To make a long story short, there are quite a few animals in the history of philosophy. Aristotle, for one, but also bees and wolves and sheep. *Animals: A History* offers an extended and, at times, pointed overview of the varying ways that philosophers and thinkers of various sorts (although mostly philosophers) thought about what nonhuman animals are, what humans are, and what the differences between us mean.

A broad theme emerges in the book’s first half, dedicated to philosophy and animals up to the last few centuries. Although many wondered what nonhuman animals are, and some even argued for treating them well, few defended doing so on the basis of their intrinsic worth. Porphyry, very notably, defended abstinence from eating animals, but his arguments mostly drew on the negative impacts of such behavior on human beings like himself. Much of the book is also dedicated to analyzing, and in places complicating, the idea of a fundamental difference or “gulf” between the human and nonhuman. Although European thinkers until very recently tended to agree that humans were differentiated by their capacity for reason, the book’s contributors show that many were still very interested in what other creatures could do well and, sometimes, better than humans. As *Animals* moves toward the present, the idea of any fundamental difference became complicated by the concept of “drives,” “welfare,” and nonhuman “rights.” (The book’s title, one could note, therefore reflects a tension: humans are animals, most agree, so what we really mean here is “Nonhuman Animals: A History”; nevertheless, some authors still use “animal” and “human” as opposed categories.)

Broadly, *Animals* is divided into longer chapters and shorter “reflections,” some of which one wishes were expanded into chapters. I quite enjoyed, for instance, a short piece on Aesop’s fables. An array of authors are brought in to cover the collection’s extensive material, which makes for quite a wide-ranging text as well a few missed opportunities: the chapter on animals in Islamic thought and a subsequent chapter on animals in medieval European thinking, for instance, cover
parallel ground and leave the reader hungry for more explicit cross-comparison. At times, the length differences make for an inconsistent read: a reflection on Chinese fish paintings takes only a few pages, while dozens are dedicated to the place of animals in Indian thought. The reflections are also frontloaded, focused on cultural analysis up to the medieval period, and largely vanish by the book’s end.

Although it is not universally the case, much of the collection’s explicit consideration of the role and place of animals in non-Western philosophy is relegated to the shorter reflections, which can’t avoid suggesting that these are mostly diversions from the main story: Aristotle’s long and complicated influence on our thinking about animals. The role of animals in African philosophy is given only a short reflection, for example, and one that is mostly focused on interpreting an animal mask rather than introducing readers to a broader philosophical tradition. Is there substantive African or Chinese philosophy about the human/non-human question? One assumes yes but can say little about it after finishing the book.

*Animals: A History* is by and large a philosophical history, and to a substantial degree an Anglo-European philosophical history. Its focus is on ancient Greek thought and its legacy as well as the impact of some great later European thinkers: Descartes, of course, as well as Kant and others. The aim of the book, and the Oxford Philosophical Concepts (OPC) series it is a part of, is not simply to offer an overview but to critically investigate a philosophical concept. It is successful in doing so, even as some chapters are more argumentative and interventional than others. But there are still noticeable absences. Engagement with the contemporary continental tradition of thinking about nonhuman animals, including the work of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, and others, is absent. How relevant the book’s chapters are for historians, another goal of the OPC series, is less certain, but as an accessibly written text, I think it will be useful for teaching. The chapters on Descartes and Kant, for example, are likely to complicate a student’s expectations, just as they will support our long-standing tendency to reflect on what it really means to be human.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at [https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment](https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment)


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