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# Taking Animals Seriously: Interpreting and Institutionalizing Human-Animal Relations in Modern Democracies

Thomas Saretzki\*

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**Abstract:** »Tiere ernstgenommen: Interpretation und Institutionalisierung von Mensch-Tier-Beziehungen in modernen Demokratien«. *Zoopolis* by Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2011) is a very important contribution in the process of rethinking our relationship with animals. But is their proposal to conceptualize animals as co-citizens (in the case of domesticated animals) or as sovereign communities (in the case of wild animals) appropriate and persuasive with regard to the task of restructuring the theoretical foundations and the practical perspectives for transforming human-animal relations in modern democracies? In the face of the epistemological and methodological problems of interpreting animals and their behavior, this contribution argues that we are not on the right track if we try to take animals seriously by interpreting the relationship between them and us without realizing that it will not be possible to communicate with them on a level that can capture the political dimensions of that relationship. While expanding our moral imagination to see animals in new ways may induce new commitments and yield new allies for the animal advocacy movement, the next step required would be to proceed from an extended moral imaginary towards a political theory of human-animal relations which includes perspectives on institutionalization that can come to terms with the problems of moral advocacy in a democracy.

**Keywords:** Animals, human-animal relations, *Zoopolis*, anthropomorphism, interpretation, advocacy, institutionalization, citizenship, democracy.

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## 1. Introduction

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As new information on the mistreatment of animals is circulating in the media, more and more people are concerned about the way animals are used in industrialized countries. The call for changes in established practices is looming large. In media discourses and political arenas, the issues are often framed as questions of responsible lifestyles or consumer patterns, especially with regard

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to what we should or should not eat. The growing significance of food politics coincides with an uprising of animal advocacy. At the same time, animal advocacy is confronted with questions concerning the (re-)definition of its agenda and its self-understanding. Is an improvement of existing animal welfare policies enough? Should the traditional critique of animal exploitation be supplemented or even replaced by a critique of animal enslavement? And if so, is it possible to conceive of new political forms of “animal liberation” without falling into the snares of militant activism? At least those who become aware of the intensity and extent of animal mistreatment in industrial societies begin to raise and seriously consider fundamental questions that go beyond animal welfare. They wonder about what our duties vis-à-vis animals really are, whether or not these traditionally accepted duties have to be redefined in light of new developments, and how such a transformation of our relationship with animals might be brought about.

*Zoopolis* by Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka (2011) is a timely and very important contribution in the ongoing process of rethinking our relationship with animals. While this involves many issues, in this contribution I am going to focus on conceptual concerns and ask: Is Donaldson’s and Kymlicka’s proposal to conceptualize animals as co-citizens (in the case of domesticated animals) or as sovereign communities (in the case of wild animals) appropriate and persuasive with regard to the task of restructuring the theoretical foundations and the practical perspectives for transforming human-animal relations in modern democracies?

In my contribution, I do not want to raise questions concerning the normative premise that humans have moral duties or should follow normative principles in their political actions with regard to human-animal relations (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 4). However, I do want to problematize the *theoretical premises* and *consequences* of their proposal to view animals as co-citizens or to conceptualize communities of wild animals as sovereign. For the sake of discussion, I will subsume these problematizations under two headings and will formulate them as two basic questions: a critical question on *interpretation* and a practical question on *institutionalization*.

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## 2. Interpreting Animals, Their Behavior and Their Relation to Humans: Whose Perspective, Whose Concepts?

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Many passages in Donaldson’s and Kymlicka’s (2011) chapters on domesticated or wild animals remind me of my experiences in the village I grew up in. I lived in close contact with the variety of animals one can imagine as being part of the good old farms with woods and pastures before the wave of agriculture’s intensified industrialization. While most interactions with animals as a little boy were friendly and pleasant, some were not. Trying to make sense of these

mixed experiences, I asked my grandma who was both a farmer's daughter and also another farmer's widow. She told me:

If you did not get along well with some animals even if you wanted to be kind to them, it doesn't have to be the case that they dislike you or even tried to hurt you. It might have been that you just did not understand each other properly. Listen, here's the lesson that you should not forget when you meet animals: *Don't assume that they see the world as we do!* Always remember: they have their own perception and rules of behavior and their own ideas of how the world is and should be working! And even if we can watch them over a longer period of time and try to understand them, we can never be sure that they understood us properly or that we understood them properly, since we and they cannot talk to each other in order to reach an agreement that we and they understand in the same way.

