

Caring to Dialogue

Feminism and the Treatment of Animals

Josephine Donovan

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In recent years feminists have brought care theory to the philosophical debate over how humans should treat nonhuman animals. Care theory, an important branch of contemporary feminist theory, was originally articulated by Carol Gilligan and has been elaborated, refined, and criticized extensively since it was first formulated in the late 1970s. Since the authors included in the first part of this volume applied care theory to the animal question in the early 1990s, it has established itself as a major vein of animal ethics theory.

This article is an attempt to further refine and strengthen feminist animal care theory. I hope to reposition the discussion to emphasize the dialogical nature of care theory. It is not so much, I will argue, a matter of caring for animals as mothers (human and nonhuman) care for their infants, but of listening to animals, paying emotional attention, taking seriously--caring about--what they are telling us. As I note in the conclusion of my article "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory" (chapter 2, this volume, 76): "We should not kill, eat, torture, and exploit animals because they do not want to be so treated, and we know that." In other words, I am proposing in this article that we shift the epistemological source of theorizing about animals to the animals themselves. Could we not, I ask, extend feminist standpoint theory to animals, including their standpoint in our ethical deliberations?

Standpoint Theory for Animals

Because it offers a more theoretically sophisticated political perspective than care theory, standpoint theory, a significant vein in contemporary feminist theory, may prove a useful supplement to care theory regarding the ethical treatment of animals.¹ Especially in its original articulation by Georg Lukács, standpoint theory would seem to be particularly apt for the dialogical focus I am proposing here. Lukács, a Marxist, developed the idea in his *History and Class Consciousness* ([*Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, 1923] 1971), in which he posited that the proletariat evinces a particular and privileged epistemology because of its commodification or reification in the capitalist production process. When a subject is treated as an object, Lukács argues, the experience necessarily evokes a critical consciousness born of the subject's ironic knowledge that he or she is not a thing. In capitalist assembly-line production, Lukács notes, the worker "is turned into a commodity and reduced to a mere quantity. But this very fact forces him to surpass the immediacy of his condition" (166). Beneath the "quantifying crust," however, lies a "qualitative living core" (169), from which arises a critical, subversive consciousness. Lukács elaborates: "[I]n the proletariat... the process by which a [person's] achievement is split off from his total personality and becomes a commodity leads to a revolutionary consciousness" (171). Moreover, "Corresponding to the objective consciousness of the commodity form, there is the subjective element... [and] while the process by which the worker is reified and becomes a commodity dehumanizes him ... it remains true that precisely his humanity and his soul are not changed into commodities" (172).

Feminist standpoint theory has generally--following Nancy Hartsock (1983)--rooted an oppressed group's awakening critical consciousness less in objectification and more in bodily experience and in the practice or memory of nonindustrial craft-based labor (use-value production);² however, for the purposes of developing a feminist approach to the animal question, the Lukácsian emphasis on reification as the primary element constitutive of the critical standpoint would seem more useful.

In applying the theory to animals, it is abundantly clear that they are commodified and quantified in the production process--even more literally so than the proletariat, whose bodies at least are not literally turned into dead consumable objects by the process, though they may be treated as mechanical means. Where one immediately senses problems, however, in applying standpoint theory to animals is in the question of how their subjective viewpoint is to be articulated. For obviously, unlike human workers, animals are unable to share their critical views with other animals and to organize resistance to their objectification and (in the case of animals) slaughter. However, the fact that workers rarely expressed a proletarian standpoint spontaneously or rose up en masse against their treatment (a perennial problem in revolutionary theory) suggests that the differences between the two cases may not be as great as they might at first appear. Often, as a practical matter, Marxist theorists have fallen back on the idea of an intellectual vanguard leading and educating the proletariat so as to recognize and act against the injustices that are inflicted on it (the most famous example here being V. I. Lenin's idea of the vanguard party). And indeed a central question in feminist standpoint theory has been that of the relationship between the theorists articulating the standpoint and the women on whose behalf it is being articulated (Hartsock 1998:234-38).

