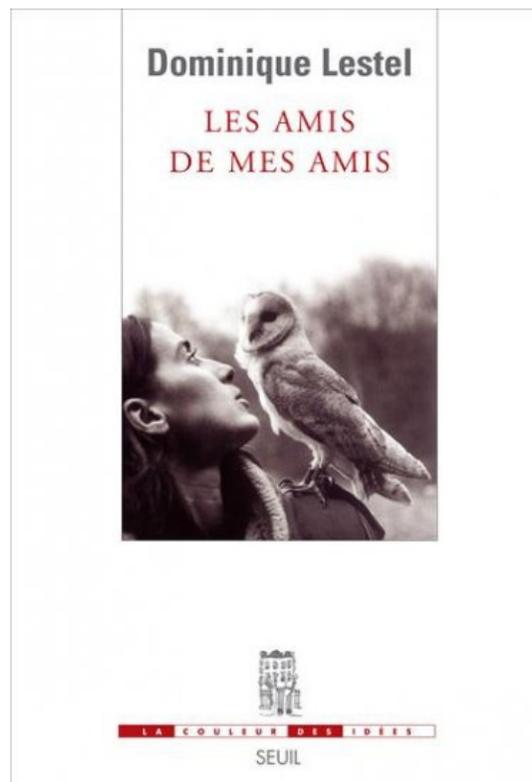


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The Friends of My Friends

Dominique Lestel, *Les Amis de mes amis* (The Friends of my Friends). Paris: Seuil, 2007. 220p. €20.00



Dominique Lestel is a very influential philosopher on animality in France. A founding member of the Department of Cognitive Science of the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and a member of its Department of Philosophy, his research work brings together philosophy and ethology to address the presence of culture in animal societies. After a few other stimulating books¹ addressing great apes' societies and animal-humans relationships, Lestel published *Les Amis de mes amis* in 2007. The book examines friendship between people and animals and promotes a new definition of friendship as physical proximity and attachment. Drawing on ethological literature, novels, and other materials, Lestel describes and analyzes a number of situations where humans and

animals have developed some kind of proximity and friendship in living together, in playing music together, or through other games. Unlike most previous philosophical trends that stress the differences between humans and animals and elaborate human specificities, Lestel argues that there is no point looking for *the* specificity of humans that would distinguish them from animals. Instead, his objective is to elaborate the proximities between humans and animals and to document animals' emotional and cultural lives. Including short chapters with short sections and written in a quite conversational style, *Les Amis de mes amis* is easy to read. It will be of great interest for scholars in environmental humanities, philosophy and ethology, as well as for every person living with animals and interested in our relationships to them. It also reminds us of the concrete and situated nature of our relationships with others, whether they are humans or not.

In the first chapter, Lestel strongly criticizes the influential Cartesian theory of the animal-machine that has contributed significantly to the shaping of French philosophy and conceptions of animals since the 17th century. For him, thinking that feeding an animal is very much like winding a clock is unsatisfactory, counter-intuitive, and nonsensical. Descartes's followers turned animals into machines with very coercive devices; then they called them "machines" and disregarded all other phenomena as anthropomorphic anecdotes. They refused to grant animals feelings, sensations, initiative, and intelligence. They fundamentally and pathologically distrusted life. They also despised people whom Lestel considers true experts on animals, such as hunters and breeders. Moreover, the animal-machine theory is not only about the animals' nature, it is also about human-animal relationships: it justifies animals' enslavement by humans. Lestel denounces mass livestock production and argues that too many animals are sacrificed for the sake of so-called scientific experimentation. Considering animals as machines is both disrespectful — as it leads to humans exploiting animals — and wrong — as it deeply undervalues animals' real qualities, as well as our rich relationships with them.

Little attention has been paid indeed to the fact that animals do not leave people indifferent, and, for example, that people like touching animals. The ethologist Joyce Poole has written about how deeply she was moved when watching the birth of an elephant.² Recognizing that we can understand animals' feelings is not an anthropomorphic delusion; we are indeed able to share emotions with animals, especially with species such as cats, because we share a common history with them.

Lestel suggests that humans might be a particular species in the sense that they are interested in a lot of other different species and can be friends with them.

Asking what friendship is, Lestel cites the work of anthropologist Shirley Strum, who showed that with baboons friendship does not draw on feelings but on reciprocal favors and assistance.³ Ethologists have described favored relationships between animals, including mutual assistance, toileting, sleeping together, and remembering one another. For example, some female grizzly bears raise their young, travel, and feed together. Most academics have denied these relationships the quality of friendship because they do not consider friendship a scientific concept. In an attempt to define human exceptionalism academics have always sought some abstract notion beyond communication, as for instance the notion of cognitive skills. Instead, Lestel argues, we should pay more attention to the practical details of human-animal encounters, such as place and play. For Lestel, sharing strong feelings with an animal is all about getting close to it, holding it back, and sharing objects and space with it. For instance, the artist Jim Nollman developed and tested the notion of inter-species music, where animals participate in the music proposed by the musician.⁴ Today, we conceive of friendship in psychological terms and define it as feeling affection. Lestel wants to return to a pre-psychological approach to friendship, such as the one developed by philosophers from ancient times (Aristotle, Epicurus, Cicero), who conceived of friendship as shared living and shared activities. Lestel defines friendship as a “favored partnership”; it is a “long-lasting attachment including non-utilitarian goals.”

