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editorial: animals in education: ethical perspectives

On Education

The contributions to this issue of on_education develop ethical perspectives on the role of animals in education. In so doing, the authors engage with normative and empirical questions such as the following: What should parents and schools teach children about the consumption of animals and/or their use as clothing, for product testing, and in scientific research (among other uses)? Should schools offer animal rights education? Is it morally acceptable for schools to offer meat and/or other animal products, or should schools offer vegetarian or vegan meals only? And what do parents and schools in fact convey to children about animals and the human-animal relationship, about 'essential' differences and commonalities between animals and human beings, and (on that basis) about animals' moral and political standing relative to human beings' moral and political standing?

Keywords: animal ethics, animals, Anthropocene, education, Speciesism

Even for children growing up in (post-)industrial societies and wholly urban environments, animals are – in a way – everywhere. Representations of animals appear in and around many a cradle or child's bed: teddy bears, tigers, pigs, sharks, crocodiles – there is hardly an animal species (or genus) unrepresented in toy form (Macho, 2022, pp. 63–65). Wallpapers that decorate children's rooms often feature animals, extant or extinct, cuddly (like puppies or kittens) or enjoyably terrifying (T-Rex and other dinosaurs). Children's books, including explicitly educational ones, are populated by animal characters. Supermarkets sell dinosaur-shaped turkey nuggets – a marriage of animal representations and the flesh of real animals. Most children meet other animals, whether they are fully aware of it or not, in the form of meat on their plates. They also encounter living animals: individuals of the same species they eat are admired and fed by children in petting zoos, and many children share their home with dogs, cats, or other animals, or encounter pets at friends' places. There are birds that sing in the morning or fly overhead, insects in the garden, insects in the house, rodents and hedgehogs scurrying away in the dark. And then there are the animals reported on in the media – hens killed by the thousands or millions to prevent the spread of bird flu, a cow escaping from her transport to the slaughterhouse and becoming an animal celebrity and local hero (Joy, 2020, pp. 125–127), bees disappearing mysteriously, and so on.

In another sense, animals have largely disappeared from most children's (and adults') lives. Unlike in pre-industrial societies, children do not grow up with a variety of animals around the house and in the streets, pets excepted. Wild animals have been on the retreat for millennia, but the process has accelerated in the past century. Large mammals in the wild now contribute just 3% of the mass of all large mammals on the planet, human beings account for 30%, while domesticated animals used for consumption (i.e. whose meat and/or milk we use) make up 67% (Lewis & Maslin, 2018, p. 4–5). At the same time, the latter animals have been rendered 'invisible' to their human consumers

(Joy, 2020, p. 24). There are more than eleven million pigs in the Netherlands (a small country, but one of the largest meat-producers in the world), for instance, but biking around the country one could easily be forgiven for thinking there are only a handful of pet pigs around (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022). The process of meat production, from breeding to slaughter, is hidden from view.

What are the educational implications of the above? John Dewey drew attention to the fact that all communication, all social life that has not become entirely routine, is educative. He therefore argued that "the measure of the worth of any institution, economic, domestic, political, legal, religious, is its effect in enlarging and improving experience", in other words its educational effect, whether intended or not (Dewey, 1997, p. 6). If we take this to heart, it seems we must acknowledge that when it comes to human-animal relations the combined effect of our institutions is an educational mess. For many children, family life sends highly mixed – if not plain contradictory – messages about how we should relate to animals: some intelligent and social mammals are (to be) coddled, while other, equally intelligent and social, mammals are (there to be) eaten; yet the latter are also to be empathized with in stories and petted in petting zoos. Our economic, legal, and political institutions by and large convey and aim to justify the view that human beings and animals are in different categories altogether; yet these, too, make an important exception for the animals we love as pets. In short, our institutions betray an anthropocentric stance. Anthropocentrism, however, is both scientifically and ethically hard to justify (because we are, biologically, animals, and share much of our physiology with many other animal species, who are also capable of complex cognition, emotion, and behaviour, and of deep emotional attachments to others), which lands us in an educational tight spot. For, presumably, we want the moral education we offer our children to be well-founded, and the schooling they receive to be scientifically informed.

