

## Review

# Josephine Donovan, *Animals, Mind and Matter: The Inside Story*

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It is relatively easy to situate the latest book by the literary theorist and ecofeminist in the continuity of her work. After her initial research on feminism and local colour literature, and her subsequent adoption of ecofeminist principles along with the animal liberation movement and veganism, she began to develop a so-called aesthetics of care (derived from the ethics of care), which she thoroughly defined and elaborated in her 2016 work *The Aesthetics of Care: Animal Ethics, Ecosympathy, and Literary Criticism*, about which I wrote for the literary portal *LUD Literatura* in an attempt to migrate her theory into the Slovenian space of literary studies (Krivec 2016). In the mid-1990s, together with Carol J. Adams, she began exploring alternative approaches to the animal question beyond the mere notion of rights. The latter have been debated for some time, but the basic conundrum, with which Donovan would probably agree, was once articulated in a very simple and clear way by another ecofeminist and vegan, patrice jones: ‘The property-based legal system that currently divides the world into countries, with borders policed by armed guards and internal laws enforced by armed police, is inherently violent. Within this reality, “rights” can be an important tactic for achieving real relief from the suffering of people and animals. But true peace and freedom will require us to rebuild our communities from the ground up’ (Radaljic 2019).

There is, of course, an artificial divide that stands in the way of the actual implementation of care towards fellow beings – and this seems to be the crux of her critique in the book under review. And this is why the author looks more closely at the possibilities of human-animal communication, animal subjectivity, critiquing Cartesianism and its Enlightenment, scientism, new materialism, etc. She introduces everything from the findings of quantum physics to the notion of animal dignity, partic-

ipatory epistemology, cosmic sympathy, panpsychism, ethical mimesis, emergence aesthetics, etc. in order to propose the possibility of a new way of looking at the problem.

In short, Donovan is not content with simply expanding the moral community to include non-humans, but rather defends and argues for the possibility of a total transformation of our relationship with other animals by questioning the place they are assigned in our society. It is important to note that the need to transform our attitudes is independent of particular cases, which can be understood as sometimes more and sometimes less ethical.

First of all, she introduces the possibility of real communication between humans and other animals, criticising above all the idea of scientism that has repeatedly made this dialogue impossible. It starts with Descartes and his understanding of non-humans as a kind of machines, but there is also a scientific view that excludes the possibility of subjectivity in animals. Although we are repeatedly confronted with the relativisation of what animals communicate to us, she argues that it is nothing short of necessary to introduce the notion of subjectivity into our relationship with them. It is not difficult to understand when an animal is sad, happy, angry ... unless, of course, one is talking about species whose world is difficult to grasp because of their biological distance from us. A scientific approach that constantly questions such observations could just as well study relationships between people in a similar way, but it usually does not do so, which is already an indication of the internalisation of speciesism.

At this point I need to draw attention on two notions. First, of course, there will always be a kind of barrier between me and the other, which will make it impossible for me to know 'what it means to be that person.' This is an insight that the American philosopher Thomas Nagel, in his 1974 essay 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', has argued most prominently in recent decades. But this is not to say that there is not a wide range of possibilities for dialogue.

And second, when I talk about scientism, I actually *do* mean scientism, not science. What I have in mind is kind of a culturalised approach to these questions, which at best paints a clichéd picture of a mathematised science rather than an actual science that can easily take subjectivity into account by introducing a method suited to it. I myself more or less agree with the definition of scientism in *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*: 'the view that the inductive methods characteristic of the

natural sciences are the only source of genuine factual knowledge and, in particular, that they alone can provide true knowledge about man and society' (Quinton 1999, 775). The distinction between scientism and science does not seem to be emphasised enough in Donovan's book.

In the end, however, Donovan is not interested in centring a critique around approaches that explicitly view the world and its inhabitants as entities of primarily instrumental value. As a result, she directs her critique at approaches that are perhaps even more perfidious, such as the so-called new materialism and its two main proponents: Karen Barad and, above all, Donna Haraway. Although both root their thought in the philosophy of Bruno Latour, in which Donovan at least recognises the potential for the emergence of compassion and ethical treatment of animals, the new materialism, despite its declarative posthumanist stance, turns out to be a thought that only deepens anthropocentrism. The latter is expressed above all in the strange conclusions that follow from this 'renewed' world view. For example, Haraway calls for a kind of trans-species solidarity, emphasises our interconnectedness with other living beings and the need to surpass anthropocentrism and speciesism, but in the end not only does she not practise veganism, she regards it as 'meaningless' and advocates animal experimentation and (industrial) animal husbandry, which, for example in her book *When Species Meet*, she says is 'entangled labour [with] humans and animals together in science and in many other fields, including animal husbandry up to the table' (Haraway 2008, 80).

What Haraway, according to Donovan, misses here is the introduction of an explicitly anti-fascist *standpoint theory*, a notion based on Hegel's study of the master-slave dialectic and later developed by György Lukács, but which became particularly prominent during the second wave of feminism. For Lukács, in short, this notion explains the specific point of view of the oppressed proletariat, who can actually see the class struggle from its point of view. If we introduce this kind of animal perspective into Haraway's theory, the possibility that vivisection is some kind of 'a common struggle between man and animal' simply becomes impossible, since it is not reasonable to assume that this is an animal perspective of what is going on.

