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developing multispecies education with children and animals

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In order to be able to deal with the challenges of the Anthropocene, and for reasons of justice, humans have to learn to live differently with other animals. Multispecies education, in which animals of different species learn from and with one another, is an important part of this project. The voices of animals and children should be at the front of developing new practices and institutions, for epistemological and democratic reasons. This essay sketches how we can develop new practices of multispecies education, and reflects on the questions at stake with a group of children.

Keywords: animal philosophy, children, dialogues, multispecies community, multispecies education

The world as we know it is disappearing. The global climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, extinction of species and related ecological crises are rapidly changing the circumstances under which humans and other animals live. Ending the exploitation of ecosystems and animals asks for more than technological solutions: humans in rich parts of the world[1] need to learn to engage differently with the others with whom we share the planet, such as other animals and plants, and to relate differently to ecosystems and nature as a whole. Multispecies education has an important role to play in this project (Acampora, 2021). In this essay I investigate how we can and should develop new forms of multispecies education. With multispecies education I mean education that prepares human and nonhuman animals for co-existing in multispecies communities.[2] For example with regard to multispecies communication, play, knowledge creation and work. While this matters for animals (including humans) of different ages, in this text I will focus on human children (hereafter 'children') and nonhuman animals. Both children and nonhuman animals are heavily affected by the current ecological crises, and they have no or very little democratic voice in debates about the future of the planet, or other political questions that concern them (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2018). This lack of voice also plays a role in knowledge production. For this reason, in what follows I not only consider multispecies education from a theoretical perspective, but also include a conversation about this topic with a school class of Dutch children.

Education in Multispecies Communities

In theory and practice, humans have long been the standard for organizing communities. The view that humans are not only special animals but also the standard to which all animals should be measured, and whose interests are prioritized by default, is called anthropocentrism. In most societies, cultural, political, economic, social and other structures are anthropocentric. However, this view is increasingly criticized in different fields of study. Studies in biology and ethology challenge human supremacy both by showing continuities between species and by emphasizing the value of

difference. In the humanities, scholars deconstruct ideas about 'The Human' under the influence of poststructuralism, feminism, decolonial theory and Actor-network theory, emphasizing the importance of humans and more-than human relations.

These developments have consequences for thinking about communities. Recent years have seen much attention paid to the multispecies community in animal philosophy, critical animal studies, and related fields. The starting point of this scholarship is that our communities, cities and nations are and always have been multispecies, encompassing a variety of relations, that range from avoiding each other when sharing habitats, to sharing beds and banks in the case of companions. In these relations, humans and other animals exercise agency, in various ways. Theorizing the multispecies community is a critical project: theorists for example analyze relations of domination. But animal philosophers also focus on normative obligations towards other animals, and the question of interspecies justice (i.e., Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011).

In reforming multispecies communities, education has different roles to play. Humans need to educate themselves by making space for and listening to other animals – similar to 'unlearning' racism. This is a cultural project, which is already taking place in art and academia (Meijer, 2019). Animals of different species, including humans, also need to learn to form better relations. Nonhuman animals can be teachers in this project too.

There are many ways in which humans can, and sometimes should, learn from and with other animals. I will here mention four. First, humans need to learn from other animals about what kinds of beings they are. Centuries of oppression have distorted views we have of other animals, in science (Despret, 2016), culture and politics (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011); countering this asks for new forms of engagement with them (Meijer, 2019). Second, humans should learn from and with other animals how to better live together. I do not mean how to take care of them in the right ways, but rather rethinking 'community' together, using political concepts to guide us (Blattner et al., 2020; Meijer, 2022). Through embodied experiments and practice-based research humans and other animals can for example collectively learn how to co-govern shared communities. These experiments already take place in certain animal sanctuaries (Blattner et al., 2020). Third, human societies can learn from animal communities how to live better on the planet with regard to natural resources. This is recognized in approaches to nature conservation based on animal cultures. Their ways of life are more sustainable, and attending to those can guide us in protecting natural areas (Bell Rizzolo & Bradshaw, 2019). Fourth, we can learn from other animals about the meaning of life. The basics of existence – love, loss and community – are the same for many animals. For example, from the ex-laboratory mice with whom I lived I learned about care, courage, kindness, dealing with illness and death, and other things that matter in life. Their lives are very short, but they make it matter (Meijer, 2022).