In the case of animals, it is clear that human advocates are required to articulate the standpoint of the animals--gleaned, as here argued, in dialogue with them--to wit, that they do not wish to be slaughtered and treated in painful and exploitative ways. And human advocates are necessary as well to defend and organize against the practices that reify and commodify animal subjects.

A Dialogical Ethic of Care for the Treatment of Animals

Ludwig Wittgenstein once famously remarked that if a lion could speak we couldn't understand him (1963:223e). In fact, as I have been proposing here, lions do speak, and it is not impossible to understand much of what they are saying. Several theorists have already urged that humans need to learn to read the languages of the natural world. Jonathan Bate has proposed that we learn the syntax of the land, not seeing it through our own "prison-house of language," in order to develop appropriate environmental understandings (Bate 1998:65, as cited in Simons 2002:77). Similarly, Patrick Murphy has called for an "ecofeminist dialogics" in which humans learn to read the dialects of animals. "Nonhuman others," he claimed, "can be constituted as speaking subjects rather than merely objects of our speaking" (1991:50).³ Earlier, phenomenologist Max Scheler spoke similarly about the necessity for learning the "universal grammar" of creatural expression ([1926] 1970:11). Indeed, over a century ago American writer Sarah Orne Jewett speculated about the possibility of learning the language of nonhumans, asking,

Who is going to be the linguist who learns the first word of an old crow's warning to his mate ... ? [H]ow long we shall have to go to school when people are expected to talk to the trees, and birds, and beasts in their own language! ... It is not necessary to tame [creatures] before they can be familiar and responsive, we can meet them on their own ground. (1881:4-5)

There are those, to be sure, who still raise the epistemological question of how one can know what an animal is feeling or thinking. The answer would seem to be that we use much the same mental and emotional activities in reading an animal as we do in reading a human.⁴ Body language, eye movement, facial expression, tone of voice--all are important signs. It also helps to know about the species' habits and culture. And, as with humans, repeated experiences with one individual help one to understand that individual's unique needs and wishes. By paying attention to, by studying, what is signified, one comes to know, to care about the signifier.⁵ In this way, what Adams (1990) famously termed the absent referents are restored to discourse, allowing their stories to be part of the narrative, opening, in short, the possibility of dialogue with them.

The underlying premise here is that one of the principal ways we know is by means of analogy based on homology. If that dog is yelping, whining, leaping about, licking an open cut, and since if I had an open wound I know I would similarly be (or feel like) crying and moving about anxiously because of the pain, I therefore conclude that the animal is experiencing the same kind of pain as I would and is expressing distress about it. One

imagines, in short, how the animal is feeling based on how one would feel in a similar situation.⁶ In addition, repeated exhibitions of similar reactions in similar situations lead one inductively to a generic conclusion that dogs experience the pain of wounds as we do, that in short they feel pain and don't like it. The question therefore whether humans can understand animals is, in my opinion, a moot one. That they can has been abundantly proved, as Midgley points out, by their repeated success in doing so (1983:113,115,133,142).

Of course, as with humans, there is always the danger that one might misread the communication of the animal in question, that one might incorrectly assume homologous behavior when there is none. To be sure, all communication is imperfect, and there remain many mysteries in animal (as well as human) behavior. Feminist ethic-of-care theorists have explored some of the difficulties inherent in attempting to assess the needs of an incommunicative human and/or the risks of imposing one's own views or needs on her. But as Alison Jaggar summarizes, care theorists maintain that in general such "dangers may be avoided [or at least minimized, I would add] through improved practices of attentiveness, portraying attentiveness as a kind of discipline whose prerequisites include attitudes and aptitudes such as openness, receptivity, empathy, sensitivity, and imagination" (1995:190).

Understanding that an animal is in pain or distress--even empathizing or sympathizing with him--doesn't ensure, however, that the human will act ethically toward the animal. Thus, the originary emotional empathetic response must be supplemented with an ethical and political perspective (acquired through training and education) that enables the human to analyze the situation critically so as to determine who is responsible for the animal suffering and how that suffering may best be alleviated. In her recent book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag warns that people do not automatically act ethically in response to pictures of other people's pain (she doesn't deal with images of animals). While she characterizes as a "moral monster" the person who through a failure "of imagination, of empathy" (8) does not respond compassionately, she nevertheless argues that various ideologies often interfere with the moral response. Too often, she claims, sympathy connotes superiority and privilege without self-reflection about how one is contributing to the suffering one is lamenting. She therefore urges that a heightened humanist political awareness must accompany the sympathetic response in order for truly ethical action to result. Photos of atrocity "cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect" (117) on who is responsible for the suffering and similar questions.

