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Just A Plaything For Your Pet Cat?

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Animals are not merely passive 'others' in our world, argues **Erica Fudge**. In fact, by their very 'otherness' they help us define ourselves - as well as drive our technology.

When I play with my cat, how do I know that she is not passing time with me rather than I with her?" When Michel de Montaigne asked himself this question in the late 16th century he was continuing a philosophical tradition that took animals as the limit point of human understanding. Going back to the second century AD, and the work of Sextus Empiricus, and continuing through Montaigne to the present in Jacques Derrida's recent work, animals have put into question humanity's assertion of its all-powerful knowingness.

The question that Montaigne asked, "What do I know?" is answered with a clear recognition that human knowledge does not include an understanding of animals. This sceptical mode of inquiry is just one way in which animals have entered into scholarly debate. But in the past ten years or so another way of thinking has emerged in the humanities that is not only asking "What do I know?", but also, "What have I bothered to know?"

Where, from a sceptical perspective, animals present the limits of humans' capacity to know, from this other outlook it is clear that we have limited our own range of knowledge. By ignoring how animals have been a part of the ways in which humans live, work and think, scholarship (with few exceptions) has concentrated on human society and culture without ever fully acknowledging that human society and culture almost always includes animals - as pets, co-workers, food, vermin and imagery.

But this is changing. Where in the past it was subjects such as biology and zoology that looked at non-human animals, work in the humanities has emerged that is challenging the hegemonic position of the human. This work comes under the heading of "animal studies" and its focus is vast, taking in not only how humans have lived with animals throughout history, but also how we use animals to think and create.

This work challenges the assumption of the object-status of animals and is thinking about the ways in which animals are productive presences, how they have, in very different ways, played a role in making and constructing meaning as well as how their meaning is made and constructed by humans. In a recent article in the journal *Society and Animals*, Jonathan Burt argued that film technology developed because of animals and the human desire to film the non-human world.

Putting animals at the heart of cultural change rather than presenting them as mere passive objects of human work is adding another perspective to our understanding of human-animal relations. It is also challenging assumptions about who and what can be considered the moving forces of culture. The ethical possibilities of such a challenge should not be underestimated.

In many ways the emergence of animal studies in the humanities follows the pattern that gave birth to cultural studies and women's studies. Political and social change outside the academy found their way into the modes by which scholars constructed and deconstructed their worlds. Animal studies, in this sense, can be seen as a product of the environmental and animal welfare movements of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. But there is also another context. Alongside - and very different from - the growing welfare movements, post-humanist thought has also had its impact. If "human" is no longer simply to be understood as a transcendent category, but is interpreted as being constituted by, as much as constituting, its world, then many of the ways in which that category is used to establish our unthought domination over animals come under scrutiny. And knowledge, of course, is one of the most obvious places to begin.

Derrida has recently argued that "interpretive decisions depend on what is presupposed by the general singular of this word animal": that we can only know because we have constructed a category of "other" - the animal - that allows for the assertion of the human's right to be the standard by which the world is known. One outcome of this is that we might have to admit that it is eminently possible that a cat may well play with us as much as we with it. We may well also have to rethink many of the ways in which humanities disciplines interpret their worlds, and may even have to think about that word "humanities" itself.

Anthrozoology has been offered as one possible term to cover the new field, and this year's annual conference of the International Society for Anthrozoology shows just what this approach might do to the way we configure the world. When the death of a pet is discussed at this conference it is other animals' as well as humans' responses to the death that comes under scrutiny. When thinking about the experience of attending the zoo, both human and animal gazes are the subject. These are ways of thinking that engage with established methodologies, but that also look at what has previously been ignored. What, I am asking in my current work, might the perception of animal rationality tell us about perceptions of human rationality in the early modern period? I would argue that one cannot be separated from the other; that "they" are always the thing that "we" are not; that we construct them and in doing so, construct ourselves. "What do I know?" is answered with "I am not that", forgetting that "that" is something that we put there in the first place against which to construct ourselves.

Despite increasing interest in research, however, the inclusion of animal studies within the curriculum of humanities departments in higher education institutions is still rare in the UK (North America is certainly ahead of us in this). Philosophy has established the subject of animals as a category of inquiry in ethical and ontological debate, but other disciplines have yet to follow this lead. The study of animals is still, it must be said, regarded somewhat as a sentimental eccentricity. I still get asked if I own a pet when I tell people about my research.

A group of British scholars has joined together to address the absence of animal studies in UK universities. The Animal Studies Group's eight members work in a range of areas: from visual culture and theory to early modern history; from anthropology to contemporary literary studies; from

philosophy to cultural geography. The group meets regularly to exchange ideas with the aim of promoting the study of animals in the humanities; of making the case for the significance and value of looking beyond the human in our study of cultures and ideas. We are working on a number of projects, including an undergraduate textbook that we hope will encourage a greater inclusion of animal studies in the humanities. The textbook will promote our belief that the expansion of the humanities to include animals need not merely be echoed in the creation of "cats in literature", or "horses in history" modules. Animal studies aims at something more wide-ranging than that.

Once animals enter into the debates that have until now only included humans, many of the assumptions that underlie those debates will be brought to the surface and new questions will be asked: not just "What do I know?"

but "Why do I know this?" and "What allows me to construct meaning in this way?"

These new questions can only be a good thing and, who knows, perhaps the humanities may have to rename itself.

Erica Fudge is senior lecturer in the School of Arts at Middlesex University. Details of "Animal Arenas: Spaces, Performances, Exhibitions", the annual conference of the International Society for Anthrozoology, to be held at University College London, August 20-21 can be found at: www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/CCAB/meetings.htm

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