Learning from *Teaching the Animal*

Introduction

*Teaching the Animal*, edited by Margo DeMello, program director for Human-Animal Studies at the Animals and Society Institute, is a unique and welcome resource for academics interested in incorporating human-animal studies (HAS) into their teaching repertoires. This text will be of use to scholars who intend to revise existing coursework or who wish to create new courses that engage with HAS. DeMello’s edited volume contains newly published essays by scholars from a broad spectrum of fields within the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. The text is divided by discipline, with several chapters in each of these three sections. Each chapter provides an overview of the scholar’s field, enabling those outside particular disciplines to understand core requirements and pedagogical issues. This also allows the reader to contextualize and assess the ways in which HAS can be incorporated into each field, thereby facilitating interdisciplinary engagement. Chapters also contain sample syllabuses, complete with suggested readings, assignments, evaluations, and instructional techniques. These syllabuses are invaluable resources for those who have already taught HAS courses or hope to do so in the future. DeMello’s contributors discuss the potential and/or actual challenges that can arise on the micro (classroom) and macro (university-wide) level as HAS is introduced to students and into university curricula. Although the bulk of the book is geared toward undergraduate teaching (with the exception of Waldau’s chapter on legal education and Risley-Curtiss’s on social work), many of the syllabuses are readily adaptable to graduate-level courses—and some even to advanced high school students.

Humanities

This section of *Teaching the Animal* provides a variety of rigorous discussions concerning the academic “status” of animal studies and the ways in which this field can be incorporated into cultural studies, film studies, history, literature, philosophy, religious studies, and gender studies. Of particular significance are the final three chapters: “Examined Lives: Teaching Human-Animal Studies in Philosophy,” by Mylan Engel Jr. and Kathie Jenni; “Religion and Other Animals,” by Paul Waldau; and “Teaching Difference: Sex, Gender, and Species,” by Lori Gruen and Kari Weil. The chapters on philosophy (Engel and Jenni) and gender studies (Gruen and Weil) contain veritable “minicourses” on the history of HAS within each discipline, pointing the reader toward key theorists, texts, and debates within the field. These brilliant and clearly written overviews supply the reader with an array of useful questions to pose as a means of orienting oneself toward HAS both pedagogically and theoretically. These authors navigate complex terrain with eloquence and invite instructors and other academics to engage directly with issues of dominance, hierarchy, speciesism, and bias. The benefit of HAS, these authors argue, is not only the important questions raised concerning the multifaceted relationships between nonhuman and human animals,
but the self-reflective activity that ensues once HAS has entered one’s discipline. In Gruen and Weil’s words, feminist animal studies highlights the “necessary entanglement of human with nonhuman—how we make and are made by each other” (p. 129), yet their observation is also useful as a critique of the history of disciplinary boundaries; the ways in which these boundaries are constituted, guarded, and maintained; and the necessity of HAS as a means of destabilizing such disciplinary “rules.”

Paul Waldau’s chapter entitled “Religion and Other Animals” echoes this beneficial process of challenging disciplinary conventions by discussing “the importance of unlearning” (p. 111) in the subfield of religion and animals. The consequences of this pedagogical technique have profound implications for the study of religion more broadly. In Waldau’s words, “myths about religion need to be pierced and seen for what they are, just as those human-centered features of our ignorance-based dismissal of any and all nonhuman animals need to be examined as carefully as possible. We shouldn’t be surprised that contemporary education is human-centered…. The only way to banish inherited ignorance is by taking responsibility for the quality of one’s own learning and knowledge” (p. 111). Waldau suggests that this self-awareness can be achieved by conducting a “cultural archeology” ("examining the history of one’s own cultural values") and a “personal archeology” (examing one’s own history with animals and uncovering the ways in which animals have been perceived and/or taught) (p. 110). The goal of these methods is critical thinking.

Social Sciences

Represented in this section are the disciplines of anthropology, geography, law, psychology, social work, and sociology. One chapter of note is “Animal Geographies: Exploring the Spaces and Places of Human-Animal Encounters” by Jody Emel and Julie Urbanik. The authors delineate the unique contributions of geography to HAS and give an overview of the deep history within geography of studying animals in environments that are human-controlled. More recent contributions to the subfield of animal geography come from cultural geography’s engagement with theories of the relationality of earthly existence and knowing, political economy’s interrogation of power and exploitation in (capitalist) systems of value accumulation, and political ecology’s study of many marginalized human groups’ traditional ecological knowledge and participation in conflicts over species conservation. Emel and Urbanik highlight how animal geography scholarship is permeated by ethical questions that arise through examining “who is encountering whom” (p. 202) and where, how ideas of animal subjectivity/agency are formed, and how “borders” between the human and the nonhuman are drawn. Emel and Urbanik provide a syllabus for a stand-alone animal geography course titled “The Keeping of Animals.”

This essay provides an excellent review of the subfield of animal geography, its theoretical underpinnings, and its contributions to HAS scholarship. If there is something lacking, however, it is that somewhat less detail is given with respect to teaching resources and guidelines, as compared with the broader explication of the field. That being said, the authors include very practical and helpful guidelines for meeting potential course-development and pedagogical challenges.