8. Anyone Who Likes Cats and Dogs Is a Fool

Asking whether humans can be friends with animals is fraught. So many people have such intense relationships with animals, perhaps most especially their pets, that hazarding that question is affectively perilous and something of a philosophical watershed. Tread lightly, or inevitably someone who is BFFs with their budgie will cancel you for your callousness.

When Deleuze and Guattari dropped "Anyone who likes cats and dogs is a fool" and then returned and developed the argument recursively throughout *A Thousand Plateaus*, they were in part trying to argue that owning a pet distances and bulwarks humans from their own animality. They were longing to relate to a cat as animal-to-animal, not as human-to-animal, and in the process recover something of their own animality.

There are many salient points of critique of the Deleuze-Guattari desire for becoming-animal, depths that Donna Harraway has famously plumbed. Among them is the strangeness of claiming that a pet is an animal, when they have so patently entered into a different, hybrid, maybe becoming-human zone. The question for us here is whether friendship is a mode of relationship that offers any interspecies traction: or, can we be friends with *any* more-than-humans? And if so, how would we know?

The proposition that humans and more-than-humans might relate to one another as friends rests on acknowledging that pets, animals, plants, rivers, mountains and all the rest have active subjectivities, and might be willing to consider an offer of friendship. We suggest that all of us, human and more-than, are constantly shaping and reshaping our

lives and histories, we all have beliefs and values and opinions of our own, and are enigmatic, surprising and capricious, within species as much as between.

For many of us, the easiest route to considering animal subjectivities is to talk to our pets and wonder about the ways we spend time together. Thinking about pets is to think about captivity and property and ownership, but also to consider how pets keep and care for us, often as much as the reverse. Some pets may well be fundamentally satisfied, even delighted with the safety, comfort and companionship their relationship status affords, but being held pet-captive also comes with very obvious losses: of freedom, adventure and other-animal interactions for both sides of the relationship. For all pets as much as humans, parsing those gains and lacks is a complex calculus to be constantly considered and evaluated.

Domestication and captivity come in many shifting shapes and guises. Expansionist human domination has left us managing the lives of animals near and far – from those we raise to kill and eat, to 'wild' animals that we feed off our back porches, to pets that sleep in our beds, to those whose habitats we maintain and protect – but fixed categorical indexing of these relationship deprives animals of their own creativities and striving.

Which of us – of any species anywhere – are not constantly making compromises to maintain certain relationships? Which of us enters into completely voluntary, consensual, or mutualistic encounters with anyone else, without any impositions on our decision-making? It is a consumptive fantasia of unfettered 'choice' to imagine that any of our lives are like shoe-shopping on the internet with a seemingly endless array of possible options. We are always constrained and impelled, and thankfully so. Animals of all kinds are constantly making choices – individually and collectively – based on new and old and incomplete information.

Who knows for certain what any animal is thinking? Who knows whether any more-than-human is happy, or satisfied, or frustrated, or their ambitions being savagely thwarted? We can make our best guesses and labour to communicate – just like we do with any other humans – but ultimately have to defer to their incommensurability.

Being-together really does rest on *whateverness*: loving your pet cats includes rubbing their stomach just as much as that gross playful live-dismembering thing they do with the mice they catch, just as much as acknowledging all the ineffable practises and worldviews of every more-than-human entity. Becoming-friends does not rely on 'our' animality, or 'their' becoming-humanness, it rests on the willingness to acknowledge each other's subjectivity far beyond the carceralized renditions of categorical identity, including *species*.