Why do people have more and more pets today? Lestel believes that our relationship to animals has changed greatly in the last century. It has become deeper and more diverse, in proportion to the humans’ metaphysical loneliness. For instance, people develop very strong relationships with parrots as pets. Hence the idea that biodiversity loss, far from being a loss only of useful resources, means a loss of interlocutors. We have a vital need for creatures that are not “things” around us, as Romain Gary showed in his novel *The Roots of Heaven*⁵ addressing the thinking of the forerunners of elephant protection in the 1950s. Animals stimulate human intelligence and emotion because of their irreducible diversity. And that diversity triggers thinking. That is why animals are very important to children, and representations of animals were very frequent in prehistoric times. We should not be afraid of blurring the boundary between people and animals.

Thinking is not essentially human; instead, it emerges from a crucial partnership between humans, animals, and plants. The human capacity for interspecies entanglements is unique. Drawing on the Chinese way of thinking, in which humans do not exist on their own but are constantly “plugged” into other beings and connected to them, Lestel proposes that we do not “make friends,” but rather “create ties.” He argues also that we are not self-contained bodies and minds, but rather a range of self-extensions that include familiar objects, places, animals, friends, and much more.

Lestel maintains that an animal that lives with a human is made into a person, following a process of ontological transmission. The notion of person is not a prerequisite for friendship, it results from friendship. Philosophers promoting ecocentric ethics forget that animals have been a part of families for a long time. Yet we still lack notions and words to understand properly animals and their relationships to humans. We are also unable to grasp properly the sense of funeral behaviors that have been observed in elephants and apes after one of their relatives dies.

Lestel aims to replace the romantic vision of friendship as affection with a topographical vision of friendship as attachment. Being friends means cohabiting and sharing the same territories. With baboons, being a friend means being close in practice, sometimes even simply to sleep or to do nothing special. Is it possible to be friend with a machine? Lestel argues that we can be friends with artifacts as with animals, and that we can develop rich and fulfilling relationships with non-living entities. Loving machines were created in Japan at the end of the 20th century, such as the robot called Tamagotchi. It needed to be fed, washed, and reprimanded, and it was able to grow or, by contrast, to die if it was not sufficiently cared for. And it happened to be a marketing success. This type of machine gives us the opportunity to forge new types of attachment and to enrich our lives with a new type of friendship. In order to understand them properly, we should not seek a clear-cut boundary between the living and the non-living, and we should forget the deceptive opposition between nature and culture.

Finally, in *Les Amis de mes amis* Lestel defends several interlinked theses. First, he argues that our psychological definition of friendship is only a specific case of a broader definition of friendship as “a particular investment at the margins of the self.” Then he elaborates animals’ emotional and cultural lives. While drawing on a number of ethological examples of animals’ behaviors in their natural milieux (for instance baboons), Lestel believes that we cannot really know animals’ feelings and representations. In fact, he is interested less in animals or in animal-human

relationships than in the emotions animals trigger in humans. His main question is: how can we, as humans, understand and share feelings with animals? He argues that animals play an irreplaceable role in the constitution of the human self. That is why we need to consider more closely the assemblages of humans and non-humans to understand the way inter-species friendship impacts the constitution of the self. Lestel also distances himself from environmental ethics, because he considers these ethics fail to address the fact that animals have always been part of us, of our families and societies. Lestel elaborates a rich and original understanding of the significance of biodiversity loss, claiming that biodiversity loss could lead to a critical lack of interlocutors detrimental to the development of human consciousness, emotion, and intelligence.

Notes

1. Dominique Lestel. *Les Origines animales de la culture* (Animal Origins of Culture). Paris: Flammarion, 2001; and *L'animal est l'avenir de l'homme* (Animals are the future of Humans). Paris: Fayard, 2010.
2. Joyce Poole. *Coming of Age with Elephants: a memoir*. New York: Hyperion, 1997.
3. Shirley Strum. *Almost human: a journey into the world of baboons*. New York : Random House, 1987.
4. Jim Nollman. *The Man Who Talks to Whales (Dolphin Dreamtime 1987)*. Boulder (Colorado): Sentient Publications, 2002.
5. Romain Gary, *The Roots of Heaven* [1956]. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958 .