarily dismissed on the grounds of what is held to be a scholar's unacceptable ethical stance with respect to the human treatment of animals. In this third and final paper I consider the contribution of animal geography and animal geographers to these ethical questions and debates. There are three sections. The first looks at the ways in which accounts in animal geography have contributed to traditional ethical discussions about 'the animal'. The second opens the question of the ethical positioning of the animal geographer. The final section explores a number of new ethical questions that contemporary studies of human-animal relationality have, either directly or indirectly, raised.

1. Ethical places

> 'So long as there is recognizability and fellow, ethics is dormant. It is sleeping a dogmatic slumber. So long as it remains human, among men, ethics remains dogmatic, narcissistic and not yet thinking. Not even thinking the human that it talks so much about' (Derrida, 2009: 108)

Geography's own 'animal question' (the 'place' of the animal in geographical explanation) is profoundly ethical. In one of the defining early volumes of the sub-

discipline, Lynn writes of the new animal geographers: ‘we are remapping the moral landscape of animal-human relations, revealing a diverse world of ethically relevant nonhuman beings’ (1998a: 280). Moreover, and this from a prescient chapter in the other defining volume of those early days, such uneven animal-human relations themselves ‘have an ethical ‘resonance’ or ‘freight’, even if they do not fall within the compass of ethics in terms of either formalized systems of thought or more messy emotional/moral ‘systems’ of judgment’ (Jones, 1990: 268).

If animal geography, along with contemporary ‘animal studies’ in general, is about making animals – their presence, agency and materiality as well as their ordering, use and treatment by humans – visible and account-able, then this surely has been an intentional challenge to animals’ longstanding (spatial, moral and relational, as well as social and scientific) invisibility wrought through the practices and ontologies of modernism and humanism (Berger, 1981; Wolch and Emel 1998; Smith, 2001). Making visible has eminently ethical (and critical) implications (Butler, 2007).

Nonetheless, while a good many of the advocates and practitioners of the emergent sub-discipline pursue an explicitly radical and critical moral agenda with respect to the human treatment of animals (see below), animal liberationism *per se* was never the sole *casus belli* or even the *raison d’etre* of animal geography. Its ethical and moral lineage draws wider, as much from feminist ethics (Plumwood, 1993; Adams and Donovan, 1995; Adams, 2003; Birke, 2007; Hovorka, 2015), from environmental ethics (Philo, 1995; Whatmore and Thorne, 1998; Wolch, 2002; Valentine 2004) and from care ethics (Engster 2006; Popke, 2006; Donovan and Adams 2007; McEwan and Goodman, 2010), though of course, these, and particularly feminist ethics, also influenced the emergence of liberationist thought as Singer (1975) acknowledges. Animal geography might thus be seen as a component of the wider ‘moral turn’ in our own *fin du dernière siècle* human geography (Lynn, 1998b; Proctor 1998) in which, what Barnett (2012) calls an ‘ethics of vulnerability’ combines with an acceptance of the animal as the new and vulnerable ‘other’ within our moral and social theory (Steeves, 1999; Mathews, 2012).

In the face of an already elephantine literature and a set of well-rehearsed yet endlessly debated arguments on the moral and philosophical status of the

