



Political Animal Voices

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Summary

In this thesis, I develop a theory of political animal voices. I do so in three steps. The first part of the thesis focuses on language. I first investigate the relation between viewing language as exclusively human and seeing humans as categorically different from other animals. I then discuss recent empirical research into non-human animal languages and cultures, and develop an alternative way of thinking about language. I also investigate human/non-human animal languages, and the relation between developing a common language and creating common interspecies worlds. The second part of the thesis turns the focus to animal politics. Here I draw on insights developed in the recent political turn in animal ethics, and specifically focus on political non-human animal agency. I criticise anthropocentric interpretations of politics from the perspective of justice and from the perspective of power relations, and I investigate the potential of the different concepts that are used to interpret and govern political relations between human groups for thinking about political relations between humans and other animals. In the third and final part of the thesis I focus on the relation between political animal acts and existing human political practices and institutions. I investigate how other animals already act politically, and how their agency can be fostered and strengthened. I also discuss how these acts can function as the beginning of new forms of political interaction with other animals. In addition to the theoretical chapters, I discuss two case studies: the first concerns my own experiences with Romanian stray dog Olli, and focuses on language, politics and freedom in dog/human relations. The second case study concentrates on the goose/human conflict that has taken place in the Netherlands in recent years. It shows that viewing geese as political actors is important for normative and practical reasons, and offers a different way of thinking about goose/human relations. In the conclusion I focus on thinking with animals. I discuss my own experience of bringing non-human animals into academia and I also draw more general conclusions, including offering recommendations for further research.

Most humans see language as human language, even though other animals have their own complex and nuanced ways of communicating with others. In the first chapter of this thesis I question this image of language by investigating the relation between language and anthropocentrism. I first show that current formulations of ‘language’ are rooted in a tradition

of thought that relies on distinguishing humans from other animals. In this strand of the philosophical tradition, humans are not only seen as fundamentally different from other animals, they are also seen as more important, and as the standard by which other animals are measured. The construction of language as human language springs from that hierarchy and reinforces it. Furthermore, both seeing other animals as fundamentally different from humans and seeing humans as the only animals capable of language and reason has moral and political consequences. The current exclusion of non-human animals from our moral and political realms is not based on a misunderstanding of their capacities or a natural order, and in order to address this exclusion it is therefore not enough to argue that they are like humans in significant respects. We also need to reformulate the concepts that were defined by excluding them, first by investigating how they came into being, and second by interpreting them anew with other animals. In the first section of this chapter, I criticise this view of language, reason, and animals. I discuss the connection between the concepts ‘language’ and ‘animal’ in part of the Western philosophical tradition, using the work of René Descartes and Martin Heidegger as examples. We find an alternative approach in the work of Jacques Derrida, which I discuss in the second part of the chapter, and which complicates stereotypical views about ‘the animal’ and critically examines the image of the human that is connected to it. His critique is valuable, but he provides only a negative view of non-human animals, language, and human-animal relations. In the final section, I argue that this is unfortunate: in order to adequately address anthropocentrism, we need to redefine these concepts in and through interaction with non-human animals.

To do this, we need to engage with other animals. Chapter 2 therefore turns the focus to non-human animal languages. I draw on empirical studies of non-human animal languages and cultures, in order to provide a better insight into their worlds as a starting point for conceptualising interspecies interactions and world-building. I begin by discussing language research in which humans investigate the linguistic capacities of other animals through teaching them to use human language. I then discuss problems with this approach, for non-human animals and language, and I discuss how Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later work, and specifically his concept language games, can function as an alternative way of conceptualising and studying non-human animal languages and interspecies languages. Seeing non-human animal languages as a set of language games can bring to light similarities with and differences to human language, and allow us to better understand non-human animal agency in shaping language. This also offers us a new way of studying non-human animal languages, one in which humans do not begin with predetermined concepts which they

impose on other animals, but start by seeing non-human animal expressions as meaningful. In order to be able to study non-human animal languages in this manner, we need to stop focusing on how they, or we, can prove that they actually use language, and instead see them as social and curious beings who look for meaningful interactions with members of their own and other species. The second half of the chapter, in which I use ethological studies and philosophical insights to provide a phenomenological view of language, is devoted to exploring how different functions of language can be characterised in a multispecies context. I discuss the language games of mimicry, alarm calls, grammar, identity and performativity, as well as meta-communication. In the final section I argue that we need to move from thinking *about* to thinking *with* other animals, and that we therefore need to explore the relation between language and world in an interspecies context.

