

swath of Europe's eastern borderlands, offers several narratives of its past. Though they speak of the same place, each of these narratives is radically different, depending on the narrator's ethnic-religious identity. For the Jews, a town like Buczacz was a venerable old *shtetl*. For the Ukrainians, it was part of their ancestral lands, ruled and exploited by the Poles and their Jewish agents. For the Poles, it was a borderland they had civilized and protected from savage invaders from the east and the south, an outpost of European culture and Roman Catholic faith.

While undertaking this research, I became fascinated as well with the current Ukrainian politics of memory, and how they relate to a past largely unknown to the present population. My ruminations on this issue culminated in a book, which Princeton University Press is publishing this fall, *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine*, a journey in time and space into this cradle of Jewish mysticism, Ukrainian nationalism, and Polish Romanticism. Since its independence, Ukraine has been obliterating the last remnants of Jewish civilization from this region and replacing them with the symbols of a resurgent local nationalism. The book documents cemeteries turned into markets, synagogues made into garbage dumps and sports halls, unmarked sites of mass killings, and staircases made out of gravestones. Conversely, it also reveals the rapid erection of statues, memorials, and museums that not only celebrate the Ukrainian nation but also glorify nationalist leaders who collaborated with the Nazis in the murder of the Jews. The book includes sixty out of hundreds of photographs I took in order to record this second destruction as well as the rapidly vanishing remnants of a world that is no more.

Harriet Ritvo

on the animal turn

Learned attention to animals is far from new. The scientific study of animals stretches back at least to Aristotle. Livestock have attracted the interest of scholars with either a practical or theoretical interest in agriculture. Critics of art and literature have explicated animal symbols and animal themes. Historians

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have chronicled important animal-related institutions, from humane societies to zoos. People distinguished in their association with animals, whether as breeders or hunters or scientists, have had their biographers – as have some animals distinguished in their own right, from Jumbo to Seabiscuit.

Nevertheless, during the last several decades, animals have emerged as a more frequent focus of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, as quantified in published books and articles, conference presentations, new societies, and new journals. With this change in degree has come a potential change in kind. As it has expanded the range of possible research topics in a number of disciplines, the animal turn has also suggested new relationships between scholars and their subjects, and new understandings of the role of animals in the past and at present.

Most scholars who specialize in the study of animals believe that human beings fall within that category. This is as true of scientists, who locate *Homo sapiens* within the primate order (along with lemurs, monkeys, and other apes), as it is of humanists (whether they are posthumanist or not), who claim kindred in footnotes or parentheses. (Here is my own declaration: I share the view that people are animals.)

But, often, such assertions seem defensive, even strident. Indeed, the recurrent need to make them reveals persistent semantic and cultural tension, as does the reluctance of many taxonomists to relinquish the distinction between the family *Pongidae*, including bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans, and the more exclusive family *Hominidae*, reserved for australopithecines and humans.

The entry for ‘animal’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* similarly distills the

uncomfortable conjunction of similarity and otherness. The first sense, illustrated with learned examples ranging from John de Trevisa to Thomas Henry Huxley, includes all living things that are not plants. The second sense, illustrated mostly with literary quotations, is less inclusive and more popular: “In common usage: one of the lower animals; a brute, or beast, as distinguished from man.”

No matter how careful their definitions or how forceful their assertions, scholars are inevitably influenced by the common usage of the terms they deploy, as well as by their more rarefied and specialized senses. With regard to the study of animals, this often means that explicit claims of unity (humans are animals) paradoxically work to reinforce the human-animal boundary they are intended to dissolve. That is to say, such claims incorporate a grudging acknowledgment that this boundary is widely recognized and powerfully influential. Why else would it be continually necessary to deny its validity or remind ourselves of its arbitrariness? Further, like clichéd metaphors that turn out to be only half-dead, such claims may bring buried assumptions into the full light of consciousness, thus inspiring articulate contradiction. Some scholars within the emergent field of animal studies call themselves ‘posthumanists,’ but there is a sense in which that label embodies the same kind of wishful thinking that the term ‘late capitalism’ does.

The story does not end with this paradox, however. Cognitive dissonance seems to be among the least troublesome of human mental conditions. Assertions of extreme difference – for example, that animals lack souls, intelligence, or even feeling – have traditionally coexisted with implicit acknowledgments of similarity, even identity. People

who would resist the notion of shared phylogeny have often embraced metaphorical kinship. Thus the apparatus of animal pedigree emerged in Britain – not coincidentally – at about the same time as published records of elite human ancestral lines, distilled in volumes often referred to as ‘stud books.’ With regard to human participation, the animal-oriented books were less restrictive. Breeders and fanciers of relatively undistinguished personal extraction could bask in the genealogical glow of their chattels. Contemporary examples of parallel slip-page abound, as the movie *Best in Show*, a satiric look at high-end canine competition, demonstrated several years ago, and as the marathon telecasts of the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show display annually.

