

The Bioethics of Reciprocity: A Manual

L'animal est l'avenir de l'homme

By Dominique Lestel

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Reviewed by Hollis Taylor

Animals are our future, proposes philosopher and ethologist Dominique Lestel, turning the popular conception of Darwin's Tree of Life on its head. While not denying that human and non-human animals share a common ancestor, Lestel details how minding animals holds currency for us today—and tomorrow—in this volume of practical philosophy. He navigates the contested zone of human/animal interactions, taking snapshots through the lenses of ethology, philosophy, history, epistemology, psychology, and the man on the street.

The book is laid out in four chapters plus two *entr'actes*. In Chapter 1, 'The animal is not a machine', he revisits a theme he fleshed out in earlier works (*Les amis; L'animalité*), where he drew the distinction between the classic representation of the Cartesian animal-machine and an *animal machiné* (which he characterised as a living being that, when mistreated, is compelled to transform itself into an automaton as a coping mechanism). In this latest work, he begins by listing the most common arguments put forward by animal rights opponents:

- Serious people don't care about animals.
- People who love animals don't like people.
- There is something more urgent than saving animals: saving suffering children.
- People who love animals should refuse to eat meat.

Lestel then suggests how to mount a successful defence of animal rights, with the goal of rehabilitating both the image of animals *and* of those who would defend them. He presents this without sentimentality or caricature.

Perhaps no issue within the animal rights movement is more contentious than that of eating animals. It might surprise some to read that Lestel supports meat eating as a natural part of our humanity. The case for vegetarianism is traditionally argued on ecological, health, or moral grounds. Lestel plays devil's

advocate, suggesting that human carnivores also have clout in the campaign for the ethical treatment of captive animals. He feels that by informing ourselves of where our animal products come from, we help to insure that the animal enjoyed maximum wellbeing during its life. However, this is by no means a straightforward task for the consumer—nor is it for the philosopher, as evidenced by the two extracts from upcoming books published in this issue of *AHR*, one of them Lestel's, that highlight the terms of current debate on vegetarianism in more detail.

The *Entr'acte historique* that follows is a summary of key people who have thought about or worked on (and occasionally *with*) animals from the seventeenth century forward. The list inevitably includes Descartes, Pavlov, the behaviourists John Broadus Watson and Frederic Skinner, and the classical ethologists Konrad Lorenz and Nikolaas Tinbergen. Lestel also briefly profiles some lesser-known twentieth century figures that he feels were unjustly rejected, marginalised, or forgotten because they attributed to animals an ability or trait assumed to be the sole province of humans. Those seeking a more in-depth account would do well to refer to Lestel's *Les origines animales de la culture* (2001).

In the next chapter, 'The animal, a favourite partner', Lestel dismisses concepts that have made their way at least subliminally, and however partially, into much human thinking. These concepts include that an animal is a marvelous machine, a small version of a human, a less successful copy of a human, or a species that will eventually evolve into a more human-like life form. Instead, he would elevate their status to that of a human interlocutor, in dialogue with humans, or even in partnership with them (38). He notes that animals suffer and feel pleasure (the latter being more significant than the former in his mind), that they have positive and negative emotions, and that these emotions are potentially recognisable by us. He calls attention to the quotidian examples of animals living in human communities and reviews cases of animals as innovators and creators, and he itemises some of their notable aesthetic activities and inclinations.

In contrasting academic psychology with its popular counterpart both in this chapter and the *entr'acte* that follows, Lestel makes a case for common sense and the average person's assessment of animal abilities, which he finds more generous and credible than, and almost entirely incompatible with, that of the scientist. He credits the American philosopher and essayist Paul Shepard (1925-1996) for innovative thinking about the place animals occupy in our lives, including how they stimulate and enrich our imagination. Both authors have written about how animals help us to navigate the very essence of our humanity, including areas like development and communication.

At the centre of *Entr'acte épistémologique* is man, quite literally. In his analysis of anthropomorphism, Lestel argues that it is not so much a methodological error

as it is an artefact of human thought; he believes that much ‘anthropomorphism’ could be more accurately described as ‘anthropocentrism’. While many assume that we long ago left our condition of animality, Darwin wrote that ‘the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind’ (105). Our evolutionary continuity and alignment with animals is an abiding theme for Lestel.

He catalogues the unwritten rules for university ethologists, whose taboo areas of research include:

- Attributing sentiments to animals.
- Giving any credence to anecdotes about animals.
- Having an emotional relationship with an animal that you are studying.

Lestel himself has spent time in the field observing orangutans. Thus, when he writes, ‘To speak of anthropomorphism with distaste signifies on the one hand that it is possible and pertinent to describe an animal as if it had no rapport with a human, and on the other hand that it is possible to make an “objective” representation of it totally independent of the observer who is working it out’ (88), he speaks from practice and not just in theory.

In Chapter 3, ‘The infinite debt’, the discussion centres on the manifold benefits brought to humans by animals, from the economic and ecological to the ethical, spiritual, pedagogical and intellectual. Such a debt stretches back into pre-history and forward into time, reminding us that both the book’s title and its reverse have purchase. His claim that the human spirit needs the animal to become and remain human (111–112) echoes Rose’s ethnography, *Dingo Makes Us Human*.

In his final chapter, ‘The bioethics of reciprocity’, he ranges far and wide, including a return to themes introduced in previous chapters. He begins with biosemiotics and Uexküll’s *Umwelt* theory, and then moves on to a critique of some of ethology’s most problematic issues—animal torture, vivisection, experimentation, and other mistreatment. He interrogates field observation versus laboratory experimentation—or, more to the point, the field observer versus the laboratory experimenter. The tension between engagement and disengagement, and which posture makes the better researcher, is a subject over which much ink has been spilt. The former implies a bodily knowledge, which Lestel contrasts to the abstract knowledge of the experimenter, who forgets that he has a body (158). The book concludes with a meditation on the concept of reciprocity, suggesting that, at its richest, it goes far beyond a simple exchange. Reciprocity has the potential to foster interconnectivity, interdependence, and obligation; reciprocity invokes kinship.

One of Lestel’s gifts is the ability to move (and move us) effortlessly between matters of continental philosophy and the everyday. And yet, while he excels

at synthesis, his writing is peppered with provocative contrarian notions. In this concise manual, and indeed throughout his oeuvre, Lestel uses animals as an entry point into a compelling examination of Western thought and human development through the ages. To date, the book is only available in French. The writing is clear and the vocabulary straightforward—those with intermediate French skills should be able to navigate its pages. Lestel's ordinary, accessible, non-technical language underlines animals as acting subjects (Crist 2), rather than calling upon the distance of a technical idiom that tends to portray animals as objects. In eschewing the specialised for the commonsense, Lestel's linguistic medium mirrors his message.

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