There is more than enough reason, therefore, to take a closer look at what education conveys and should convey to children about (other) animals. What *do* parents and schools convey to children, whether implicitly or explicitly, about animals and the human-animal relationship, about 'essential' differences and commonalities between animals and human beings, and (on that basis) about animals' moral and political standing relative to human beings' moral and political standing? And what *should* they convey to children on these issues? More broadly: what do other aspects of our society, beyond the educational system and family life, such as economic and political institutions, convey to children on these points? To what extent can or must the education children receive be conceived of as *mis*education? Are other animals portrayed as fundamentally other than human animals, or as fundamentally similar? Does the message vary with age or school subject? Is there a dominant message in (post-)industrial, urbanized societies, or is it culture-dependent? Has children's education (at home, through children's books, in society at large) changed historically, and how might historical perspectives on this issue inform normative arguments? Some psychological research suggests that children aged 5-9 are less speciesist than adults (i.e. they had a lesser tendency to prioritize humans over animals) (Wilks et al., 2021); but what is the relevance of such and other psychological findings for normative questions about what we ought to convey to children about (other) animals? And what does research on educational encounters with other animals tell us about how these affect children's moral attitudes towards other animals? Examples of more specific *normative* questions to be addressed are: What should parents and schools teach children about the consumption of animals, and/or their use as clothing, for product testing, and in scientific research (among other uses)? Should schools offer animal rights education (Horsthemke, 2018)? Is it morally acceptable for schools to offer meat and/or other animal products, or should schools offer vegetarian or vegan meals only? And should governments develop policy on the 'animal educational' effects of

public institutions and practices?[1]

The contributions to this issue take many of these questions head-on, from a range of disciplinary perspectives. In the first paper, Kai Horsthemke provides a rigorous philosophical defense of anti-speciesist education – showing the ethical importance of rationality and consistency, while acknowledging also the crucial motivational and educational significance of emotions, affective bonds, interest, empathy, and care.

Eva Meijer's contribution links up with the recent political philosophical interest in non-human animals to argue for multispecies education, in which animals of different species learn from and with one another. This is not just a matter of justice for animals, but also a necessity in the face of the ecological, economic, political, and other challenges of the Anthropocene.

Both Horsthemke and Meijer find support in psychological evidence for children's spontaneous interest in the natural world and their concern for (other) animals. The third contribution to this issue is by Gail Melson, who has dedicated an important part of her career to exploring children's relationship with animals in the context of child development. In this paper she provides an overview of research findings on children's moral reasoning concerning animals, emphasizing the opportunity and the need to make these productive in biocentric forms of education.

That there are significant obstacles to overcome is highlighted in Marvin Giehl's contribution, which documents the many implicit and explicit ways in which children – at all stages of their development – encounter and imbibe anthropocentrism and speciesism, as well as in the paper contributed by Andreas Hübner and André Krebber. But like the authors of the first three papers, Hübner and Krebber find a source of hope and inspiration in children's capacity for sympathetic understanding of and fellowship with other animals – though at the same time they acknowledge the complexity and plurality of children's attitudes towards non-human animals, and the problems we face if we wish to overcome ingrained patterns of education and child-rearing.

A transition towards forms of education that do justice to all animals and, beyond that, promote caring and enriching interspecies relationships, thus requires sustained attention to, rethinking, and reshaping of current educational practices. The next two contributions, by Amélie Lipp and Michel Vidal, and by Joachim Nieuwland and Franck Meijboom, respectively, exemplify how, in the fields of agricultural vocational training and veterinary education, this rethinking and reshaping can be done. Lipp and Vidal, drawing on a relational ontology inspired by sociologist Hartmut Rosa's work, explain how their pedagogical and didactic approach, which emphasizes our embodiment and lived relational experience, can lead to transformations in how students relate to animals and conceive of those relations.

Recognizing the same kinds of problems in how their students (fail to) 'see' non-human animals as the previous authors, Nieuwland and Meijboom, too, explore the possibility of different types of relationship, of different ways of knowing and being with animals. Conversing with the classical literature in animal ethics, they argue for the educational importance of approaches that go beyond the cognitive and the rational, suggesting – again, in a similar register as Lipp and Vidal – the use of contemplative pedagogy, and ending with a plea for the value, in this context, of fostering deep wonder.

The two contributions that follow engage with Critical Animal Pedagogy. Reingard Spannring

argues that Critical Animal Pedagogy fails to shed the anthropocentrism and speciesism it seeks to counter. Casting humans in the role of oppressors and animals in the role of victims, it relies on a far too narrow understanding of emancipation as 'emptying cages'. Spannring urges us to take animal subjectivity seriously and to take an interest in what animals are interested in and therefore want and need to learn. Finally, Karin Gunnarsson Dinker investigates recent vegan interventions in formal educational contexts in Europe and across the world, exploring the potential of such interventions to modify children's attitudes towards non-human animals and the conditions under which they may be successful.

The Editorial Team

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1. Recently, the Dutch city of Haarlem became the first in the world to ban meat adverts in public space (Boffey, 2022).