

# H-Net Reviews

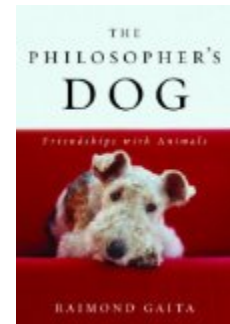
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Giorgio Agamben. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004. viii + 102 pp. \$43.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4737-0; \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-4738-7.

Raimond Gaita. *The Philosopher's Dog: Friendships with Animals*. London: Routledge, 2003. 214 pp. \$23.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4000-6110-5.

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## Openness and Meaning

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#### Openness

Giorgio Agamben is a professor at the University of Verona and a frequent visitor to the United States. He is a highly published philosopher in the European tradition. I see him as similar in approach to thinkers like Gianni Vattimo or Jean-Luc Nancy. His work, like theirs, is broadly political, with what we would identify as spiritual dimensions, and involves aesthetics and literature as well. Agamben and these others write books that work through our failed attunement to the world, ourselves, each other. The work performed is cultural critique, drawing on a broad and historically deep understanding of culture that sees traditions reaching back thousands of years. Agamben's translated books include *The Coming Community*, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and the Bare Life*, *Means without End*, and *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*.<sup>[1]</sup>

Here is Agamben's story. Western metaphysics has predicated what it is to be human through an oppositional distinction with animals. Humanity is not animal. Animals are non-humans. You can be beastly to humans, and that is inhumane. The opposition has been part of a technological worldview wherein we should master nature, because nature otherwise dominates us. What is distinctively human is this mastery over nature. We

should tend and keep animals, and when we have an animal side to ourselves, we should oppose that. Humanity, in this tradition, grows in controlling "the animal other" within ourselves and our world. As Heidegger noted, factory farms are a natural outgrowth of such a tradition, and he thought Auschwitz was as well.<sup>[2]</sup> Call this dimension of Western metaphysics, its *mastery of animals*.

Agamben assumes this mastery is part of a relation to the world that is nihilistic. In making that assumption, he draws on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century tradition of examining nihilism in Western culture. He does not produce the scholarship to show this tradition is reasonable, nor the textual evidence to show Western metaphysics is as he says it is. But that is because doing so would be beyond what he can do in one book, and it would reinvent the wheel. Rather, his story fits within the background assumptions of the critique of metaphysics and nihilism. If you have reason to reject that critique, *The Open* will be questionable to you.

Nihilism is a cultural condition, often thought of as a historical period, wherein people lose meaning in their lives. The idea behind Agamben's book is that mastery of animals has contributed to our culture's loss of meaning. Seeing that, we have reason to undo our cultural complicity in mastery of animals. Agamben helps us do so through interpretive work that shows how mastery of

animals affects our concepts and imaginary sense of ourselves. He then explores a sense of ourselves, animals, or our universe that does not involve mastery of animals. The question is: How can we relate to animals in a way full of meaning?

For the Heideggerian tradition to which Agamben belongs, we are most true when we respond to meaning. Our worlds close down when we try to master them, and they open up when we cultivate meaning. At the base of meaningful life is an uncontrollable freedom where we, contingent beings that we are, must receive life, rather than pretend to consume it. We cannot master people, or the contingency of living beings—that is, cannot and have them become meaningful for us in a way that has a future, rather than an eventual dead-end of a non-relation. Even “mastering” the piano requires grace.

Heidegger gave European culture a gift in the 1920s when he wrote *Being and Time*. That he subsequently became a Nazi is part of the tragedy of nihilism he analyzed.[3] *Being and Time* wants people to experience the meaning in being and tries to show that meaning is what makes us humane, i.e., is what is proper to human life. According to Heidegger’s analysis, things lose meaning when they become tools. We use them, but do not respond to them as what they are. While we need to use tools, Heidegger’s larger worry is with a culture where technology—the Greek root of which means “tool”—has become our central way of relating to the world and each other, even to ourselves. In such a world, we use things, but do not respond to them as what they are. So too with animals, who are not things, of course, but fellow living beings.

Agamben’s book is interesting, because it artfully explores a non-technological relation to animals. This relation is subtle, too, because Agamben, citing Walter Benjamin, thinks we can have reason to use animals at times. But he wants to envision a way we might do that without losing their meaning. Although he does not mention this, the practice of thanking an animal you’ve slain for the gift of its life might be an example of the kind of non-technological use-relation he has in mind. What is it to open up our lives to animals?

#### Meaning

I believe Raimond Gaita’s book *The Philosopher’s Dog* is a wondering and beautiful answer to this question. Gaita teaches at Kings College London and the Australian Catholic University. He is an increasingly well-known Wittgensteinian, whose anecdotal biography of his fa-

ther won him the prestigious Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Non-fiction.[4] He has also written recently on the notion of common humanity, including the difficulty of conceptualizing the evil of genocide.[5] Gaita weaves storytelling into his philosophical work, and has the surprising advantage of being able to move between technical philosophy and everyday prose with ease.