Why am I recalling this story that I am sure a lot of people have experienced in one way or another in their interaction with animals? Because I think that in spite of its familiar simplicity, grandma's lesson still points to a fundamental problem of thinking about human-animal relations: we cannot presume that they see the world as we do. Since we cannot talk to them, we cannot be sure that we reach a common understanding with them, especially when it comes to complex social regulations. Hence I would argue that this basic *problem of intersubjectivity* between humans and animals reappears in any kind of political theory that applies concepts derived from a human polity (such as citizenship or sovereignty) to animals and their forms of social behavior. The human-animal relationship is an *asymmetric relation*, at least as far as communication beyond the level of dyads between individual humans and individual animals is concerned. When we reach the level of politics, it is *we* who interpret the relationship. They cannot tell us what they want from the other animals or from us in political terms. When we reach complex levels of social interaction it all comes down to us.

Let me take the question of the possibility and the limits of interpretation and mutual understanding regarding political concepts one step further to the domain of *scientific research* on animals. Knowledge from this domain is often simply presented as "objective" scientific evidence about the world of animal life as it is. Looking more closely, however, we are not only confronted with different theories that biologists have formulated to explain animal behavior. If we try to understand how biologists produce knowledge about animal behavior and reflect on the methodology of field studies in behavioral biology, we learn that these researchers have to come up with protocols about their observations in the field in the first place. Researchers have to translate what they have observed with their senses into descriptions in the form of basic statements. In order to communicate with other members of research communities they have to use language. Thinking about human-animal relations more broadly, we have to realize that not only in everyday communication, but also in biological research, it is us again: *we use our language* to describe what *they* (the animals)

are doing. Anybody who has ever worked in that field will soon become aware that it is really problematic to use the language we are familiar with from describing and interpreting human behavior for animals. If we describe what we have seen by putting ourselves in their shoes, we have to realize that such descriptions presuppose that animals actually perceive and experience the world the way we do. A description that implicitly takes their perspective, but uses our language is based on an imagined reciprocity, if not on pure speculation, since we cannot ascertain and, therefore, should not presuppose that their ways of seeing and experiencing the world are like ours. This fundamental problem of studying and interpreting animal behavior becomes ever more obvious if we climb down the ladder of animal orders from higher vertebrates such as mammals, birds and reptiles to insects, mollusks and other so-called “lower” species which still belong to what we call the animal kingdom.

It has a history in theology and its philosophical critique, yet the classical term used by reflective ethologists and philosophers of science for critical reflection about this basic epistemological and methodological problem in interpreting animals and their behavior is “*anthropomorphism*” – describing and conceptualizing other entities like god or organisms in the natural world in a language that was developed with reference to human beings and that carries meaning which makes sense with regard to human thinking and conduct. Another word for such an epistemologically and methodologically unreflective approach is “humanizing” concepts of animal life, i.e. conceptualizing their behavior as if they were like us, as if they were humans.

So here is my *critical question*: If we want to take animals seriously, is it an appropriate way to conceptualize (a) their world and their way of living or (b) the relationship between their world and ours in terms such as citizenship or sovereignty – terms that *we* invented and keep on using to interpret complex social relationships between humans at the same time? Is it not that an interpretation that is based on a *projection* of concepts that have meaning for our ways of social interaction and complex organization onto the world of animals or even ecological communities – communities that embrace multi-species relationships, some of them cooperative, some of them not? If we continue on this line of interpretation, does not the next step lead us to some kind of *conceptual paternalism* with normative implications that are hard to avoid? In the end we could find ourselves in a situation that might be familiar from interactions with other formerly “dependent” communities that we “liberated” or that we urged to “liberate” themselves by following our concepts of constituting a way of living.

