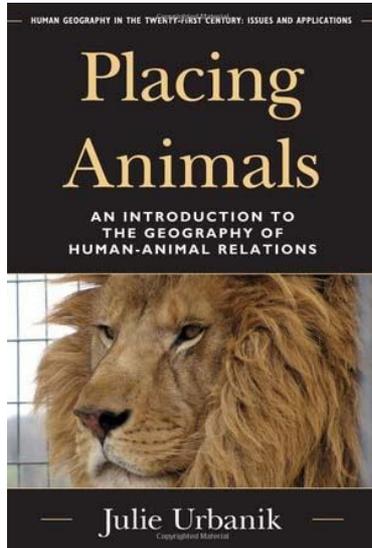


Not Rights but Place: Thoughts on Animal Studies in the Form of a Book Review



Placing Animals: An Introduction to the Geography of Human-Animal Relations

Author: Julie Urbanik

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Julie Urbanik's *Placing Animals: An Introduction to the Geography of Human-Animal Relations*, one of the newer books in the growing genre of Animal Studies, is well worth a close examination. In this brief review I would like to present Urbanik's book as charting the path of critical shifts in our thinking about animals. The author presents this long and convoluted story in clear, precise language, free of jargon; it is geared for undergraduate students who are in the beginning stages of thinking about animals and thus works splendidly as an introductory overview for a first or second course in Animal Studies.

Urbanik begins her book with an overview of the history of geography, the source discipline from which Animal Studies logically emerges. Much attention, justly so, has been paid to the tradition of thinking about animals as housed in philosophy, seeing what ethicists called 'the animal question' as an issue of 'right thinking = right action.' But if we look to the anthropologists and geographers we will see that they have been studying non-human species right along with us humans all along. The first two chapters are an historical overview and discussion of map making; after all, a map separates out the spaces between the me-and the not-me, the us- and -them, humans here, animals there.

Urbanik then presents the main components of geography as including "Concepts" such as Landscape, Place, Power, Scale and Space. She notes: "Analytic categories are those umbrella categories that help geographers make sense of processes and differences around the world. This book will emphasize five major categories: cultural, ecological, economic, ethical and political." (2012,11)

The next three chapters examine the myriad entanglements between ourselves and animals which we encounter on a daily basis: food production and laboratory research, family members in our homes, objects in education and players for our entertainment. The last chapter looks at animals at home in the wilderness, even though there is often nothing wild about them at all. Every chapter abounds in specific examples, as well as asking a range of 'thought questions', so that students become personally engaged. At the end of each chapter, Urbanik has prepared a list of excellent Discussion Questions, a set of Keywords/Concepts, a selection of references for further investigation as well as experiential exercises for students.

The Philosophic Tradition

The author notes the reality that there are actually two aspects now to Animal Studies – surely a sign of a successful genre, when the original splits into parts – 1) the more intellectually oriented disciplinary study and the 2) the more political and activist driven endeavor. This mirrors the movement in philosophy from the efforts by Utilitarian philosophers struggling to create a rigorous ethic in a secular world, to the more contemporary thinkers who exhorted us to cast a wider net in thinking about other species. The philosophers have asked a series of questions, using human qualities to judge non-human animals e.g., do they have a soul, do they feel, do they think, can they talk, what species are they (and is this relevant?)

Each of the proceeding questions encapsulates a stepping-stone in our thinking: is our ability to feel so different? Is our sense of planning and intention so different? Is our ability to communicate so different? With each gradation, we have moved further towards erasing the divide between Us vs Them. Regan's question began to shift the focus from us to them and so was a profound shift in the rubric of inquiry. All of these questions are set in the tradition of a highly intellectual anthropocentric stance, even if that stance is what is being questioned.

