Interview

*The **Interviews / Symposia** format acts as a platform for conversations, where participants discuss the original work of an author, practitioner, policy maker, or activist. As such, these entries do not offer an outlet for original research, but instead reflect the personal views of the participants*

Doing Politics with Animals

An interview with Sue Donaldson

Eva Meijer

Introduction: In *Animals and the Right to Politics*, Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka challenge the wide-spread assumption that only humans can engage in politics and argue that non-human animals should be recognized as political subjects and as members of political communities entitled to collective self-determination. They connect recent work in political theory about agency and community with recent insights from biology and ethology about nonhuman animal cultures and societies to develop an embodied and situated idea of doing politics. The book explores not only the theoretical underpinnings of animal democracy, but also sketches how these insights could inform practical work in wildlife conservation projects, animal sanctuaries, and urban design.

P/A **Sue, thank you for accepting my invitation to have a dialogue about your new book. Before we discuss the book itself, I would like to know a bit more about the multispecies relationships and encounters that shape your life and thinking. Could you say something about the role that nonhuman animals play in your writing process, or your life more generally?**

SD Thank you, Eva, for inviting us to this dialogue!

Will and I are very lucky to live on the border of the Frontenac Arch biosphere, a unique geological region of the Canadian Shield dotted with lakes and rocky outcroppings, populated by many kinds of animals and plants, and replete with fascinating human and nonhuman histories. We experience multiple animal encounters every day – around our home which is perched in the woods above a lake, and in our explorations of the many local trails and parks. Some animals we get to know individually; most of them we enjoy more anonymously from a distance. They are always top of mind and have profoundly shaped our thinking about human-animal relations. And over the years we have lived with many dogs. Our two most important relationships have been with Codie (1990-2005) and Roxie (since 2016). Both have spurred us in their different ways to think more seriously about what it means to share a life on equal terms, and to engage in world-making together.

P/A **In *Animals and the Right to Politics* you paint a very lively picture of multispecies politics: you discuss many forms of nonhuman animal political agency and democratic processes, both in their own species-specific communities and in shared communities with humans and other animals. Whenever I discuss these topics with philosophers or other academics, I often find they have a very different understanding of the beings we call 'animals'. You capture this – unfortunately still common – view of other animals with the term 'minimal animal', that you borrow from Dominique Lestel. Could you explain what you mean with the term and why you find it useful when thinking about politics?**

SD There are many different versions of the 'minimal animal', operating in different domains. In science, there is the highly reductive idea, which reigned for much of the 20th century but is now in rapid retreat, that animals are basically mindless, instinct-driven or conditioned creatures. In the broader public culture, there is the idea that animals are separated from humans by a qualitative abyss; animals are those in contrast to whom humanity is defined. But our primary focus in the book is with the way the minimal animal appears in work by animal studies and anti-anthropocentric theorists — amongst people who see themselves as advocates for animals. For the most part, these thinkers acknowledge the idea that humans are animals; they recognize the fact that animals are complex thinking and feeling beings, and that animal worlds are incredibly diverse including sophisticated social and cultural dimensions. Nevertheless, for strategic reasons they tend to set aside these richer features of animals' lives and focus instead solely on their capacity to suffer. In effect, they emphasize "the least that animals can be and still merit moral concern". For example, to make the case that the extreme violence and suffering humans impose on animals is wrong, advocates often appeal solely to the indisputable fact that animals feel pain, and avoid making any claims about whether animals have agency, or whether they have societies, cultures and politics. Because these dimensions of animals' lives are more disputed or less well studied, advocates think it is strategically more effective to set them aside.

Will and I think this is the wrong strategy since it implicitly reinforces limited ideas of who animals are and how they can be harmed. And it occludes critical information that might stimulate more transformative ways of thinking about human-animal relations. Another form of the minimal animal appears in those strands of animal studies that have been influenced by actor network theory, new materialism and other posthumanist approaches to thinking about agency. To the extent these theories consider animal agencies, they tend to do so in a flattening way that lumps animal agencies in with the agencies of plants, weather events, material objects, and so on. If theories of right relations with animals are based on what animals share with plants, ecologies and the inanimate world, they will miss many of the most important questions of animal rights, which need to attend to the specificity of different kinds of animal subjectivities and animal communities.