To further investigate the relation between language and building common worlds, we need to shift the focus from studying animal languages to living with other animals. Humans and other animals share habitats and households, and sometimes develop close relations. While there are significant phenomenological differences between species, there are also many things that are shared, physically and culturally, and there are ways to come to new forms of understanding in which language can play an important role. Language is a tool in building new relations, a way of expressing how beings view the world in order to come to an understanding about it. Building common worlds with other animals again requires viewing other animals as subjects with whom we are entangled in meaningful relations, who co-shape our lives, and who have their own unique perspectives on life. This means moving beyond scepticism and anthropocentrism; it also implies recognising that neither humans nor other animals evolved in a vacuum; humans and other animals share a planet and are connected through many different practices. Engaging with other animals in new and respectful ways aimed at increasing their freedom is possible, and offers members of different species a way to learn and further develop empathy. In the first half of Chapter 3, I theorise the connection between language and world in interspecies relations. I do so first by reflecting on the relationship between language and world, in which I use dog trainer and philosopher Vicki Hearne's views about interspecies language games, and Heidegger's views on the relation between world and language. I then turn to the embodied aspects of language, drawing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In the following section I focus on understanding other animals and the role of empathy in this process. The second part of the chapter investigates how this works in practice. I first conceptualise ethologist Barbara Smuts' experience of living with baboons as world-building practice, using the phenomenological insights derived

from the first part of the chapter. I then turn to living and speaking with dogs, discussing language, habits, and building common worlds. In the following section, I consider sharing households with other animals, and the role that material interventions can play in working towards understanding and improving conditions for other animals, including increasing their freedom. In the final section I further explore the relation between these different examples of interspecies world-building practices and freedom.

In the first case study, I develop these ideas further by discussing my own personal experiences with Romanian stray dog Olli around three themes: language, freedom, and politics. I focus on the first three months with Olli, in which a common language and habits were created and a certain level of freedom was established for him. The first section shows how our common language and habits came into existence. This created a common world, as well as a way to express that world, which changed both the dog and the human in question. The second section discusses learning to walk on the lead in relation to freedom and oppression in interspecies communities. The last section focuses on Olli's political agency as a former stray dog, both on the micro- and macro-levels. By emphasising Olli's perspective and actions, this chapter also aims to explore ways to move beyond anthropocentrism in philosophy. I learned to see the world through his eyes, and experienced the constraints dogs must live with in cities anew, because everything was new for him. Living together changed both of us.

The second part of this thesis further focuses on the politics of relations between non-human and human animals. Non-human animals are not seen as political actors by most humans, systems and societies, nor are they seen as part of shared political communities, even though human acts, institutions and systems greatly influence their lives. In Chapter 4, I challenge this political anthropocentrism and offer a different way of thinking about non-human animals, and politics. I first discuss challenges to anthropocentric interpretations of politics – which, for example, argue for non-human animal rights on the grounds that other animals are like humans in significant regards – from the perspective of justice. These critiques are important and could drastically improve the position of many animals. Because our current view of politics is anthropocentric, however, we also need to investigate the power relations that have shaped our understanding of politics, and investigate the different forms of institutional and epistemic violence that play a role in these processes. These are discussed in the section which follows. Our systems of knowledge, which are interconnected with cultural practices, intersect with political exclusion. While humans recognise direct violence towards other animals, institutional violence is often not recognised because it is

interconnected with epistemic violence, which renders it invisible. Language plays a role in this process. Other animals are formally excluded from political institutions and practices because they do not speak, which refers back to a view of language as exclusively human, and this view is interconnected with cultural practices and knowledge production.

Challenging this requires rethinking politics with other animals. In section 3, I therefore turn the focus to political non-human animal agency and the limits of the political. Non-human animals exercise political agency, and recognising this is part of seeing them as full persons. In addition to analysing power relations, we should aim to get a better view of what constitutes a good life for them, and develop new forms of politics in interaction with them. In the final section, I further investigate how we can develop new forms of politics with other animals.