We cannot know whether they would accept these concepts as a valid interpretation of the way their communities are organized since we cannot talk to them about these conceptual questions and *thus cannot ascertain* whether or not this would be appropriate to their understanding. Does this not suggest that we should be more cautious before we start projecting our concepts on their communities and try to be as unassuming as we can when interpreting their

behavior and social organization? And if we can only talk about them among ourselves, i.e. to other humans, *who* is it that we are really trying to address when we transfer our contestable normative concepts of our way of living and self-organization to their behavior and their communities?

Concepts like citizenship or sovereignty are *our* concepts for *our* way of living. We can reinterpret and extend them for example in the direction of an animal friendly, animal respecting or even *animal caring concept of citizenship for us*, expressing *our identities* as citizens of our political communities. But if we take animals seriously, we cannot project our self-understanding on them and then proceed in a *counterfactual “as if mode,”* i.e. thinking of them and interacting with them as if they behaved or organized themselves according to our concept of citizenship.

In other words, I would argue that interpreting their way of living in terms of our political concepts is misleading. And if we did, it would leave us with basic conceptual *ambiguities*. We would end up with two fundamentally different concepts of citizenship: one concept of citizenship for us and one concept of citizenship for them. And we would find the same ambiguity with the concept of sovereignty. Would such ambiguity help in terms of theory or sorting out the issues and options with regard to rethinking the human-animal relationship?

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### 3. Moral Imagination and Political Theory: Legitimizing Animal Advocacy or Institutionalizing Human-Animal Relationships?

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Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, 24) characterize the second part of *Zoopolis* entitled “applications” as a “journey,” as a “sketching out of a more positive vision of human-animal relations.”

It is an exercise in expanding the moral imagination to see animals not solely as vulnerable and suffering individuals but also as neighbors, friends, co-citizens, and members of communities ours and theirs.

No doubt, the story line of their journey captures the feeling and the imagination of a number of people. Many readers (like the author of this comment) who care about animals may spontaneously think: This is how I personally feel about animals living with me or at least next to me, and how I could imagine the future of a good life for mixed communities of animals and humans. Yet, on second thoughts, many of these readers will also realize that if we see animals in this way and if at least that part of our self that cares about living with animals likes to imagine such a positively defined human-animal relationship in the future, then the attractiveness of that vision for us does not necessarily imply that most of our fellow countrymen and women share this feeling for animals or will also be attracted by this “moral imagination.” They may simply see and interpret the

human-animal relationship in a different way and act accordingly. And today, in fact, most of them do. Moreover, our fellow countrymen and -women are also citizens of our existing polities who have the same rights as we do – rights granted and protected by their citizenship status. Finally, in liberal polities, these rights protect their private domain from political interventions and put constraints on our sovereignty as a political community.

In liberal polities, existing *institutions* provide a basic line between the *public* and the *private*. And their existing legal frameworks entail private property rights that clearly locate the right to interpret and define any positive aspect of human-animal relations for most domesticated animals on the private side. Beyond the restraints of existing laws for animal welfare, which every citizen has the duty to respect properly, there are no restrictions. We could imagine animals any way we wanted to. We could see them according to the existing limited or to some kind of expanded “moral imagination” such as the one outlined by Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011, 24) that I would interpret as an ethical vision of their and our good life. And we could or could not treat animals accordingly. Within the existing institutional setting it is up to us, it is *our private decision*. The *animals* themselves simply have to live with whatever we decide. At least most domesticated animals are objects of different interpretations of their good life and of good relationships with their human owners *by their human owners*.

Whether we like it or not, we do not live in “a world that takes seriously the idea that animals and humans can co-exist, interact, and even cooperate on the basis of justice and equality” (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 24). We live in a world in which most humans view their domesticated animals as commodities subject to economic calculations and the rules of private property. In practice, even the fundamental negative animal rights have not been invented by the animals themselves, by some hypothetical human-animal coalition or by some other entity beyond this world. These rights have been invented and to a certain degree implemented by humans as a result of political actions by humans, who – often against the resistance of other humans – acted as animal rights’ *advocates*. Thus, even the invention of animal rights itself is a result of humans acting as advocates on behalf of animals and claiming to represent the best interests of the animals to be protected.