*The Philosopher’s Dog* is part storytelling, part philosophical reflection on friendship with animals. The philosophy is best understood as an accessible exploration of a single, truly deep and underappreciated article by Cora Diamond.[6] Gaita dedicates his book to Diamond and quotes from “Eating Meat and Eating People” in the epigraph. One reason I love Gaita’s book so much is that it shows how an obscure article can have an afterlife that is relevant to people. But there are more reasons to love the book, as Nobel Prize winner J. M. Coetzee himself notes on the book’s jacket. Simply stated, the book explores the meaning of our lives when they are open to animals.

Let me give some background on Diamond’s article. “Eating Meat and Eating People” is an article exploring vegetarianism and the reasons for it in debate with animal liberationists. Diamond, I think rightly, shows the positions of Peter Singer and Tom Regan to be dehumanizing.[7] She believes there are reasons to respect animals, but they are not those given by Singer or Regan. Both these animal liberationists, she charges, have misunderstood how important our sense of humanity is in creating our moral universe, and she thinks they do violence to our moral fabric when they level the nuanced distinction between us and animals for their purposes. Rather, Diamond suggests, we should think about how our sense of humanity already has possibilities in it for deepening our moral relations with animals.[8]

The problem is, it is hard to make sense of what Diamond means in the short space of an article. What would it look like to find possibilities in our sense of humanity for deeper moral relations with animals? Don’t we already think it is human enough to slaughter them at will and in the most degrading and industrial of manners? Diamond’s article is easy to overlook, because she did not explain enough of what she meant. Perhaps it is very hard to do so and requires help. Perhaps, too, it is exhausting given the way academics tend to “do” contemporary moral theory. Happily, Gaita provides some help.

What Gaita does is to examine how his shared life with animals, especially his German shepherd Gypsy, allows us to see what it is to be meaningfully hu-

man. Not surprisingly, being meaningfully human is enriched through relationships with animals. Heidegger or Agamben could have said that, too. The question is, specifically, why? What do animals show us and we them? What do we share? How is life enriched?

The center of Gaita's book is several chapters and a recurring theme focusing on our mortality and the way we share it, and don't share it, with animals. The book opens with stories of his father's cockatoo and dog. Both were integrated into the life of the household and communicated a great deal, in their own manner, with the Gaitas. When the dog died, Raimond's father buried him, and on the house-side of the fence. Many years later, Gaita found himself at a loss about how much money to pay to keep Gypsy, his German shepherd, alive. Since he did, he has watched her grow old, and two central chapters of the book recount this process and, in turn, explore mortality.

Gaita is not a naive romantic. He knows that humans struggle with hunger, disease, and war on any given day. Indeed, I have cited his work on appeals to common humanity, and the book we are currently discussing opens with a discussion of appeals to common humanity as forming our moral sense. Gaita does not think we should love animals over humans, or that there is no difference between human and animals. He is not interested in simplistic moral principles and working out a moral calculus to work them through the "recalcitrant" cases, as Peter Singer constantly does when he realizes, for instance, his theory could require he do away with the mentally retarded to save the great apes.[9] Rather, Gaita wants to explore what Cora Diamond called *the* difference between animal and human life and the analogies out of which we form a richer and more meaningful world with animals and ourselves.

Dogs are not mortal as we are. We do not know exactly what dogs feel or experience about death, but they do not imagine it or let it bring them to despair as humans can. However, they have an intimation of death, and we can feel, with them, the fear of death, as well as the waning of our powers at the end of the day of life. But these differences in abilities does not account for the differentiation we've made between human lives and dogs. Some humans aren't able to perform much in the way of extended imagination toward death, but we still treat them as humans. Gaita understands, following Diamond, that the question of marking the difference between humans and animals is not *derived* from any special properties. Rather, it is something in our form of life: a way we

bring up our young and treat each other, formed out of so many factors we could not responsibly enumerate them. For instance, you can look into a dog's eye and share happiness, but not at all in the way you do with a human when, vulnerable, a million unsaid messages shoot back and forth between your look and the millions of gradations possible within it. The thing is, though, that contra the animal liberationists, noting this difference in kind between humans and animals is not speciesist. Rather, *failing* to note it can create a moral mess and a failure to appreciate what and how we do share with animals.

Death for us is not death for the dog. To deny that is to be oblivious to meaning. Dogs howl at the death of their fellows, and they can miss each other and people terribly. But they do not revisit the shrines of their ancestors, or bring flowers to their parents' grave three decades after their deaths. There is nothing speciesist in acknowledging such facts. Moreover, doing so allows you to see clearly what you can share with dogs, or animals, and that acknowledgement is the beginning of a lucid imagination that does not mislead people into fantasy, but is a clear eye into the meaning life holds during our fragile time on Earth.