In further developing political relations with other animals we can and should draw on insights developed to conceptualise political relations between groups of humans. In Chapter 5 I draw on recent work in the so-called ‘political turn’ in animal ethics, most notably Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka’s political theory of non-human animal rights, to discuss how these concepts can guide relations between groups of non-human animals and human political communities. I first focus on those non-human animals who are part of human communities, and review proposals to see them as citizens or members of a republican community. Using the concept of citizenship can clarify relations and offer a new perspective on formulating membership of interspecies communities; in this process political communication, and non-human animal agency, play a major role. In section two, I turn to non-human animals who do not wish to be part of human communities. I discuss recent proposals to view them as sovereign communities, and contrast these with proposals to conceptualise these relations as interspecies cosmopolitanism. In the second half of this chapter I discuss problems with traditional interpretations of sovereignty which rely on claims made by the powerful to legitimise the territorial domination of others. In order to challenge human sovereignty, we should challenge human superiority on all levels, including existing political systems. However, existing institutions and systems also hold a promise for other animals, and, like citizenship, these concepts can bring into focus new forms of interacting with other animals and institutionalising these relations. Furthermore, new political relations are not a matter of all or nothing. In the final section, I turn to examples of new ways of relating to other animals – as found in existing institutions – that can function as beginnings for further reformulating laws and political practices: labour rights, habitat rights, and urban planning. A non-anthropocentric interspecies political system is currently no more than a utopian ideal, but

this does not mean that change is not possible; these examples can be seen as beginnings for new ways of thinking about and interacting with other animals politically.

In thinking about further developing political relations with other animals, we find that they can act and express themselves in a great variety of ways. In animal philosophy, ‘animals’ usually means mammals, though birds, fish and certain invertebrates are sometimes included. An important reason for this is that sentience is usually seen as the grounds for rights and human obligations; non-human animals have interests, and it is therefore wrong to harm them. Small animals, such as bees, worms and spiders, are often excluded from this image, because it is unclear whether or not they are sentient. Since there are many non-human animals who are beyond doubt sentient and who suffer greatly from human violence, it may indeed seem best to focus on these cases. The lives of small non-human animals and humans are, however, also intertwined, and humans use them for their benefit. Furthermore, it is problematic to only focus on those animals who are most like us, and who is seen as sentient is also partly a result of human-centred discourses. In Chapter 6, I therefore discuss worm politics, both in order to further clarify the borders of the political, and in order to show the variety of possible relations with non-human animals. I do so by contrasting new materialist approaches to non-humans with political animal philosophy. I also discuss the relation between knowledge and power around the example of earthworms as laboratory animals. I then turn to new forms of interacting with earthworms, first by discussing eating as relating and then by reviewing proposals to view them as sovereign communities, or neighbours. I end by suggesting that we should respect earthworms and start regarding them differently. Food can be a starting point in establishing new relations.

In the second case study, I draw on the insights developed in the first two parts of the thesis to investigate the goose/human conflict around Schiphol Airport. Geese are not wanted in the fields around the airport, yet they keep coming back because they like the grass. In response, humans kill them, even though this does not solve the problem. Many different parties play a role in this conflict – politicians, animal welfare activists, farmers, the airport, the general public – but the role of the geese is underexposed. The geese are the centre of attention, but no one is paying attention to their views on the matter, nor is anyone interested in working with them to solve this situation. This is unfortunate for normative and practical reasons. Seeing geese as political actors, paying attention to their species-specific behaviours, and investigating how they act politically can help us to establish new relations, and further clarify how human political concepts can play a role in interspecies relations more generally. For this to happen, it is important to begin seeing them differently and to develop a non-

anthropocentric view of sharing space. Translating their agency and communication with them into political institutions can be done in different ways, for example, by developing new models of deliberation, and different human groups can play a role in this process. In this case study I first discuss viewing geese as political actors, and goose/human communication. I then turn to human political concepts, such as ‘foot voting’ and squatting, and investigate how these can shed light on group goose agency. I also discuss the politics of space; humans have given themselves the right to claim certain spaces, and finding new ways of sharing space is important in all non-human/human animal conflicts. In the final section, I offer recommendations for dealing with geese in new ways in relation to existing human political practices and institutions.

The third part of the thesis further explores how we can bridge the distance between non-human animal and interspecies political acts, and existing human political institutions and practices, in order to promote political animal voices and foster non-human animal political participation. I investigate how other animals already act politically, and how their agency can be fostered and strengthened. I also discuss how these acts can function as the beginning of new political interspecies practices and institutions. In Chapter 7, I focus on the role of non-human animals as agents of social and political change. The role that non-human animals play in social change is not usually acknowledged in theory or in animal activism, because non-human animals are not seen as political actors or as agents of social change, even though they act politically and influence human political institutions and practices. This is problematic because it does not recognise non-human animal agency, and reinforces viewing them as mute, in contrast to human actors, which reaffirms anthropocentrism and unequal power relations. It also leads to a situation, common in animal activism, in which humans speak for other animals. This runs the risk of obscuring their perspective, and is problematic for democratic reasons. We therefore need to explore non-human animal activism and possibilities for interspecies political change. It is paradoxical, as well as patronising, if humans are still presented as the group that decides what is best for other animals, or if humans determine the precise form and content of ‘rights’ or ‘liberation’. This should instead be a mutual project. Taking non-human animal agency into account in activism can furthermore help us to see the existing situation in a different light, and open up new ways of thinking about social and political change. It can also contribute to imagining and creating new interspecies communities. In this chapter, I first discuss non-human animal acts of resistance, and investigate whether these acts can be seen as civil disobedience. I then turn to the relation between non-human animal oppression and the oppression of human