P/A **In the book you propose another view of both nonhuman animals, and political agency. Drawing on research in biology and ethology, you give many examples of practices in the social and political lives of animals, including about their culture, sociality, and mindedness. I for example loved the story of the olive baboons, who changed their culture to be more peaceful after the high status and aggressive males in the community died because of tuberculosis. And I did not know about the Greater Anis (birds from the cuckoo family), who form groups with unrelated adults to raise their children together. They are with six or more birds, who during the day meet in circles facing inward to speak to each other. Their meetings have different functions, they may coordinate the work of that day, but also function as a way to seek comfort as a group after chasing off a predator. These stories foster the reader's imagination – they show how much there is going on around us – but also inform your understanding of political agency and community. Your discussion of political agency is very thorough and convincing, not just with regard to nonhuman animals, also when it comes to how and why human agents act, and how we can improve political and social life for everyone. I remember that when *Zoopolis* came out, you expressed hesitation about how we should approach the question of animal agency, but now you present a clear picture. For those readers unfamiliar with the debate, could you briefly sketch what kind of political agents nonhuman animals are, and how your thinking about animals has influenced your ideas about (political) agency more generally?**

SD I'm glad you liked the discussion of agency! You and I have discussed this question in depth over the years in ways that have been very helpful to me. Many critics of *Zoopolis* were unpersuaded by Will's and my account of animal political agency. Most of these critics share what Sharon Krause calls a 'sovereign agency' view in which being an agent involves forming a conscious intention to affect the world in a deliberate way. And on that view, political agency requires a conscious intention to change political relationships, practices, institutions or futures — a view which seems to exclude nonhuman animals who probably don't think about politics in abstract terms. Animals might engage in various forms of resistance and negotiation but if they don't consciously address these actions to political authorities or processes, then they are merely acting out, not engaging in "political agency". We think this sovereign view is too limited, and that Krause's alternative relational and distributed view of agency as "the affirmation of one's subjective existence through concrete action in the world" (Krause 2013) does a better job of capturing the ways in which members of a political community can bring about political change that affirms their subjectivity and supports

their flourishing through willed and purposeful action even though that might not be consciously understood as 'political'. So, in the case of the olive baboons, the mass death of dominant males allowed the surviving baboons to experience a different political reality, one which they preferred and then actively reproduced and sustained through their own ongoing choices and actions. Presented with alternatives through embodied experience, not abstract deliberation, they made a judgement and acted on it as a group. This case shows the importance of the political 'holding environment', a concept (applied to political theory by Bonnie Honig and others) which plays an important role in our theory. Social, ecological and material environments enable and disable individual and collective agencies in complex ways, creating multiple openings and barriers for individuals and groups to "affirm their subjective existence through concrete action in the world". In the case of the baboons, the absence of powerful and domineering males created an opening in which the behavioural choices of other members of the community could shape their shared culture in a new direction. The preferences and choices of the survivors, in conjunction with a new affordance in their circumstances, enabled them to reshape the political environment. Or consider the catastrophic effect on elephant communities when human hunters kill off experienced and knowledgeable elders, leading to fragmentation, loss of resiliency, and psychosocial breakdown. Animals' ability to function as effective communities — to survive, to flourish, to maintain their forms of co-operation and care and integration of new members – is undermined because their collective agency depends on community-level practices (teaching, leading, cooperating) that must be continuously reproduced through social and cultural practices and relationships. The fact that this collective agency can break down due to outside destructive forces shows that it was operating all along, even if the elephants didn't think of themselves as engaging in political processes of leadership, collective decision-making, and so on. As minded individual subjects living in community they engage in politics - indeed, they have to do politics to survive.

P/A **This question is closely connected to the last one, because you not only propose another view of nonhuman animals, but also of 'politics'. One important formulation in *Animals and the Right to Politics* is Bernard Williams' 'first question of politics', which comes down to choosing peaceful relations over violence. You contrast this idea of politics with other views, like the 'capacity contract'. Why should we understand politics like this when thinking about non-human animals and what is wrong with the capacity contract?**

SD Our goal in the book is not just to document the empirical evidence that animals engage in politics, but to defend the normative claim that animals have a right to politics. And this means we need to show that animals are competent at politics, and that animal politics is worthy of respect. If animal politics was just about domination and 'rule by bullies,' as Frans de Waal calls this view, then it's not clear why humans would be under an obligation to respect and enable it. There might be many instrumental reasons for doing so – e.g. to conserve stable populations – but we are interested in why animals have a right to collective self-determination. And this is where Williams' first question of politics comes in. According to Williams, the first question of politics is whether a group is able to organize its social life and make collective decisions peacefully and consensually in ways its members accept, or whether social order is only maintained through coercion and violence. Insofar as a group is able to live together and make decisions peacefully in ways its members accept, then it has solved "the first question" of politics, and this is an important normative achievement that

should be respected. Viewed this way, many animal groups successfully address the first question of politics. As with human politics, this is a matter of degree, and varies over time. Animal politics can be more or less legitimate, achieving greater and lesser degrees of satisfaction, security and allegiance amongst the governed. And animal groups can change their practices over time, often achieving levels of coordination, cooperation and care that put many human societies to shame. This is not to say they are consciously striving to conceive and create 'just' societies, or that they are all egalitarian, or that they succeed in protecting the individual rights of all their members. But in thinking about ideal justice we shouldn't forget that answering the first question of politics is an enormous achievement in itself, and animals' allegiance to their own ways of doing this gives us powerful reasons to respect and support their right to politics rather than imposing alien rule on them.

