

Embodied Animal Ethics Reflections, 3 x 20 points each = 60pts

Grading: 20 points each; Best 3 of 4 will count; you can skip one or drop lowest score

Turning in: Upload to Canvas by class time on sessions: 7a, 8a, 9a, 10a

Description: Theories and frameworks are not the same as an experience with other-than-human beings. Categorizing and theory-building risks erasing potentials for merely being with other beings. Moreover, discourses about human-animal relations are powerful, performed repeatedly, and difficult to escape, such as humans are superior to animals, or knowledge only comes from texts and human minds (rather than our bodies, intuition, or other beings), or dogs are always loyal, birds are dumb, cats are loners, etc. This assignment asks you to allow yourself to have an experience with an other-than-human being, however it may occur, AND to identify discourses, terms, concepts, approaches and perspectives (from your life and from our course) that get in the way of and/or clarify new aspects of the experience for you.

Directions: During weeks 6-10, students will complete an embodied animal ethics reflection that will be due on Tuesdays 7a, 8a, 9a, 10a, engaging the previous week's readings. These reflections include 3 elements:

1. Seek (or allow) an encounter with an other-than-human being/s that week.

- You can choose this experience or try to allow a being to choose you.
- This could be a short walk tuned into sounds/sights/scents, etc.; it could be watching ants on a sidewalk, attending to a companion animal in a new way or with new information; observing lobsters in a tank at the grocery store or fish in a pond, reflection on the abilities, relations, feelings, or death of a living being, removing a spider from the shower, watching/noticing birds, bees, squirrels or other wildlife, watching a tree or plant or life forms related to that tree or plant, observing an animal killed on the road, examining the meat, milk, or dairy aisle, learning something about the habits and history of local wildlife. Your experience should change weekly; you can plan it, but I encourage you to let yourself be chosen by a being, whatever that might mean to you. *This is not an exhaustive list of activities and is only meant to spur your imagination*

2. Embodied Reflection

- Reflections will be due on Tuesday 7a, 8a, 9a, 10a and should address the previous week's readings (viewings/activities optional and secondary). Hence, Reflection 1 (due 7a) will cover 6a-b readings. You are welcome to reference previous weeks as well (weeks 1-5) but not at the expense of engaging the assigned week's readings. *Repeat: each reflection covers the previous week's readings (7a covers 6a-b readings; 8a covers 7a-b readings, etc.)*
- Consider how the discourses that surround you, as well as the terms, concepts, theories, assertions, and perspectives of our readings (and viewings/activities optional and secondary) get in the way and/or clarify any aspect of your encounter. Discourses include ideas and attitudes that are inherited, cultural, familial, academic, philosophical, religious, etc., and extend to the perspectives, terms, and approaches we're engaging in this course.

3. **Write a 1–1.25 page single-spaced (12 pt font) reflection and question** that joins the previous week’s readings and activities with your experience with another being.

A very basic framework for this reflection *could* be (you need not copy exactly):

1. Start with your experience: “This week, I observed X other-than-human being in Y context in order to consider last week’s Tuesday and Thursday readings on the topic/s Z.”
2. Reflection: “Thinking about the features (or content, critique, terms, merits, limits, etc.) of last week’s topics while observing X gives a different perspective than just reading these views, such as, _____. I found myself considering particular elements of and/or questions about last week’s topics as well as previous weeks’ theories, terms, and concepts in the following ways: _____.”
3. Question: “One question that has emerged for me is: _____.”

The strongest reflections will integrate:

1. experience with an other-than-human being/s
2. readings from the previous Tues/Thurs (viewings and activities optional and secondary)
3. consider how particular discourses from your life and from our course get in the way of and/or clarify your encounter with terms, theories, perspectives, etc.
4. an emerging question reflecting the week’s readings and your encounter; avoid simple/unanswerable Qs such as merely “Can we really ever know an animals’ mind or pain?” or “Is it even realistic to change long-standing habits or practice?” Good questions reflect engagement with your experience in light of what our sources do claim, dispute, refuse, suggest, etc.

Basic percentages for the reflection should be (20% describing other-than-human being activity; 70% engaging specific discourses from our course (and life) that get in the way of/clarify the encounter, using terms, theories, perspectives, etc.; 10% emerging question).

CITATIONS: While including in-text page numbers for direct quotes is always welcome, YOU DO NOT HAVE TO INCLUDE IN-TEXT CITATIONS IN THIS ASSIGNMENT IN ORDER TO FOCUS MORE ON THE EMBODIED REFLECTION ASPECT OF THIS EXPERIENCE. However, direct quotes, borrowing, and paraphrasing should still be accurate and accurately reflect the authors’ perspectives we engage.


See samples on the following pages.

During the weekends, I work retail—as a cashier mostly. Our point-of-sale (POS) system—the computer application by which my (mostly) sisters-in-arms, and myself, carry out transactions—is constantly being updated, in that ridiculously incremental way that makes one wonder what exactly needs to be changed so often: ver. 2 → ver. 2.1 → ver. 2.141 [...] → ver. 2.14159265359 → (finally) ver. 3. What’s most interesting to me, and what’s most relevant to the discussion at hand, is that every update, regardless of how seemingly insignificant, always brings with it a new representative animal; so that—because I am an emotional being who, sadly, cannot calculate the thick of the moment—these updates seem neither to be the strings of numbers they are nor the unseen software improvements they suggest, but rather: a dingo → a koala → a tapir [...] → a tardigrade, ad infinitum—each one doodled there on the monitor, a piecemeal metaphor for progress.