As noted in the introduction, the feminist ethic of care includes a political perspective. To a great extent, as noted by several of the contributors to this volume, getting people to see evil and to care about suffering is a matter of clearing away ideological rationalizations that legitimate animal exploitation and cruelty. Recognizing the egregious use of euphemism employed to disguise such behavior (copiously documented in Joan Dunayer's book *Animal Equality* [2001]) would seem to be an important step in this direction.

But it is not just a matter of supplementing care with a political perspective, for the experience of care can itself lead into political analysis, as Joan Tronto points out in her call for a "political ethic of care" (1993:155). "Care becomes a tool for critical political analysis when we use this concept to reveal relationships of power" (172). In other words, although Tronto doesn't treat the animal question, if one feels sympathy toward a suffering animal, one is moved to ask the question, why is this animal suffering? The answer can lead into a political analysis of the reasons for the animal's distress. Education in critical thinking, these thinkers emphasize, is therefore imperative if an ethic of care is to work.

We also need education, as Nel Noddings proposed (1984:153), in the practices of care and empathy.⁷ Years ago, in fact, Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson contended that "empathy is a discipline" and therefore teachable (1987:195). Many religions, they note, use imaginative exercises in empathetic understanding as a spiritual discipline (195). Such exercises could be adapted for use in secular institutions like schools (including, especially, high school). Certainly a large purpose of such a discipline must be not just emotional identification but also intellectual understanding, learning to hear, to take seriously, to care about what animals are telling us, learning

to read and attend to their language. The burgeoning field of animal ethology is providing important new information that will aid in such study.

In conclusion, therefore, a feminist animal care ethic must be political in its perspective and dialogical in its method. Rejecting the imperialist imperative of the scientific method, in which the “scientific subject’s voice ... speaks with general and abstract authority [and] the objects of inquiry ‘speak’ only in response to what scientists ask them” (as Sandra Harding [1986:124] characterized the laboratory encounter), humans must cease imposing their voice on that of animals. No longer must our relationship with animals be that of the “conquest of an alien object,” Rosemary Radford Ruether notes, but “the conversation of two subjects.” We must recognize “that the ‘other’ has a ‘nature’ of her own that needs to be respected and with which one must enter into conversation” (1975:195-96). On that basis and in reflecting upon the political context, a dialogical ethic for the treatment of animals may be established.⁸

Supplementary Excerpts from the Full Version

These two passages appear in the longer Signs version of the essay but not in the shortened version above. They clarify what dialogical care implies for killing animals and when an animal's immediate wishes may be overridden. The wording is unchanged; the ellipsis marks an omitted passage.

Does dialogical care permit “humane” slaughter?

Garner wonders, however, if animals raised humanely (with care) and slaughtered humanely (but nevertheless slaughtered) would be acceptable under care theory (241), for the animals would be receiving compassionate treatment during their lives. Garner's question points to a misapprehension of care theory that I believe a dialogical theory will help to correct. From the point of view of a dialogical ethic of care, the answer to Garner's question would clearly be no, for if we care to take seriously in our ethical decision making the communicated desires of the animal, it is apparent that no animal would opt for the slaughterhouse. . . . Humans know this, and a dialogical ethic must be constructed on the basis of this knowledge. Caring must therefore be extended to mean not just “caring about their welfare” but “caring about what they are telling us.”

Longer version, p. 310.

Must the animal's immediate wishes always prevail?

