

**Gary Steiner.** *Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism.* Columbia University Press 2013. 312 pp. \$95.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780231153423); \$32.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780231153430).

Steiner's book makes an inroad toward elaborating a naturalistic, non-reductive basis for human and non-human kinship, and for the normative obligations that only humans may have to other animals. It issues a striking appeal to reconsider the broad category of animal life and it lays the groundwork for an unprecedented ethical procedure. In so doing, Steiner appraises not only postmodernism, but broader approaches to ethics and to political liberalism that warrant human decision-making in a way that circumvents binding resolutions about our obligations to animals.

The infamous obscurity of postmodernism factors in its dismissal in many philosophy departments, as well as its near-absence in the most widely discussed works of ethical theory over the last two decades. Certain aspects of Steiner's identification of the prevarications of postmodernism will be familiar to those who read across philosophical traditions, even within the period usually called *postmodern*. Steiner argues that critical theories in a score of registers share a blindspot, even a noticeably bad conscience as regards their (non-)treatment of animals. One of Steiner's representative cases is launched with Derrida's confession 'I am vegetarian in my soul'; his assertion that the killing of animals by humans is a 'monstrosity,' coupled with Derrida's refusal—in the works devoted to deconstructing the boundary between human and non-human life—to act upon his consideration of animals by authorizing vegetarianism anywhere but in his metaphorical soul. Steiner does not use Derrida merely to pose the old saw about why we fail to act on our ethical realizations; he pivots on Derrida's case to distinguish something rotten at the crux of later modern thought.

Steiner's postmoderns work to topple the metaphysical subject, but they suppose that its fall crushes any viable notion of human agency. Steiner pinpoints the limit at which anti-metaphysics trades its critique of reason for a paralyzing relativism. He identifies just why thinkers celebrated for their political commitments and revelations of personal ethical struggle do not endorse a systematic account of agency to justify their stand against domination. Postmodern theory lures us with an implicitly moral standard that it is too skittish to satisfy; it stops forever short of developing a regulative measure for justification and progressive clarification. Its major thinkers become practically 'impotent'; they infinitely 'postpone meaning and action,' dramatizing Abraham's choice in the moment that God commands filicide as the prototype for every ethical decision.

However, Steiner also finds key features of postmodernism requisite for conceiving of a human *nous* able to orient and warrant practical action, while sustaining the respect we owe beings who cannot petition for the same intellectual measure. As he moves to analyze contemporary handlings of cosmopolitanism, of environmental philosophy, and of different approaches to liberal political theory, Steiner maintains that these approaches suffer, too, from a slide into either relativism or boorish dogmatism, and moreover that they lack precisely the resource that ought to be seized from the postmodern course. Steiner returns to Rawls's statement that a robust conception of obligation toward animals would presuppose 'a theory of the natural order and our place in it'; he then begins to explore the very theory Rawls avoids, with elements from Porphyry and the Neoplatonic and Stoic traditions, foremost the notions of *universal persona* and of *cosmic justice*. Steiner builds these into his own 'Nonanthropocentric Cosmopolitanism' in the final chapters. En route, Steiner presents a devastating appraisal of the jurist Richard Posner and of related approaches to animal rights which stem from the 'deep ecology' tradition. Steiner appropriates appreciatively from a number of better-equipped initiatives in recent pluralistic, cosmopolitan theory, including in the works of Kwame Anthony Appiah, Seyla Benhabib, and Richard J. Bernstein.

Even so, Steiner's ultimate goal is distinctive. He rejects every liberal theory in which our decision about how to treat animals is understood to be part of a comprehensive doctrine, because, he shows, inevitably these will fail to provide a true (a nonanthropocentric) animal ethics. He rejects as well any account of moral universality that entails the possible consensus of linguistic beings. Because of its privileging of linguistic reason and consensus, he rejects both dialogic and subaltern cosmopolitanism. Steiner returns to postmodernism primarily for the initially Heideggerian portrayal of *letting be* and of *dwelling*. Postmoderns are so good at enumerating the suffering of others, Steiner suggests, because they recognize the irreducibility of Otherness and the demand to do others justice by letting them *be* other. Yet *letting be* is wrongly conceived where it serves as the excuse for inaction. A working theory of justice able to incorporate animal ethics must hold to the non-identity elaborated in the postmodern tradition, but it must also take up the activity of *dwelling* as a way of making sense, and of making space for oneself and for others, through intentional appropriation. Steiner proposes that the care given to Otherness in the postmodern tradition can be secured by a coordination of regulative ideals—open to discourse and reasoning, but willing to be ethically responsible to others who, even in principle, will not participate in the conversation. He indicates that a fuller account of 'natural order' and animal kinship will entail the treatment of affects and emotions, and signals the outline of such an analysis.

