
Book Review

Aaron S. Gross, *The Question of the Animal and Religion: Theoretical Stakes, Practical Implications* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 304 pp., \$30.00 (pbk), ISBN: 0-231-16751-2.

Aaron S. Gross's *The Question of the Animal and Religion* is a remarkable piece of scholarship that effectively reads the question of the animal into not only the history of religions, but the scholarly apparatus that has emerged to study and theorize religion. The book begins with a recounting of the AgriProcessors scandal of 2004—the undercover investigation by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)—that revealed a recurring procedure of ripping the trachea and esophagi out of cattle as they lay dying at a kosher slaughter factory in Iowa. Drawing on Jewish textual sources, Gross shows that the act of kosher slaughter has been defined on two dimensions of Jewish practice: the act of killing animals establishes humans above animals as the dominant stratum of creation, but *also* attaches human beings to a horizon of ethical concern that demonstrates our moral superiority to animal life. The practice of kosher slaughter, Gross's opening chapters demonstrate, ties a knot between the human, the animal, and the religious.

Chapter 3 surveys four different accounts of the nature of religion from Émile Durkheim, Ernst Cassirer, Mircea Eliade, and J.Z. Smith. Gross presents a patient, textured reading of each of these thinkers, neatly tracing their convergences and differences. Crucially, he shows that each of the first three figures defined religion with constant reference to the animal as that which is categorically excluded from religion. Animals, Gross demonstrates, 'have always been at the center of the modern and contemporary study of religion, albeit in a camouflaged and forgotten manner' (p. 61).

This pattern wavers when Gross turns to Smith's self-reflexive theory of how religion is constituted as an object of study. On the one hand, Gross poses a fascinating critique of Smith: by insisting on the critical force of locating the study of religion in the human sciences (rather than seeing it as divine), Smith depletes religion's status as a *sui generis* marker of human specialness but leaves the constructed border between humans and animals untouched. 'One could even argue that Smith...[has] failed to fully shift religion from the sphere of the divine sciences', Gross suggests. 'When we consider the extent to which Western thought has divinized the human[,]...to shift the study of religion from divine to human may really be little more than a shift from one understanding of the divine that ascribes attributes once considered exclusively divine, such as infinity, to the human—as in, for example, the idea of the infinitely open human that can never be fixed' (p. 83). Here, Gross aligns with other recent approaches (e.g., the work of Manuel Vásquez or Kevin O'Neill) that have highlighted limitations of Smith's groundbreaking work—in this case, his neglect of animals.

But Gross also reads Smith graciously, drawing on the rich repertoire of Smith's oeuvre to open avenues for reflection on religion and animals. Gross points especially to Smith's interest in the way that taking seriously non-modern epistemologies opens up the possibility of thinking about animal engagement with religion in more compelling ways (p. 85). This anchors Gross's

next chapter, in which he engages with the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold. Gross is interested in Ingold's work on non-European ontologies that traffic in neither the subject-object nor the human-animal divides. Although from the perspective of anthropologists such as Durkheim or Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, the failure to arrive at the human-animal distinction is a signal of the failure to graduate to 'rationality', Gross is interested in the way that these ontologies open up the possibility of bringing animals more actively into conversations about religion. Rather than raw materials of ritual, animals are recognized as religious actors in their own right, embedded, like humans, in fields of relationships with their worlds. This opens the possibility of animals as 'religious subjects' (p. 99).

With this on stage, Gross moves to a theoretical framework that links religion and animality back to the ethical questions that launched his study. In the philosopher Jacques Derrida, Gross finds a thinker who explores all of these themes as an interrelated cluster with reference to Jewish intellectual coordinates. For Derrida, all of these topics are linked by *différance*—the principle of differentiation that makes possible meaning, thought, and ethics. Whereas earlier Jewish ethicists such as Emmanuel Levinas had argued that animals could not be proper subjects of ethics, Derrida's notion of *différance* reintroduces the animal into the ethical fold, calling on us to question the very strategies we use to constitute ourselves as ethical subjects.

In the final synthetic chapter of the book, Gross returns to the AgriProcessors exposé, setting it against a backdrop of sources from the Torah, the Rabbinic tradition, the Talmud, and Jewish philosophy to demonstrate that it represents an extreme iteration of an ongoing oscillation of the motifs of 'dominion' and 'kindness' towards animals—the radical affirmation of the human religious right to dominion over animals. In a Derridean move, this of course also makes humans radically dependent on animals to constitute ourselves as religious subjects. Gross proposes that making visible the centrality of animals to religion allows us to see them as creatures with their own meaningful relationships with their worlds and their own capacity to shape our religiosity.

Gross concludes by turning to the ethical dimension of this claim. Although this book often resembles the philosophical and theoretical work of Jacques Derrida or J.Z. Smith, Gross advances beyond their method in his commitment to bringing his conceptual investigations into conjunction with a set of practical implications. This clearly comes naturally for Gross, who was a consultant involved in planning the PETA investigation at AgriProcessors (and personally reviewed five hours of illegal slaughter footage) and is himself the founder and CEO of the anti-factory farming advocacy group Farm Forward. In the book, he analyzes the correlations between the way we conceptualize animals, humans, and religion, and the way we live and eat.

Gross is particularly insightful when mapping the self-understanding of Jews with respect to Kosher slaughter—how the undercover video of brutal slaughter at AgriProcessors stunned American Jews and prompted new initiatives in considering the relationship between ethics and food. Gross's decision to focus on AgriProcessors as the book's central case study seems like a particularly apt critical move. In particular, the long, detailed summary of the animal abuse taking place at AgriProcessors helps bring animal pain directly into the critical conversation. Confronting his readers in a blunt but respectful way with the criminal actions of AgriProcessors highlights the network between how we think about animals and what is done to their bodies.

Gross's work could be classified as a work of Jewish philosophy—an address to Jews calling them to seize the intellectual tools of the Jewish tradition and take responsibility for what is done in their name. But Gross's readings are so subtle and so sophisticated—and so lucidly

presented—that the very line between secular and religious philosophy comes to waver, as it should. *The Question of the Animal and Religion* feels like a threshold space between the world of books and the world of living bodies, spotlighting the dynamic, mutually constituting relationship between our ideas and the ethical demands of animal faces, animal worlds, and animal religions.

Donovan Schaefer
Faculty of Theology and Religion
University of Oxford
donovan.schaefer@theology.ox.ac.uk