# **REVIEW ARTICLE**

# **Animals, Misanthropy, and Humanity**

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# **Animals and Misanthropy**. By David E. Cooper(London: Routledge, 2018), pp.146+vii. Hardback and paper. £65/£14.99. ISBN 978-1-13-829593-3 and 978-1-13-829594-0

*David. E. Cooper’s claim in* Animals and Misanthropy *is that honest reflection on the ways human beings treat and compare with animals encourages a dark, misanthropic judgment on humankind. Treatment of animals manifests a range of vices and failings that are ubiquitous and entrenched in our practices, institutions, and forms of life, organized by Cooper into five clusters. Moreover, comparisons of humans and animals reveals both affinities and similarities, including a crucial difference that animals are capable of virtues while being vice-free, whereas humans are both virtuous and vicious. Various familiar ways of thinking morally and scientifically about animal life are criticized for being overly abstraction, occluding richer ways of engaging with animals better able to disclose the fundamental wrong of treatment of them by humans. The book offers a concise, lucid challenge to mainstream ways of thinking morally about animals and to comfortably optimistic estimations of the moral performance of humankind.*

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In this short, lucid book, David E. Cooper argues that honest reflection on the ways human beings treat and compare with animals encourages a doctrine of misanthropy—not hatred or revulsion, but “a dark vision and hostile appraisal”, directed not primarily at individual people, but at human culture, humankind, or what have come to be our dominant forms of life (p. 2). Misanthropy can emerge from sustained attention to many deleterious phenomena, such as pervasive misogyny, wars, our systematic destruction of the natural world – reflection on the latter, indeed, often results in verdicts on humanity as a “planetary disease”, in Ian MacHarg’s words. Cooper’s claim, though, is not that our treatment of animals affords just another locus for misanthropy. Instead, the extensive and intensive “brutality to beasts” integral to human forms of life is “uniquely awful”, “distinctive”, and “a crime of stupefying proportions”, as J.M. Coetzee calls it (pp. 77, 94, 79).

*Animals and Misanthropy* begins by characterizing misanthropy, then develops two strategies of argumentation, focused on criticism of our treatment of animals, and on morally unfavorable comparisons between us and them, before concluding on ways of responding to its grim conclusions. Given the neglect of misanthropy in modern philosophy, Cooper characterizes it as an evaluation of human life as infused with vices and failings that are both ubiquitous and entrenched. Many are moral, such as cruelty and greed, while others reflect emotional, aesthetic, and epistemic failings – cold-heartedness, hypocrisy, self-deception, insensitivity to beauty. Such misanthropy reinstates “a darker perception of human beings”, pushed out by self-serving confidence in our natural goodness encouraged by Enlightenment moral optimism (pp. 54, 56). Current demands to tolerate others, without judging their ‘choices’ and ‘lifestyles’, create a climate hostile to condemnation of vices and failings (so one can expect critics to target this aspect of Cooper’s book).

Chapters 3 to 6 present the two main strategies employed by the misanthrope. First, there are morally unflattering comparisons between humans and animals, culminating in the provocative claim that animals have virtues but no vices, making them morally superior to we humans, whose vices tend to be more numerous and robust than our virtues. Closely related is a more familiar critical strategy, describing five clusters of vices and failings that are typically manifested in our treatment of animals. Factory farming, for instance, manifests such vices as cruelty, greed, and a cold-hearted willingness to exploit other creatures for human use. In developing these arguments, Cooper is consistently sensitive to the testimonies of scientists, writers, and others closely engaged in appropriately responsive ways to animals. There is no abstract talk of ‘animals’ in general, in isolation from their significance to specific people and communities, nor reductive talk of human beings as ‘just another species of animal’. Without being speciesist, the misanthrope emphasizes that human beings are “fundamentally different from other animals”, for instance, in our capacity for existential self-concern (p. 24).

Central to the comparative strategy is the asymmetry of virtue and vice. Cooper notes various differences, such as the fragility of virtue and corresponding robustness of vice, or the psychological complexity of vices, as compared with the innocence or simplicity of virtue. The virtues are slow to grow, uprooted easily, easily undone. By contrast, vices grow quickly and sturdily, amply nourished by our self-interest, desire for convenience, and moral lassitude. “Nobody”, observes Cooper, “refers to the fragility of badness” (p. 57). Human vices, then, are complexly scaffolded by the “machinations, complications and temptations” built into the social world, which provides vast “scope and material” for our failings (pp. 69, 70). Animals, by contrast, enjoy more innocent forms of life, lacking such corrupting conditions for and incentives to vice. In response to obvious counter-examples, such as cats toying with mice, this is better explained as radical uncertainty due to the mixed messages their killing receives – a dead rat elicits praise, a dead robin a slap. Certain animals may, concedes Cooper, evince vices, but this concession does not upset the misanthrope’s guiding claim that vices are not “distinctive of – typical of and integral to – animal life”, as they are for human life (p. 63).

