

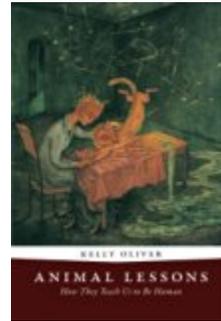


Kelly Oliver. *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to Be Human*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. x + 364 pp. \$89.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14726-2; \$29.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-14727-9.

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Pedagogical Relations

Climate change, environmental degradation, mass species extinction, cross species viruses, and many other contemporary pressures call on us to think about *the human* and humanity's relationship to the world. The announcement of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, in which humankind is identified as a geological force has prompted a reconsideration of what it is to be human and how we might think about human history when we can no longer assume the "continuity of human experience." [1] Kelly Oliver's superb new book, *Animal Lessons*, is a timely and important study, essential reading for those considering such contemporary issues as those above at the heart of which lie questions concerning the human and/or humanity. Oliver shows, for example, that responses to climate change grounded on the assumption that humans are masters of nature not only are unlikely to work but also risk further damaging "earth others." [2] And while that might already be obvious to critical thinkers, *Animal Lessons* also shows that research which enlists animal studies to understand what is unique about humans and their relationship with the world are fraught.

Animal lessons or animal pedagogy refers to the philosophical use of the animal and animal studies to "teach us about men, the human, and humanity" (depending on which philosophical work one looks at) (p. 8). Oliver shows that philosophical thinking about humans depends greatly on animals. In her chapter on Simone de Beauvoir, for example, Oliver examines the ways in

which de Beauvoir drew on animal studies to both challenge patriarchal stereotypes that denigrate "females of all the species" and to distinguish women as human beings equal to men and distinctively different from animals (p. 156). "The ambivalent conclusion," Oliver writes, "is that female animals teach us something about ourselves because they are like us but that woman is human because ultimately she is not like them" (p. 159). The general problem arising with this animal pedagogy is that our dependence on animals for thinking about the human has been denied and projected onto the animal to create the illusion of human mastery. That this continues is not surprising given that "to acknowledge the dependence of *man* and *humanity* on *animal* and *animality* is to undermine man's sense of himself as autonomous and self-sovereign. For, if anything, in the history of Western thought, man trains animals and not the other way around" (p. 21). Animals, however, are never simply mastered; throughout *Animal Lessons*, Oliver examines the ways in which animals "bite back" to "reveal the secrets to the philosopher's success in apparently mastering the impossible, turning wild animals metaphors into domesticated beasts of burden to prove their theories about man" (p. 13).

Animal Lessons begins with a heartfelt poem celebrating Oliver's relationship with her feline companion Kaos. I found this poem intriguing, promising an experimental edge to the book. I was thus disappointed that the fascinating chapters that follow are written in a standard aca-

democratic style. Oliver crafts the central argument of *Animal Lessons*, parts of which have been previously published in various scholarly journals, through a careful examination of the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Herder, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben and Julia Kristeva. Oliver discusses the importance of each philosopher's work to research on animal lessons in the introduction of the book. Although Oliver had to choose a limited number of philosophers to undertake this project, I would have liked to hear more about her decisions on which philosophers to include and her thoughts on those that she might have included. While the general argument of this book is widely accessible, those familiar with the philosophical works she engages are likely to get the most out of these chapters. In contrast to the chapters considering particular philosophers, the book begins with a broadly readable chapter on animal rights. This chapter demonstrates how *Animals Lessons* might be operationalized by scholars to address particular concerns, such as how to respond to climate change. Much of the animal rights debate circulates around the question of whether animals are the same as or different from humans (p. 25). Oliver argues that, given that humans are conceptualized as opposite to animals, comparisons to the human present a fundamental problem for animal rights. She asks: "Can what was once considered the Cartesian object become the Cartesian subject? In other terms, can those considered other or man's opposites, including women and animals, be included in the category *man*?" (p. 26). Addressing these questions, Oliver draws out problems with a rights approach to justice more generally. Thankfully, the discussion does not end there and she goes on to conclude the chapter by suggesting "the limits of the human" as an alternative place to start thinking about human animal relations (p. 45). Drawing on Derrida, Oliver suggests that all embodied beings, both human and animal, share the capacity to suffer, that is, a vulnerability to others. She explains, "In a sense, the capacity to suffer is an impotent power, a powerless power, the power of interdependence, which Derrida suggests may be definitive of humanity and of all of life" (p. 46). This shared "embodied vulnerability" is "the limit of the human in the face of the animal" (p. 46). Oliver also draws attention to other thinking on the limits of the human including psychoanalytic and Deleuzeian networks, which blur the boundaries between human, animal, and machine. Rather than "dissect them and examine their brains to learn something about our own," she argues, "what we need is a sustainable ethics, one based on responsibil-