Politics are not, and cannot, be just between humans. With pets, animals we eat, captured and 'wild' animals, the possibility of friend-relationships is always there and thus the possibility of politics. To insist on kinship is to occlude that possibility – to collapse that relationship into relatedness or likeness – or, in Nancy's words, it then "necessarily loses the *in* of being-*in*-common. Or, it loses the *with* or the *together* that defines its essence. It yields its being-together to a being *of* togetherness." As Martha Nussbaum puts it:

> This quality of active, striving agency suggests that animals are not only objects of wonder but also subjects of justice [...] Wonder suggests that animals matter directly, for their own sake – not because of some similarity they have to ourselves [...] animals matter because of what *they* are, not because of kinship to ourselves.[1]

The impossibility of surety in any of our more-than-human relationships defines the field of unfixity, of being unfinished. Do any animals feel 'substantive concern' for us? Does a river have any care for human experience? Could a tree agree to being in relationship with us? Maybe. If so, how would we know? Those questions are burdened by the limits of language and (most of) our human imagination. But if humans can acknowledge the creativity and subjectivity of every more-than-human entity, recognize the own-ness, the flat-ontological existence of both species and individual, their own ineffabilities, that is to open up the

1 Martha Nussbaum, Justice for Animals, New York: Simon and Schuster, 67, 2023.

chance of a politics marked by negotiation, compromise, fluidity and porousnesss.

Animals and other beings are not metaphors. The desire to use the more-than-human world as justification in-of-itself for prescribing human relationships is one more rhetorical ploy. Free-market enthusiasts have long deployed Darwin as the validation for a world driven by competition, survival of the fittest, and 'natural' hierarchies. Those of us interested in socialist socialities cite Kropotkin's rendition of evolution as full of mutual aid, cooperation and reciprocity. Certain naturalists see forms of symbiosis in the more-than-human world as the template for human social organization. It's all fine and good to notice admirable relational practises anywhere and go about building aspirational politics around them. But reducing animals or rivers of trees to theatrical props is just bad manners and does damage to our capacity to be in relationship.

Any ethological (or ontological) efforts that deny or collapse the striving and creativity of animals and more-than-humans is just barking up the wrong tree, but respectful inquisitiveness is another thing altogether. Belgian philosopher Vinciane Despret's book *Living as a Bird* strikes us as an example of a generous curiosity. Starting with close observations of the warbling blackbird, she asks why so many birds emerge from long winter's migrations and generally peaceful co-existence and then seemingly all of a sudden start singing and acting aggressively, defending territory and brawling with other birds.

Despret argues that birds have very different conceptions of 'home' and 'space' than most humans tend to. It's hard to claim that birds 'live in' or 'inhabit' one place: their relationships to space are just so different from ours and they occupy a whole different set of dimensions. While we are stuck on the ground, birds move up and through vertical space in immeasurably shifting vectors and lines of flight, which as Despret notes, inflects everything, including their experiences of barometric fluctuations and atmospheric flows.

This multi-dimensional movement of birds through space cannot be reconciled with what she calls 'petit-bourgeois' renditions of territory and private property that have traditionally marked ornithological explanations for bird behaviours. Birds appear to be aggressively defend-

ing territory, but not in the propertarian sense of seizing public land for individual ownership and then defending its borders against incursion. Her observations suggest that there are zones of spatial contestation, peripheries of occupation where skirmishes flare up, and then dissipate into 'nothing personal', just regular reorganizations of who gets to hang out where.

Ethologists, burdened by their extant assumptions of private property, have habitually observed animals and then let those jaundiced eyes travel into human social prescriptions for territorial allocations with the supposed evidence of property as 'natural'. Despret says that for birds, territory only exists in the making of it, and that there are no fixed lines or borders to their territoriality, there are only malleable zones of social possibility, interactions and re-positioning.

Does this mean that Despret's study of birds, or any other evidence of non-sovereign, non-propertarian territoriality among animals is justification for our own arguments towards a borderless world? That'd be very handy, but sadly no. There is a universe of different kinds of birds and even among very specific flocks of very specific species, there is still a world of difference. Birds are themselves; they are just like every other person. We love the idea of porous territorial zones that open whole realms of new socialities, but not because it is a 'natural' construct. We might admire and wonder about certain modes of life, and suggest they are worthy of emulation, but not as some kind of teleological historical task.