Animals are morally privileged relative to humans, then, insofar as they are incapable, by virtue of their psychologies and forms of life, of most, if not all, vices, like self-deception, vanity, hubris, and *amour-propre.* A further sense of their moral privilege is their capacity for a set of virtues, with Cooper’s proposed candidates being “compassion, loyalty and gratitude, equanimity, and spontaneity” (p. 71). These virtues are neither ‘reactive’, little more than the absence of their corresponding vices (such as temperance), nor ones that presuppose distinct features of human life, such as existential self-regard. Animals, for instance, cannot exercise the virtue of justice, since that presupposes a form of life inclusive of concepts of fairness and obligation, unavailable to animals. If so, confinement of virtue to humans is best abandoned.

To defend these claims about animal virtues, Cooper appeals to rich testimonies from writers with close relations to animals, while also inviting us to phenomenologically consult our own experiences. A Labrador, sensing the sadness of its owner, places its head on their knee – an act of compassion or sympathy. Such cases may be dismissed as anthropomorphic projection or sentimentalisation, of course, the natural behavior of those who love their dogs. Cooper’s reply is that such reflexive dismissals fail to show proper fidelity to our lived experience and to our immediate, intimate engagements with animals. An important reason for this is the privileging, within our culture, of certain distancing strategies that serve to occlude the complexities of animal lives.

Two main culprits are the privileging of detached scientific descriptions of animals and certain styles of abstract moral theorizing. An example of the first is the “ritual skepticism”, as Mary Midgley calls it, many scientists exercise towards animals: an insistence on regarding judgements of feelings as ‘hypotheses’, perpetually awaiting a verification that never comes. ‘Objectivity’, on this view, requires evacuation of our close, affectively-layered associations with animals, which erroneously valorizes empirical poverty as epistemic purity. Moreover, these distancing strategies conspire with a second set, which privilege abstract forms of moral understanding.

Contemporary talk of animals ‘rights’ and ‘moral status’, for instance, presumes that “rational regard for their status and rights, not emotions like compassion, defines a morally acceptable relationship to animals” (p. 125). Cooper criticizes these approaches as needlessly and invidiously abstract and idle. Abstract, because they neglect the personally, culturally, contextually sensitive character of our actual relations to animals. It matters, morally, if they are sacred, totemic, or ‘companions’, for instance, or otherwise woven in the fabric of human life. Idle, since the practical implications, if any, of talk of animals’ rights or status is typically opaque. ‘All animals have rights’ may sound good, but gives no guidance on the treatment of animals – whether they can be eaten, say, and, if so, on what sorts of occasions and for which purposes. Moreover, argues Cooper, this ‘two-stage’ moral procedure of first ascertaining animals’ moral status, then deriving their rights is “peculiarly dog-legged” as a strategy for “identifying the wrongs done”. Recognizing that a way of treating animals is cruel is sufficient, with no further need for rights-talk to “lubricate” the judgment or offer “further explanation” of the wrong (p. 128).

The offending styles of animal ethics are evident among activists as well as ethicists, a fact that extends their invidious effects beyond the academy. Many works that document our awful treatment of animals operate with the assumption that these behaviors reflect failures of rationality, rather than of virtue or goodness. Melanie Joy and Hal Herzog, for instance, talk of the “inconsistencies”, “paradoxes”, and “gaping holes in logic” of those who, for instance, feed certain birds while shooting others. Cooper’s complaints are, first, that these “paradoxes” ignore the complexity of our actual relationships with animals—why, for instance, we ‘love dogs, eat pigs, and wear cows’, to cite the title of Joy’s book. Second, a focus on irrationality deflects attention away from our vices and failings, thereby letting us off the hook. Most of us are happier to admit to inconsistencies and illogicality, rather than to “vanity, callousness, willful ignorance, and self-serving illusions” (p. 127). Better to be guilty of failures of logic, than confess failings of character. By focusing on rationality, we disguise the genuine nature of the wrongfulness of our treatment of animals and overestimate the efficacy and relevance of such corrective strategies as better education and rational debate.