animal, the question we need to ask is what has been animal geography's more specific contribution to this broader ethical debate. Three answers spring to mind (though there are certainly more). The first lies in our subject matter, those 'animal spaces and beastly places' (Philo and Wilbert, 2000) that range from the body, the home, the zoo, the farm, the neighbourhood, the lab, the city, the brownfields, the greenfields and, beyond all that, the wild. Animal geographers provide a dynamic spatial framing for what Proctor (1998) might call, a 'descriptive ethics'; revealing how different human material and semiotic constructions and orderings of space/place create differential conditions for moral behavior and social/ethical practice with respect to non-humans. 'This geography of (un)ethical relations', writes Jones (2000: 288), 'involves the spaces and patterns by which we classify and act upon differing groups of animal and other non-human others'. Whatmore and Thorne's (1998) analysis of the 'precarious geographies of wildlife' and the 'moral geographies of wilderness' is an early example, along with Anderson's paper on Adelaide zoo (Anderson 1995) but more recent work, for example Jones (2003), Palmer (2003), Jerolmack (2009) Braverman (2011), Barua (2014) and Srinivasan (2014) explores how different socio-spatial categories, be they the countryside, the city, the zoo, the 'dwelt ecologies' of northern Indian forests or seashore conservation sites, provide distinctive frames for investigating the differentially constructed ethics of human-animal interaction and, consequently, the varied ways we live together with non-humans. Matless' (1999) sense of how the distinctive nature-cultures of individual places – here the Norfolk Broads – help establish "an animal geography which does not necessarily begin with matters of rights or welfare", is suggestive of an emergent ethics to come. Space, write Bolla and Hovorka (2013: 57) in their elucidation of a 'transspecies spatial theory', 'takes on an active role in the production and reproduction of human-animal positionality'. Placing animals in wild and other spaces also confers certain ethical responsibilities upon humans. In this way, 'the place of wildlife in the city', write Van Doren and Rose (2012: 18), 'opens our engagement with the urban in ethically compelling ways'. Elsewhere, increasingly technologized spaces of human-animal interaction, such as for example the modern automated milking parlor, the animated pig pen or the electronic zoo, generate not only new spaces for emergent and novel ethical

practices but also new moral agencies (Davies, 2000; Holloway, 2007; Driessen, 2014a).

2. (Un)ethical treatments

> We don't think of hogs as animals, not in the same way as cats and dogs and deer and squirrels. We say 'pork units'. What they are Bob, is 'pork units' - a crop like corn or beans (Ribeye Clark in Annie Proulx, 2002: 302).

Of course there are animal geographers who maintain that this is not enough. This short article is not the place to rehearse the moral arguments that underlie the commitment of a great many animal geographers to a more engaged, normative and highly critical stance with respect to the various aspects of humanity's treatment of animals (as food, as experiment, as spectacle or as companion) that they, through their scholarship, reveal. Such arguments pervade virtually all aspects of animal geography in different ways, and have done so since the beginning (Wolch and Emel, 1998; Johnston, 2008; DeMello 2010). Yet they do not define it. For some they should; a more humanitarian humanism, even when it makes visible the mechanisms and consequences of human domination, is not in itself transformative. Being transformative and emancipatory is a second response to the question of what animal geography has brought to the ethical table.

In a pair of articles, Wilkie (2013a; 2013b) perceives a growing tension in the broader field of human-animal studies, first, over the capacity of humanist ethics to genuinely reach beyond the human (Pederson 2011; Steiner, 2014; Weitzenfeld and Joy, 2014) and, second, regarding the degree to which a more radical critique and direct personal engagement should constitute the foundational moral repertoire of such studies (Best, 2009; Birke, 2009; Peggs, 2013). This tension increasingly plays out in a seeming bifurcation between 'animal studies' and their critical counterpart. Critical Animal Studies, formalized by capital letters, an acronym (CAS), an institute and a journal, has emerged over the last 20 years as a component of, yet also counter-narrative to, the renewed academic interest in 'the animal' (for two counter-narrative examples, see Cole, 2012 and Cole and Stewart, 2014). Critical animal studies also offers a focus for more specific and active opposition to what is

held to be the ethically unacceptable material, instrumental and conceptual treatment of animals by humans (Nocella et al., 2012).

As an ethical position, CAS are avowedly 'liberationist', drawing on anarchist political theory, feminism, intersectionality, critical race studies, posthumanism and activist political engagement (Best et al, 2007; Twine, 2010; Taylor and Twine, 2014; White, 2015). Critical animal studies are explicit in their 'normative commitment to the removal of all forms of animal abuse', which include the killing and eating of animals, as well as their embrace of emancipatory and ''engaged theory' as means of achieving social change (Taylor and Twain, 2014: 6). As such, CAS take issue with what Twine (2010: 21) calls, rightly or wrongly, the 'docile ethics' and the residual humanism (Wolfe, 2010a) of much human-animal scholarship. Others go further, first, by declaiming what they see as the comfortable alignment and complicity of animal studies with animal testing, animal agriculture and vivisection and, second and perhaps more paradoxically (Twine, 2014) by rejecting the elitism of post-humanism (Nocella et al 2014; White, 2015).