Continuing the tradition of deeply questioning our cherished notions, Nickola Biller-Andorno, in a collection of essays on research ethics, notes:

I want to shift the question from the passive "Can they be harmed?" further to "Can we harm them?" ...Therefore, we as human moral agents are potentially or actually part of all other beings subjective environments in a constructive, neutral, or destructive way....We can thus wrong other beings by unjust instrumentalization regardless of whether it directly hurts their physical integrity. Our moral relationship to nonhuman beings therefore has a justice perspective as well as a care perspective." (2002, 35-36)

This is a major shift in thinking, moving from a focus on our species to those species we are interacting with, saying that it is not about what attributes they might have: it is about our actions and the inter-relationships between species. Urbanik charts this progression, noting:

“An ethics of encounter requires humans to actually look at, or encounter, the individual animals humans have (in)direct relations with, then to recognize our shared dwelling, and finally to conduct a more balanced ethical inquiry that sees the individual animal, the individual human, and the larger whole.” (2012, 40)

In every chapter in her book, Urbanik brings out the theme of power and how the power differential between ourselves and other species needs to be constantly questioned, thus placing herself in the tradition of disciplines that both examine issues of ethics and also act on them. “At stake is who has the power to determine how animals can be used and where. In this chapter we have seen how an animal geography lens can be used to shed light on pets as well as larger cultural markers. *Who* you are in terms of your treatment of animals often depends on *where* you are – spatially and culturally.” (2012, 70. Italics in original.)

The Geographers’ Stance

The moral tradition of rights, justice and so forth, does not exist in the natural world. Here the boundaries are not created by culture or class, money or politics but are natural; rivers, streams, valleys through mountains, paths through a forest. To talk of the right of an antelope to not be eaten by the lion is not just irrelevant, it is absurd. The arguments between environmental ethicists and animal ethicists are well known: e.g. there is the well known problem of upholding the rights of the individual if you are wanting to think in terms of the ecosystem. It does seem clear that there are times our anthropocentric categories can move us forward, e.g. Christopher Stone’s groundbreaking article on the moral standing of trees is another example of enlarging the lens of our moral focus. But still, it can only take us up to a certain point and then we flounder. Here is where geography becomes crystal clear. Geography is about *the way it is*.

In “Animals, Ethics and Geography,” William S. Lynn comments,

As a consequence of our inquiries, we are remapping the moral landscape of animal-human relations, revealing a diverse world of ethically relevant non-human beings. Moral value is the keystone concept for remapping this world and locating animals in our moral landscape.” (1998, 280)

This is the sort of approach that Urbanik calls “the third wave or new animal geography” and she specifically comments on Lynn: “What sets the concept of geoethics apart is that it recognizes both the whole (ecosystem) and the parts (individuals), in essence constructing a value paradigm with plural centers of moral value...In fact we need to develop place-sensitive evaluations of moral problems.” (2012, 39) In different chapters in her book, the author gives examples to ground the examination of a territory increasingly laden with ideas about valuation.

Urbanik, in the chapter on wildlife, asks, “How do our ethical obligations to wildlife play out geographically?” (2012, 161) She describes the life of an elephant in a zoo as being different in quality from an elephant in the wild: the former is out of place, not home and

thus “effectively cut off from her “wild” existence. The wild elephants, however, still become unknowable to a certain extent because they, too, are increasingly controlled spatially and have to learn to live with human onlookers.” (2012, 163) It is true though, the latter population of elephants is in-situ, at-home, in a way that zoo elephants can never be. Urbanik asks readers to consider what ethical obligations we owe to each population, noting that we need to map two loci: that of place, and that of ethical obligation.

This idea of a geography of ethics relates to Owain Jones’ comment in his chapter from *animal spaces, beastly places: new geographies of human-animal relations*: “There is hence a spatiality of ethics which shadows the spatiality of encounter, forming a terrain of ethical events which is as variable as the terrain of the earth itself.” (2000, 268) In teaching a basic course in Animal Studies, I would highly recommend pairing Philo and Wilbert’s book with Urbanik’s to bring out the range of contemporary thought in this genre.