There seems to be a large gap between these examples and the current everyday meaning of 'education'. However, there are already examples in society of multispecies education, for example dogs who visit primary schools in order to teach children about how to communicate with them, and the co-training of humans and dogs in dog schools. There is also an increasing amount of literature about the social lives of nonhuman animals including their normative behaviors that can help guide human and multispecies learning with regard to sharing cities, rural areas and natural areas more justly.

For different species, between species, and in different cultures 'learning' and 'teaching' refer to

many different practices, some of which are local or species-specific while others are more general. These concepts can be a starting point for engaging differently with animals, but their precise meaning has to follow from the interaction. In this process, existing educational practices and institutions, like schools, can be extended beyond the human (Acampora, 2021) and we also need to develop new practices and institutions that center multispecies education. Donaldson and Kymlicka for example mention the right to basic socialization in the context of citizenship for domesticated animals (2011, p. 123–126), and I have explored the role of conversations with animals in refiguring society (Meijer, 2019). Some of the examples I discussed above, like the experiments towards co-government in animal sanctuaries, already have a fairly concrete form: in embodied and material conversations (i.e. intervening in the landscape, speaking about objects and houses, playing, developing habits, rituals, new roles and new social relations) humans and other animals ask the others questions and have the space to respond, after which new questions arise (Blattner et al., 2020; Meijer, 2019). However, learning with and from other animals has not been something we have taken seriously as societies, so developing new educational practices will require more experiments in houses, cities, rural areas, and on farms. The perspectives of animals and children should be foregrounded in these investigations.

The Right to Co-Shape Education

In the Western philosophical tradition, both children and animals were traditionally not seen as able to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.[3] Donaldson and Kymlicka (2018) bring to light similarities in their positions, and diagnose that these follow from a social contract view of democracy, which they call the 'capacity contract' model. This model is unnecessary exclusionary, they argue, and does not take all our intuitions with regard to politics into account. They propose a model of citizenship based on membership, based on the idea that our societies are already interspecies, something children recognize, before they are socialized into being speciesist.[4] They emphasize the importance of not only developing a view of community in which animals of all species as well as children can thrive, but also of including their perspectives and voices in the process of working towards these. While children and animals may not be capable of Rawlsian or Habermasian deliberation, they have many ways of expressing their position. Reimagining the future is a project in which children and animals should also have a voice. In this context, Donaldson and Kymlicka focus on domesticated animals' right(s) to co-shape the shared multispecies community. I would add that liminal and wild animals also should have a voice in these matters, for example when we share habitats.

Because animals and children have their own perspective on life, the good life, and how and what they want to learn, it is not enough to develop new educational programs in a multispecies context without them. They should have the right to co-author these. I just discussed several examples in the case of animals, but there are currently many examples of projects that involve children in political decision-making too, albeit often in an advisory role (Dar & Wall, 2011; Wall, 2019). In many countries around the world there are for example children's parliaments on international, national and local levels there are children's councils, and children's councilors (Dar & Wall, 2011). As Dar and Wall show, not all of these examples give children more voice. Sometimes their ideas are not considered seriously, or their presence is merely ornamental. Furthermore, if children are consulted within prefabricated frameworks, adults will still determine how society looks, while their interests may be very different, as is the case with the climate crisis and the Covid pandemic. The same discussion takes place in animal rights philosophy, between those who argue that political representation is enough to cover animals' interests, and those who argue they have a right to voice

and co-authoring democracy. The movement for children's rights can learn from recent developments in animal philosophy, where embodied and situated encounters, dialogues, forms of deliberation, co-government and related practices are conceptualized politically and socially, together with animals of different species (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2018).

Democratic Theorizing With Animals and Children

In order to work towards multispecies societies and learn a new way of existing as humans, we need to move beyond the anthropocentric paradigm. To develop new practices and institutions that educate, we need to engage with those whom it concerns. Engaging with others is not just important in political practice, but also in the production of knowledge.

In this context, Hans Asenbaum (2022) points to a tension in democratic theory. For decades, democratic theory has theorized concepts like inclusion, agency and transparency. However, in the process of theorizing these qualities are generally absent. Democratic theory is a product of the "academic ivory tower" (p. 1), created by humans who were trained in specific educative institutions, which requires social and economic resources not available to all. This affects the process and outcome of this type of knowledge production. Asenbaum draws attention to underlying processes of systemic inequality, rooted in capitalism, heteronormativity and colonialism – and, I would add, anthropocentrism and speciesism (see also Acampora, 2021). Drawing on critical indigenous grounded theory, participatory research and assemblage theory, he argues for the importance of democratic theorizing, instead of 'theorizing democracy', and including marginalized knowledges in theorizing, for example through dialogues.

