

BOOK REVIEWS, NOTES AND COMMENTS

Edited by

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**PICCOLO LIBRO
DELLE CURIOSITÀ
SULLA SCIENZA**
**L'eccezione che
non si studia a scuola**
Paolo Gangemi
Milano: Sironi Editore; 2016.
208 p.
ISBN: 978-88-518-0268-4
€ 17,90

*[A booklet on the oddities
of science.
The exception we do not study
at school]*

Are scientists similar to any other person? The answer is obviously yes, (I cannot understand how any job can significantly modify our human nature) but the (false) mythology of science as a “superior” activity and the home of a sort of laical transcendence could make the question less obvious than it is.

To put science “on the ground” and to convince lay people that scientists are human beings (and thus capable of irony, fond of funny stories and able to connect their professional activity to their personal tastes) is the goal of Paolo Gangemi’s book.

Paolo Gangemi is a mathematician, thus he views science from a very “eccentric” position with respect to the great majority of scientists. Experimental scientists face each day the effect of noise and the radical uncertainty of their results, on the contrary, a mathematician thinks uncertainties are exceptional oddities interrupting the basically “flat and granted” texture of science. This is why the sub-title of the book is *L'eccezione che non si studia a scuola* (The exception we do not study at school). Paolo Gangemi seems to think the best way to make lay people to consider a scientist as an “human being” and not a deity is to collect all the “oddities” that put “science at the human level”.

As I said before, I do not think science really needs such an operation, I never imagined science as a deity, but this does not eliminate the fact Paolo Gangemi writes in a very captivating way and his anecdotes are of sure interest for the reader.

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**UMANI E ANIMALI:
QUESTIONI DI ETICA**
Simone Pollo
Roma: Carocci editore; 2016.
148 p.
ISBN 978-88-430-8465-4
€ 14,00

*[Humans and animals: ethical
issues]*

The debate on animal experimentation in this country has been often characterized by a very simple dichotomy: in favour or against. It is a clash between questions of principle, where the very idea of animal wellbeing gets lost in the process somewhere. In this battle between opposite fields, no space seems to be left for a mediation between the different positions, or for a real well-thought discussion on the pros and cons of this scientific practice. This book offers precisely this kind of reflection.

Simone Pollo, a moral philosopher from University “Sapienza” in Rome, is interested in animal ethics and in a naturalistic view of morality. As a starting point, Pollo affirms that our biological history, that is, what makes us biologically as well as culturally human, is inevitably intertwined with the presence of other animals in our lives. Therefore, it does not make much sense to simply label as “wrong” and then dismiss a practice (for example, animal experimentation), because this practice is part of our biologically relevant interaction with other animals. Obviously, it does not mean that such practice must not be ethically scrutinized and improved, but it cannot be just denied in principle. Then, animals are just part of what we are, and the human activities which “use” animals are necessarily characterized by different aspects, not just technical ones. For example, farming practices are related to the economic growth of a country, or the use of animals in biomedical experiments is related to society demands and expectations. The relationships we have with the other animals are complex and multi-layered, characterized by different emotions and feelings: we develop strong emotional bonds with them.

The book opens with a general chapter describing the ubiquity of animals in our lives: everything we touch, everything we eat has had to do with an animal, in a way or another. Then, the next chapters recount the history of the interaction between philosophy and, let say, animal rights. In particular, how different schools

of thought consider the position of the animals in relation to humans, and therefore, what kinds of rights and duties we have to them, is discussed. In telling us the history of the philosophical thought on the moral status of non-human animals, the author clearly indicates a “pre-” and a “post-” Darwin temporal mark, a distinction which help us to better understand how the Darwinian concept of continuity has shaped some of the most recent views of our relationships with animals, dismantling a classical anthropocentric vision of nature.

But what I really found both engaging and convincing in this part, is the critique of the classical animal ethics view championed by Peter Singer and Tom Regan, and others. The author affirms that those theories, the utilitarian (Singer) and the deontological approach (Regan), are inadequate to offer an analysis of our relationships with animals and, even more, to propose a morally functional code of behavior towards our fellow animals. Our relationships with animals cannot be dictated by some abstract rules coming from abstract thought. Although logically and formally correct, such theories cannot account for the complex world of feelings and emotions we share with other animals and characterize our relationships with them. These feelings are crucial in guiding and determining our actions with and towards animals. The important point, and this could attract strong criticisms to the author, is that “specism” has its own evolutionary foundation. It is a courageous position, and I personally agree. We care for our fellow humans, more than for other individuals belonging to different species. This is considered to be wrong by classical ethical theory: species membership does not have to translate in moral privileged over other species. It is as wrong, as it is “racism” and “sexism”. Instead, the author gives us some intellectual tools to read “specism” in a different way, which does not mean to automatically accept it, but to better understand where it comes from.

and then to decide what position to take. It suggests our minds cannot really accept the idea that all of the species are the same, and they have the same rights. We are naturally driven to consider other humans are inevitably more similar to us, than other animals.

I am involved in different issues related to the use animals in laboratory research so, if you can forgive me, I obviously found the part on animal experimentation especially illuminating. But this little book is much more than this. Pollo approaches also the issues related to meat consuming, and animals in the wild. I must admit that, here and there, I found some of the parts on vegetarianisms and “self-perfection” path difficult to follow, and sometimes slightly convoluted in some passages, as well as too simplistic in others. But these are very minor itches. In general, the style is very clear and readable.

I agree with nearly all that is written in this book. One of the the passages I appreciated the most was at the beginning of the text, where Pollo informs us that his book will not tell us what to do or how to behave. It is a rare and very welcome thing, considering that we are talking about a book on moral conduct and ethical choices.

I think that this volume should be read by anybody interested in our relationship with other animals, and by professionals working daily with animals in research laboratories or farm animals industry. I would recommend in particular this book to be read by students approaching disciplines like biology and, in particular, those interested in working with animal models in basic and/or translational medicine. Please, before taking a position, give yourself a chance to escape the traps of a sterile and, frankly, boring battlefield.

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