

rethinking animal ethics through mutual understanding: towards an education of radical responsibility

Andreas Hübner and André Krebber

Animals are the closest human link to nature, which makes animal ethics key to a responsible education in the 21st century. They provide a lens for recalibrating our understanding of society and social relationships as well as societal relationships to animals and nature. A capacity that we already have in relation to animals but reject is at the heart of this role: our capacity for mutual understanding. Hence, we argue for an animal-ethics education that reconfigures the animal ethics of old in response to the insights of our current historical situation and that takes seriously our understanding with animals. What emerges from this is a stance of radical responsibility that challenges an anthropocentric responsibility and human preoccupation with a responsibility of leading, dictating and establishing facts. Recognizing our capacity for mutual understanding across species-boundaries is key to this radical, non-anthropocentric responsibility.

Keywords: animal ethics, education, human-animal studies, mutual understanding, radical responsibility

Challenging Animal Ethics in Education

To elaborate on animal ethics in children's education might seem odd. All the more, since it seems to be common sense that children have a mutually understanding way with animals. So why contemplate the need for education on ethical considerations towards animals? In fact, our common perception of animal-children relationships runs aground itself: Children are seen equally proverbially to be cruel and mean to others, or at the very least at times indifferent to others and singularly consumed by what *they* want. Turning to animal ethics in education then opens up a chasm in the historical situation that we occupy, reconfiguring meanings of animal ethics, perceptions of child- and adulthood, our relationship to animals, and environmental concerns. The educational treatment of animal ethics, we want to argue, is not just a question of an improved recognition of the well-being of nonhuman animals, although this is a very important one. Rather, raising the question of animal ethics in education retroacts on the evaluation and understanding of education's societal role. The animal and animal ethics are key to responsible education in the 21st century, as they provide a lens for recalibrating our understanding of society and social relationships as well as societal animal-human relationships. At the heart of this role is a capacity for mutual understanding that we derive from Theodor W. Adorno, who accredits to children a "collusion with animals" that however "adults drive out of them". As collusion, it incorporates a communicative understanding across species boundaries, but extends also to the recognition of a social communion: "Human beings have not succeeded in so thoroughly repressing their likeness to animals that they are unable in an instant to recapture it and be flooded with joy; the language of little children and

animals seems to be the same” (Adorno, 1970/2002, p. 119). We thus call for a new animal ethics in education, one that moves beyond the present status quo towards an ethics of mutual understanding (Hayer & Schröder, 2018; also Benz-Schwarzburg et al., 2020).

To cast children as solely considerate towards animals (re-)produces an idealized image that is in many ways belittling of their complexity, denying them after all a more contradictory and varied relationship with the world (Gubar, 2011; Melon, 2005; de Rijke, 2017). It sanitizes them. Even more, it reinforces a notion of speechlessness that, historically speaking, has always troubled interconnections between animals and children. In the past, animals and children have been regarded and came to be protected as dependent beings, most famously in nineteenth-century Gilded Age America. Indeed, both, animals and children, have often been perceived as “speechless”, a trope that “stood for the inability to act physically, legally, and politically on one’s own behalf” (Pearson, 2011, p. 23). Nonhumans especially are not simply muted, “but in the most refined of unethical situations incapable of anything but silence, when it is only the action of the human that should be silenced/ceased” (MacCormack, 2013, p. 14).²

Animal ethics, long established in education (Horsthemke, 2018; Wibbecke, 2013), still struggles with this bias today: Animals and children cannot advocate their own cause, but are reliant on other people to do so on their behalf. Yet, and this is key to animal ethics, there is a lack of consensus on the moral and political status of animals, while and also because virtually all people are connected in some form to animal companionship, husbandry, exploitation, and killing (Tuider & Tsilimekis, 2021, p. 317).