This conception of legitimacy – which focuses on whether group members have a sense of belonging/allegiance and willingly orient themselves to the group and its practices even as they contest specific norms - is different from conventional accounts of political legitimacy that invoke the idea of a social contract amongst equals. According to contractualist political theory, political authority is only legitimate if it can meet certain standards of rational justification amongst free and equal citizens. But as Stacy Clifford Simplican has argued, this contract is in fact an exclusionary 'capacity' contract. The contractualist framework according to which legitimate governance is achieved through agreement amongst equals to govern themselves through mutual consent requires sophisticated cognitive capacities for understanding, deliberating and mutually justifying the nature of society in abstract terms. As Simplican argues, this model divides society into two groups those who rule, and those who are ruled. Those who are deemed capable of contracting are granted the power not only to govern themselves, but also the right to govern those they deem to fall short in cognitive capacity. In this way animals (and others who don't engage in abstract forms of deliberation and mutual justification) are subjects or wards of self-appointed humans who take it upon themselves to act 'on behalf of' animals, rather than respecting their own right to, and capacities for, self-government. This is obviously problematic in terms of legitimacy, since it is unconcerned with how and why animals can and might shape the process of self-government; it also renders invisible the myriad ways in which animals exercise forms of political agency not captured through ideas like contract.

So, I suppose a way of summing this up is that a normative theory of a right to politics requires that politics be more than just 'rule by bullies', but the alternative to rule by bullies is not idealized models of contractual agreement, since that inevitably excludes not only animals but also many humans. Instead we articulate a conception of legitimate politics tied to ideas of trust, belonging, allegiance, willing participation and the renunciation of violence.

P/A **One of the things I love about *Animals and the Right to Politics* is how much, and how seriously, you engage with the work of other scholars in the field. *Zoopolis* has arguably been the most influential book in the political turn in animal ethics, but in addition your presence at conferences and workshops, the events you have organized and other projects you set up, like the postdoc position at Queen's University in Kingston and the A.P.P.L.E. (Animals in Philosophy, Politics, Law and Ethics) research center, have also been really important for political scholarship about nonhuman animals. In theory and practice your work has helped many scholars forward (it surely benefitted my own work, which is something I am very grateful for).**

This commitment to the community is visible in this book as well. In all parts, but especially in the first part of the book, where you set the stage by examining different strands of thought in the political turn, and responding to them. You address the arguments against your position that are made from a) what you call 'wardship' perspective (which you refute with the discussions of agency and politics that we touched upon above), b) the resistance stance (which focuses on resistance against the state, and nonhuman animal resistance, and is often found in critical animal studies), and c) cosmopolitanism.

There are many questions here that are relevant to the political animal community, but of course everyone should read the book to find the specifics. Here I want to focus on the refinement of your stance in *Zoopolis* about liberal democracy, with which you respond to both the resistance and the cosmopolitan critiques. One of the criticisms of *Zoopolis*, from different theoretical directions, was that liberal democracy is exclusionary and not a good starting point for doing politics with other animals. Of course, you already give a thorough critique of existing liberal democracies in *Zoopolis*, and propose a thorough transformation. But in *Animals and the Right to Politics* you address this in more detail, also with regard to the Westphalian nation state and the concept sovereignty. How has your idea of political membership changed since *Zoopolis*, and can you explain what you mean by bounded membership and the right to a place?

