An interesting philosophical issue concerns when we ought to extend philosophical concepts to cases previously thought to lie outside the concept’s boundaries. This question pervades animal ethics and shows up in discussions surrounding whether animals have moral rights, whether they are persons, whether they can act morally, whether they can form sovereign communities, and many others. One area of debate in questions like these concerns the reach of our concepts. Are we extending these concepts in meaningful and coherent ways that illuminate the core purpose or idea behind them, or stretching them beyond recognition in ways that lack justification?

This issue is central to evaluating some of the claims made by Eva Meijer in her book, *When Animals Speak: Toward an Interspecies Democracy*. Meijer makes many seemingly provocative and bold claims. Among them, she claims that many other animals use language, are political agents, can engage in civil disobedience, political activism, as well as political deliberation. Even worms, we are told, are political agents. On the surface, at least, these claims seem quite bold and represent an extension of these basic concepts far beyond their current boundaries.

Meijer’s book is centred on developing ‘a theory of political animal voices’ (p. 10). At its core, she thinks animals speak and our politics must listen and adjust in ways that take seriously their agency and voices. The book consists of three parts. Part 1 focuses on language and argues that other animals use language. Parts 2 and 3 turn to politics. In Part 2 Meijer claims that other animals are political agents and considers and discusses recent proposals, from Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, that extend concepts of citizenship and sovereignty to domesticated and wild animals, respectively. Part 3 examines how ‘existing political practices and institutions can be extended to incorporate non-human animal political voices’ (p. 12). Here we find the claims that other animals engage in political activism, civil disobedience, and are capable of political deliberation, once properly understood. Ultimately, I don’t think Meijer convincingly defends many of her central claims. Here I raise two main objections that I think challenge the core of this project and that get at shortcomings with the book.

First, it often isn’t clear whether Meijer is trying to extend concepts to other animals or redefine them so that they include other animals but in such a way that they no longer are the same concept she started with. Take her claim that other animals use language. Sometimes she explicitly states that she is redefining language so that it includes non-humans and non-human languages (p. 10) and includes other things, like eye contact and certain body movements, that
we don’t always think of as language. But in other places she suggests that what other animals do goes beyond mere communication and is in fact a type of language, consistent with how we presently understand human language. In an interesting section that summarises recent empirical work on the alarm calls of other animals, she writes that alarm calls ‘should be seen as expressions of an individual animal’s intelligence rather than as simple mechanistic reactions: as language, rather than as communication’ (p. 52). Yet she does not explain what separates a language from mere forms of communication. And ultimately it isn’t clear what she means when she says other animals use language.

This same concern applies to some of the other, seemingly bold claims Meijer makes (that animals are political agents, who can engage in civil disobedience, etc.). In these cases, Meijer seems to argue that there is a coherent way we could interpret or see the actions of animals as forms of political agency, political participation, or civil disobedience. But often these interpretations – like her chapter that claims worms can be understood as political actors – are quite stretched and amount to very little beyond the view that animals can influence political actions and decisions. It isn’t clear why we should interpret the world in these ways, and Meijer doesn’t have much to say here for those not already convinced, or who doubt that promoting this way of talking is an effective way to achieve political goals involving animals.

My second objection concerns Meijer’s frequent claims that we need to rethink and reformulate our understanding and approach to politics to respect the agency of non-human animals. There are a couple of issues here. First, it isn’t clear how the first part of her book, which claims animals use language, connects to this recurring statement that we need to take the agency of other animals seriously. Maybe the reasoning is that if we can show animals use language and are agents, then this creates a prima facie case that they are capable of, and deserve, much greater political participation and voice over their lives. If this is the best way to understand her argument, however, then it is clearly flawed. My 2.5-year-old daughter is a language user and clearly an agent, but it doesn’t follow from this that she presently is capable of being a political agent or that she is owed forms of political participation. She has no conception of politics, or of the state, or governance. The more relevant question, as I see it, is how well our political institutions serve her interests. Meijer briefly discusses some of these concerns in Chapter 4, but her responses are too brief and not convincing.

Finally, missing from Meijer’s book is much discussion of why the agency of other animals ought to be taken seriously (apart from welfare concerns). Again, there seems to be an assumption that if we can show animals are language users, then we can show they have a voice that needs to be considered. However, Meijer doesn’t really explore why this is or what would justify this claim. The assumption that seems to pervade the book is that non-human
animals are capable of high levels of autonomous decision-making, and that it could only be prejudiced to think otherwise.

Ultimately there’s a much simpler and more convincing story we can tell. In some cases, the only way we can best promote the welfare or flourishing of other animals is by paying close attention to what they communicate to us, by studying this in various ways, so that our political decisions and institutions actually promote their welfare or flourishing. This story is free of all the conceptual baggage that Meijer wades into. It doesn’t matter whether we think other animals use language or simply communicate in interesting ways, what matters is understanding what contributes to and promotes their welfare. Similarly, it doesn’t matter whether we think they are capable of things like civil disobedience or political deliberation. All of this is a distraction. The hard and necessary task is working towards a world where far more humans care more about animals, and finding specific ways we can change our political institutions and political decision-making to better promote the welfare of other animals.

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