

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Issue VII
August 2007
www.cla.calpoly.edu/bts/

Review of Gary Steiner's
Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents
(University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005)

Richard Schubert
Consumnes River College

In the history of Western Ethics "heterodox philosophers have continued to express themselves in the midst of a predominantly anthropocentric tradition", Steiner claims in *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents* (p.2), aptly subtitled *The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy*. Built around Steiner's previously published "Descartes on the Moral Status of Animals" (*Archiv fuer Geschichte der Philosophie* 80 (1998): 268-91), which serves as its sixth chapter, *Anthropocentrism* is emphatically not one of those books offering little beyond what was contained in its seminal predecessor. While Steiner's treatment of Descartes is one of the most detailed in the book (and noticeably more technical than his treatment of other philosophers), *Anthropocentrism* as a whole offers an admirably complete (even if slightly uneven) treatment of western animal ethics. Canvassing Epic through Contemporary thought, encompassing philosophical work within the Analytic and Continental Tradition as well as within ethology, Steiner's judicious alternation of direct and indirect quotation renders his book surprisingly detailed despite its mere 251 pages of text (not including notes, index, and bibliography). In addition to treatments of the figures one would expect (e.g. Aristotle), *Anthropocentrism* includes treatment of historically significant, but oft

neglected figures (e.g. Saint John Chrysostom). Steiner's work is both careful and thorough.

Despite inconsistencies in the style in which it is written, *Anthropocentrism* is quite readable thanks to its generally lucid prose, occasional mid-chapter previews, regular end-of-chapter summaries, and, most notably, its clearly introduced and developed, overarching narrative structure. Steiner traces the historic development of an "orthodox" anthropocentric conception of direct moral considerability based on kinship and capacity standards that ultimately deprives non-human animals of moral status in the western philosophical mainstream. He also notes (and champions) dissenting "heterodox" conceptions, past and present, which he argues might be developed into a less biased, and thus more satisfactory, theory of moral considerability. The merits of this overarching narrative structure notwithstanding, the addition of further start-of-chapter overviews (contained in only the sixth chapter) would have further improved the clarity and navigability of the work.

Structural considerations aside, the book is not without its weaknesses, none of which undermine its value. Steiner fails to clearly distinguish what we might identify as two senses of 'anthropocentrism'. In one sense, the term has purely descriptive meaning (roughly, "centered on humans"). In the other sense, the term has both descriptive and evaluative meaning (roughly, "centered on humans and illicitly so"). While Steiner's introduction of 'anthropocentrism' as a "prejudice" on the first page of the text would appear to commit him to use of the term in the latter, evaluative sense, his subsequent usage is promiscuous between the latter and former senses. Moreover, he never provides a persuasive argument that anthropocentrism in the merely descriptive sense is an error;

that is, while he makes plausible his claims that various views in the history of western ethics are centered on humans, he never provides reason sufficient to convince someone who didn't already see this as problematic that it is indeed so.

What Steiner provides in the way of original argumentation is unpersuasive, although his diagnosis of the difficulty in arriving at what he sees as a satisfactory moral theory is interesting. The problem, he thinks, is in developing a theory that supports both liberal democratic values and the moral status of animals. Capacity-based theories, which acknowledge the uniqueness of human rational and experiential capacities to a sufficient extent to support liberal democratic values, fail to capture the moral considerability of animals. Kinship based theories, which capture the moral considerability of animals, fail to acknowledge the uniqueness of human rational and experiential capacities to a sufficient extent to support liberal democratic values (p. 223-230). What is needed, Steiner argues (following Hans Jonas' development of Heidegger's thought, which in turn revives the less-anthropocentric perspectives of the ancients invoked by Romantic thought) is a hybrid theory that would carve out a "middle position between the extremes of unrestricted liberalism and unrestricted cosmic holism" (p. 230). The relevant "inscription of liberalism within a philosophy of nature would allow liberal ideals to prevail as principles governing human relations, while denying ultimate authority to such ideals in matters bearing upon human relations with nature" (p.238), allowing "us to retrieve a sense of belonging to nature that has manifested itself episodically in the history of Western Philosophy" (p.237). Unfortunately, as Steiner himself concedes, it is "not clear how such an inscription is to be achieved" (p.238).