But – as we know from many other fields involving moral issues and moral commitments – the decision to become an advocate for a certain policy with moral implications in and by itself does not justify one’s stance to become the *legitimate public order in a democracy*. Almost all kinds of advocacy are likely to have their adversaries – and the interesting question in terms of reflecting their political dimensions is whether or not and eventually how its reflective practitioners can come up with a political imagination that embraces not only their followers, but also the other members of modern societies who have different visions and concerns.

I would argue that this is where the *political dimension* comes into our discussion about the human-animal relationship (see Ahlhaus and Niesen 2015, in this HSR Forum). To put it in very simple and basic terms: the primary space of the political in this relationship is not between humans and animals. The political space is a *space between humans*. And it is opening up (or closing down) because we humans have different views, normative principles, values and interests in relation to animals and hence about the way we as a democratic society can and should structure or transform this relationship in political terms.

So a *political theory about the human-animal relationship* should not just be concerned about expanding (or reducing) our “moral imagination” to view animals in one way or another. To focus on the expansion of “moral imagination” about the future of human-animal relations would limit political perspectives and turn its practical orientation into something like a moral campaign trying to convince as many fellow citizens as possible that a positive vision such as the communitarian one outlined by Donaldson and Kymlicka is the best concept of the good life both for humans and for animals. Yet such a strategy would not only neglect the fact that in most industrial societies most citizens have different visions of their good life in relation to animals. It would also disregard the fact that most of the existing institutional frameworks of liberal democracies limit the sovereignty of their democratic political institutions vis-à-vis the domain of private decision-making about the fate of animals by defining them as private property. Thus a political theory of human-animal relations should also be concerned with how we communicate in our controversies and interact in our conflicts about these relationships and the legal settings that predefine the matter of these conflicts as public or private. It should offer some ideas about how we can and should deliberate and decide upon issues related to animals and how we can and should institutionalize these processes of deliberation and decision-making about our relationships with them. Since animals cannot speak for themselves, to repeat the truism, their interests and concerns have to be interpreted by humans if they are to be taken into account in the political process at all.

So here is my *practical question*: While our “moral imagination” to see animals in new ways may induce new commitments and attract new allies for the animal advocacy movement, can we expect that this new *moral imaginary* will be accepted, let alone implemented, by all or even a majority of people in modern societies in their daily practices simply because of its attractiveness? While the aim of *Zoopolis* was to supplement traditional animal rights theory, does this expanded “moral imagination” of animal advocates also provide a persuasive exercise in expanding our *political imagination* in terms of a viable and legitimate strategy? Or what would be the next step in proceeding from this extended moral imagination towards a political imagination that can come to terms with the *problems of moral advocacy in a democracy*?



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## 4. Conclusion

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Should we see and treat domesticated animals as co-citizens and wild animals as sovereign? Are citizenship and sovereignty good conceptual starting points for rethinking the human-animal relationship? I am skeptical as to whether or not we are on the right track if we try to take animals seriously by interpreting the relationship between them and us without realizing that most of them are very different from us and that it will not be possible to communicate with them on a level that can capture the political dimensions of that relationship. Thus, my reasoning with regard to the question of *interpretation* leads me to say: No, we should neither interpret animals nor our relationship with them in these terms. But if we think of our relationship with other citizens within democratic communities – and this is where the political dimension comes in – I would say: Yes, citizenship theory and concepts of sovereignty can help to think about issues of *institutionalization* within the human domain. Theories about citizenship are not only about rights and duties. They can also offer orientation on how we interpret ourselves as citizens and how sovereign we want our democratic political institutions to be in relation to private prerogatives when it comes to conceiving and treating animals in one way or another.

The conceptual problem for a *political theory of human-animal relations*, I would argue, is *twofold*: It has to come to terms not only with one, but with two different kinds of relationships: the *relationship between humans and animals* and the *relationship between different groups of humans* who have different views on how to interpret human-animal relations and how to structure and regulate them in the political domain. On the one hand, such a theory would have to work on an *analytical framework* that provides appropriate concepts for the analysis of the political dimensions of the structure, the function, and the dynamics of existing human practices in relation to animals. On the other hand, if it were to be a political theory with practical intent, it would have to explicate and justify a *normative framework* that provides the reference for practical judgements and orientation for political strategies to change existing forms of human-animal relationships in a democratic way.

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