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## **Naming names — or, what’s in it for the animals?**

“Most of them accepted namelessness with the perfect indifference with which they had so long accepted and ignored their names” [Ursula K. Le Guin, “She Unnames Them” (1987)]

In Le Guin’s story, the animals do not much care about the names we have given them — the “generic appellations [...] and all the Linnaean qualifiers that had trailed along behind them for two hundred years like tin cans tied to a tail.” The (human) narrator gives the names back, recognizing that their names had stood between her and them. Once they were unnamed, “how close I felt to them....They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one same fear” (195). Naming, describing other animals is, in the story, a way of not communicating, of not understanding who they are.

Some years ago, Shapiro (1993) urged the development of human-animal studies in ways that respected nonhumans, and treated them as beings with their own interests — interests which may or may not include how we name them. Since then, human- animal studies has thrived — in new courses, books, and journals such as this one — alongside calls to “bring animals in” to areas of academic inquiry previously closed to them. All these endeavours are to be welcomed: among other things, they facilitate wider cultural change toward respect and cooperation with the other species inhabiting this earth.

It is one thing to consider animals within wider intellectual concerns, however, but it is sometimes another to respect them for themselves, or for our research inquiries to yield benefits for them. Whenever I review papers for journals, or read much of the published literature, or do my own research in human-animal studies, I often find myself thinking — but what’s in it for the animals? How could/might they benefit? Do they? Does this research I read about take seriously the animals’ points of view — or only the viewpoint of the humans thinking about animals? That is, are the animals going to be completely indifferent to our endless ways of renaming them?<sup>1</sup>

My purpose in this paper is to speculate around these questions, not to answer them definitively. Rather, I seek to provoke discussion. Perhaps I, or we, cannot really know their points of view, though that does not absolve us of the responsibility of trying to think about them. I approach these questions from the perspective of someone who feels that bonds with various nonhumans are essential to my life (even if those nonhumans are indifferent to my tedious spouting of written words at the computer, unless I name aloud important things, like “walk”, or “carrot”, depending on whom I am addressing).

A second reason for asking about what's in it for animals comes from my own, rather uncomfortable, positioning atop the divisions of academia. In part, I do science studies, including sociological work having to do with the place of animals in society. But I'm also an ethologist, working sometimes in animal welfare. To me, all kinds of inquiries into how we humans relate to nonhumans are fascinating: but how much do they make the world better for animals? In animal welfare science, the purpose of the research is arguably fairly explicit — to discover “what is good” for animals and to make recommendations.<sup>2</sup> Yet how well do any of these areas of inquiry tell us about who animals really are? About what is in it for them?

I also consider these questions important because human-animal studies (HAS), like women's studies and environmental studies, grew partly out of political activism; in this case, animal advocacy has contributed to the corpus of knowledge we call HAS. Whatever position one takes in relation to animal politics, there is a principle behind it of trying to organize politically on behalf of animals — of trying to do “something for animals” — which matters. Here, I want to draw parallels from my experiences of relationships between feminism and academic women's studies. Animals may be “good to think with,” as some would have it, but that alone is no good to them unless the thinking is accompanied by change. Without change among humans, perhaps most nonhumans are likely, as Le Guin suggested, to agree “enthusiastically to give their names back to the people to whom — as they put it — they belonged” (194).

Clearly, this paper is personal opinion: it is not a research report, nor a thorough review. Opinion it may be, but it's a viewpoint honed through years of work in various aspects of human-animal relating, and through many years spent contemplating underlying intellectual chasms. What it is is a plea for scholars to pause, to ask more overtly what the animals might think about what we do, about whether who they are really informs our work

**On the limits of research.** There are many reasons for the recent growth in intellectual interest on the theme of nonhuman animals. One is the increased questioning of modernist ideas of “nature,” as something separate from us humans, which has spurred a great deal of inquiry into how we use, and have in the past used, concepts of “nature” and “animals” (Franklin and White, 2001). A second, related, factor has been the (slow) recognition in the social sciences that the beings who make our social world work are not only human (Noske, 1989), so that to understand social processes and cultural change requires us to trace many different networks — human and animal, human and machine (Latour, 1993).