I share Asenbaum's concerns about theorizing about others without engaging with these others, and his trust in dialogue, broadly construed as a way of developing new methodologies. In the case of nonhuman animals, theorizing about them instead of with them, often reinforces silencing them. To avoid this we can investigate how dialogues can work in relations with others who express themselves differently, must take their agency seriously, and interrogate our own positionality (Meijer, 2019). 'Dialogues' here refers to embodied, ongoing, situated conversations with others (Meijer, 2019). Listening is often neglected in philosophy and politics, but is an important part of this project (Muruzabal Lamberti, 2023).

Learning to think with groups such as children or animals, and to collectively create new forms of knowledge, needs time. Asenbaum (2022) stresses this in relation to his collaboration with Black Lives Matter activists, and I have argued this in relation to nonhuman animals (2019, Chapter 9; 2022). In order to avoid knowledge colonialism – taking and appropriating insights from marginalized groups –, both in the case of humans and nonhumans, one needs to build a relationship and offer something in return. However, this kind of engagement is also labor-intensive, and can be burdensome for both scholars and participants. In certain cases, such as with animal companions (Meijer, 2014, 2022), this tension can be resolved because day-to-day interactions can function as the dialogue between researcher and participants. But this is not always the case, and we therefore also need to think about other methods.

In deliberative theory and activism, citizens' assemblies are proposed as a way of improving democratic decision-making. For example, the environmental activist group Extinction Rebellion argues for the implementation of citizens' assemblies in political decision-making regarding the future (Extinction Rebellion, n.d.). Randomly selected adults meet to have informed conversations

about certain topics, and afterwards their views inform binding agreements. These assemblies can be asked to represent other groups, such as future generations. This model can also help us think about collective dialogues with children and, in a modified form in which spatial arrangements facilitate the discussion, nonhuman animals (Meijer, 2019). As a very first step, I therefore decided to discuss the ideas developed above with a class of school children.

A Conversation About Children's Rights, Education, and Animals

On January 11th 2023, I visited a class of 24 eleven to thirteen-year-old children at Ssbo 't Sterrenbos, a special educational needs school in the middle of the Netherlands, to discuss these ideas.[5] We spoke for around fifty minutes and were seated in a circle. Their two teachers and one teaching assistant were also present and participated in the conversation. I had prepared questions, but the conversation flowed naturally around the topics that I wanted to discuss with the children, so I left my notebook closed. The conversation addressed four themes: children's rights and education, children's political voice and participation, animal rights and voice, and poverty and work. I will leave the latter theme out of this description because it is not related to the topic of this article, but it was clearly something the children felt strongly about.

I was the first philosopher the class met, and after a round of introductions in which they mentioned their name, with which companion animals they lived, and their favorite animals, we spoke about philosophy, and what it is that philosophers do. Philosophers think, was the consensus, and one girl mentioned that they think about the future. Another girl mentioned that philosophers think about human rights, and this immediately steered the discussion in the direction of children's rights.

We first discussed which rights are important for children – they mentioned privacy, playing, and learning. All children felt strongly about what they learn in school. Reading and learning languages were mentioned as important, and understanding the news as well. Topics that they wanted to learn more about were history, foreign languages like Chinese, and traffic. I asked the children if it was important to them to be able to determine what they learned in school and while most children thought that was the case, some had doubts. Sometimes adults know more about a certain topic and so are in a better position to judge what they should learn, a few children thought. One girl mentioned that she sometimes disliked certain topics and therefore thought they were unimportant, while they were important. Their arguments for participating in thinking about their education were that they know best what is important for children since they are children, and that adults do not always make the right choices. The children mentioned that they had the feeling their voices were heard.

Having voice was also seen as important in other contexts, at home and in politics. Specific political topics they mentioned were the climate crisis and poverty. They knew that there are possibilities for democratic participation for children, such as the children's question hour in the Dutch parliament, and children's councils. They suggested that their political participation could be improved by better access to politicians, and that politicians should actually follow their suggestions, and not just listen to what they say and go on with their business. This led us to discuss listening, and the different forms of listening there are: children often need to listen in the form of obeying, but for a conversation, such as the one we were having, you need another kind of listening, in which you focus on understanding the other.

