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A Case for Felt Kinship
[Review of Gary Steiner’s book
*What We Owe to Nonhuman Animals:
The Historical Pretensions of Reason
and the Ideal of Felt Kinship,*
London and New York: Routledge, 2024]

Дело об ощущаемом родстве
[Рецензия на книгу Гэри Стайнера
*What We Owe to Nonhuman Animals:
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Абстракт

Рецензия рассматривает том *What We Owe to Nonhuman Animals: The Historical Pretensions of Reason and the Ideal of Felt Kinship* (“Что мы должны нечеловеческим животным: Исторические притязания разума и идеал ощущаемого родства”), новейшую работу, опубликованную почетным профессором философии Университета Бакнелла Гэри Стайнером. Монография представляет обзор и критику антропоцентризма западной философской традиции. В частности, она настойчиво выступает за признание полного морального статуса нечеловеческих животных, противореча доминирующей позиции

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Abstract

The review discusses the volume *What We Owe to Nonhuman Animals: The Historical Pretensions of Reason and the Ideal of Felt Kinship*, the latest work published by Gary Steiner, Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Bucknell University. The monograph provides an overview of and a challenge to the anthropocentrism of the Western philosophical tradition. In particular, it forcefully advocates for the recognition of the full moral status of nonhuman animals, going against the grain of the hegemonic Western philosophical stance. The review introduces the main arguments advanced by the author and addresses the volume’s structure, the conclusions it reaches,

западной философии. В рецензии рассматриваются основные аргументы автора, обсуждается структура книги, ее выводы и значение для статуса нечеловеческих животных.

Ключевые слова: западная философия, мораль, этика животных, аффект, рационализм

and the relevance of its discussion for the status of nonhuman animals.

Keywords: Western philosophy, morality, animal ethics, affect, rationalism

Gary Steiner's latest monograph *What We Owe to Nonhuman Animals: The Historical Pretensions of Reason and the Ideal of Felt Kinship* situates itself within the frameworks of moral philosophy and animal ethics, the latter being concerned with extending moral standing from humans alone to nonhuman animals and with shaping respectful, reciprocal human–animal relations. In his volume, Steiner overviews the Western philosophical tradition with what concerns attitudes toward nonhuman animals. He demonstrates how this strand of thought, running from at least the times of ancient Greece up to modern days, has maintained a strongly anthropocentric stance by defending humans' cognitive and moral superiority over other sentient life-forms on the grounds of humans' unique condition as rational beings. The author demonstrates that this position does not stem from rational considerations but rather from affects driven by fear, arguing that this framework has emboldened humans to draw hasty definitive conclusions on nonhuman animals' inner lives.

Instead, Steiner argues for a nonanthropocentric model of living grounded in the refusal to perpetrate violence against animals and the recognition of humans' ultimate ignorance concerning animal interiority. This position derives from a need, according to the author, to develop an alternative toolkit that departs from the traditional pathos of arrogance and self-certainty through which to perceive nonhuman animals. He opts instead for one that includes humility, generosity, and the acknowledgment of the mutual kinship between human and nonhuman animals, which he associates with the openness afforded by Heidegger's conception of "letting beings be." The latter concept promises to move humans toward a more inclusive trans-species moral community.

Steiner is not alone in expressing his concern about how humans treat animals. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, an efflorescence of works in human–animal studies have been published on such topics. A renewed attention on animal ethics has ensued, with recent contributions to the field stemming from multiple different perspectives. The energized focus on the status of nonhuman animals in Western society can be considered within the framework of varied "turns" that have followed one another – and often coexist with one another – in the twenty-first

century, from the “animal turn” to what Richard Grusin has termed the “nonhuman turn,” which indicates a growing concern with decentering the human in order to recognize multispecies entangled networks.¹ Of such turns, some directly concern the field of animal ethics. Among them is, for instance, the “political turn,” which considers how dynamics of power and injustice at institutional and systemic levels intersect with the oppression of nonhuman animals.² Even more recently, an “affective turn” can be witnessed among scholars concerned with the moral status of animals, one that has developed as a reaction to the excessively rationalistic approach existing not only in the centuries-old Western philosophical tradition but even in more recent positions within contemporary animal ethics. While Steiner does not make explicit reference to most scholars working in this direction – who in this sense could be said to challenge his assertion that in fifty years not a “great deal of progress has been made in the endeavor to debunk the self-serving and ultimately arbitrary assumption that members of the human species are categorically superior to members of all other species in the cosmic scheme”³ – his emphasis on emotion and affect for the shaping of a nonanthropocentric model seems coherent with recent developments, lucidly summarized by Ralph R. Acampora in his recent article.⁴

Steiner does not limit himself to a critique of the Western tradition's rationalism and its concomitant denigration of emotions. He suggests that a wholesale, unmitigated rejection of reason cannot constitute the solution to the anthropocentrism that has been handed down through time from philosophers who go as far back as Aristotle. He considers this stance in contrast with that of postmodern thinkers,

¹ Richard Grusin, “Introduction,” in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), vii.

