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Rethinking the Political with Other Animals

Eva Meijer in Conversation

with Dariusz Gzyra and Patryk Szaj

Переосмысление политического
с другими животными
Дариуш Гзыра и Патрык Шай
беседуют с Евой Мейер

Абстракт

В интервью Дариуша Гзыры и Патрыка Шая, взятом у Евы Мейер, обсуждаются политические аспекты отношений между людьми и живыми существами, не принадлежащими к человеческому роду. Цель беседы – переосмыслить политическое вместе с другими животными (в отличие от простого разговора «о» животной политике). В интервью поднимаются следующие темы: политический поворот в исследованиях животных (*animal studies*), развитие этих исследований в последние

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Abstract

The interview with Eva Meijer that Dariusz Gzyra and Patryk Szaj conducted considers the political aspects of relationships between humans and non-human animals. It aims at reconsidering “the political” along with other animals (in contrast to speaking simply “about” animal politics.) In the course of the interview, the following issues are raised: the political turn in animal studies, the progressive development of animal studies over the years, non-human languages and their role in political participation, the advantages and disadvan-

годы, внечеловеческие языки и их роль в политической жизни, преимущества и недостатки либеральной демократии в контексте межвидовой политики, метод «снизу вверх» в политической теории, политическая функция литературы, роль политических партий и других институтов в условиях системных изменений, животные как члены рабочего класса, а также запутанная эмпатия, касающаяся не только чувствующих животных, но и нечувствующих форм жизни.

Ключевые слова: политический поворот в исследованиях животных, межвидовая политика, внечеловеческие языки, участие в политической жизни

ages of liberal democracy when it comes to interspecies politics, the “from the ground up” method in political theory, the political task of literature, the role of political parties and other institutions in a systemic change, animals as working-class members, the entangled empathy that, perhaps, involves not only sentient animals but also non-sentient beings.

Keywords: the political turn in animal studies, interspecies politics, non-human languages, political participation

Dariusz Gzyra, Patryk Szaj: What has been termed the so-called *political turn* in theorising about human and animal relationships? How is politics and “political” understood in this context? And do you think it actually happens?

Eva Meijer: For a long time, animals – or rather nonhuman animals, or more-than-human animals, or other-than-human animals, because the word “animal” already sets up a binary opposition – were seen as beings to think about, by philosophers in the western tradition, if they were considered at all. Reason, intelligence, thinking and related qualities were considered human capacities, which all other animals did not possess. In the past decades, the view of animals as simple beings who act solely on instinct has been challenged by research in biology and ethology on their intelligence, language, cultures, and social lives. The view of humans as rational autonomous beings is also challenged, from the perspective of post-structuralism, feminist and decolonial theory, and other fields of critical theory. This has led to a change in animal philosophy, from viewing animals as object of consideration, as is common in ethical discourse (leading to the question whether humans are allowed to kill, eat or capture other animals), to viewing them as agents who co-shape relations with humans and human communities. This movement towards intersubjectivity has resulted in more attention being paid to animals from the perspective of political philosophy; while there have long been political discussions about animals in such fields as animal rights theory and ecofeminism, there is now a broader discussion in which theorists from different strands of political philosophy (liberal democrats, Marxists, Foucauldians etc.) use concepts such as democracy, intersectionality or sovereignty to better understand multispecies relations. What “politics” means precisely with regard to animals is a point of contestation,

and so is the scope of the political. Some theorists focus on power relations and use a post-structuralist or Marxist approach to multispecies relations, others argue for extending liberal democratic concepts and institutions to include animals, yet others focus on political animal agency and multispecies entanglements. This political framework provides a new lens through which we can view relations with more-than-human animals, which is connected to improving the lives of actual animals, because political institutions can play an important part in this project. Relations between human and nonhuman animals are political, and can change for the better.

D.G., P.S.: Is it accurate to say that, over time, theorising about the politics of relations with other animals becomes more mature, more detailed and innovative? That there has been the progressive development in this field in recent years?

E.M.: Yes, the discussion has become much more refined and interesting in the past ten or fifteen years.

D.G., P.S.: Could you point out the most promising areas and directions of these changes? Which new concepts, theories, or publications do you find particularly interesting, innovative, and useful for social change?