In light of this dissent, there already exists, of course, a long-established widespread norm of animal ethics in education: that children need to overcome, or restrain, their mutual understanding with animals to become adults. Here, mutual understanding, especially when it comes to animals’ suffering, is seen as a challenge to manage, and an obstacle to inhabiting a more instrumental relationship with animals (Cole & Stewart, 2014; Newton, 1996, pp. 315–316; also Melson, 2005; Rudd, 2009). This existing animal ethic is one that is responsible for safeguarding the right to dispose of animals in even the most drastic form, by killing them, while simultaneously not blunting children’s capacity to feel with others completely. It is necessary for managing the emotional and cognitive response to animals and their suffering so that animals can be used as material resources at will, but without undermining the emotional relationship to the world so completely that all forms of violence would be condoned.

When taking notice of an existing form of animal ethics in education, we also need to acknowledge an integral blind spot of formal animal-ethics education: “Learning spaces are organized along anthropocentric and speciesist lines” (Spannring, 2017, p. 65). In other words, anthropocentrism and speciesism, both deeply embedded in Western societies, remain largely invisible, even within critical pedagogy and environmental education. Education too often focuses on the benefits for human learners, neglecting post-humanist perspectives that stress ethical relations with more-than-human beings, and disregarding “the lives of the animals involved” (Russell & Spannring, 2019, p. 1138). Thus, “the curriculum, disciplinary boundaries, teaching locales and tools often reinforce the marginalization of the nonhuman animal” (Spannring, 2017, p. 67; also Mueller et al., 2017; Russell & Fawcett, 2013); they “implicitly consolidate dominant paradigms of [animal] utilization and exploitation” (Pedersen, 2010, p. 122). Education must overcome its “institutional anxiety”, that is, the infrastructural anthropocentrism inherent in educational institutions, originating from “unspoken assumptions about human exceptionalism” (Pedersen, 2021, p. 165). Animal-ethics education (1)

has to be “liberated” from the grips of the animal-industrial complex. (2) It has to turn into a “space for unthinking the human, ourselves and our relations to the world” (Gunnarsson Dinker & Pedersen, 2016, p. 427). (3) It has to offer a learning space characterized by attentiveness and responsivity towards nonhuman animals. Ultimately, it must build on “an interspecies etiquette that is informed by the needs and meanings of the nonhuman Other” (Spannring, 2017, p. 67; also Horstmann, 2021; Hübner et al., 2022).

Making Space for Mutual Understanding

To raise the question of animal ethics in education then instigates a shift in perceptions: First, a reflection on the being of children as deeply contradictory in their relation to animals, rather than simply appreciatively understanding. And secondly, it brings into view an animal ethics that is not orientated towards a recognition of the animal as sentient, mutually understanding other, but one that secures the appropriation of the world as a human resource. At a time when a dangerously (let alone jarringly) rapid and comprehensive dying and dying out of animals (and plants) obliges scientists to call out a sixth, human-caused mass extinction; when we urgently need to change our relationship with the natural world; and when there are deep contradictions between our animal agricultural system and how people see the treatment of animals, yet both personal and systemic actions remain incapable of change, an educational perspective on the ethics of animal-human relationships may prove crucial for working towards remediating some of these issues.

Children wrestle with making sense of the world they encounter and live in as much as adults, although they might draw on different approaches and resources than adults. In some way, everything is contradictory to them and calls out to be made sense of. Children can rightfully expect some help in this negotiation. Furthermore, their perceptions of and responses to the world are as multifaceted as the adults’ relationship to the world is deeply contradictory. Children’s relationships with animals are nothing exceptional here, they are deeply entwined with speciesist practices and the objectification of nonhuman animals, enforced by the pedagogical normalization of human-animal binaries (Young & Bone, 2020). Yet to help them rectify their contradictory relationship to animals (that is, that they empathize with them while being equally capable of cruelty towards them) by suppressing their mutual understanding for their suffering to manage their commodification and thingification seems historically highly inappropriate in light of the challenges we face.