² Robert Garner and Siobhan O'Sullivan, eds., *The Political Turn in Animal Ethics* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Tony Milligan, “The Political Turn in Animal Rights,” *Politics and Animals* 1 (2015): 6–15; E. van den Brandeler, “The Political Turn of the Animal Ethical Discourse: The Need for a Virtue Ethical Approach,” in *Justice and Food Security in a Changing Climate*, eds. Hanna Schübel and Ivo Wallimann-Helmer (Leiden: Wageningen Academic, 2021), 185–189.

³ Steiner admits a few pages later that “some progress has been made in traditionally minded philosophical efforts to rethink the nature of nonhuman animal experience as well as the moral status of nonhuman animals” (5), mentioning Christine Korsgaard as an example of a scholar who has made significant contributions to the field. It can still be argued, however, that he engages with a limited and selective array of contemporary voices, often chosen, as in the case of Korsgaard, on the grounds of their residual anthropocentrism, against which Steiner sets his own position.

⁴ Ralph R. Acampora, “The Affective Turn in Animal Ethics,” *Relations Beyond Anthropocentrism* 11, no. 2 (2023): 9–23. See also Elisa Aaltola, “Affective Animal Ethics: Reflective Empathy, Attention and Knowledge *Sub Specie Aeternitatis*,” in *Human/Animal Relationships in Transformation*, eds. Augusto Vitale and Simone Pollo (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 67–89; Donovan O. Schaefer, “You Don't Know What Pain Is: Affect, the Lifeworld, and Animal Ethics,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 30, no. 1 (2016): 15–29.

against whom he expresses criticisms in multiple works.⁵ Instead, he suggests the necessity of a mutual interplay between reason and emotion in revising moral commitments and humans' bond with nonhuman animals. While Steiner attributes a limited yet still valid role to reason in this process, he also urgently argues for the recognition of the affective basis of moral life. This foundation of feeling that establishes the grounds for a sense of human's shared fate with and obligation to nonhuman animals constitutes what Steiner calls "felt kinship," which he had first introduced in *Animals and the Moral Community*. This approach, for Steiner, can offer a path toward a nonanthropocentric revision of humans' place on Earth.

The volume follows a well-structured framework, comprised of an introduction and five chapters, each neatly divided into orderly sections. Before developing the volume's main argument on nonhuman animals' moral status, one around which several of his previous monographs revolve,⁶ he first reviews some of the most renowned figures of Western philosophy – who can be seen as most representative of the anthropocentric strain running through it – and the dubious speciesist assumptions on which they base their arguments.

Chapter One and Two are dedicated to the overview and critique of the hegemonic Western philosophical tradition of human exceptionalism, with a focus on the role of reason – considered the highest among the experiential faculties and one exclusive to humans – in asserting human superiority and denying the moral status of nonhuman animals. Steiner terms this overarching stance the "anthropocentric background ideal of living." The main figures Steiner focuses on in these chapters are Aristotle, Seneca and the Stoics, Descartes, and Kant. He demonstrates that far from being impartial, the arguments advanced by the representative figures of this tradition are driven by affective investments and the ulterior motives of control and domination. Such philosophers are discussed along with more recent twentieth- and twenty-first-century thinkers, among whom John Rawls, Peter Singer, Martha Nussbaum, Christine Korsgaard, and Thomas Nagel, whom Steiner suggests retain certain anthropocentric views inherited from the Western tradition. By investigating the history of modes of treating animals and how they have developed diachronically, the author identifies the roots of current speciesist practices. This historical overview seems essential for the revision of dominant views on the moral standing of animals.

⁵ See especially Gary Steiner, *Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁶ Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005); Gary Steiner, *Animals and the Moral Community: Mental Life, Moral Status, and Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

In Chapter Three, Steiner delves deeper into the role of historical contextualization as he challenges the rooted idea in Western philosophy whereby reason can be considered an eternal and ahistorical faculty that is valid beyond the constraints of context and circumstance. The author rejects both this latter conception as well as a total critique of reason, which he identifies in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, William James, and Richard Rorty. This view, according to him, rests too much on contingency and arbitrariness, and fails to account for the autonomous if limited role of reason in the pronouncement of moral judgment. He argues instead for an immanent critique of reason and its rehabilitation through its conception as embedded in history and inscribed in time. In supporting this argument, he borrows José Ortega y Gasset's notion of historical reason and John William Miller's actualism. While he notices the anthropocentric orientations retained by these two scholars, he believes that their theories, grounded in a sense of community rooted in universality, once adjusted, hold the potential for developing a notion of embodied rationality that makes it possible to recognize the tie between reason and affect and, in virtue of this tie, the closeness between humans and nonhuman animals.

In Chapter Four, Steiner provides the adjustments to the theories of Ortega and Miller that he feels are necessary, especially when it comes to the criteria on which the exercise of reason and the formulation of moral commitments are founded. In this context, Steiner, with the support drawn from the theories of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and to a lesser degree Schopenhauer, appeals to embodiment and affect as modes of engaging with the world that provide reason with the guidance needed to operate moral judgments. Through this approach that conceives historical reason and embodied affect – both seen as crucial in the formation of moral commitments – in a dialectical relationship, it becomes possible to include animals as beneficiaries of moral concern and as part of a shared trans-species moral community grounded in democratic ideals in virtue of the embodied, affective constitution shared between humans and nonhuman animals.