E.M.: When I began to study philosophy, around 16 years ago, discussions about animals at the university mostly took place in the field of ethics, and focused on utilitarianism *versus* deontology, or perhaps virtue ethics. There was some attention paid to the work of Donna Haraway and Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, but that was it. Now there is critical philosophical work about animals in many different directions, ranging from decolonial theory to linguistics. So, what I appreciate most is not one concept or book, but rather the fact that scholars are using so many different angles to approach questions about animals, multispecies relations, and related topics. We need to do the work in all fields of study. I also think it is very important to integrate thinking about animals in anthropocentric theory, and normalise critical multispecies thinking as part of "critical thinking," because right now there is still a lack of concern for animals in fields concerned with challenging power structures, such as feminist and decolonial philosophy. This is not only problematic from the perspective of solidarity with animals, but also obstructs seeing the full picture, because the oppression of animals is connected to other forms of oppression, in material and symbolic ways.

D.G., P.S.: According to Aristotle, the use of language is an elementary condition for participation in political life. You seem to accept this assumption while emphasising that to include non-human animals in political considerations, we must significantly expand our understanding of language. How do we avoid reproducing anthropocentrism in acquiring knowledge about non-human languages and defining what constitutes language?

E.M.: Thinking about and with animals for me as a human always entails a double movement: using a concept such as language to shed light on what happens in

the real world (i.e. to understand how interaction between animals – including humans – works), and then rethinking the concept in interaction with other animals. In the basis, this is what philosophers always do: clarifying the meaning of concepts in a given time. But in relation to animals, we need to be careful, because as humans it is easy to reinforce anthropocentrism. Our knowledge structures and concepts have been shaped by excluding other animals and their agency. So, determining what “language,” “democracy” and other concepts mean should be a multispecies endeavor. With this I do not mean we need to do more research that holds animals captive in laboratories or zoos, as is still common in biology and ethology – this is violent and leads to the creation of knowledge that reinforces a hierarchy with the human on top. But there are forms of thinking with animals that are based on equality and respect for animal wisdom, for example in sanctuaries or by researchers who write about their (rescued) companions. Overcoming human supremacy is a process, in anthropocentric societies, that includes a lot of learning and unlearning.

D.G., P.S.: To what extent can interspecies broadening of concepts, approaches, and orders that once focused exclusively on humans help us in this “learning and unlearning”? For instance, you eagerly use the tools of phenomenology or Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of “language games.”

E.M.: I will use the example of “language” to answer this question. Language has long been equated with human language, even though other animals clearly have voices and express themselves. This expresses and reinforces a hierarchy between humans and other animals. I have found it helpful to use the word “language” in thinking and speaking about the expressions of other animals, and for challenging this hierarchy and arguing for a more heterogeneous understanding of language and expression, based on difference. This has allowed me to point out similarities and differences between the languages of humans and those of other animals, to explore the role of language in building new and less violent multispecies relations, and to better understand the concept “language.” Many humans see language as one practice or equate it with a natural language like English or Dutch. But words work very differently in different discourses and practices, multispecies or human, like poetry, academic discourse, novels, political discourse and so on – many philosophers find it hard to understand novels because they expect something different from a text. Thinking about animal languages has helped me to become a better writer through paying even more attention to language.

D.G., P.S.: When considering the prospects of interspecies politics, you move smoothly between the possibilities offered by the current institutions of liberal democracy and completely different ways of thinking and acting developed together with non-human animals. Why do we need both of these approaches at once?

E.M.: As humans we face a cluster of problems that cannot be solved by the current political framework – think of the climate crisis, extinction of species and

loss of biodiversity, capitalist exploitation of the planet and many of its inhabitants, large-scale exploitation of animals and human workers in different parts of the world. Existing democratic systems often have elections every four years, which makes the long-term planning needed for addressing ecological crises difficult. Politics is seen as a struggle about interests, and not as a tool for fostering care for all of us. There is also a large gap between politicians and citizens in countries that use the model of representative democracy, which is interconnected with increasing polarisation and the rise of the extreme right in Europe and the US. In order to overcome these problems and adequately address the climate crisis and related crises, we need new political frameworks and other stories about how to live with nonhuman and human others. And we need to develop these with other animals not to repeat anthropocentrism. At the same time, change does not come from nowhere, and there are ways of working towards a non-anthropocentric politics beginning from the *status quo*. For example, animal political parties and animal rights and liberation advocacy, cultural projects such as critical veganism and multispecies art, and multispecies education. These kinds of projects can help us envision alternatives, create dialogue in human societies, and can make a difference for animals alive now.

D.G., P.S.: What does your “from the ground up” method of developing political theory (the political voices of nonhuman animals) and normativity regarding socio-political practices consist of?

