Catherine Osborne offers an insight into the place of animals in ancient writing and literature in her work *Dumb Beasts and Dead Philosophers: Humanity and the Humane in Ancient Philosophy and Literature*. Her three-part exploration draws upon a selection of historical ancient writing in order to contend that a contemporary humane attitude is not developed through critical reasoning, arid argument, or language alone. Instead she argues that moral truths may be learnt from listening, through poetry and story.

Part one of the book looks at how human attitudes to animals are constructed. Starting with literature in chapter one, a selection from William Blake’s *Auguries of Innocence and Songs of Experience* is explored. Blake deals here with human perceptions of nature and the consequences of our moral choices. Osborne notes that moral consequences are not merely utilitarian for Blake, but that our moral sensibilities are dependent on strongly developed empathic responses, which she terms “emotional responses with cognitive content” (6). These are acquired through a process of moral learning. Osborne subsequently contends that consequentialist arguments alone are unlikely to bring us to an attitude of deep empathy with animals. Without this process of moral learning we may fail to attach significance to things that may enhance our lives—for Blake, these are what are “worth understanding” (13). Blake does not merely exhort us to develop our moral sensibilities; much of Blake’s work is driven by deeply pantheistic undertones, implying a unity of nature. Osborne emphasises that Blake’s appeals do not rest upon philosophical argument, but upon developing our moral sensibilities. She warns us against pure sentimentality, whilst advocating a position of compassion, and goes on to discuss our place in nature by questioning attitudes that may lead us into “anthropocentric pride” (23).

Nature and ancient conceptions of providence are the themes of chapter two. Dealing with our moral place within nature, Osborne presents us with a view of the environment as not naturally divided, but which reflects our perception of nature and our “culture’s ethical take on it” (26) through the work of Herodotus, Protagoras and Democritus. For Protagoras, the providence of nature is for mankind’s well-being, but is also bountiful and
impartial. In this vein, Protagoras sees humankind as the “forgotten child” (31) of nature—godlike and distinct from other animals. Arising from this hierarchical view, our god-given morality legitimises our political actions and ultimately “war against the beasts” (33). Early thinkers used analogies with animals and nature to think about their place in nature and about questions concerning superiority and inferiority of species. This form of enquiry recurs in contemporary debates on the moral status of animals.

In her treatment of Democritus, Osborne draws out a straightforward choice: either we can “come to think of ourselves as just one kind among equals. Or we can come to think of ourselves as something marked out as favoured” (35). Osborne concludes part one with the observation that it much depends on how we read the natural world and this ancient choice likely remains as pertinent today as then. In Herein, the author steers us clear of naturalistic fallacy, arguing that our moral divisions are perpetuated through our outlook and are not written into nature for us to read off, whilst at the same time acknowledging that moral vision does indeed not have to correspond with empirical biological fact.

While Part one of the book emphasises outlook, that is, how we come to view our place in nature, and the meaning and value we give to nature depending upon our attitudes to it. P, part two looks at how we perceive difference and begins by questioning what difference may mean for us, and the “value we place on rational consistency” (44). In considering three ancient thinkers, the author explores the reincarnation myths of Pythagoras, Empedocles and Plato in turn. Direct comparisons with contemporary ideas on animal welfare and rights are deliberately scant here, in this exploration of humanity and the humane in ancient philosophy. However, in discussing similarities in perception between the human and animal, Osborne makes an important distinction between the classical emphasis on possession of a soul as the primary source of human/animal similarity and contemporary comparisons based essentially on the body (biological, physiological and psychological traits). This distancing from biological consideration and the clear delimitation of body and soul is further explored through the ideas of Empedocles and his interpretation of reincarnation which, Osborne argues, are fundamentally kinship based. Reincarnation is again the theme in discussion of the dialogue of Plato’s Timaeus. The living things of the world are classified according to habitat; perhaps importantly for wider debate, Osborne identifies that for Plato there is “no special class for human beings” (55). For many contemporary thinkers this would likely seem a radical proposition. Indeed, as the author notes, Plato does not conclude that humans are animals, but rather that all animals are human,
at least to the degree that every soul at first incarnation is born as a human male. This androcentric view is again likely to prove controversial for the modern mindset. At this point the author reminds us that “it is our moral outlook that grounds our perception of similarities” (62), not biological similarities that ground our moral stance towards other animals.

In chapter four, Osborne takes a “sideways glance” (63) at the contemporary emphasis on language use in debate over animal/human differences through the prism of Aristotle’s notion of *phantasia* and Cartesian *automata*. In protracted discussion, the author draws out some interesting (and challenging) observations for a contemporary understanding of human/animal relationships through her thorough analysis of the pertinent Aristotelian concepts. Her theme is one of continuity and she finds within the selected text much emphasis on continuity between human and animal behaviour, challenging divisions between our understanding of what constitutes rational and irrational souls. In presenting us with analysis of this ancient argument, the reader will recognize the import for modern debate on our understanding of animal capacities and behaviours.