The fundamentality of vices and failings to our treatment of animals brings us to the second strategy that Cooper’s misanthrope brings to bear – the ‘critical’ strategy of describing the myriad vices and failings manifested in our practices, institutions, and forms of life. There are two parts to this: first, a cataloguing of five ‘clusters’, organized around a general type of failing – vanity, greed, and so on – then, second, documentation of the activities, projects, and structures that manifest them. Among its merits, this vice-theoretic framework enables more fine-grained descriptions of the moral wrongs in treatment of animals than is possible using rights, autonomy, and moral status. Battery farming, for instance, is awful because it is cruel, not because it violates the putative rights or autonomy of chickens, an appeal to which is an argument too far. As Cooper puts it in a recent interview, one main message of *Animals and Misanthropy* is that “what is fundamentally wrong in our treatment of animals is *us.*”

Cooper documents in detail the ubiquity, entrenchment, and prominence of our vices and failings across various areas of life. Industrial agriculture, fur trapping, medical research, hunting, country sports, neglectful pet-ownership – all manifest differently vices associated with hatred, greed, vanity, mindlessness, and ‘bad faith’. Moreover, vicious treatment of animals is worse for its “variety”, “triviality”, and “casualness” (pp. 114-115). I’m always struck by the zeal with which people ‘swat’ wasps and flies, crushing them to death as nonchalantly as one might brush away crumbs. Some animals are maltreated so they can be exploited for our use, while others simply get in the way of human activities in which they are, to their cost, “entangled”, their lives therefore being ones of “routine suffering” (pp. 80, 81).

Cooper’s ‘charge list’ will strike some readers as insufficiently discriminating. Few of us perform the brutal deathwork of abattoirs, place terrified monkeys in ‘wells of despair’, or batter seal pups to death. But the misanthrope replies, first, that there are plenty of vices, of which cruelty and mercilessness are just a few. Workers in battery farms may be cruel, but to buy cheap chicken breasts while pretending it’s ‘ethical meat’ requires willful ignorance, moral hypocrisy, and self-deception. Second, much maltreatment of animals is “institutionalized”, a product of systems and institutions, hence the misanthrope’s focus on collective forms of life (p. 86). Although certain individuals will vividly exemplify certain vices, what’s really being targeted is our entire structure of attitudes, practices, and ways of living ordered around and premised on the systematic exploitation of animals.

The misanthrope’s focus on whole collectives and forms of life might encourage one to suppose that robust, organized animal activism is the best response to their critical verdict on human life. “Move the world to protect animals”, declares UK World Animal Protection. But the misanthrope pauses, argues Cooper, before committing to such ambitious responses, and the final chapters consider three different styles of response to misanthropy. Two are rejected by Cooper in chapter eight. ‘Optimism’ is exemplified by Steven Pinker, who judges “marvelous” the recent moral progress of human beings. Unfortunately, his discussion of animals is triply circumscribed, focused on reductions in violence, on selected practices (like hunting), and on the United States. Had Pinker considered a wider array of vices, practices, and contexts, there would be fewer grounds for such radiantly self-congratulatory optimism about the future prospects of animals.

Similarly, Cooper rejects ‘radicalism’, the various large-scale projects of “moral engineering” and “social revolution” that aim to transform substantively the moral character of human beings or the social, economic, and ideological structure of our culture (pp. 117, 118). A popular example is radical reduction of the human population, something equally attractive to climate activists. Such radicalism is congruent with modern globalist rhetoric of ‘saving the planet’, but Cooper argues it is invariably fanciful, hubristic, or guilty of fantasy, as when advocates of entomophagy cheerily anticipate the swift, mass replacement of meat by bugs in Western food cultures.

One thing radicals seem prone to ignore is the difficulty with which such changes could be effected. Melanie Joy coined the helpful term ‘carnism’ to describe the ideology that conditions people to eat certain types of animal, sustained by powerful cultural and economic “defenses” – an account strangely at odds with her attendant confidence in its imminent collapse and loss of “power” (p. 117). Joy might point out that supermarkets and restaurants now boast ‘veggie’ options as standard: but they still predominantly stock and sell animal products. ‘Meat-free Mondays’ always end promptly on Tuesday morning.

Cooper’s skepticism about optimism and radicalism will set him at odds with ethicists and activists who argue and advocate on behalf of animals, who will also protest his preferred ‘quietism’. By this, he refers to smaller, humbler changes to one’s own life, aimed at “personal accommodation” to animals that try to “make the best of [our] lives in a world inhospitable to goodness” (p. 118). Cultivating a garden, attending to birds, wildlife photography, reading the ‘zoographies’ people write about the birds or beasts to whom they are “attuned” – these offer ways of relating to animals that “enact” virtues of attention, care, and appreciation (p. 121).