For Wilkie (2013), the growing distance between 'critical', and what others (Best, 2009) have termed 'mainstream' animal studies is an inevitable consequence of the sub-discipline's maturation. How strange that such maturation should engender an increasingly polarized (yet surely porous and, for the great majority of animal studies scholars, fundamentally false) binary, at a time when the early anthropocentric constructionism of animal studies has genuinely given way to an increasing recognition of the 'animal-as-such' (Shapiro, 2008), to an expanding awareness of our own responsibilities and to a growing challenge to the simplistic reductions of biologism (Chrulew 2012). Twine's concern that animal ethics becomes problematic 'partly because it implies a space purified of the 'human' (Twine, 2010: 31) might thus be countered by Wolfe's insistence that the biopolitical point is more and more the 'newly expanded community of the living' (2010b: 105). Twine's second concern, that animal ethics 'cannot presume to fix an understanding of the 'animal' or animality' (ibid) similarly suggests the need for a more open and lively ethical space, one that recalls Merleau Ponty's interanimality (Dillard-Wright, 2009) or, at the very least, challenges the idea of animals as somehow deserving of ethical status because they are merely (lesser) others. The problem with the liberal

humanist model, Wolfe (2010b: 118) writes, is that ‘in its very attempt to recognize the unique difference and specific ethical value of the other, it reinstates the very normative model of subjectivity that it insists is the problem in the first place’. The problem with the posthuman model, argues Driessen (2014a), is that we risk losing any sense of responsibility and agency. In the final footnote of their introductory chapter, Philo and Wilbert (2000) warn against overly simplistic positions, as does Haraway (2008: 297): ‘there is no rational or natural dividing line that will settle the life-and-death relations between humans and nonhuman animals; such lines are alibis if they are imagined to settle the matter “technically”’.

3. Flourishing Ethics

‘The great instrument of moral good is the imagination’ (Shelley, 1821)

If animal geography has helped confound the category of the animal, it has surely also confounded those seeming ethical universals that come with such categorisation. In their place, animal geographers reveal and invigorate the contexts and manners in which ethics are formed, performed and reformed through multiple human-animal interactions. These are, to use Whatmore’s (1997) phrase, ‘relational ethics’, borne not solely out of pre-established codes of moral behavior but rather responsive to (and to some extent creative of) the co-presence and mutual corporeality of non-human others. Pragmatic and responsive, reflecting Dewey’s ideas of experimental and affective learning combined with moral imagination, such relational ethics represent ‘an attempt to turn the tide of moral discussion from questions of how to achieve objectivity and detachment to how to engage responsively and with care’ (Gilligan, 1982: xix). Or, as Haraway puts it: ‘in relationships, dogs and humans construct ‘rights’ in each other such as the right to demand respect, attention and response’ (2003: 53).

There are several dimensions here. If ethics is about mattering (Barad 2007); then animals can matter to us in many different ways (Roe 2010). Greenough and Roe (2011:50) argue for an ethics ‘that emerges from affectual, embodied understandings of human and nonhuman relations’, what they call ‘somatic sensibilities’ that come from the shared experience of simply ‘having a body’. While

this is slightly different from what Popke (2009: 85-86) calls a 'non-representational ethics' through which one is 'exposed to the potential for being otherwise', it nonetheless articulates with Popke's ethos of 'generous sensibility' that enlivens affective engagement with others, human or non-human. The animal scientist Temple Grandin (1995) has long argued that the particular perceptive sensibilities associated with her autism provide her with a unique understanding of the perceptive universe of farm animals. As Weil (2006: 96) argues, we see in Grandin 'the effects of a posthumanist subjectivity whose ethical responsibility is determined not by law or some repeatable maxim, but by something else that, as Derrida insists, is 'incalculable"'. Lulka's (2012) search for meaning in his unwitting bisection of a lizard with a lawnmower leads him to an ethics informed by immanence yet ultimately leaves him hanging. Quoting Miguel (2007: 50), he states 'we can only know life by living it (222). Here, an immanent ethics or perhaps even an ethics of ethology (Sharp, 2011: 210) draws on a continuously experimental engagement with what humans and animals have in common – 'capacities for affecting and being affected in this plane of immanence' (Deleuze, 1988: 125) - rather than mitigating for the effects of difference through distant moralities; a politics of 'mutual inclusion' as Massumi (2014) would have it that, in its way, recalls Ingold's (2000) ethics of dwelling together in a world in which trust replaces domination.