Moreover, what we share with animals does not have to be symmetrical. We can experience an indignity for them they might not experience, and doing so is both humane and respectful of *them*. One of Gaita's recurring cases is of not wanting to do something to an animal that he thinks would be undignified. He speaks of how he should never have thought to hit his neighborhood stray cat with a shovel to put it out of its misery when it was mortally wounded, but that killing it another way would be better. He cites a passage from J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, in which a protagonist incinerates the corpses of animals killed at the pound, so that the incinerator workers won't hammer their rigor-mortis-stiff legs into pieces to roll easily into the incinerator.[10] We can have a relation to animals in which our world would not include disfiguring them and treating them with such callousness. They might not care at all—but that is not the issue. *Because* we can form a relation with them, because that relation is meaningful, we can treat them in some respects as we would want to be treated and *care* for them as fellows on this "death-bound journey." [11] In fact, to *not* think in terms of how we might do so shows a shallowness of humanity, out of which our culture seems possessed.

Indeed, how could we, of any imagination, accept factory farming, should we only have to stop and think about it in the face of the actual farms? The issue is not

whether we need the farms, nor whether they could be rationalized for their usefulness, nor whether the animals feel pain when drugged out of their minds. The issue is whether what we do to them is a meaningful and rich relation flowing from our sense of our own humanity. If it is, then we have a very debased sense of humanity, self-esteem lower than the low. For consider: in a factory chicken farm, we chop off their faces, just to name one part of the operation, which as people know has multiple cruelties. No human who stopped and thought about what it is to be released for a short while into this life, spreading the air with your own physical and animal mystery as you dust your wings and sing, no human would think chopping off your face is a meaningful expression of life on Earth. The act is blunt and meaningless, and even factory farmers justify it being so.

Gaita's point, and Agamben's, is that we do not *have* to live that way and that, out of a desire to live meaningfully, we *should* not. We can relate to animals so much we mourn for them or we can simply care that they have a fair chance in life even when, eventually, we kill them. In any case, relating to animals opens up our lives and makes them more meaningful, because it deepens our reverence for life. Reverence for life, however, is not something we must have, in the manner of moral requirement generated by a moral theory.[12] Rather, it is something we can have, should have with each other, and would do well to have with animals and even beyond. The issue here is not what we must do, but what we *lose* when we let ourselves live callous lives.

To begin with, we lose something beautiful and exhilarating, something which Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist of J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, knew well.[13] We lose participating in this world of life in such a way that we experience the meaning of being. The animals around us, they are full of life and mysterious possibilities we ignore at our own loss. Humanity is not measured by a simple moral rule, but by the measure that Heraclitus said is so deep, there is no account. Both Agamben and Gaita are not naive. They know we use animals, and they do, too. But for them, as it should be for us, that use is a question, and what is so damning about our world is how it is not even a question.

#### Notes

[1]. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and the Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); *Means without End* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); *Remnants*

*of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2000 [Vol. 1], 2002 [Vol. 2]).

[2]. See Richard Bernstein's article on this note, "Heidegger's Silence: *Ethos* and Technology" in *The New Constellation: Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Post-Modernity* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1992).

[3]. Saying this does not excuse Heidegger, but helps explain a way to make sense of how a thinker with his concern for meaning could become a tool of the Nazi party. See Emmanuel Levinas's remarks on his teacher and on how he admired his early work while refusing to forgive him for his later deeds: Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1991).

[4]. Raimond Gaita, *Romulus, My Father* (New York: Headline Books, 1999).

[5]. Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[6]. Cora Diamond, "Eating Meat and Eating People," in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1995).

[7]. See my "Analogical Extension and Analogical Implication in Environmental Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 8 (Fall-Winter 2001): pp. 149-158; or "A Sense of Ecological Humanity," *Social Philosophy Today* 18 (2003).

[8]. Diamond's idea is the seed for a book I am writing now, *Ecological Humanity* (to be published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2005 or 2006). Her idea, despite its obscurity, is very rich, I feel.

[9]. A position that arises quickly when teaching Singer's *Animal Liberation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002, p. 18); cf. Singer's acknowledgement that a brain-disabled human is not worth as much as a higher-functioning animal.

[10]. J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (New York: Viking Press, 1999).

[11]. Cora Diamond, "How Many Legs?" in Raimond Gaita, ed., *Value and Understanding: Essays for Peter Winch* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 149-178.

[12]. As in Paul Taylor's *Respect for Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[13]. J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Prince-

ton: Princeton University Press, 2001). This novella is Viking Press, 2004).  
now part of his latest book, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York:

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