In relation to scholarly inquiry in HAS, I want to focus on two areas, animal welfare research and sociological studies. I do so simply because these are the two — admittedly disparate — areas in which I personally work. My question — what's in it for the animals? — has its origins in part in my own interests in ideas of animal rights (however problematic that term) and animal agency. It also derives from my frustration at having to work in two different areas, with different methodologies and assumptions, but which both have to do with humans and their relationships with nonhumans. While there is undoubtedly much interest in HAS in taking

interdisciplinary approaches (and this journal is testimony to that), disciplinary divides still seem to get in the way.

Now, I think it's reasonable to assume that most people in any area of HAS are interested in real animals, and would generally support ideas of animal agency and strive for their wellbeing. And there is some cross-over, as is evident in the membership of organisations like ISAZ.<sup>3</sup> Yet there is also mistrust, even incomprehension (different methods, different approaches, different jargon). So, despite years of specializing in interdisciplinary work in various guises, I still find myself having to move between two disparate worlds, speaking different languages — sometimes, in welfare science, sometimes, in sociological/humanities approaches to animals. I rather doubt that animals' interests are best served by such moving around.

What I want to do here is to sketch out some gaps in what these two worlds contribute to our thinking about animals, as well as acknowledging their benefits.

From the perspective of research in animal welfare and behavior, for example, "what's in it for animals" might well be improvements in their living conditions and quality of life. There is now greater awareness in ethology of animal consciousness, cognition, and emotion, which might be said to benefit animals through broader cultural awareness of our animal kin. There are also many studies in animal welfare science, which often focus on specific potential problems to the animal — such as ways to reduce stereotypies in captive animals, how to train lab monkeys better to accept interventions and so minimize pain and suffering, how to reduce stress in farm animal transport, and so on. As long as we go on using animals in these particular ways (and that is a significant caveat), then surely finding out how to make animals comfortable matters.<sup>4</sup>

There are, however, limitations to these studies, arising partly because scientific approaches — with their focus on controlling variables — constrict what conclusions can be drawn. For example, reviewing dog welfare and housing in kennels (which might be for temporary accommodation or in the process of rehoming), Taylor and Mills (2007) suggested that the predominance of quantitative measures in science limited our understanding of welfare and stress, not least because it means that individuals and their specific needs are not considered. As a result, we do not have enough knowledge about dogs' experiences of living in kennels — their points of view. What slips out of the scientific approach, then, is context and the specific lives of individual animals.

Part of that context, for many animals, is humans. We are often the ones who can make their lives comfortable (providing dogs with a good home, for instance), or uncomfortable (say, by expecting farrowing sows to remain in crates for our convenience). So what about sociology — one part of the study of what humans do? How much context does that provide — and can that tell us much about animals' points of view? In many ways, "bringing animals in" to the social sciences has indeed become highly fashionable, and "animal issues" of all sorts of journals are appearing. Yet, animal presences might also be said to be absent, or at best a very spectral presence.

Reviewing the positioning of animals in recent social science, Irvine (2007) suggests that sociology tends to act as though individual *selves* are not important in the creation/production

of social life, let alone animal selves. Rather, it focuses on social processes and not the selves who are part of them. In that sense, for all the enthusiasm to bring animals in, animals' experiences would not seem to be critical. Irvine goes on to point out that, despite such assumptions, there is plenty of evidence that nonhuman animals have selves, that they can attribute feelings and meanings, and can share a focus of social attention — as, indeed, her own research on dog-human relationships attests (Irvine, 2004). Rarely, however, does sociological inquiry consider animals' interests in that inquiry.

Many sociological studies tend to focus on how animals, as generalities, fit into human social processes and structures (my own work on horsepeople's cultures included: Birke, 2007). These might indicate ways in which human attitudes impact upon animal lives, but do not explicitly *include* animal experience and subjectivity in the study — just as ethological studies rarely explicitly address the human context. These are limitations imposed by the specific methodological approaches of the respective disciplines. What we are evidently not doing well enough, then, is to examine the *relationships* between people and animals and how those are experienced by either partner<sup>5</sup> (Melson, 2002, makes a similar point regarding psychology). How can we go about examining the processes of enmeshing, of coming together, that create a relationship, when we are beset by disciplinary boundaries? Since the success or failure of those relationships have massive implications for animal wellbeing — even for their lives — then that seems to me to be an important deficit that we should address much more explicitly.