Understandings of animal behavior have been similarly inconsistent. In the nineteenth century, for example, as now, some pets really did belong to human families in all but the narrowest biological sense. At the other end of the affective scale, the relationships between some working animals and their owners strongly resembled the relationships between some human laborers and their employers. The docility and loyal devotion of dogs and horses were praised in terms equally applicable to human servants. Such behavior could also be appreciatively characterized as ‘sagacity’ or even ‘intelligence.’

The intellectual powers of the animals anatomically closest to humans inspired more complex responses, but the conventions for displaying apes and monkeys unambiguously emphasized resemblance. Zoo apes and sideshow monkeys were dressed in jackets and dresses; ate from utensils and drank from cups; and appeared to enjoy cigarettes and illustrated books. The guardians of public morality kept a watchful eye on animal

attractions, worried that they were potential sites of unedifying behavior on the part of both the exhibited creatures (so that the feeding of live prey to carnivores was prohibited) and the raucous human observers (so that the admission of the lower classes into zoos was initially controversial). The pages of many natural history books and travel accounts contained still more suggestive evidence of closeness: reports, speculative but compelling, of the sexual interest of wild apes in human females. Sometimes such resonances were figured as metonymy, emphasizing similarity, and sometimes they were figured as metaphor, emphasizing difference. But whether the animal analogue was wild or domesticated, primate or ungulate or carnivore, continuity and discontinuity were inextricably intertwined.

As always, some animals were more equal than others. The likeliest targets of unconscious identification and projection were the animals who were most like people, either because they looked like people or because they were members (whether underprivileged or hyperprivileged) of the same society. Animals outside these overlapping circles of familiarity were much less likely potential surrogates. They might serve as the subjects of scientific study and amateur fascination, but with a few exceptions – the social insects (ants and bees) whose economic organizations seemed to replicate those of people, or the aquatic creatures that, in the spirit of “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” could be seen to figure in prenatal human development as well as in remote human ancestry – the interest was of a different kind.

Indeed, it was so different that it brings the use of the blanket term ‘animal’ to cover them all into question. This expansive and promiscuous usage epitomizes a serious difficulty that arises

when we abrogate the conventional dichotomy between humans and other animals: the elimination of one boundary seems to require the establishment of another or others, although the location of replacement boundaries is equally problematic. If no obvious gap can be discerned between most kinds of animals and those apparently closest to them, large gaps emerge when very dissimilar animals are juxtaposed. The claim that people are like cats or beavers or hippopotami (that they belong in the same category with those kinds of creatures) is not the same as the claim that they are like jellyfish or fleas or worms. Both claims are interesting, and both seem true to me, but they make sense in different contexts.

Confusion about the appropriate context – or intentional misunderstanding of which sense of ‘animal’ is being invoked – can lead to the kind of *reductio ad absurdum* that often undermines animal advocacy, at least when animal advocates are not preaching to the choir. It is relatively easy to explain why pigs and dogs should receive the same legal and moral consideration, even if it is much less easy to ensure that they actually receive it. Resistance to acknowledging suine claims to humane treatment tends to rest on pragmatic (mostly economic) grounds.

But when, under the general ‘animal’ rubric, claims to consideration are made on behalf of creatures that share fewer human capacities, resistance becomes stronger and more principled. If defended in the same terms as those of our fellow mammals (or even our fellow vertebrates), the rights of lobsters, oysters, or termites offer ready targets for ridicule. (Of course, this is a historically specific observation. Two centuries ago Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* was travestied on the grounds

that if rights were granted to women, farmyard animals would be next in line.)

The most sweepingly inclusive (or powerfully reductive) categories thus make more sense for scientists than they do for scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Biology has offered increasingly detailed and fascinating accounts of the genetic similarities that connect the smallest, simplest animals with the largest and most complex – and, indeed, that unify all the eukaryotes, whether animal, plant, or fungus. But such insights have had little impact on everyday understanding and behavior at present, and their retroactive influence is still more limited.

The study of human culture, whether contemporary or historical, requires a focus that is at once larger and smaller. For understanding the relationships between people and other animals, the fact of similarity is important, but so also is the extent of similarity, which tends to be a matter of opinion or perception. It varies from place to place and from time to time. For example, although the general outline of mammalian taxonomy has remained reasonably constant for several centuries, Anglophones tend to feel closer to gorillas and chimpanzees now than they did in the late nineteenth century. Meanwhile, the once-common notion that dogs, or even horses, might bear a closer resemblance to people in important ways has largely disappeared.

Thus, as the animal turn breaks new ground, it also revisits perpetually unanswered questions. Nor are such questions confined to the realm of scholarship. The standing of animals, even those closest to us, still presents vexed moral, legal, and political issues, and the range of possible positions is not very different from the range that was available to Victorians. Within my own expe-

*Note by
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rience as a scholar, the study of animals has become more respectable and more popular in many disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, but it is far from the recognized core of any of them. It remains marginal in most disciplines, and (not the same thing) it is often on the borderline between disciplines. This awkward location or set of locations is, however, the source of much of its appeal and power. Its very marginality allows the study of animals to challenge settled assumptions and relationships – to re-raise the largest issues – both within the community of scholars and in the larger society to which they and their subjects belong.