Chapter five continues the theme of continuity between human and animal behaviour. Osborne goes on to confidently refute the presumed *scala naturae* often attributed to Aristotelian thought. From the outset Osborne argues that for Aristotle an order of increasing complexity of function does not naturalistically conflate with increasing inherent superiority. Echoing contemporary themes, the author recognises that “the cumulative structure of plant and animal souls, which Aristotle describes in De Anima, does not in itself have any ethical implications” (103). In assessing the various meanings of complexity for Aristotle, Osborne reveals that the commonplace hierarchical picture of the *scala naturae* entrenched in much modern scientific thought—that sees humans enshrined atop the ladder and other beings assigned sundry lower rungs—is not of Aristotelian provenance. The author rightly takes care to qualify that this is not to refute the argument for a hierarchy of understanding and reason in Aristotle’s work, but rather a hierarchy of value. This challenge to traditional assumptions on Aristotelian thought is bold and rigorously argued. If Osborne’s arguments hold, her conclusions are far reaching and may challenge many longstanding interpretations of early thought on our place in nature and the human “special claim to greatness” (126).

Part three of the book begins with the legend of Androcles and the Lion and some later thoughts on the early Christian asceticism of the Desert Fathers are offered. In this part of the work Osborne asks us to acknowledge that the ‘beast’ of ancient literature has “always been included in the moral
Osborne raises wider questions of moral response and enquires if the virtues of loyalty, generosity and hospitality exist solely as uniquely human attributes. Through story, Osborne brings into focus her recurrent theme: that imagination, empathy, compassion, love and sympathy are hallmarks of the humane individual. These are the attributes that help us “respond to the needs of others despite superficial barriers of race, class, or (in this case) species” (139). The strength of her analysis here is that a clear distinction is made between what is presented as the faculty of imagination and mere anthropomorphic sentimentality. Through insightful and pragmatic scrutiny the “spectre of sentimentality” (141) a recurrent contemporary preoccupation in philosophical discourse concerning the moral status of animals—is, in this context at least, vanquished. In its place the author asks us to relinquish sentimentalised false dogma that inhibits much moral theory.

Osborne begins chapter seven with a familiar question: do animals have rights? The ideas of natural rights, property rights and conflict of rights are explored through scenes from plays by Sophocles, including Philoctetes, Ajax and Antigone. Osborne moves on to discuss the language of rights in contemporary context and asks the reader to distinguish between legalistic language of rights and the notion of rights within authentic moral debate. She concludes that it is not the possession of rights that is ultimately significant but the “declaration of them by others” (182).

Chapter eight is devoted to an exploration of Democritus and Hermarchus and ideas of self-defence. Osborne grounds her argument in a pragmatic view of what contributes to human well-being and broadly argues against seeking reasons to justify decent treatment towards animals. Osborne and sees Democritus as drawing no significant line between mankind and the beasts, likewise, in her (lengthy) treatment of the consequentialist arguments of Hermarchus, her take on these utilitarian arguments seems to be in agreement with Socrates’ observation that “it is not because it is to my benefit that I ought to do something. I ought to do it because it is right” (221).

Chapter nine focuses on the work of Porphyry and his four books on vegetarianism, in which he argues that meat eating is bad for humans. Arguments, often the caused Although Porphyry clearly determines that the vegetarian diet is not for everyone, a fact that many modern vegetarians would concede, Osborne’s own take on vegetarianism is troubling. Throughout, Osborne encourages the reader to develop empathy and kinship with nonhumans and at minimum to view animals with compassion—indeed to be advocates for the voiceless. Here the author’s final message
seems oddly out of kilter with her early admonitions and it is hard to
determine a firm moral foundation for her encouragement to slaughter
animals that are “honourably raised by compassionate farmers” (238) in
light of her earlier observations on value and moral outlook.

Despite these criticisms, Osborne’s book offers a refreshing perspective
on animals and the humane. If the reader accepts the author’s fundamental
assertion that we assimilate moral truths primarily from listening by means
of poetry and story, then Osborne’s work will likely be seen as a rich and
thought-provoking resource in enlivening debate on contemporary animal
rights issues. However, this assertion will strike some as controversial in
its apparent dismissal of rational arguments as the most effective way to
understand moral truths. Osborne has chosen her ancient texts carefully,
but it may be that there are many ‘dead philosophers’ who would emphasise
a rich interplay of both poetic and rational process as means of discovering
moral truths.

Osborne’s thesis that a humane attitude is not necessarily developed
through reason, language, and arid text, and that moral truths may be learnt
from listening via poetry and story, is well maintained throughout the work.
Osborne argues that moral truth is essentially experiential and dynamic
in nature and not merely intellectual assent to critical reasoning. While
her analysis is interesting and thought-provoking, the reader is left with
questions on the relevance of some of the themes to contemporary normative
ethical application on issues of animal welfare and rights. This is not in any
respect a failure on the part of the author. Indeed, the underlying strength
of the work is that in illuminating ancient ideas, it affords the reader the
opportunity to shed fresh light on current ways of looking at the complex
interrelationships between human and nonhuman animals. In this respect,
this timely work can only add value to the ongoing animal rights debate,
not least in enlivening old perspectives for a new audience.

Mark Reardon

University of Wales, Newport