

1st Annual European Conference for Critical Animal Studies, University of Liverpool, United Kingdom, April 23rd 2010

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The first annual conference for Critical Animal Studies in Europe was held on Friday 23rd April 2010 at the University of Liverpool. The day was a resounding success with 48 activists and academics coming together to present papers and discuss issues within the broad theme of “*Anima(s) Matter(s): the Future of Critical Animal Studies*”. Unfortunately, three overseas delegates were unable to attend because their flights were grounded as a result of the recent eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland.

Alastair Currie, policy adviser for PETA UK, began proceedings with a presentation on the challenges faced by contemporary AR advocates, giving a summary of policy milestones and changing attitudes to animal issues in Britain. He used key performance indicators to make an argument for evidence-based advocacy and more research into the reasons why some people choose to become vegans while others don't and on which tactics are most effective in generating adherence to AR principles.

Dr. Dan Lyons of Uncaged presented his doctoral research into the evolution of British animal research policy, tracing its relation to particular animal ‘use’, ‘welfare’, and ‘AR’ ideologies. By way of a case study on xenotransplantation experiments on primates using pig organs, Dr. Lyons suggested that despite legislative changes, and particularly the 1986 Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act, the discourse very much remains one of animal ‘use’ as opposed to ‘welfare’. He concluded that the animal research lobby enjoys a large structural advantage and that the policy community only reacts symbolically to demands for greater attention to welfare issues. Dr. Lyons suggested that animal advocates ought to challenge and expose secrecy surrounding animal experiments to prevent the regulatory system from evading scrutiny.

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In the presentation that followed, delegates heard from *Professor Robert Garner* of the Politics Department at the University of Leicester, who sought to explore the relationship between cognitive capacities and moral entitlements. Prof. Garner noted that the AR movement is divided along ethical lines in terms of adherence to the ‘use position’, whereby the use of animals is categorically considered wrong irrespective of how they are treated whilst being used, or the ‘sentient position’, which holds that the infliction of suffering is the moral wrong. He holds that the use position is not necessary and requires us to accept an ethical position that is difficult to sustain with regards to the distinction between human and non-human animals’ autonomous capacities and their respective intrinsic versus instrumental interests in liberty. Prof. Garner argued that even if we accept these distinctions, and this leads us to adopt the sentient position, many of the goals of those who hold the use position can still be met by an application of the sentient position. He concluded that perhaps a goal of reducing suffering by engaging with public policy opportunities may be more attainable and effective than campaigning for veganism.

The fourth presentation was given by *Dr. Simon James*, Senior Lecturer in the Philosophy Department at the University of Durham. Dr. James suggested that ethology (the scientific study of animal behaviour) is as much a social science as it is a natural science by challenging the ‘objectivist model’ in ethology and juxtaposing it with a ‘hermeneutic model’. He argued that the objectivist model is an empirical impossibility because it challenges us to describe animal behaviour as a mere series of perceived movements and from there to attribute meaning to behaviour. Dr. James proposed that ethology is not about inferring meaning on naked objects, but that animals present themselves to us in meaningful ways and that the objectivist model forces us to purge animals of all their meaning.

Dr. Anat Pick, Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader in Film at the University of East London, presented an account of ‘creaturely ethics’ that seeks to transcend the liberal-humanist discourse of animal ‘rights’, which requires for certain criteria be met for animals to be given moral consideration. Drawing on the philosophical-theological work of Simone Weil, Dr. Pick proposed a discourse that transcends rights reasoning and recognises the shared vulnerability and finitude of all creaturely life as the foundation of our ethical obligations to other animals.

After lunch, *Jasmijn de Boo* from Animals Count, a political party that is contesting the 2010 British general elections and aims to positively influence the outcome, presented an interesting analysis of mainstream British political parties' policies on animals. Animals Count intends to raise the profile of animal issues in politics and hold other political parties to account. Jasmijn de Boo explained how the Green Party for instance has already agreed to make animal issues more prominent within their policies and campaigns as a result of discussions with Animals Count.

The presentation that followed looked at feminism, ethical veganism and animal rights. *Dr. Karen Morgan* is a researcher at Cardiff University, a co-founder of *vegatopia.org* and school speaker for the Vegan Society. She considered the linked oppressions of women and other animals and suggested that activists advocating for ethical veganism and animal rights can learn from the success of the feminist movement in taking their issues into the mainstream and from the close and productive relationships between feminists academics and activists.

Professor Celia Deane-Drummond, Professor of Theology and the Biosciences at the University of Chester, gave a talk on "Taking leave of the animal: transhumanity as transanimality", and argued that transhumanity as it manifests itself in various forms of biotechnology for instance is a form of secularised eschatology that leads to a weak understanding of human beings and is ultimately dehumanizing. She suggested that by trying to create 'human perfection', biotechnology aims to transcend animality and further distances us from other animals.

The penultimate paper of the day was presented by *Dr. Richard Twine*, Lecturer in Sociology at Lancaster University and President of ICAS. His paper sought to encourage a dialogue on the scope of Critical Animal Studies (CAS). He drew on Steve Best's critique of 'mainstream' animal studies as unhelpfully abstract and suggested that CAS should seek to respond to interlinked crises and struggles, break out of the academy and build alliances with social movements, critique "theory for theory's sake", and destabilise human/animal dualisms.

The final presentation was given by *Dr. Richard White*, Senior Lecturer in Geography at Sheffield Hallam University, and Editor-in-Chief of JCAS. His presentation brought together many of the day's themes and drew directly on Dr. White's research and experience of the activist-academic divide in the city of Sheffield. He explained what possibilities there were for critical engagement and made suggestions for creating more productive spaces that would encourage mutually beneficial exchanges to occur between academics and grassroots activists. This included the suggestion of creating an on-going radical seminar series that would take place in a non-academic space, and would be tasked with addressing and responding to a range of critical themes and intersections that relate to the crises facing humans, other animals and earth.

The day ended with a question and answer session and panel discussion on the strategies of the animal rights movement and ways to build alliances between activists and academics. Thanks must go to ICAS, the Society for Applied Philosophy, the Mind Association, and the Department of Philosophy at the University of Liverpool for kindly sponsoring this conference, and especially to *Stephen Clark*, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Liverpool for organising the event and arranging for vegan buffet lunch and refreshments throughout the day.