People are deeply troubled by the treatment of animals in intensive agricultural systems and the disconnect from their suffering that it implies. Yet at the same time, this only partially translates into changed consumption behavior (Boogard et al., 2011; Harper & Henson, 2001; Te Velde, 2002; also Clark et al., 2016, p. 456).³ There is an already double-layered contradiction here in the relation of adults to the world. Furthermore, a central challenge of our environmental situation, and to be able to understand a phenomenon such as the climate crisis, is to recognize the agency of nonhuman entities that meddles in the instrumental appropriation of nature that has dominated human relationships with nature at least in the modern period (e.g., Latour, 1991/1993; Thomas, 1996). We might start to make sense of these conundrums through the dominant rationale for managing our relationship with animals already mentioned. When children grow up to disregard animals as others (except in very specific settings, such as in the case of pets) and to objectify them, when we learn to see them as instinctually (and therefore not self-)driven or fully mechanistic, and learn to manage our emotional response to animals to make them dispensable, it seems unsurprising that adults struggle to actually acknowledge animals as others in their own rights, even in a historical moment that produces recognition of their suffering, and that such recognition remains on a

declarative level, and even more difficult to extend towards all of nature. To acknowledge animals as others (and by extension nature as self-determining), will require instead an unlearning of the social restrictions placed on our capacity to understand animals. Animal-ethics education needs to withstand today's anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism (Hübner & Roscher, 2019), and, bearing in mind resonance pedagogy, "overcome the appropriation, aggression, and dominance of past human-animal relationships" (Hübner, 2022, p. 74). A prerequisite for this is assessing the historicity of human-animal relations, more particularly the historicity of human-animal commodification and thingification, and understanding how these relations have changed over time considering past practices, spaces, bodies, and materialities (Roscher et al., 2021).

Children might be able to teach us a lesson in recognizing, acknowledging and respecting animals as active participants in our societies. Listening to and taking seriously the readiness of children to 'collude' with animals opens up the opportunity for a different kind of mediation of the relationship with animals, one that does not suppress mutual understanding, in turn leading potentially to a more appreciative relationship to them, one that recognizes them as self-willing others. This, of course, would have major implications for our relationship to the world – implications we just might urgently need to address our environmental peril by acknowledging an active, self-driven dimension in nature.

However, there is no simple and linear process that might lead to respect for nonhuman animals and environmental action (Spannring, 2017, p. 68). It is only now, in response to an unprecedented era of climate crisis, nature destruction, mass extinction and industrialized animal death that educators, students, and children are beginning to realize the relevance of nature-human and animal-human relations and to recognize "how human and nonhuman lives are intimately intertwined in terms of evolution, genetics, ecology and culture" (Spannring & Hawke, 2022, p. 990). Realizing the aforementioned implications requires a *radical*, in the everyday sense of the word, framework similar to the one that has been suggested by Heather McGregor, Sara Karn, and Jackson Pind (2021) for history education in the Anthropocene – a framework based on four theoretical touchstones: radical truth, radical hope, radical imagining, and radical teaching. Drawing from indigenous studies, such an approach would place animal-ethics education as pivotal for the wider field of education in the 21st century. It would have to ask for an inquiry into "local and global environmental histories, and histories of human flexibility and resilience" (radical truth); it would require "learners to identify, examine, and critique the assumptions (mythologies/root metaphors) that underpin society's current values and then envision ways of living differently" (radical imagining); it would need to reconceptualize the classroom and allow for "evidence, agency, perspectives, and ethical questions that derive from more-than-human beings" (radical teaching); and finally, it would attend "to eco-anxiety and the range of other emotional responses and complex aspects of climate change education" and encourage "youth to write their own stories about the meaning of life as life changes" (radical hope) (McGregor et al., 2021, pp. 500–501). By these means, animal-ethics education becomes key to education in the 21st century.