What Steiner does suggest as an initial step in realizing what he calls "Jonas's

dream" (p.238) is a more judicious use of cognitive ethology, one which avoids the usual "great emphasis on the study of capacities for intelligent thought and communication" and instead cultivates "our understanding of...our *kinship* with members of other species" (p.238). Unfortunately, Steiner's account of just how such an understanding of kinship is to be developed seems deeply unsatisfying. As Steiner sees it, perspectives that would foster an understanding of human-animal kinship are available, "in particular, [via] the method of 'heterophenomenology'...[which] interprets [animal] behavior by way of analogy to human experience" (p.246). Using it, one "describes how the world would appear to the organism if it had sensory experiences (third person perspective), or how it would appear to me if I had certain features in common with it (first-person perspective), to explain or predict some aspect of the organism's sensory systems or of its recognition of objects in the environment" (p.246, quoting Dasie Radner, "Heterophenomenology: Learning about the Birds and the Bees," *Journal of Philosophy* 91 (1994): 398).

Steiner illustrates both heterophenomenology and how it might be brought to bear on issues concerning the moral status of animals by sketching the application of the method to bees. Heterophenomenology, he tells us, supports the conclusion that bees have subjective awareness, the possession of which, he suggests, is sufficient for moral considerability since it underwrites the requisite kinship of bees and human beings, who are, of course, themselves morally considerable (p.246-248). While he concedes to Gould and Gould that "all the behavior observed in bees can be explained as instinctual or programmed, and no appeal to subjective awareness is needed in accounting for the behavior of animals such as bees" (p.248), he argues that

such an account...loses sight of the sense that there is something it is like to *be* a honeybee...Even if such models can provide operational accounts of apian

problem solving and communication, it is worth questioning whether they grasp the whole truth about the lives of bees. For they treat bees and other animals in exactly the same way that Descartes did: as pure organic mechanism (p.249).

We ought to reject such a mechanistic account, Steiner argues, because it is anthropocentric. But even if Descartes' argument for the mechanistic account of animal behavior lacks cogency given the extent to which it is infected by an illicit preference for specifically human capacities, it doesn't follow that we ought to reject its conclusion. Even if Steiner's negative arguments (e.g. criticisms of views that deny bees inner lives) succeed, his positive argument (e.g. for the conclusion that bees do indeed have such lives) is question begging--if it is an argument at all, rather than a restatement of *his* prejudice.

It seems ironic that Steiner views analogical reasoning about what it's like to be an animal as cogent, when human beings would clearly be the primary analogs. Heterophenomenology (or, at least, the relevant application of it) is centered on human beings (and thus anthropocentric in the descriptive sense identified above), but Steiner seems committed to the view that it is not illicitly so (and thus not anthropocentric in the evaluative sense identified above). Especially when reading *Anthropocentrism's* treatment of the contemporary period, one begins to suspect that what distinguishes permissible human-centeredness and illicit human-centeredness from Steiner's vantage point is whether the result is ultimately favorable to the direct moral considerability of animals. Steiner is, at best, preaching to the converted.

A further point brings into relief the importance of providing a better-supported distinction between permissible and illicit human-centeredness. As Steiner himself acknowledges, the general thrust of the history of western ethics tightly links moral

considerability and moral agency, seeing agency as both effectively necessary and sufficient for direct considerability. While Steiner is at pains to expand the scope of such considerability, he seems to accept the usual account of agency according to which only creatures with rational capacities like those of human beings are agents. He leaves unaddressed, however, why such a view of agency is not as illicitly anthropocentric as the corresponding views concerning considerability.

The strength of *Anthropocentrism* lies in its scholarly exegesis and synthesis, not its independent argumentation. Steiner does an admirable job of communicating the historical interconnectedness of major works in western moral theory, most especially in making clear the debt the Early Moderns and their successors owe to the ancients. *Anthropocentrism* contains both concise encapsulations of secondary literature and, at many points, substantial original work in the History of Philosophy. In addition to methodically developing its main thread, *Anthropocentrism* ably develops a number of related discussions one might not expect, such as one concerning biblical revisionism and one concerning the proper role of moral theory in relation to individual judgments of value. Despite its relative dearth of non-interpretive argumentation, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents'* thematically unified treatment of the history of western Ethics is unlikely to leave those who read it discontented with their expenditure of reading time.

Richard Schubert
Cosumnes River College, Sacramento