

Tønnessen, Armstrong Oma & Rattasepp, "Thinking about Animals in the Age of the Anthropocene"

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Book Review

Tønnessen, Morten, Kristin Armstrong Oma, and Silver Rattasepp, eds. *Thinking about Animals in the Age of the Anthropocene*. Lexington Books, 2016.

What is the role and place of animals in the Anthropocene, the epoch in which humans took the leading role in changing the Earth? *Thinking about Animals in the Age of the Anthropocene* brings together a dozen inspiring contributions written by a variety of scholars, all who took part in the 2015 conference, “Animals in the Anthropocene: Human-animal relations in a changing semiosphere,” that resulted in this edited volume. Instead of solely focusing on the species after which the Anthropocene was named, the articles collected carefully examine the interspecies entanglements that are crucial in understanding the co-created world we inhabit.

In their introduction, archaeologist Kristin Armstrong Oma and philosopher Morten Tønnessen provide the reader with a vivid overview of the ongoing Anthropocene debate and its most important critiques. As one might expect from a book on the Anthropocene, the authors also chose their own starting point for the epoch: the Neolithic Revolution. After all, humans have been purposefully changing the lifeworlds and conditions of animals through domestication and modification of the Earth’s flora and fauna for 20.000 years. Although at first the proposed starting point appears a little arbitrary, it undeniably suits the cause of the authors and starts to make ever more sense when scrolling through the volume. Because if we understand the Anthropocene as a result of the agricultural revolution, our understanding of the human epoch “must be rooted in an acknowledgment that it is not solely a human enterprise.” That is to say, we need not forget about the animals with whom we co-created the Anthropocene in an interspecies entanglement.

In the first section of the book, titled “Beyond Human Eyes”, Susan M. Rustick sets the tone by arguing that we have trapped ourselves in a narcissistic dualistic frame of thought by naming the current epoch after ourselves thus putting the human on a pedestal and hence retaining the modernist idea that all other life is mere background scenery. Within this dualistic framework, it is simply impossible to come up with “an appropriate ethical response grounded in compassion and a recognition of our mutual interdependence with all of life.”

Therefore Rustick proposes some alternatives to dualistic thinking in order to overcome the flawed designation of the human as the most exceptional being in the world. These alternatives range from indigenous spiritual perspectives to Jainism and Deep Ecology. What all of these non-dualistic worldviews have in common is their egalitarian approach to life on Earth. Rustick argues that we should not underestimate the power of language here: the European semiotic system is imbued with the concepts of human-nature dualism – think only of the objectification of nonhumans (in general, but especially in agricultural language). The Anthropocene is only one

more concept derived from a semiotic system that assumes hegemony over nonhuman life. This narcissistic semiotic system, resembled by the Anthropocene concept, holds us hostage in such a way that “we do not know what we do not know because we do not read the signs.” We only see ourselves reflected in the world around us, while we need to pull ourselves away from our reflection to overcome this fundamental problem. In the subsequent contribution, Louise Wrestling warns us, in a more moderate voice, that this pulling away should be done very carefully so that we relearn to inhabit the vast web of ecological relations in a way that both “moves far beyond the narrow western philosophical discourses” and is ethically sensible towards the animal others.

In the section “Phenomenology in the Anthropocene”, Eva Meijer delves deeper into the role that language can play in the objectives proposed by the previous authors. She critically engages with what she calls the anthropocentric view of language in order to uncover a language fit for the interspecies world beyond the human world of the Anthropocene. Usually, that is, in the Western philosophical tradition, language is understood as an endeavor defining the human; speech is what separates us from animals. In response to the more recent challenges of human exceptionalism, Meijer suggests understanding animal languages through Wittgensteinian language-games: uncommon and open-ended uses of linguistics and non-linguistics. This way, one is forced to indiscriminately recognize the different types of human-animal language-games that are put to practice. Although Wittgenstein might not be the most accessible philosopher, Meijer illuminates the theory with a variety of very down-to-earth examples of language-games between humans and, for example, dogs. Overall, *Thinking about Animals in the Age of the Anthropocene* is characterized by such pleasant shifts from dense academic theory to vibrant and comprehensible examples clarifying the point of the matter.

From dogs to wolves then. Environmental philosopher Martin Drenthen kicks off the section “Beast No More” with a thought-provoking article on how the resurgence of wildlife in the humanly-altered European landscape confronts us with the fact that “we humans are not the only agents in the world of the Anthropocene[.]” Drenthen directs attention to the hybrid landscapes that are both the result of the cultivation of lands and domestication of animals and of rewilding efforts and species management. In these landscapes, “wild and tame get intertwined” thus troubling the traditional distinction between culture and nature. Hybrid landscapes, Drenthen argues, change human-animal relationships. To come to a profound understanding of this, he opts for an ecosemiotic approach to landscape change – after all, as soon as the human and animal worlds become entangled in hybrid landscapes, so do their spheres of significance. This approach should be complemented by an interpretative hermeneutic one. For this, Drenthen appeals to Paul Ricoeur’s theory of understanding text; according to which, the understanding and explanation (of a text) implies an intertwining of both distantiation and appropriation. Even though a landscape is not a text, this theory can be helpful

to grasp – or “read” – its meaning. That is to say, to understand the meaning of a landscape, we need to appropriate the place that is “out there”. Every now and then, Drenthen continues, our understanding of a landscape is breached; for example, by the recent resurgence of wolves in the Western European landscape. In a careful application of his theoretical framework, Drenthen analyzes how the arrival of the wolf “challenge[s] existing notions both of the specific cultural nature of the Dutch landscape and of what it means to live in a cultural landscape[,]” but also calls attention to new understandings of interspecies relationality.

Another fascinating change of perspective in thinking about animals is proposed by the sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynsky in the final section of the book, optimistically called “New Beginnings”. Instead of focusing on the meaning of animals for the human, Szerszynsky asks what the animal means for the planet. By introducing the equivocal term metazoic, referring to the state of being a multicellular animal as well as to the current eon in Earth history, he directs attention to the importance of the animal in planetary evolution. Szerszynsky convincingly shows that, viewed from an Earth system perspective, thinking about animals is of the utmost importance if we want to understand the planetary changes we are now going through. Texts like these make one wonder why there is relatively little attention for the subject treated in this pioneering volume, which also includes contributions by Sebastjan Vörös and Peter Gaitsch, Annabelle Dufourcq, Almo Farina, Carlo Brentari, Katharine Dow, Mateusz Tokarski, and Gisella Kaplan.

Without being alarmist, *Thinking about Animals in the Age of the Anthropocene* successfully advocates the need to inquire beyond human ways of understanding the world we inhabit, for this world largely depends on the animals and interspecies collaborations that are expounded in this cogent and convincing collection. Although published in 2016, the articles brought together by Tønnessen, Armstrong Oma, and Silver Rattasepp exhibit a profound and interdisciplinary array of engaged research that seems to be becoming more relevant by the day. This is the kind of interdisciplinary endeavor we need to make sense of the world of the Anthropocene.

Dennis Hamer