



## Partecipazione e Conflitto

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## BOOK REVIEW

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Monica Gazzola e Roberto Tassan, *Oltre l'antropocentrismo. Contributo a un logos sull'animalismo*, Gruppo Editoriale Viator

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### **An invitation to reposition ourselves in coexistence with non-human animals**

Beyond Anthropocentrism. A Contribution to a Logos on Animalism, by Monica Gazzola and Roberto Tassan, published by Viator Publishing Group, is an essay, or rather two, that deconstructs the all too established demarcation of the boundary between "man" and "animal". A demarcation that we find at the basis of our anthropocentric culture and that justifies all forms of exploitation, violence and prevarication on all living beings.

She is a criminal lawyer, and he is a scientific popularizer. The dual perspectives developed in the two essays of which the book is composed offer a profound and accurate reflection on the limits and necessary possibility of overcoming anthropocentrism, ranging from a critical examination of its religious, philosophical and scientific roots to an evaluation of vegetarian nutrition. This nutrition is treated both in relation to the extraordinary intellectual and emotional faculties of some animal species, as a necessary overcoming of that "meat paradox" whereby we love animals yet eat them, and through a comparison of the organoleptic characteristics of animal and plant proteins.

In the first part, Monica Gazzola - who had already edited, with Maria Turchetto, *Per gli animali è sempre Treblinka* (Mimesis), a volume on the subject of torture practiced on animals - well highlights the connection between the way we think about animals and the way we treat them. Rethe many philosophers who made the concept of language coincide with human language, considering it the expression of thought itself and reason and thus excluding other animals *a priori*, the author denounces how it may seem logical that animals do not enjoy rights, though logical it is not. Not only is it false (or at least limited) to infer that their inability to speak as humans denotes their lack of intellect and, therefore, soul, but also because evaluating the intelligence of animals in human terms and inferring that they are incapable of feeling pain is part of a skepticism of the past that is refuted by many scientists today.

What if we humans were also considered unintelligent by an ant because we cannot cooperate as well? Or thought stupid and lost from a pigeon's point of view because we do not have the same spatial awareness? Or, again, insensitive from the view of a dog because we are unable to orient ourselves by our sense of smell or demonstrate unconditional trust and loyalty to our loved one?

Even without going so far as to turn the tables, recent studies show that nonhuman animals communicate with each other in more complex patterns than previously thought, and that they possess abilities that were unimaginable to us until recently. Think of the extraordinary ability of horses to interact with humans, based on the latter's bodily messages; the cognitive capacity of the octopus, which the documentary *My Friend at the Bottom of the Sea* masterfully recounts; the amazing orientation skills of the birds that migrate from our cities every year to winter in the heat of an African country and then return to the same place.

Add to this the fact that language can mislead, cause misunderstandings, and build diametrically-opposed worlds in the eyes of interlocutors. Not to mention, there are the tragic consequences of having considered other human beings as barbaric (and, therefore, inferior and liable to violence and exploitation, if not extermination) just because their language was not understandable to us: from Australian Aborigines to Native Americans, considered in colonial times as savages and, therefore, without respect, to the point of being dispossessed of their lands and children themselves. Or, as the author writes, "in early 20th century America there were scientists who asserted that blacks constituted an intermediate race between man and orangutan, and that it was, therefore, absurd to think of giving them an education since they lacked the necessary mental capacity" (p. 44). Moreover, I would add, that "our" Western women themselves, for too many centuries, have been treated as objects neither rational nor capable of making political decisions.

And what about the many (too many) humans who are capable of communicating with and caring for their pets while they find a fellow human being who belongs to another culture incomprehensible and feel entitled to discriminate against them or deny them the slightest respect for universal rights?

Provocative and topical issues that impose themselves today in the scientific and ethical debate (see, among others, the book *Animal Languages. The Secret Conversations of the Living World*, by Eva Meijer) denounce the limits of our anthropocentric vision and its harmful consequences, primarily on nonhumans.

Gazzola and Tassan's book is not a treatise on biology or ethology. Rather, it could fall among the new academic disciplines focused on animals, such as Animal Studies, and more generally among interdisciplinary attempts to overcome the anthropocentric view of Aristotelian and Cartesian memory. The book ranges from the well-known passage from Genesis ("Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth. Subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that crawls on the earth," Gen. I,28), which, according to Gazzola, "deresponsibilizes" us toward animals, whose "duty of care and custody" we should instead have; to the philosophical treatment that reifies animals and thus legitimizes any cruel and despicable treatment inflicted on them; to modern physics and the epistemological revolution it inevitably entails.

At the basis is the attempt to take animals seriously, not to discriminate against them as inferior or mere objects or tools just because they belong to other species, to move beyond the established manifestations of speciesism that underlie our culture, including science, politics, jurisprudence and our everyday consumer practices. To move beyond an arrogant and prejudice-soaked attitude that legitimizes a world in which humans largely determine the lives of many other species, occupy or pollute their territories, forcing them into intensive farms for food, or exterminate them through hunting or deforestation.

Therefore, this original and necessary perspective is welcomed, today more than ever which invites new communities and relationships and identifies some solutions to the many practical problems associated with inevitable earthly coexistence.