Writing of companion species, Haraway (2008: 134) locates the ethical core in a commitment to 'flourishing'. Flourishing, she argues, entails compassionate action, which, in turn for Wolfe, (2010b, p. 122) is a way of 'thinking ethics outside of a model of reciprocity between 'moral agents'. This is important for we cannot assume reciprocity from non-humans even when they appear to look back (Buller, 2013b). For Lorimer (2007), it is the aesthetic charisma of (certain) feral non-humans that engages our ethical and caring sensibilities; a charisma that is relational, ethological and affective too. For Miele and Evans (2010), shopping for welfare-friendly food products becomes an act of care-at-a-distance, though one that is 'care-fully' mediated by food labels. Finally, Davies (2012) offers a 'speculative ethics' that extends beyond the more coded and formal ethical procedures of lab animal work to generate experimental cultures of care. All of these 'caring practices'

towards the non-human entail 'a specific modality of handling questions to do with the good' rather than simply a 'productive' justice (Mol et al. 2010: 13).

4. A final bark

Animal geography, along with other cognate animal studies disciplines, has been inventive and innovative in developing and exploring the multiple (and, certainly, in places, contradictory, for example, Driessen 2014b) real-world ethical entanglements of lived human-animal relations. But might we, in our enthusiasm, go too far? Barnett (2012), writing on 'Geography and ethics' in this journal, distinguishes from the aforementioned 'ethics of vulnerability' another affirmative, neo-vitalist ethics in geography that acclaims 'the generativity of life' (380). Popke (2009) too acknowledges the prolificacy of these vitalist materialisms in contemporary geography, yet he also raises the possible limits of an entirely open-ended affectivity. Wolfe (2013:104) warns against a limitless ethical purview: 'An affirmative biopolitics need not – indeed […] *cannot* – simply embrace "life" in all its undifferentiated singularity'. Are all our encounters with the non-human always 'ethical', and more so than our encounters with each other? 'Those people with the time and the ability to read philosophy', Driessen (2014a, p. 256) points out, 'are unlikely to go out in the morning to milk a herd of cows'. But one project of animal geography is, to borrow from Law (2003: 4), the using of our particular analytical stance 'to sharpen ethical questions about the special character of the human effect'.

The final irony is that many of our ethical standpoints derive from a sort of hybrid pantheism that celebrates or sometimes inverts what is seen as the inherent ethical supremacy of the 'natural' order. In this, animals have become our foil and our relationship to them, occasionally distorted by ethics. Despret (2012) recounts the tale of the 'unnatural' behaviour of two incestuous otters at a recent Paris exhibition. It should have been entirely 'normal', for these were animals after all, for the otters not to feel the need to conform to human moralities - for such moralities distinguish us. To be human is to be 'unnatural' (un-animal) yet the natural (animal)

world provides us with many ethical metaphors, moral referentials, virtuous codes (Bekoff, 2001; Peterson, 2013) and perhaps, even behavioural models:

> 'Lately, ethologists have taken the trouble to watch wolves systematically, between meal-times, and have found them to be, by human standards, paragons of regularity and virtue. They pair for life, they are faithful and affectionate spouses and parents, they show great loyalty to their pack, great courage and persistence in the face of difficulties, they carefully respect each other's territories, keep their dens clean, and extremely seldom kill anything that they do not need for dinner. If they fight with another wolf, the fight ends with his submission; there is normally a complete inhibition on killing the suppliant and on attacking females and cubs. They have also, like all social animals, a fairly elaborate etiquette, including subtly varied ceremonies of greeting and reassurance, by which friendship is strengthened, co-operation achieved and the wheels of social life generally oiled'. (Midgley 1973: 114)

Homo homini lupus est … really?

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