E.M.: When I write about more-than-human animals I am always searching for ways to incorporate their agency in the text. In a sense, all my work is co-shaped by them, not just the work that has animals as a theme, because I am shaped by the relations with the companions with whom I live, and the other beings who are part of my life-world. But in the animal work I want to make this explicit. For example, by writing about the animals that I know, or by incorporating stories about/ from humans who live differently with animals, and see their own position in the larger whole differently, like Len Howard, who lived with birds, or in my recent work, non-western ontologies such as Daoism. In a new book about multispecies dialogues (*Multispecies Dialogues. Doing Philosophy with Animals, Children, the Sea and Others*, forthcoming this year with Amsterdam University Press) I describe embodied, situated dialogues that I have with nonhuman others, such as my late dog companion Olli, the ex-lab mice I adopted, and the amphibians that I help cross the road when they come out of hibernation and migrate to the ponds, as a basis for developing a new understanding of “dialogue.” Starting with concrete examples enables me to acknowledge both the agency of other beings and my own situatedness, which matters for critiquing power relations and envisioning new forms of relation and community. The model of the dialogue is helpful, because dialogues work like this, they include questions and answers, they move and change us, and can be a powerful tool for learning about others and becoming more worldly.

D.G., P.S.: Could you give an example of how these “embodied, situated dialogues with nonhuman others” translate to specific theoretical approaches or practical solutions?

E.M.: The dialogue is both the theoretical approach and the practical solution, or at least, that is the idea. For example, in the case of the ex-lab mice I adopted, I got to know them through a process of interaction. This process included watching each other, mouse and human expressions, material interventions such as boxes I placed in their homes, experiments around food. They told me they were not so interested in interaction, and showed me who they were. I learned about their rituals when somebody died, they greeted, washed and buried the body of their dead friend. And what they liked in terms of play. Learning to see them was necessary to be able to care for them in the right way, given the unavoidable condition of their captivity. Engaging with mice in this way is a practical project, a form of learning to live with one another (there are many more examples, that might include very different acts, and have different outcomes). At the same time, viewing the interaction as a dialogue, to which different beings contribute, can be a method for multispecies thinking – for taking seriously the agency and initiative of others, and decentering the human in interaction.

D.G., P.S.: Len Howard, whom you mentioned, is also the heroine of your novel *Bird Cottage*. In *When Animals Speak: Toward An Interspecies Democracy*, you emphasise that literature has a role to play in preparing the ground for interspecies democracy. In your opinion, what exactly is the political task of literature, and how can we avoid reducing the artistic value of the text to a simple political message in this context?

E.M.: As a philosopher, I would answer that we need the imagination for taking the perspective of other beings, thinking about other futures, and conceptualising social and political change. Stories can show us parts of reality that were hidden from our view, and reading is active, it requires an effort to take the perspective of the other that is lacking from watching series. Other forms of art also have their role to play in social and political transformation in their own ways – music and visual art connect to other senses in other ways, which matters for multispecies thinking too.

As a novelist I would answer that even though all books are political in some sense – they are written and read in a specific time, offer stories that affirm the existing ideology or challenge it – they are also always more than political. I don't think novels have or should have a message. As texts they work very differently than philosophy, and show much more about the ambiguity of life than philosophical argument. Writing novels also works completely differently than writing philosophy. The story decides what happens and unfolds as I write. The language itself plays a more important role too – in philosophy language has a more instrumental role,

even though in the end the meaning of course always escapes the text, because it is co-created by each reader anew. But in novels the language is central.

D.G., P.S.: There is an abyss between the new models of interspecies socio-political relations contained in the works of theoreticians and reality and practice. There are many indications that political changes in favour of nonhuman animals will continue to be gradual. Which practical solutions do you consider particularly useful in the transition process at the stage where we currently are?

E.M.: I have already mentioned some of these above – animal rights and liberation advocacy, political animal parties, cultural change. But I think we need to take this question more seriously in relation to other animals, and we need more political experiments. Like the experiments in living differently that take place in certain animal sanctuaries, for example, but also new farming practices. I also think there is room for taking these seriously in our political and public discourses, that wasn't there before. I take part in the public debate in The Netherlands, where I am located, and I am noticing a shift in how humans view other animals. In part this is due to the "woke" discourse, which teaches us about power relations, in part to new research about animal capacities, and in part to the climate crisis that forces rich humans in rich countries to rethink their position in the greater whole. In strengthening this shift and envisioning other futures, we need more room for, and stories about, animal agency – including attention for their cultures and languages, and forming new multispecies practices and communities with those near to humans. The next step is connecting these insights to processes of decision-making, and more generally making them public.