Perhaps then there is some research, in animal welfare and other areas, which has the potential to reduce future animal suffering, and perhaps to change human attitudes. But, the very qualities that can make good research (careful manipulation of variables, for instance, in the case of science) can also entail the exclusion of context. I suspect that much research in human-animal studies is motivated from our individual experiences of bonding with specific nonhuman others: it is a pity, then, that the research we generate so often ignores precisely that individual other, whose personal experiences drown in a sea of generalisations. Who is s/he, this other one whom I write about in research papers? What would be her/his point of view? While those questions may not always be addressable in human-animal studies, there are many times that I think they should be asked.

**On politics and accountability.** Intellectual interest in animals developed partly out of the social movements of the 1970s, which galvanized inquiry in many interdisciplinary fields. Human/animal studies grew, like women's studies and environmental studies, in response to particular social and political questions.<sup>6</sup> And it retains that dual interest — both in abstract ideas regarding how we think about nonhumans, and in practical aspects, such as what happens in laboratories and animal shelters.

Yet the parallel with feminism should give us pause for thought. Women's studies began out of liberation politics in the early 1970s. It represented a concern to analyze and understand the intellectual and theoretical underpinnings of the injustices that we saw all around us. Alongside

working on campaigns (promoting women's reproductive rights, for example), we looked at what we were being taught within the universities — only to discover just how deep-seated were the sexist biases prevailing throughout the academic disciplines.

To get these issues aired within the patriarchal structures of knowledge and teaching we call academia was a considerable challenge. Too often, we were told that we were not being “objective” and that we should not be bringing political radicalness into intellectual life. We met much opposition; but, eventually, we succeeded in getting women's studies courses onto curricula, women's studies journals into the libraries, and feminist viewpoints into several parts of mainstream thinking.

There are, inevitably, drawbacks to such growth in the ivory towers, however. As feminists involved in 1970s struggles for women's liberation sometimes ruefully acknowledge, the subsequent rise of academic women's studies was, initially, a cause for celebration — at last! — women's issues were being taken seriously. But then it became institutionalized, often removed from connection with the activism that once drove it. Over the years, I seemed to be teaching fewer and fewer students who had much inkling of what the women's *movement* had meant. As a result, the original radical challenge to mainstream orthodoxy became diluted. Abstract theory, not practice, seemed all too often to become paramount.<sup>7</sup>

So, too, has HAS begun to enter the mainstream, with the rapid proliferation of journals and undergraduate courses. Now even in the mainstream, that concern to investigate further our relationship with nonhumans has the potential to contribute to sociocultural change, to enable us to take nonhuman animals more seriously as conscious, sentient beings. In that sense, it could be said to be beneficial for animals in a generalized way, in that it gets a few more humans on their side (or at least enables understanding of how animal suffering is engendered by human cultures).

These may, however, be limited gains. Attempts at legislative reform, such as the recent Animal Welfare Act in the U.K., are no doubt in response to changing political and social mores: public opinion is now less supportive of some uses of animals. But, of course, nothing much changes, because the law cannot challenge the fact of those uses. Thus, Britain may have one of the most highly regulated systems in the world regarding the use of animals in laboratories. Yet as critics have often pointed out, this simply means that animal use is regulated; the fact of animal use in painful experiments remains unchallenged.

At an academic level, while many contributors to these inquiries are indeed informed by radical ideas about nonhuman animals, acceptance in academia is not conducive to them. A recent editorial in the *Journal of Critical Animal Studies* (Best & Gigliotti, 2007) makes this point, arguing that more radical politics tends to be excluded (its own remit stems from academic interest in the politics and ideas of animal liberation). Integration into the academy thus brings with it the risk that the links to a politics that once informed it begin to unravel. There is, then, a danger that HAS is in the process of becoming, as women's studies has sometimes done in my experience, too theoretical and too little informed by practice. If so, then — like women's

studies — it would be in danger of losing any ability to make change for animals. To lose that link to activist politics and to the possibilities for change would for me be a terrible mistake.<sup>8</sup>

Still, despite all the difficulties, women's studies did lead to a growth in research explicitly informed by feminist values. In particular, I want to draw attention here to debates about what constitutes feminist research: among other things, that can include debate over how to do *responsible* research, studies that are accountable to the people who are subjects of the research (Skeggs, 2001). Accountable research, feminists usually argued, was research that rejected objectivist assumptions that researchers could stand apart from their subjects. It was, furthermore, research which involved the subjects at different stages, as well as involving the researcher in the communities being investigated.