The great strength of this book, I find, stems from its capable *wedding* of the critical, Kantian notion of regulative ideality in a tradition of works leading through contemporary political liberalism, *with* the framework for an account of natural kinship that avoids the naturalistic fallacies rampant in recent environmental philosophy, as well as *with* the postmodern ethos devoted to alterity, to dwelling (as intentional, principle-guided occupation), and to letting (others) be. Now I wish to mark two disconnections in the overall comprehensiveness of the argument—neither of which derails it. My first qualm has to do with the near-absence of Peter Singer's work from Steiner's considerations. This is not relevant simply because no living thinker has done more to secure animal welfare, but because of the way it speaks to a common discomfort with utilitarian approaches to ethics in general and to Singer's early defense of preference utilitarianism in particular. Most importantly for Steiner, Singer makes effective use of the *principle of equal consideration* which Steiner works to articulate (as *moral equivalence*), and which he too links to sentience. Steiner stands against the trajectory of that principle in Singer's practical ethics, but he does not attempt to supersede it, nor does he engage the notion of *personhood* which Singer draws into preference considerations. It seems to me that granting thinkers such as Porphyry the leeway to judge their ethical appeals relevant in different measures to different sorts of people, and granting as well 'room for discretion' in pursuing the vegan imperative, rings as inconsistent with the ready dismissal of Singer for countenancing any discussion of humane animal slaughtering in the meat industry.

Disdain for utilitarianism begins with Nietzsche, as least for avowedly postmodern or Continental philosophy, and Steiner credits Nietzsche with inscribing into postmodernism the ambivalence that comes to characterize it. Yet what is missing is an appreciation of the charged possibilities also within Nietzsche, in which, for example, the upsetting of metaphysical truth comes together with the investigation of moral hypocrisy and of our buttressing of the fantasies that reassure us, in the form of intellectual systems and social institutions. As with Singer, the issue here is not just that Nietzsche looms largely as an alternative to Steiner's proposals, but that Nietzsche provides initiatives that could be vital for the elaboration of Steiner's position. By the book's closing, Steiner arrives at the possibility of shared experiences of horror as a ground for developing empathy. Although he is careful to broach them in the language of regulative possibilities, Steiner's suggestions about evoking empathy skirt the issue of false consciousness, which he began to examine in the book's middle

chapters. Steiner is right not to expect Nietzsche's assistance in calling for empathy, but the Nietzsche who rejects utilitarianism because of its inability to celebrate the legislation of value by the willing, desirous sense-maker is one to whom Steiner might return. Similarly, the Nietzsche who forces embodiment into the philosophical conversation, and the Nietzsche who entices us to look at how bad faith animates our allegedly moral loyalties—is one who could be integral to an elaboration of emotion, kinship, and narratives of disavowal.

*Animals and the Limits of Postmodernism* stands alone as a critical appropriation of the post-modern ethos, but its arguments follow progressively from Steiner's *Animals and the Moral Community: Mental Life, Moral Status and Kinship* (2008), and it draws from the resource of *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy* (2005). Readers will find resonance not only between these and Steiner's popular opinion pieces, but also with the divergent possibilities Steiner unearths in *Descartes As A Moral Thinker: Christianity, Technology, Nihilism* (2004). The present book scrutinizes our inaction in the face of suffering, viciousness, and banality, and it designs a remarkable cosmopolitan scheme for sustaining consistent thought and action on behalf of others. Throughout, Steiner proves to be an adroit critic and a dynamic ethical theorist.

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