D.G., P.S.: We are curious if you could name a specific institution, office, or legal change, the establishment or modification of which you consider particularly conducive to transformation.

E.M.: The Party for the Animals has made a change in public discourse and animal politics in the Netherlands. The rise of forms of theory that take seriously social transformation and multispecies justice is also a promising development; academic activism is a slow but effective form of activism, and it's one of the fields in which I see most progress. There are also many interesting grass roots initiatives in which humans actively engage with nonhumans. For example, humans in sanctuaries that see themselves as multispecies communities, such as VINE Sanctuary, are already living differently with other animals, and show that new relations emerge if the terms of interaction change, and if humans begin paying more attention to other animals. Stichting Kapitalocean (The Capitalocene Foundation, <https://www.kapitalocean.nl/>) in the Netherlands aims to establish a new relation with the land, in which humans are not the owners of it, as a challenge to capitalism. The humans there develop new ways of farming, in which they give 50% of the land to nonhumans, 10% to humans, and the rest is shared. I am also interested in

initiatives that combine artistic and academic research with activism, such as the Embassy of the North Sea <https://www.embassyofthenorthsea.com/>, KNOCKvologan <https://knockvologan.net/>, and Zoöp <https://zoop.earth/>.

D.G., P.S.: How do you assess the activities of political parties that specialise in animal-related issues? What role do they play, and are they fulfilling their task successfully?

E.M.: In the Netherlands, the Party for the Animals is small but rather successful. There are now elected politicians in different levels of government, from the local to the national level. Their main function has been to bring animals into politics, to open up the discourse. This includes devising new laws or legislation, advocating for taking their interests into account, and influencing other parties. Importantly, the Party for the Animals in NL is not a one issue party, but connects animal interests to human interests, and they propose a holistic view of politics. Because there is room in the discourse for rethinking the human, I think animal parties can play an important role in the shift from human-centered to multispecies politics. However, their power is limited because they are bound to the political systems they are working from.

D.G., P.S.: What do you think about such practices as granting legal personality to nonhuman animals and other elements of the animate and inanimate world or appointing animal protection advocates? Are they not related to the assumption that a political arrangement in which we humans speak on behalf of other animals is inevitable – the assumption you criticise?

E.M.: There is no clear recipe for social and cultural change, and I think different discourses and practices can be tools for improving the lives of other animals and their status in society. Humans have different qualities too; we can all contribute in our own ways. However, in working towards change we should be careful not to repeat oppression, including epistemic oppression – animal advocates should for example be careful not to perpetuate the view that animals are silent or mute. Furthermore, animal exclusion is not a simple error in systems like capitalism: these are built on the use of animals. Working towards change therefore always also requires critique of existing social and political mechanisms.

D.G., P.S.: Your book *When Animals Speak: Toward An Interspecies Democracy* opens with examples of acts of resistance by domesticated and wild animals. You also take up Jason Hribal's idea that we should treat certain animals as working-class members. What would this mean, and why did not traditional Marxist philosophy see animals this way?

E.M.: I'd like to direct readers interested in the second part of this question to Dinesh Wadiwel's new book, *Animals and Capital* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), which deals with Marxist thought in detail – this is not my area of expertise. Concerning animals as workers more broadly, we should acknowledge violence in

the current exploitation of animals as workers, and viewing their work as work matters for advocacy. Here too, the animals invite us to reconsider what counts as work. For example, for the lab mice whom I adopted care was central to their life, and integrated in all their practices. They also had many projects that they worked on, collectively and on their own. I learned from them that animals have their own projects and work that matters for them, and that care, which we now frame neoliberal-ly in human societies, should be part of all our acts, and integrated in work systems. Another example is my dog companion Doris, who sees herself as the guardian of the house and me, and has taken on the role of protector. In her writings about VINE Sanctuary pattrice jones shows that the animals who are part of the sanctuary community take on roles in the community, like welcoming newcomers, or watching for danger. They choose work that suits them.

D.G., P.S.: Will you agree that the depth of exclusion of nonhuman sentient animals requires profound systemic changes so that they are granted genuine respect as members of a more-than-human community?