Due to time constraints, I changed the subject to animals. We had been speaking about different

kinds of rights so I asked the children if animals also should have rights. There was a very loud yes from the group. However, some children did object that they do not need the same rights as humans; these children wanted to improve animal welfare, while others held a strong animal rights position. The latter was most prevalent, and arguments for animal rights were that they have feelings just like us, that they are like us, and that pigs and others in intensive farming often do not see the outside world in their entire lives while we can eat fake meat that tastes just like meat. The children also held strong objections to zoos, and specifically mentioned it should be forbidden to take animals away from their homes and families. Only when animals are severely injured, that could perhaps be a reason to care for them in a zoo. They also felt sorry for wild animals in circuses and were against the use of all animals in circuses.

I asked what they thought about listening to animals, and whether that matters for animals like it does for human children. Most children thought so, because the animals have thoughts. They can express themselves in different ways, with their voices and faces, but also by making nests, and dogs sometimes make a nest of blankets on the couch. A way to listen better to the other animals as societies is to consult humans who study their feelings and thoughts, the children mentioned. I asked about multispecies learning. Young animals also need to learn, from their parents, or from humans when they live with humans, but the idea of learning together with animals in the school building was immediately rejected, since this would make the animals uncomfortable. Yet there were many things they wanted to learn about animals, for example about the language of brown bears.

We then spoke about what it means to lead a good life, about the strangeness of life, and about work and money. At the end of the conversation, I asked the children if they had questions or if there were things that they wanted to say. There were a couple of questions about my work, and then the children returned to the topic of the future. Adults may decide, but it is our future, said one boy. Another boy added: we are the ones who have to live longer on this planet. You don't know that, said another boy, but the point was clear.

Not all children in this group could respond immediately to questions. Some children need more time to think about responses, have trouble speaking, or cannot participate actively in this kind of conversation for other reasons. All children however paid attention and engaged enthusiastically. Some expressed their approval in nonverbal ways, for example by nodding. Some did not make eye contact, but contributed to the discussion by making sounds that either expressed approval or disapproval. While our conversation raised more questions than we could answer, it was obvious that the children had a lot to say on the topics we discussed and were eager to share their perspectives. They also expressed a desire to continue with philosophy. Possible further steps are creating spaces where encounters take place, writing letters to animals to formulate questions, and creating a collage together with drawings and text to further think as a group.

Further Steps: Space, Play, Voice

Seriously thinking through questions of multispecies education with children and nonhuman animals asks for practice-based experiments. Insights from different fields of study, such as ethology, education, and political philosophy, can guide how these are set up, as can conversations with children and with nonhuman animals. This raises many questions which I cannot answer in this text for reasons of space, but some themes that came up in the conversation with the children can provide a starting point.

Space: at the end of the conversation the children mentioned they would prefer to learn not in school but in a playground or at least an outside space, with opportunities for different activities. As mentioned, they disapproved of bringing animals into the school and thought it best to learn about and with them in their habitats. I agree that multispecies education should begin outside, and want to add that the design of the space matters. While invading in others' habitats is to be avoided, many natural spaces, parks and urban areas are already shared between animals of different species. One way of engaging with these animals is through play.

Play: this was an important activity for the children, and is important for other animals too. Playing together can help with learning about the other, boundaries, and improving overall joy (Irvine, 2001). Acampora discusses 'befriending' as part of building a non-anthropocentric zoögogy (2021, p. 10); play can be the first step in that process.

Voice: according to the children, just as them, animals should have a say in questions that concern their lives. Furthermore, the children stressed that taking their voices into account asks for developing institutional mechanisms that they can affect, for actual democratic power, and that the same is true for other animals. After all, it is their future too.

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1. Alternatives are found in indigenous knowledge systems, as well as in animal cultures.
2. Some authors (Acampora, 2021) use the term 'zoögogy', but this mostly focuses on educating humans.
3. Although the ideas of main figures in the philosophical canon were shaped by their relations with nonhuman animals, leading Oliver (2009) to argue that animals taught us to be human.
4. Attitudes of children towards animals change as they grow up, leading scientists to claim that speciesism is learned. See for example McGuire et al. (2022), see also Donaldson and Kymlicka (2018) for a thorough discussion of this phenomenon.
5. For reasons of privacy, I will not mention their names in this text.