A dialogical ethic does not assert that the animal's position should be the only matter taken into consideration or that the human should automatically comply with the animal's wishes. Ethical decision making is in fact made dialogical by the introduction into the conversation of factors the human knows beyond the animals' ken, which may be relevant to the ethical choice. In the case of domestic animals for whom one has assumed responsibility, such factors might include, for example, a decision to give one's companion animal a vaccination, even though one knows the animal doesn't enjoy going to the vet or receiving a shot. One nevertheless decides in this case to override the animal's immediate wishes because one sees that the animal's suffering is likely to be minimal and temporary and that the long-term result is likely to be beneficial to the animal, saving her from worse pain and suffering.

Longer version, p. 317.

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Notes

1. Carol Adams initiated this line of thinking in her 1997 article, "'Mad Cow' Disease and the Animal Industrial Complex" (see esp. 29, 41-42, 44). Adams takes a slightly different tack than I do here, seeing cows as "alienated laborers" whose standpoint has been ignored. See also Slicer (1998). While care theory and standpoint theory derive from different philosophical traditions, they connect in their concern about paying heed to others' misery. And in the original formulation of feminist standpoint theory, Nancy Hartsock (1983) identified as the feminist standpoint the female relational ontology that is at the heart of care theory. Where care theory and standpoint theory differ, however, is that the latter is more of a political theory that seeks to locate the causes of the misery and to confront and eliminate it politically; care theory is more of a moral theory aimed at alleviating misery in an immediate way. Both approaches are necessary, I argue below. While poststructuralists and postmodernists have critiqued standpoint theory for its alleged essentialism and ascription of privileged perception to the oppressed (proletariat), it remains nevertheless obvious that certain groups are treated as having an essential reified identity which enables their abuse. As Laura Lee Downs aptly asks in the title to her article on the subject, "If 'Woman' Is Just an Empty Category, Then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night?" (1993). See also Godfrey (2005). Like women, in being determined as objects, animals are forced into an essential identity, which as subjects they resist. This critical resistance, which humans know through communication with animals, is the animals' standpoint.
2. Catharine MacKinnon is the exception here. In "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method" ([1990] 1995), she proposes that "sexual objectification" be considered the basis for the emergence of a woman's standpoint (135). For a survey of feminist standpoint theories, see Harding (1986:141-51).
3. In the past few years, a number of other literary theorists have begun exploring the possibility of a dialogical "animal-standpoint criticism." I have just completed an article (not yet published), "Animal Ethics and Literary Criticism," that further develops this concept.
4. This is to disagree somewhat with Thomas Nagel, who in "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (1974) argues that we humans cannot apprehend "bat phenomenology" (440); that is, we can only imagine what it would be like for us to be bats, not what it is like for bats to be bats. To an extent Nagel is correct, of course; it is a truism of epistemology that we are limited by our mental apparatus. However, I believe more effort can be made to decipher animal communications and that while we may never fully understand what it feels like to be a bat, we can understand certain pertinent basics of his or her experience, sufficient for the formulation of an ethical response. For an alternative view to Nagel's, see Kenneth Shapiro's "Understanding Dogs" (1989), which argues that we recognize the validity of interspecies "kinesthetic" communication. Although Val Plumwood proposes a "dialogical interspecies ethic" in her recent *Environmental Culture* (2002:167-95) that would seem to be consistent with what I am proposing here, she inconsistently argues that it is ethically permissible to kill and eat nonhumans under this ethic: one can "conceive [them] both as communicative others and as food" (157). This would seem to defeat the purpose of a dialogical ethic, which is to respond ethically to what the "communicative other" is telling one, namely and invariably that she does not want to be killed and eaten.
5. Here I am modifying classical structuralist terminology.
6. In the locus classicus on the subject of knowing another's inner states, "Other Minds" ([1946] 1979), J. L. Austin insists that a primary prerequisite for such communication is that one must have had the feeling oneself (104). Austin, however, like Nagel, abjures the possibility of knowing "what it would feel like to be a cat or a cockroach" (105).
7. Noddings (1991) has, however, stipulated reservations about applying care theory to animals. See also my critique of Noddings's position (Donovan 1991).
8. Other theorists who have advocated and explored dialogical ethical theory include Martin Buber, Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, and Mikhail Bakhtin. See further discussion in my article "Attention to Suffering: Sympathy as a Basis for Ethical Treatment of Animals" (chapter 7, this volume).

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