E.M.: Yes. And this is a question that is at the same time enormous and possible. Everything should change, but we can immediately begin acting differently now, and there are already many examples of practices and relations built on care and respect (also outside of western paradigms of thinking and acting).

D.G., P.S.: In your recent works, you suggest that the Anthropocene epoch poses several new challenges for us, such as the necessity to include in the political community not only nonhuman animals but also – perhaps – plants, fungi, and even inanimate beings. Could you elaborate on this thread? Is not there a conflict here between sentientism and, let us say, the “kinship” model that focuses on relational ontology? In other words, does “entangled empathy” (as proposed by Lori Gruen) and the new materialist thinking to which you sometimes refer offer a way out of the deadlock mentioned above (sentientism vs. other strategies for assigning moral status)? And would it not require the development of a wholly new political paradigm, going beyond representative democracy and the ideal of sovereignty (as highlighted, for example, by Donaldson and Kymlicka in the context of wild animals)?

E.M.: I recently finished writing a short book about multispecies assemblies, aptly titled “Multispecies Assemblies,” in which I discuss this question in detail. In this text I use the model of assembly – used for political decision-making by the ancient Greeks, anarchists, the Zapatistas and many others throughout the centuries – as a starting point for doing politics with animals, plants, human children, natural entities and others. I draw inspiration from multispecies justice theory, indigenous theory, animal political philosophy and other fields that emphasise multispecies entanglements and propose a non-anthropocentric framework for rethinking politics. Multispecies assemblies are a form of direct democracy in which

humans and nonhumans speak about matters of common concern, in embodied and situated processes of question and response. Some nonhumans can speak for themselves, like many animals and perhaps sometimes plants or natural entities, others need to be represented by humans. Precisely because of the entanglements and the co-dependencies between humans, other animals, plants, the natural world, we need a model of politics that takes into account the voices and interests of different beings, that does justice to their agency, and offers room for experiment and the formation of new knowledge. The model is meant as a first step, and needs to be informed and filled in by actual experiments. While humans have the responsibility to work towards change, because of their current position of dominance, the assemblies should evolve further on the basis of interaction with the other beings involved. The voices of animals, who have been silenced for so long, should be central in this project.

D.G., P.S.: How would you respond to potential objections from some authors arguing for sentience-based ethics and politics rather than the one drawing on “entanglements and co-dependencies”? Do we understand correctly that, in your opinion, sentience is not enough? Also, how non-sentient beings can speak for themselves?

E.M.: The concept of “sentience” is something that humans assign to other beings. Historically, the scope of sentience has changed significantly – for example, there was doubt about the sentience of human babies and most animals for a long time. Now there is discussion about whether plants are sentient, and debate about which insects are sentient. Connecting sentience to moral worth is problematic because the foundation is shaky – human knowledge is imperfect and based on bias in research. I therefore don’t think sentience is the most helpful lens for looking at relations with other beings.

I don’t really understand what you mean by “sentience is not enough.” Humans have different ethical and political duties towards different groups of animals, and determining these duties needs to be contextual and take into account their ways of flourishing and needs, historical obligations, current relations, and so on. I take the position that all animals are sentient, as long as we don’t know they are not, and plants probably are too, so I am in favour of animal liberation and more critical and careful relations with plants. But the argument about language and deliberation is not an argument about moral worth. The multispecies assembly is a model for doing democracy with nonhumans, not to establish the worth of animals or plants (which is not up to humans anyway). Concerning the last question: in assemblies deliberation involves more than speaking in human language, and in it we need to develop new common language-games with other beings, like animals and plants.

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Eva Meijer jest filozofką, artystką wizualną, pisarką i piosenkarką-autorką tekstów. Pisze powieści, eseje filozoficzne, teksty akademickie, wiersze i felietony, a jej prace zostały przetłumaczone na ponad dwadzieścia języków. Ich powracające tematy to język (w tym milczenie), szaleństwo, zwierzęta nie-ludzkie i polityka. Meijer obecnie pracuje jako postdoctoral researcher na Uniwersytecie Amsterdamskim w ramach grantu Veni przyznanego przez NWO (Holenderską Radę ds. Badań Naukowych). Projekt nosi nazwę „The politics of (not) eating animals” [Polityka (nie)jedzenia zwierząt] (<https://evameijer.nl/thepoliticsofnoteatinganimals.htm>). Pisze również eseje i felietony dla gazety NRC oraz jest członkinią Multispecies Collective (<https://themultispeciescollective.cargo.site/>). E-mail: e.r.meijer@uva.nl.