Emerging Radical Responsibilities

Hence, we call for an animal-ethics education that reconfigures the animal ethics of old in response to the insights of our current historical situation and that takes seriously our capacity for mutual understanding instead of rejecting it. By acknowledging such understanding, we might recognize animals as entities who are, like us, self-willing, if in their very own ways, and far from identical to us (Adorno, 1951/2005, p. 105; 1970/2002, p. 119; Krebber, 2017). What we suggest is an animal

ethics that completely implodes the speciesist hierarchy from within. We do not aim to hoist animals up to our level – to make them human. Instead, by recognizing capacities for individual self-determination, which in European traditions of thought have made up an exclusively human cognitive repertoire, in other animals as well, the foundation for the hierarchy itself erodes, simultaneously catapulting humans from their seats in it and levelling them up with other animals, without having to make them identical. Animals here become others that are nevertheless similar to humans in that they also act upon the world in their own undetermined, individual ways. Adults then should start to listen to children and their way of mutual understanding with animals, while redefining the ethics with which they confront children in such a way that it recognizes animals as sentient others with an agency that partakes in the shaping of this world. Ultimately, children may become agents of posthuman pedagogies (Gunnarsson Dinker, 2021) – consistent with an intergenerational and participatory educational framework that moves beyond anthropocentric ideologies (Spannring, 2021).

In this vein, the modern (white, western, cis-gender, male) human, “against which all other beings (including many humans) have been constructed as inferior” (Lloro-Bidart & Banschbach, 2019, p. 5), could be demystified, and enlightened, Eurocentric metanarratives deconstructed; this is urgently needed, as climate change and species extinction already threaten those most marginalized and vulnerable – human and more-than-human (Bell & Russell, 2000, p. 200). At the same time, this would encourage children to embrace, while further developing and refining, their ability to listen to and understand animals. As future adults, they might be better placed then in both their relationship with nature as well as with regard to abolishing the excesses of animal suffering. Current adults, in turn, would not have to continue their helpless gesture of passing on the responsibility to rectify the mess they leave behind, but would learn to be more responsible in their relationship with animals and nature in the here and now. Animal ethics shifts in all of this from an ethics that considers managing our relationship to animals in terms of making them accessible as resources, to one that embraces our capacity for understanding them, in order to recognize them as other subjects.

What emerges from this is a stance of radical responsibility that challenges an anthropocentric responsibility and human preoccupation with the responsibility of leading, dictating and establishing facts. Instead, such radical responsibility would curtail our tendency to prescribe solutions from an anthropocentric position and dial back the weight of our own actions to consciously recognize the part others take in shaping our world, whether we acknowledge it or not, and lend our hand to other creatures to pursue their desire for life in negotiation with our own. Such responsibility would be radical in a number of ways: it would radically depart from the dominant human cultural tradition of anthropocentrism, at least in cultures shaped by European Enlightenment; it would radically consider all animal life as equally worthy of living, not just human animal life, even if this still includes conflicts of interest that will have to be negotiated, but not through employing an anthropocentric lens; it would radically reverse the animal-ethics educational paradigm from leading children to suppress their colluding and mutual understanding with animals to nurturing it; and it would be radical in taking responsibility not by shaping and controlling but by restraining ourselves and making space for the will of other animals to shape their environments as well. An ethics of recognizing our capacity for mutual understanding holds the key to pursuing such radical responsibility.

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1. Both authors contributed in equal parts to this article.
2. Violence and morality are key to understanding children-animal ethics: when toddlers or young children hurt animals, they are rarely blamed for doing something morally wrong. Even in the case of animal death, toddlers and children are acting without reflection, they have not yet developed the skill set that divides right from wrong, and, thus, they are not held responsible for their actions (Gruen, 2011, p. 55). Still, in recent research, the idea of children doing right or wrong and the “discourse of children as either naturally good or innately evil has similarly been interrogated by childhood researchers” (Tipper 2011, p. 147).
3. These studies pertain primarily to western perspectives. For an international perspective on attitudes towards animal welfare, although not in comparison to consumption behaviors, see Sinclair et al. (2022).