In light of Buddhist (and to some extent, Jainist) tradition—specifically that which uses different animal species narratively to illustrate the dangers of unrighteous behavior; so, too, the virtues—this rampant (and seemingly unending) appropriation of the non-human image suggests that the modern church of accumulation and change and profit and always-earnest effort, to whose altar I am always bowing my head, may resemble its Eastern cousin more than ordinarily believed. And truthfully, using *and* anthropomorphizing the animal is not unique to any one belief system or cultural ethic: One need only consider the myths (here loosely defined) of any civilization—either extant or extinct, Occident or Orient.

Ian Harris, in *A Communion of Subjects*, says that “it could be argued that the often highly anthropomorphic character of the essentially pre-Buddhist folk-tradition of [the *Jataka*] is largely devoid of ‘naturalistic’ content, thus defeating the intention of those who bring them forward as evidence of an authentic Buddhist environmentalist ethic” (208). Not unlike Kim Socha, perhaps, I expect most discussions of this type (i.e., those that attempt to make activism out of dogma) each one to lead us to the same conclusions: that because the world’s major religions were made (or realized) many thousands of years ago by people who had not yet developed their *sense of self* or *sense of community*—at least in accordance with the fashions of today—these traditions *must always* be out of sorts with the modern zeitgeist. The result is an impulse away from traditionalism and toward progress, which is neither a point nor a circle nor a sphere nor a spherinder.

It's baffling to think that perhaps the most effective preservative is not language or the written word or table salt or temperature but is instead ideology.

That being said—again, Harris—“a positive approach to the natural world based on a doctrine of enlightened self-interest is better than no approach at all” (213). Sometimes, even I (a weaker atheist than I once was) perceive my immediate environment as something akin to “godless.” Religion, particularly religion untainted by consumerism (a bodhisattva, not a saint), seems the best guide available for the lesson in infinite compassion that all of us really need now. 

While I've learned to lament the reduction of the animal—from the nonsingular nonspecific, betrayer of Derrida's *différance*, to the ought-of-sight/out-of-mind absent referent of Carol Adams—I can't deny that, right now, we sure could use a software update.

?

Considering humankind's infatuation with storytelling—a marriage that some might theorize has produced children: namely religion itself (a story that loops, a story that never began, a story that can't end)—what kind of psychological ramifications does the use of animals in narratives have on the developing child's brain (including such classics as “what does the cow say? what does the fox say? et cetera,” but also “hey diddle the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon”)? Furthermore, how might this kind of mythologizing or educating or indoctrinating explain prejudicial beliefs *of all kinds*? Can it be undone, or simply *not passed down*? The answer to this question might be somewhere in Fifield's “embodied transformation” or Calarco's “indistinction,” or maybe somewhere slightly beyond.

Sample B

Animal Reasoning

Having been limited in the amount of activities I can do in light of the circumstances surrounding the coronavirus, I have been taking a number of walks so that I'm not trapped inside all day. On these walks, I have encountered a number of animals, particularly cats. There are several cats that live in our neighborhood, and I'm sure many of them are pets, though some are simply neighborhood cats. As a fan of cats, I often find myself attempting to interact with them, to see if they would perhaps like to be pet or given attention. What becomes obvious when seeing several of them over the course of many walks is their differences in personality and attitude, and one might even go as far as to say their ability to reason, in their own way.

Most of the cats would scurry away when being approached, which seems logical, and something I might do as a cat if a large unknown being came close to me. However, there were indeed some that were very obviously comfortable with people, allowing themselves to be approached and even pet. Thinking about these different cats and the way they acted made me consider not only Derrida's difference approach, in the way that each one had a different personality that was shaped by their own unique experiences, but also of some of the concepts that came up in this week's readings. Much discussion revolved around this concept of human superiority to animals due to their lack of ability to reason, particularly in Steiner's discussion of Descartes. This is a concept that confuses me greatly, as anyone who interacts with an animal sees their capability to think and be logical in their own unique way. They have and communicate emotions, and they can also learn. To compare them to nothing more than a machine that serves human interests is perplexing, particularly when based on these grounds. Another perspective is that of God placing animals on earth to serve human interests. This concept is challenged by McDaniel, and though most of his reading focuses on how Christianity can be good news for animals, an idea that stood out to me is that of the relationship between humans and animals being less subject-object and more so subject-subject. The cats that I saw were likely fed by different people in the neighborhood, especially if they were pets. From the cats' perspective, it would seem that humans were placed on earth to serve them. Both sides of the relationship benefit in some way from the other. A similar concept is reflected on in Christopher Carter's writing, where he discusses how in his relationship with his dog, the dog was there for him in similar ways to him being there for his dog.

1. Is the claim that the relationship between humans and animals is more subject-subject than often realized a perspective that can fall under the indistinction approach? Though this concept is reminiscent of Derrida, with his discussion of his own cat and how from a different perspective the cat is the subject watching him, the object, and I would at first assume it was a difference based approach, it seems that labeling both sides as the subject implies a certain level of indistinction between the two.