Critics of quietism will accuse it of insufficiency and egocentrism. Enhancing my life is no substitute for changing the world. An ethics that urges us to enjoy the view while it lasts, without trying to mitigate the wider reality of an unfolding ‘sixth extinction’, is unacceptable – we need vocal moral outrage, not modest quietude. Cooper’s response is that quietism does not entail an “abandonment of action”, only a soberer vision of moral agency, characterized by “focus on what one can sensibly hope to achieve oneself” (p. 118). Indeed, his descriptions of radical proposals invokes certain vices, like the conceit and fantasy manifested in hopes for any “enforced reconstruction of our moral condition” (p. 117). Trying to change the world, however well-intentioned, may be another symptom of what Heidegger called the ‘gigantism’ of the modern world.

Assessing the merits of quietism and its rivals as strategies for responding to the awful lot of animals is too large a task for a single book. *Animals and Misanthropy* was written to be accessible to the non-academic public, so lacks the painstaking rebuttal of objections desired by some readers. As befits its intended audience, Cooper avoids getting bogged down in dry scholarly wrangling, always preferring concision, and to wear his learning lightly – no mean feat, given the characteristic diversity of his sources and inspirations. He draws learnedly on ethics and ethology, phenomenology and primatology, poets and philosophers, and various figures and schools from the Western, Indian, and Chinese traditions. In so doing, we are offered powerful new ways of thinking about misanthropy, virtues and vices, and the fundamental wrongs of our treatment of animals. By reflecting on how we compare with and treat animals, we naturally learn much about ourselves, which the misanthrope argues leads to disquieting conclusions.

One omission from Cooper’s discussion is veganism, whose adherents invariably voice misanthropic sentiments, while talking of attention, care, and love for animals. Can veganism be an appropriately quietist way of “personally accommodating” to animals, as many hope? Perhaps, though Cooper may well worry about its optimism and radicalism, and, perhaps, its other limits – its arguable faddishness, lack of demotic appeal, and occasional tendencies to such vices as self-righteousness and moral snobbery. An interesting exercise would be to see what specific communities of ‘animal-lovers’, like vegans, make of misanthropy.

Another omission is a set of vices, not explicitly grouped by Cooper into a cluster, that manifest not in maltreatment of animals, but rather in failures to seek, cultivate, or enjoy any meaningful experiences of or engagements with them. Such vices of detachment seem quite common in the lives of modern people who barely engage with animals, beyond eating them. Many of my students, for instance, seem to have little contact with animals, cannot recognize different species of birds by sight or sound, and often cannot recall the last time they had any physical contact with an animal, unless they own a pet. They speak of ‘birds’, not of starlings, thrushes, and skylarks, specific terms that are annually removed from children’s dictionaries, on the grounds that they are no longer current within their vocabularies. Such detachment is not directly injurious to animals, but reflects and entrenches a culture within which animals become ever-more recessive – a world of “animals erased”, to cite the title of the recent book by Arran Stibbe.

*Animals and Misanthropy* ends on a downbeat note, offering the prospect of finding happiness despite reflective acceptance of what Rilke called the “dreadfulness of life”. Honest readers will find this difficult, once they internalize the realities of our awful treatment of the animals who are, in Milan Kundera’s famous remark, “at our mercy”. Confronted with fragile, vulnerable creatures, humans typically respond with systematic malevolence, greed, vanity, mindlessness, and a ‘bad faith’, which disguises all this from discomfiting moral scrutiny. This pervasive viciousness contrasts with the innocence, simplicity, and virtue of animals, thereby building a deep irony into Cooper’s doctrine of misanthropy: honest exercise of our distinctive capacities for rational self-reflection and moral deliberation delivers a verdict of misanthropy. What is most distinctive about us ultimately reveals what is really deplorable about us.

Many readers sympathetic to Cooper’s account of the moral atrocities committed by human beings against animals may be less comfortable, though, with his endorsement of the controversy analogy between it and the Holocaust. When Isaac Bashevis Singer described the plight of the billions of victims of factory farming as an ‘eternal Treblinka’, he met with moral, legal, and public censure. Sensitive to such concerns, Cooper takes care to chart relevant parallels between the vices involved in human and animal Treblinkas. Callousness, cruelty, willful ignorance, indifference, brutal willingness to exploit manifest vulnerability – these and other vices recur in both cases, which moreover were facilitated by individual wickedness, collective ignorance, and a culture of silence. Such comparisons are neither trivializing nor conflating, argues Cooper, entailing no denial of the distinctiveness of the two cases. Indeed, comparing two such profound manifestations of human vices and failings – indeed, of evil – may be essential to a full moral reckoning of humankind of the sort demanded by the misanthrope.

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