This relates to the shift in direction in some areas of environmental ethics, a change echoed by those approaching the topic of ethics via geography. In a 1997 paper published in *Environmental Ethics*, Bryan Norton and Bruce Hannon note:

In this paper, we propose a theory of environmental valuation that is based on a commitment to place...Environmental values, viewed in this way, are cultural values that are constructed from a given perspective in space and time...Sustainability planning in a community can be understood as an ongoing, community-based discussion of environmental value as part of an ecosystem management plan.” (1997, 207)

In her Conclusion chapter Urbanik comments: “An animal geography perspective reminds us that we cannot simply talk about nonhuman animals, but we must instead go out and meet them in their locations and as individuals and breeds or species. To understand the human-animal interspecies power geometry we must first map the place relations that shape practices in the first place. (2012. 185)

Geoethics as the Way Forward

From the quotation above, we can see that Urbanik emphasizes how the Animal Studies genre necessarily links environmental and societal concerns as well as contemporary political issues. Perhaps it is not coincidental that the field of Animal Studies is becoming increasingly important: those who study endangered species are well versed in the reality that as species decline, they begin to generate increased attention and in many cases, become increasingly valued.

In *Ethics for a Finite World: an Essay Concerning a Sustainable Future*, Herschel Elliott presents the idea that given the reality of our global commons, we must learn to live in a world bounded by finitude. He proposes that we discard the entire Western tradition of anthropocentrically driven ethical theory in favor of a simple question: is it

sustainable? In using the word sustainable he does not mean the usual notion of this word, driven by the human point of view but from the larger, non-human reality:

When the number of fishermen is small, to fish benefits fishermen and consumers who do not fish. But when vast numbers of fishermen use high- tech fleets to scour the oceans, fish stocks crash and fishing stops. In a growing population, to follow the principle that everyone has the right to earn a living by fishing causes harm to overwhelm the benefit. Different environmental circumstances change fishing from being moral to immoral. (2005. 22)

We can see the stepping stone progression I brought out at the beginning of this article: there is a sea-change change in our thinking about animals that Urbanik's book charts so well. A tradition that begins in asking a series of questions about *them*, and *their abilities* has evolved into a stance that focuses on the reality that we cannot go on seeing the human and the nonhuman as anything other than different species occupying places and spaces at the same time. Norton and Hannon bring out this centrality of place as part of the geoethics project: "The content of true place-based value must be a cultural artifact of local interactions, a dialectic between a culture and its natural context...a longer and larger community-oriented scale on which we hope to protect and contribute to our community which might be taken to include the entire ecological community..." (1997. 209. 212)

As Urbanik notes, there is a convergence of ethicists and geographers who are both proposing a deep paradigm shift as the only way forward as we face global limits in all directions. We must necessarily include other species in our moral calculus. The philosophers have said it is a question of justice. Here we quote Martha Nussbaum: "The fact that humans act in ways that deny animals a dignified existence appears to be an issue of justice, and an urgent one..." (2006. 326) The geographers say that human concepts, such as justice, though certainly useful, miss the central point; it is not about *our ideas* but about *the way it is*. Nobody comes out alive unless we include animals in the global moral community. Animals are part of the ecosystems that run our planet; habitat – place – necessarily needs to be central to our discussion of how to best proceed. Lynn gives us four over-arching Principles that we might follow in constructing a world governed by geoethics:

1. Principle of Geocentricism (Recognize the moral value of animals, humans and the rest of nature.)
2. Principle of Equal Consideration (Give equal consideration to the well-being of all creatures affected by our actions.)
3. Principle of Hard Cases (When faced with hard cases pitting animals against humans, solve the problem, look for alternatives, or choose a geographic compromise that defends the well-being of animals.)
4. Principle of Moral Carrying Capacity (Humans should live within a carrying capacity that preserves the integrity of the entire geographical community.)

In the summation of her text, Urbanik describes the how far we have come: "Chapter 1 identified four key social changes that have contributed to the rise of the third wave of

animal geography over the past fifteen years: our deepening understanding of how humans are impacting the natural world, the rise of animal-related social movements, the theoretical shift to a postmodern/posthuman framework that is learning to see other-than-human beings as actors in the world, and finally our increasing public love of nonhumans.” (2012. 183)

Placing Animals: an Introduction to the Geography of Human-Animal Relations provides an excellent framework for students to think through these four key social changes with depth and clarity as part of the ongoing examination of our role vis a vis the other species with whom we share places and spaces.

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