Birds are birds, they are not metaphors. They are full of mystery and weirdness and incompletenesses. It is only in that incommensurableness that politics becomes possible. We had no idea what that dog in the Nlaka'pamux Heritage Park was up to – was it going to attack us, was it just a little curious, was it bored, was it looking for companionship, did it just feel like going for a walk, was it worried about bears taking us out? All of those, none of those? Or maybe all those human-described human motivations expressed in our slender human languages are just inadequate for even approximating the range and mystery of that dog's thinking and feeling. It's always fun to speculate and laugh about what

that dog had in mind, but ultimately the only available thing is to enjoy and marvel in its company.

Those zones of unsurety, of unfixity, are precisely the political. That dog was not an enemy, even if it attacked on sight. But neither was it kin – that was not *like meeting like*. The dog was not attempting to animalize us, nor we humanize it. We have no conceptual apparatus or names easily available to describe that experience, except maybe *friend*.

The specific cringiness of someone calling themselves the 'mom' or 'dad' of their pets – or worse, talking about their 'fur babies' (!) – is augmented by its gesture towards a comfortable desire for human superiority, positioning pets as being kept and protected by benevolent guardians. It relegates that relationship back to familiar and bounded forms, ones that centre humans as the titular heads and progenitors of the 'family'. Charming interspecies interactions are a cause of constant joy – as much as in real life as on the internet – specifically because they upend expected fidelities. Dogs cuddling with pigs, cats grooming monkeys, capybaras chilling with everyone: any kind of unusual combination is a delight, as much as when a bird is willing to eat seeds out of your hand or a seal swims along beside your canoe.

The unfamiliarity of interspecies relationships is the experience of exposure, of not knowing exactly how to behave or what to expect, not being able to defer to familiar reflexes. Leaving easy relational confines, especially across species, requires a different kind of attentiveness, a gentleness, an observational presence, but also the constant possibility of loss. If being with a friend is always to grieve their coming loss, the becoming-grief of losing pets is telescoped because they die so young, or sometimes just leave capriciously. To love an animal is to be exposed to an often-way-too-soon loss, and often for reasons we cannot understand.

Suffering is endured alone but the particular kinds of tactility we have with the animals we keep – picking them up, feeding them, cuddling, caring for their injuries and maladies, helping them birth, eating them – exposes us to uncertain, unsure futures. It forces us to confront questions of domesticity and freedom, and of the ethics of our management of their lives and deaths, and suffering, the mass-scaled carcerality of animals that haunts modernity.

In a strange, pandemic-fueled sermon to open 2022, Pope Francis veered vertiginously off-script and claimed that keeping pets is "a denial of fatherhood and motherhood and diminishes us, takes away our humanity." He called it a "phenomenon of cultural degradation" and that when so many people choose keeping pets over having children, "we lose the richness of fatherhood and motherhood, and it is the country that suffers."[2] This polemic was exceedingly odd coming from a childless octogenarian who heads an organization famous for its brutality and endemic sexual abuse of children. It also raised the immediate fury of pet owners – Catholic and otherwise – across the globe. But perhaps he was on to something.

Being in relationship with animals *does* diminish us, in badly needed ways. To acknowledge the subjectivities of animals is to acknowledge the poverty of placing humans at the pinnacle of evolution, and to be willing to attend to uncertain, unfixed relationships. To be exposed to the suffering of animals and to be willing to confront the suffering of our pets can inflect our relations with other animals and more-than-human beings.

If Francis is concerned about the fate of 'the country' under assault from pet-owners, perhaps he was gesturing towards a possible unraveling of the colonial state and anthropomorphic dominations (maybe [...]?). Acknowledging the fluid and porous borders between human and animal, between living and non-living, between conscious and not, primes us for the possibilities of other kinds of borderlessness. The experience of unsurety that marks all our relationships with animals, and with friends, is precisely the flattened unfixity that makes borderlessness thinkable.

2 Harriet Sherwood, 'Choosing pets over babies is 'selfish and diminishes us', says pope', The Guardian, January 5th, 2022.