groups via a discussing of intersectionality. This is followed by a discussion of the question of speaking for others, and options for assisting other animals as activists. In the final section I discuss how stray dog agency can function as a starting point for change.

In addition to acknowledging non-human animal political agency and developing new political systems with other animals, we need to investigate how existing political frameworks can be made more inclusive in an interspecies context. Chapter 8 therefore turns the focus from activism to political participation. Non-human animal political participation is often either not considered relevant, or not considered at all, by animal rights theorists. This is problematic, because the right to political participation – to co-shaping the rules under which one lives – is not just any right. Non-human animals are individuals with their own perspectives on life and their own idea of the good life, which cannot be reduced to species-specific templates. In this chapter, I first discuss how and whether non-human animals can co-author the laws under which they live, and I explore the normative justifications for establishing an interspecies democracy. In the second section I investigate which non-human animals can or should be seen as part of a shared interspecies community with humans. I conclude the chapter by exploring ways to improve democratic interaction with other animals, in which I discuss Sue Donaldson's proposals for enabling voice and space, and end with two examples in which humans and other animals interact politically in order to investigate how democratic non-human animal participation can be improved: material deliberation with seagulls, and human-macaque greeting rituals as new forms of political interaction.

In this thesis, I have discussed many examples of ways in which non-human animals speak and act politically, at an individual level and as groups, with members of their own groups and with others. In the final chapter, I draw on these cases to develop an interspecies understanding of deliberation. I discuss how deliberation between human and non-human animals already takes place, and how it can be improved, using a systemic perspective on deliberative democracy. I do so in order to bridge the distance between existing human-non-human animal dialogues at a micro-level, and human political systems. I begin by discussing examples of dialogues between human and non-human animals in the animal studies literature. While the examples I discuss do justice to non-human animal agency and show the richness of existing relations between human and non-human animals, as well as potential for new relations and encounters, they do not challenge power relations and anthropocentrism at a macro-level. In the second section of this chapter I therefore turn my focus to deliberative theory. Developing a theory of interspecies deliberation requires not only investigating the

relations between existing interspecies dialogues and existing political practices, but also rethinking what counts as proper political agency – especially speech. I discuss the relation between democratic inclusion and different forms of speech, focusing on non-human animal languages and the embodied and habitual character of political communication in order to incorporate non-human animal voices. In the third section, I further focus on political interspecies communication and argue for the taking into account of the temporal, spatial, material and relational dimensions of the interaction. In section four, I move to translating these insights into existing democratic mechanisms by investigating the relevance of the systemic turn in deliberative democracy for incorporating non-human animal agency and interspecies encounters in existing democratic structures. A systemic view of deliberation has value for incorporating small-scale interspecies interactions into larger deliberative structures because it focuses on the whole system and brings out the connections between levels of deliberation. In this way, different human and non-human forms of knowledge and communication can be incorporated into larger existing structures. This can be a first step in incorporating political non-human animal voices in human politics, and the beginning of new forms of interspecies politics. I also return to goose/human relations in The Netherlands, both in order to show that interspecies deliberation already takes place, and to make some recommendations to improve it. Other animals speak and have their own languages, and incorporating this into politics might be less far-fetched than we think.

If we want to further develop interspecies political practices and institutions with other animals, we need to make the move from thinking about to thinking with non-human animals. One of the challenges for animal academics is to go beyond anthropocentrism in thinking, and to make the move from thinking about to thinking with other animals. In the first part of the conclusion, which can be read as the third case study, I explore how we can begin to do this. I do so by discussing my own experiences with other animals, in which I investigate their influence on my academic practice and on the wider academic world of which I am part. I focus on two examples: working as a volunteer at the *Stichting Amsterdamse Zwerfkatten* (The Amsterdam Foundation for Stray Cats), and literally bringing other animals into academia. In the second half of the conclusion I draw general conclusions and offer recommendations for further research together with other animals.