Of course, this is a case of the *use* of animals, which is in itself inadmissible and (if we instrumentalise animals for the sake of argument) ultimately largely unnecessary, but another concept may come in handy: (animal) dignity, perhaps particularly applicable to the use of animals in circuses and similar environments where they are forced to imitate typi-

cal human activities. But even a genetically modified mouse that is more likely to get cancer (e.g. the so-called *OncoMouse*, also known as the *Harvard mouse*, the pride and goldmine of this American university) is in these cases not in line with their core identity of a (more or less) healthy mouse, and since they are thus reduced to 'a thing,' they are also deprived of dignity. To put it another way, the human being imposes their *telos* on another animal in order to increase mice's instrumental value for their own purposes, thereby erasing mice's own *telos* (this Aristotelian notion is also important for Donovan) and turning it into a human artefact.

This is a case of a very much direct opposition to a speciesist theory, but Donovan in fact defends more-than-rights of animals by introducing a new conception of their place in the world. Here Donovan turns to animism and panpsychism. I have mentioned these two approaches in the same sentence because they share many similarities, or rather, modern panpsychism advocates aspects that are very similar to animistic beliefs, since it is about attributing a spiritual component to all beings as well as to all objects. In this respect, both practices are also close to deep ecology, and all three, despite their many positive aspects, deserve to be critically challenged (Donovan's critique is directed in particular at the representative of deep ecology, Aldo Leopold). This is because, in practice, their limits can be similar to those of the aforementioned new materialism and, in the final consequence, maintain the status quo, since they lead to a paradox: they replace the current notion, in which each entity has at most an instrumental value, with one in which each entity has an intrinsic value, thus replacing everything, while the relative 'values' remain the same, as well as our actions in the world.

This is why Donovan separates mere understanding of the world on the one hand and ethics on the other. The complete equivalence of stone, chimpanzee, toaster, doormat, pepper, human being, etc. is ethically untenable, which is why Donovan at one point proposes the ethical consideration of entities with which it is possible to establish communication, and at another point introduces the static/mobile binary. The very mobility of an animal presupposes their desire to avoid pain, whereas this cannot be said of a static plant.

From my point of view there are some issues with this kind of reasoning. First of all, I am not quite sure why Donovan introduces animism, panpsychism and deep ecology at all, when in the end all three concepts are rather relativised with an addendum that brings the whole point quite close to the ethics of care. The main objection to my reservation may be

a need for implementing a kind of partial respect for the rights of non-animals whenever possible, which Donovan, for example, advocates and which I myself would solve with a simple formula: a notion of rights for animals and notion of welfare for plants and other beings. On the other hand, the idea of putting notions of communication and mobility at the centre of ethics also seems somehow too narrow and at the same time ... too broad. At least, this is so if we consider that we know of animals that do not move by themselves (e.g. sponges and many other sea creatures), and that on the other hand there are moving plants, not only those that move some of their parts, but also those that 'move' in their entirety (e.g. the so-called glacier mice or *jökla-mýs*, as they are called in Iceland). The possibility of communicating with other animals also seems too subjective and limited to species close to us, since we are familiar for example, with more than a million species of insects, with which our communication is very limited, but should be ethically considered too.

Much more interesting, although also rather abstract, is the introduction of the concepts of non-locality and cosmic sympathy. The first concept, derived from quantum physics, refers to a specific relationship between two objects that have no visible physical connection but influence each other (similarly exciting is the concept of superposition, which states that the same particle can be in several places at the same time). The concept of cosmic sympathy assumes that care is an integral part of the cosmos, which is reflected in the term itself.

These two examples are crucial mainly because they show (with very real physical/mathematical problems!) that the scientific view of the world and the whole universe is flawed, but they also presuppose the validity of a teleological worldview (Donovan's defence of the latter is based on Kant's philosophy), whereas they do not really play a direct role in the ethics of care itself – the only exception being the consideration of teleology.

This is also why Donovan proposes (especially as an alternative to the new materialism) a so-called participatory epistemology, which would replace the relation 'subject : object' with a relation 'subject : subject,' referring to Nagel, who advocates a scientific revolution of the Einsteinian gravity, one that will take the mind into account. In the context of art, the so-called ethical mimesis (a concept derived from Adorno's philosophy), which transforms the dualism of 'subject : object' into a dialogue, can help us to do this. Another parallel process is the so-called emergence aesthetics, in which the spiritual dimension of nature comes to light through

the process of emergence – this happens when all the smallest particles of matter connect (in the right way), symbolising another dimension of compassion.

Donovan tells the story of the transition from the legacy of the Enlightenment to a state that seeks to introduce more-than-rights. Even if she sometimes falls into an oversimplified understanding of some areas that are not part of her core interests (such as quantum physics, which has recently become popular in the (post)humanities), and even if she proposes an understanding of the world that may not really need to be implemented for goals she advocates, it is a work that manages to introduce some controversial topics in a convincing way, without abandoning its starting points, which seem to be a mixture of materialism and an ethic of care. The fact that the author manages to bring the above into the field of literary studies, thereby making a significant shift in that area, is an added bonus.

#### Notes

This review is a revised and extended version of the review that was first published in Slovene on *Animot*; see Krivec (2023).

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