We do not expect to involve animals in the research except as subjects of it. They cannot usually report back to us their experience of research, at least not verbally. Unless that is, they are apes who have learned human language skills. One researcher did just that, asking bonobos she was working with what they thought their priorities in life were: and just as tellingly, contrary to the usual tenets of academic practice, their names appeared as co-authors of the paper (Savage-Rumbaugh, Wamba, Wamba and Wamba, 2007). Such team-work may not be possible working with all kinds of animals (and still begs the question of our utilitarian relationship with other species and the accountability of the research itself), but it does bring nonhuman interests into the picture.

In debates about feminist participative research practice, advocates knew that there will always be a power imbalance (who, after all, has the academic status and final responsibility for the project?); but it is important, they argued, that researchers remain sensitive to this and always seek to minimise the imbalance. At the least, research should bring no harms: at best, it could promote empowerment. With regard to studying animals, researchers might for example consider the ethics of particular projects, rejecting any that are seen to harm or compromise the welfare of the animals. But it is less easy to do research which, in effect, empowers animals.

Accountability toward our animal subjects, however, needs to do more than that — to effect change in the way that animals are treated there needs also to be change in policy. Writing about research into animal welfare, for example, Why (2007) points out that research on welfare along with assessment of risk factors can give us a good idea how the quality of life of domestic animals could be improved. But what matters most is policy and implementation: if guardians of animals pay no heed then the research has done little to change the lot of animals. Accountable research should, at the least, indicate potential policies.

At present, we humans take on the position of speaking for animals, of championing what we think are their causes. If the constituency under discussion were a human one, there would ensue debate about listening to the voices of those whose interests were not served by the prevailing position — much as black women's voices had to be heard to overcome the predominance, in 1970s feminism, of white, middle class experiences. Humans are inclined to think that nonhuman animals are not a political constituency, nor that they have a voice on such

matters. Perhaps — although that may simply be that we have not yet managed to hear. In the meantime, we should strive for accountability, for effective changes.

So, to ask “what’s in it for animals?” is partly to plead for greater accountability to the animals we bring into our studies. To think about that question is not only to ponder what they might think about it, but also to consider whether our investigations can help to bring about change — in the ways we think about them and their abilities, in the ways we treat them, in the ways we respect — or not — the places they live. That is, perhaps, not the remit of many academic inquiries. But thinking about politics has always been within the remit of fields like women’s studies, which sought to challenge — and change — the oppressions besetting women throughout the world. In my view, it should remain within the remit of human-animal studies. Animals may indeed be supremely indifferent to the names we give them: but they are not indifferent to the naming of oppression.

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## Notes

1. One form our naming takes is to speak about the generic “animals,” the nonhumans. This includes a multitude of different species types and different relationships with humankind. I use the term here because it is precisely in their counterpoint to humans that we can talk about “bringing them in.” But we should remember that it glosses over the enormous diversity of other species, and simultaneously commits the error of separating “us” from “them.” Hence, I sometimes use the awkward phrase “nonhuman animals” to remind us that we too belong to this generalization.
2. Although, as Gary Francione has argued (Francione, 1996), a great deal of animal welfare work, both research and hands-on practice, can be said to shore up existing inequalities and modes of oppression for animals. This “new welfarism” is, to him, flying in the face of animal rights.
3. The International Society for Anthrozoology.
4. See note (1).
5. That is, the bulk of HAS studies might focus on the effects of human on animal or vice versa, but few address the detailed day-to-day development (or not) of a relationship.
6. Particularly after the publication, in 1975, of Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation*.
7. If I want to ask what is in it for animals, I should also question how much academic feminism did for women: to be sure, there were some gains, but nowhere near as many as feminists had hoped for. I should also add that telling this story of loss of activism is one particular narrative of feminist history — for discussion see Hemmings, 2005.

8. I realize that “activism” here spans a great many perspectives and tactics — not all of which I might agree with. However, it is the broad impetus of activism, of political struggle for change on behalf of animals, that I think we must retain.

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