SD Thank you for your kind words, Eva. Let me answer this way. In both *Zoopolis* and the new book, we strongly defend the right of societies (human and animal) to exercise self-government in relation to themselves and in relation to a territory. And this requires protection from external threats like invasion, despoliation, or colonization (whether alien rule is imposed with benign or despotic intent). In *Zoopolis*, we referred to these rights of self-government in relation to territory, and protections from external threats, as a form of "sovereignty", and argued that many wild animal communities should be seen as sovereign in this sense. However, in retrospect, our use of the term sovereignty in *Zoopolis* to refer to wild animals' rights of self-government was perhaps unhelpful. We tried to emphasize that our conception of sovereignty doesn't entail ideas of unitary and absolute authority, and that it is consistent with the kinds of plural, nested and overlapping authority more characteristic of multi-nation federations and other real-world examples. But we didn't develop this story very far, and some readers interpreted us as defenders of the status quo Westphalian nation state, or indeed of a neoliberal state, carceral state, or settler colonial state. We hope that the new book makes clearer that our commitment is not to the idea of state sovereignty, but to ideas of collective self-government. Meaningful self-government, we argue, requires an enduring and relatively stable community that is more than (and other than) a set of 'affected interests' aggregated for the purpose of one decision or another. Self-governing communities have membership rules that distinguish members from outsiders, and as we noted earlier, the first task of (self-governing) politics is to develop norms and practices of peaceful cooperation amongst group members. This doesn't mean that outsiders (i.e. members of separate communities) are 'lesser', or that their rights can be ignored. To be legitimate, self-governing bounded communities must deal responsibly and fairly with outsiders and external communities — and we discuss a number of different ideas and models about how different self-governing groups can

co-exist on fair terms. But the need for justice between communities does not replace the importance of self-government within communities.

We believe that defending just forms of bounded self-government is especially important for animal communities, given how their internal politics depends, arguably more than humans, on a holding environment of relative stability of social relations, manageable rates of change to ecologies and known geographies — and given how their forms of life are often acutely vulnerable to outside disruption.

So our idea of the importance of membership and collective self-determination hasn't changed, but we no longer describe this in the language of sovereignty. Instead, our vision of how to reconcile bounded self-government with fair co-existence draws upon many sources, such as Indigenous conceptions of the interdependency of groups in relation to each other and the Land, ideas of the commons and 'uncommons', and recent work on rights to place and the need for place based polities to supplement and overlap communities of social membership. We also consider the many fascinating ways that animal communities have developed, like fission-fusion processes, for 'right-sizing' political community.

P/A **Many humans find it hard to imagine how we can live together differently with other animals. In the last part of the book you discuss different applications, like multispecies commons, wild animal diplomacy and microboards. These proposals share a commitment to taking the perspectives of other animals seriously, as well as creating opportunities for them and humans to interact differently. You show that it is perfectly doable to begin building other relationships and forms of community. I always think human attitudes are the biggest obstacle in creating better relations with other animals, not what other animals are capable of. How should we improve our political relationships with other animals, and what obstacles do you see?**

SD I often think about how humans are not so different from the olive baboons. It's very hard for us, too, to 'think ourselves' into different worlds and relationships. It's much easier if we can experience them to really 'get it'. In our work Will and I put a lot of weight on 'experiments in living' — on ground up explorations of alternatives of multispecies community that give us, and other animals, a chance to experience possibilities together, moving incrementally towards different futures. Our idea of politics centres an idea of political participation which is all about changing oneself and others in the process of concrete and embodied action and interaction, not just the exchange of ideas. Many people locate the problem in human nature and human subjectivities. These do indeed pose obstacles. But our whole theory is premised on the importance of thinking about the holding environment and how it shapes agency. Our focus is on changing the holding environment with the belief that human subjectivities will be altered in that process.

P/A **I see philosophy as a practice that can show us the world in a different way. In both your books you do not just provide arguments but also sketch another picture of reality. What is the role of the imagination in your project?**

SD Well, now I have to contradict myself. Having just said that what is really needed is grounded community building, instead we've gone and written another book! The more imaginative parts of the book, like the story of politics as it unfolds in the multispecies democracy of Riverside, are an attempt to bridge this gap, and to get readers

excited about running out and starting their own new forms of multispecies community. Even better, though, would be to go out and build these communities.

P/A **Do you have any advice for young scholars, activists and artists who want to create a better world for nonhuman animals?**

SD I've lived my life in the world of ideas (and facts!) and writing. It's a wonderful place and I think everyone should spend time there. And being philosophically inclined, perhaps it was inevitable for me (especially since writing with Will is better than heroin). But if I were 30 years old today, I think I would take a different path. I might study design, architecture, regenerative farming, planning, engineering — something to equip me with more concrete problem-solving skills, with tools for building multispecies and animal-friendly communities from the ground up, and for being more effective politically in bringing these about.

About Sue Donaldson

Sue Donaldson is a member of the Department of Philosophy, Queen's University (Kingston), and co-convenor of the Animals in Philosophy, Politics, Law and Ethics research group. Together with Will Kymlicka, they are the co-author of *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (Oxford UP 2011) and *Animals and the Right to Politics* (Oxford UP 2025).