Jeremy Bell and Michael Naas, Eds.


As indicated by the title, *Plato’s Animals: Gadflies, Horses, Swans, and Other Philosophical Beasts* takes as its point of departure the observation that ‘Plato’s dialogues are thus teeming with animals of every kind’ (p. 2), in that ‘animal images, examples, metaphors, and tropes are used throughout the dialogues to develop not just Plato’s dialogical characters, but many of the most important aspects of his ontology, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and political theory’ (p. 2). Perhaps the most prominent instance of the appearance of the animal in Plato’s dialogue is the gadfly that Socrates invokes to explain himself to the Athenians in the *Apology*, but the essays collected in this volume show that this is just one among a multitude and variety of references to animals throughout the dialogues. The aim, then, of the volume is to ‘explain the presence of all these animals in the dialogues, their strategic or rhetorical necessity as well as their philosophical significance’ through putting ‘the question of the animal’ to Plato (p. 2).

What exactly is the ‘question of the animal’? In J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello*, the titular character delivers a lecture in which she urges her audience to reconsider how we think about animals. Thinking about animals scientifically or philosophically, she suggests, distorts rather than reveals the nature of animals; thinking of animals with sympathetic imagination, as the poet does, fares better than reason alone. For one thing, she claims, it is only within a philosophical/scientific framework that the animal appears radically other to the human; within a poetic framework, the matter appears otherwise.¹ In *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida makes the stronger claim that drawing a radical distinction between the human and the animal has been essential to philosophy and ‘constitutes philosophy as such’.² Furthermore, Derrida boldly asserts that no great philosopher has taken on ‘as a philosophical

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¹ This is a paraphrase of the remarks found in chapters three and four of *Elizabeth Costello*, but especially chapter three, pp. 72-80 (J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* [New York: Penguin 2003], pp. 59-115). These chapters were also published, with responses from Peter Singer, Marjorie Gerber, Wendy Doniger, and Barbara Smuts, as *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

question in and of itself, the question called that of the animal and of the limit between the animal and the human.3 Derrida himself addresses this question philosophically, and thereby blurs the distinction between philosophical and poetic ways of thinking, and thereby also the distinction between the human and the animal. This volume fruitfully follows suit.

The question of the animal, it seems to me, is ultimately a call to reconsider the distinctions, concepts, and methods that we take for granted when we do philosophy, by reflecting upon the appearance of animals in philosophical texts. Plato’s Animals admirably puts this question of the animal to Plato (p. 2). At its outset, in asking us to pay philosophical attention to what might appear to be ‘mere rhetorical embellishments of otherwise independent philosophical ideas and arguments’ (p. 2), Plato’s Animals highlights the complacency with which we tend to accept inherited interpretations and interpretive methods when it comes to Plato’s dialogues. Many of the essays do the same, some explicitly, by wondering aloud about a particular received interpretation, others implicitly, by illuminating new questions and new ways to interpret a feature of Platonic philosophy. To mention but a few examples: in ‘Animals and Angels’, Claudia Baracchi reflects upon the temporality of choice, as it is portrayed in the myth of Er, and draws out implications for the account of justice in the Republic as a whole; in ‘We the Bird-Catchers’, S. Montgomery Ewegen lends a fresh eye to how we are to understand logos and alētheia in the Platonic dialogues by revealing the connotations of prophetic swans to which Socrates compares himself in the Phaedo; and in ‘Animal Sacrifice in Plato’s Later Methodology’, Holly Moore invokes Greek practices of animal sacrifice to illuminate the method of collection and division, specifically by showing that both collection and division are guided by a prior, non-discursive, unity.

How does one put the question of the animal to Plato? Reflecting the diversity of arguments and topics that emerge when one’s attention is drawn to the multitude of Plato’s animals, the volume is organized in seven parts, each containing two essays that share a theme in common: the political animal, for example, or the engendered animal. Speaking more generally, the fourteen essays in the volume put the question of the animal to Plato in three ways. Five of the essays focus on the animal metaphors that describe Socrates (Naas, Thorp, Ewegen, Steeves, Bell), five consider the animals that appear in myths (Krell, Brill, Hyland, Baracchi, Gonzalez), and four draw out the implications of references to animals in Plato’s argumentation (Long, McCoy), method (Moore) or drama (Northwood). This is not to say that each writer uses the animal metaphors, mythic appearances, or references in the same way or with