ity to our founding possibility, the earth, animals and other people, without which we could not live. We need a meta-ethics that goes beyond rights or recognition to the conditions of embodied life on a shared planet and the obligations those conditions entail" (p. 48). I found this immensely inspiring, something I will take up in my research on economic ethics.

When I told a friend about the book I was reading they asked me whether the author lives with a lot of cats. In her all too brief conclusion, Oliver mentions the warnings friends gave her about acknowledging her two cats in her books and, when she embarked on *Animal Lessons*, their concerns about her focus on animals rather than human relations of injustice and violence. *Animals Lessons* did in fact begin as Oliver's response to her feline companions, in particular to the loss of her "beloved companion of eighteen years, Kaos" (p. 303). However, the book's lessons will be missed if readers think Oliver has "gone to the dogs" or see *Animals Lessons* as a book only on animals (p. 303). Rather, Oliver examines the animal at the heart of philosophical thinking on man, the human, and humanity to raise questions about how we might respond differently to animal lessons. She writes, "perhaps we should attend to how we learn from, and how we should thank, our teachers" (p. 11). *Animals Lessons* thus draws readers' attention to pedagogical relations, bringing to mind Eve Sedgwick's discussion of "relations of near-miss pedagogy" in her 2003 book *Touching Feeling*.^[3] Sedgwick cites an animal study that suggests, counter to popular opinion, cats do not bring wounded animals into the house as a gift for their human owners. Instead, just as they do for their young, cats may be trying to teach humans to hunt. She wonders how we can mistake this act as a gift.^[4] Similarly, in *Animal Lessons*, Oliver suggests that we can never be sure whether the "literal and metaphorical" animals in philosophical works are "following the script, have missed the mark, or are carrying us off the stage for their own ends" (pp. 12-13). Given such near-miss pedagogy between animals and humans, Sedgwick asks, "Is it true that we can learn only when we are aware we are being taught?"^[5] "Possibly we do not want to learn the lesson our cat is teaching."^[6] This issue extends beyond animal lessons and into classrooms where Sedgwick fears that her students will reject her lessons; accept them as a gift rather than an opportunity to practice their thinking skills; or, through their resistance to the lesson, will try to teach *her* something. The issue here, skillfully addressed by Oliver in *Animal Lessons*, is the relationship between learners and teachers, whether between humans or between humans and

nonhumans, and how we can put ourselves in the way of the lessons of others. In a time of climate change, unprecedented species extinction and other concerns leading us to question the human, Oliver argues that we have a responsibility to learn how to acknowledge our dependence on others, to respond to their needs and learn how to share the Earth with them. *Animals Lessons* provides a place to start this learning, showing that “considering animals necessarily transforms how we consider ourselves and that reconsidering both *other* or animal and *self* or human and acknowledging the intimate conceptual and practical relation between them have implications for thinking about our obligations to others and to ourselves” (p. 305).

Notes

[1]. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197.

[2]. See Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[3]. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 154.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 153-154.

[5]. *Ibid.*, 153.

[6]. *Ibid.*, 154.

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