Book review of *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Thought* by Gary Steiner. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005.

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In a 1967 essay, Lynn White Jr. explores “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” concluding that Christianity, particularly the book of Genesis, endorses and even promotes the exploitation of nature by humans. Gary Steiner’s 2005 book, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Thought*, is written in a similar manner to White, whose essay Steiner mentions and ultimately corroborates. Where White focuses on Christian writings, however, Steiner extends his analysis to a wide array of Western philosophy, from Pre-Socratic thought to postmodernism, and where White is concerned with “ecological crises,” Steiner is specifically interested in the philosophical roots of our treatment of animals. These roots are found, Steiner’s book demonstrates, in the resoundingly anthropocentric arguments of Western philosophy throughout the ages. These arguments, and their early challengers, continue to inform and frame contemporary debates on the moral status of animals, which for the most part, Steiner argues, remain constrained by an over-emphasis on capacities for sentience and cognition.

For Steiner, anthropocentrism is “the view that human beings are primary and central in the order of things,” and its origin is the western philosophical “divine order of things” wherein humans are neither animals nor Gods but an intermediary between the two.ⁱ The view that humans are superior to other animals has dominated Western philosophy for thousands of years, during which time philosophers have called upon multiple capacities, including language, reason, self-awareness, and so on, to distinguish humans from, and elevate humans above, animals. The moral corollary of this anthropocentric perspective has been the pervasive belief that only humans deserve moral consideration, or at the very least humans are to be considered first in moral calculations. Steiner draws upon multiple works by Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Heidegger and many others, to illustrate the various ways 1) the boundary between humans and animals has been drawn and re-drawn; 2)

animals have been consigned to machine-like, “poor,” or inferior states; and 3) animals have been excluded from moral consideration by virtue of their perceived inferiority and otherness.

Among the most convincing and important chapters of Steiner’s book focuses on Descartes. For centuries considered one of the most anthropocentric philosophers, Descartes has recently become subject to renewed and more forgiving scrutiny by scholars who suggest that his views on animals have been misunderstood and are more enlightened than previously thought. Steiner enters into this controversy with a clear, thorough reading of Descartes’s works concerning animals, works that are, Steiner allows, not as definitive as one might expect given Descartes efforts toward clarity in his work and subsequent popular interpretations of his views on animals. Steiner argues that regardless, it is clear that Descartes considered animals as 1) inferior on the basis that the lack speech (rational discourse); 2) machines with no capacity to feel; and 3) undeserving of moral obligation.

Although Steiner traces a near hegemonic tendency toward anthropocentrism in Western philosophy, he is careful to attend to dissenting voices, to anthropocentrism’s discontents. Western philosophy has not been univocal in its denigration and instrumentalization of animals, he argues. Philosophers as far back as Plutarch and Porphyry argued that animals are rational, that they have worth in their own right and were not created purely for human use, and that they deserve mercy and justice. Much of this early work in defense of animals anticipates modern work in the same vein. Indeed, Steiner argues that Plutarch and Porphyry’s writings contain most if not all of the essential debates of contemporary theorists.

A far-reaching and comprehensive book, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents* offers to readers Steiner’s careful reading and analysis of a remarkable spectrum of works, making the book a useful one for introductory undergraduate classes on animal philosophy or for readers seeking a broad review of how animals have been conceptualized in Western philosophy. Readers seeking to better understand contemporary animal theory will find Steiner’s historical analysis illuminates the foundations of current debate. Beyond a historical review, the book also contributes to contemporary debates concerning animal rights and ethics. One of Steiner’s most critical arguments is for an expansion of what capacities count in terms of qualifying beings for moral consideration. Capacities for sentience or emotion ought not to be the only means by which humans deem animals eligible for moral

consideration, he argues; capacities for flourishing and growth ought to also be accounted for.

Steiner might have here engaged with work by Donna Haraway on the need to orient animal ethics toward a goal of multispecies flourishing,ⁱⁱ or with work by Jacques Derrida, who picks up on Bentham's famous re-orientation of animal capacity from "can they think" to "can they suffer." Derrida calls this capacity to suffer a "nonpower," suggesting that "mortality resides here, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion."ⁱⁱⁱ Although Steiner discusses Derrida's work on animals at the end of his book, he does not engage with this particular strand of Derrida's thinking, which seems an odd oversight given Steiner's interest in reconceptualizing what humans might share with other animals. These are small omissions, however, in what is an ambitious and wide-ranging passage through the philosophical antecedents to our current debates over and relationships with animals.

Notes

¹ Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Thought* (Pittsburg: Pittsburg University Press, 2005), 1.

¹ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

¹ Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2002), 396.

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