Steiner further develops his argument in Chapter Five, where he discusses the tension between individual, local affiliations and collective, global ones. Here, he articulates the notion of felt kinship, which constitutes an ideal of a universal moral community that encompasses all sentient beings – all deserving of both compassion and justice – and that is grounded in the mutual bond between reason and emotion. In this final chapter, the author proposes to extend the reach of Tzvetan Todorov's ideal of "a well-tempered humanism," which aspires to move beyond racial divisions, to include nonhuman animals. In order to achieve such an ideal, he advances the *oikeiosis* doctrine of the Stoic philosophers as a model for community-building, one that consists in the recognition of kinship on the grounds of shared maternal love and embodied nature. While the concept does not inherently

oppose anthropocentrism, Steiner sees its potential for supporting his own argument, extending this type of kinship bond from a human social community to a cosmic community that resonates with his notion of “cosmic holism.” The latter consists in a model of justice for nonhuman animals within the multispecies moral community.

Through his espousal of Todorov’s model, Steiner remains situated within the larger humanistic framework. The author is aware of humanism’s problematic historical association with the quest for human dominion and control. Yet he defends his affiliation with it because he believes that humans present certain differences in respect to nonhuman animals especially in terms of the distinct kind of agency they are able to exercise in reviewing their actions critically on the basis of moral considerations. While his argument would have perhaps benefited from a more in-depth critique of the intersectional damaging effects of humanism and its interlinked forms of domination exerted with violence on multiple embodied subjectivities, Steiner does criticize humanism’s anthropocentric affiliations and demonstrates throughout the volume a balanced and nuanced understanding of both the continuities as well as the differences between humans and nonhuman animals. While believing that humans have faculties that distinguish them from animals, he repeatedly suggests that this is not a valid reason not to confer a moral status to nonhuman sentient beings. He also reiterates the kinship – based on shared vulnerability, struggle for survival, embodiment, uncertainty, and mortality – that ties humans and animals together. In developing this position, Steiner takes his cue from Heidegger’s notion of “stepping back” and “letting beings be,” from Grimm’s insight into the nonhuman “animal-in-itself,” and Bernhard Taureck’s “imperative to discontinue use.” These concepts converge in the exhortation to resist the temptation of reaching definitive conclusions on animal lives and to exercise humility guided by a sense of openness. This approach is conceived in response to humans’ ignorance of animals’ inner lives and to the historical violence enacted against them.

One issue the volume seems to suffer from is that it conveys little sense that there might exist any other tradition beyond the Western one when it comes to animal ethics, both in terms of stances to critique and alternative models to borrow from. While a denunciation of the philosophical Western tradition that the author rightly forwards with minutia is as relevant as ever in order to seek out the roots of the widespread anthropocentrism that still plagues contemporary society, no mention is made of any stance that has existed for centuries or exists today beyond Western ones. Even the model of living that the author offers as grounds for a process of shared community-building – the Stoic *oikeiosis* doctrine – is rooted in that same tradition, even though multiple contemporary models have been advanced from beyond both the Western philosophical tradition as well as the core of contemporary

Western scholarship.⁷ However, it could be argued that this choice is intentional on the part of the author, who conceives the volume's scope as one in conversation with the Western philosophical tradition. As Steiner argues, "I have tried to show that the anthropocentric tradition is not one we should seek to reject in its entirety, but rather one in which we find vital resources for thinking past the anthropocentric limitations of that tradition."⁸ In this sense, his approach reads the tradition against the grain while seeking common ground. Such a strategy teases out certain nonanthropocentric underpinnings within that philosophical strain and ideas that can be recycled from that repository in the effort of building a nonanthropocentric model of living.

Steiner's volume constitutes a significant contribution to animal ethics. His advocacy for a mutual, dialectical relationship between historical reason and embodied, affective constitution offers a noteworthy addition to the field's "affective turn." The monograph provides readers with a valuable critical overview and commentary on key voices of the Western philosophical tradition and an attentive diachronic perspective that will be useful not only to experts in the field and scholars within the wider frameworks of environmental humanities and animal studies but also to students and undergraduates who seek a clear, accessible introduction to the question of the moral status of animals and to the main theories of major Western philosophers. Steiner's ideal of felt kinship within an extended moral community of humans and nonhuman animals constitutes an urgent and necessary call to challenge the anthropocentric commitments of contemporary Western society.

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⁷ This issue has been lamented, for instance, by multiple Indigenous studies scholars who are concerned with animal ethics and welfare. See Billy-Ray Belcourt, "An Indigenous Critique of Critical Animal Studies," in *Colonialism and Animality: Anti-Colonial Perspectives in Critical Animal Studies*, eds. Kelly Struthers Montford and Chloë Taylor (London: Routledge, 2020), 19–28.

⁸ David Steiner, *What We Owe to Nonhuman Animals: The Historical Pretensions of Reason and the Ideal of Felt Kinship* (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 247.

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