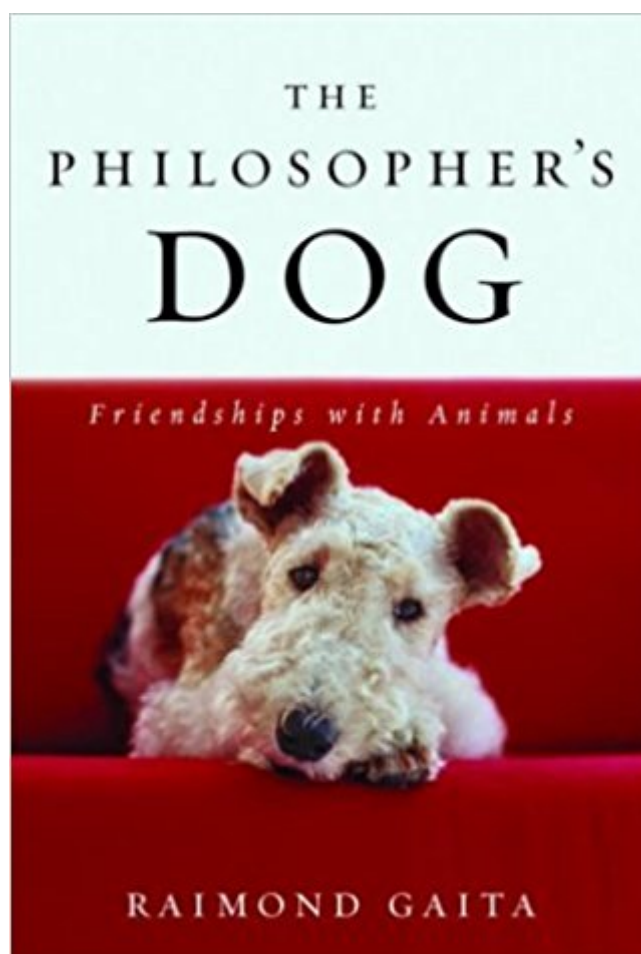


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The Philosopher's Dog: Friendships With Animals



Synopsis

The philosopher Raimond Gaita has always been fascinated by animals – their obvious intelligence and disturbing brutality, their uncanny responsiveness to our moods and needs, the deep feelings they elicit from us and seem to return. In this marvelous, luminous book, Gaita trains the lens of philosophy on the mystery and beauty of the animals he has known and loved best. The Philosopher's Dog is one of those rare works that engage the heart from the very first paragraph and haunt the mind long after one has finished reading. What does Gaita's dog, Gypsy, think about while she sits on her mat gazing out to sea for hours on end? Why did the irascible cockatoo Jack greet Gaita's father with kisses each morning but bite everyone else? How can we acknowledge that animals are sentient and yet deny that they have consciousness? Is it possible to love animals and still eat meat? In contemplating questions like these, Gaita weaves together personal stories – inspiring, sometimes heartbreaking accounts about the animals he and his family members have sheltered – with the reflections and analysis of a professional philosopher. A graceful, engaging stylist, Gaita is perfectly lucid as he grapples with great thinkers through the ages – from Socrates to Wittgenstein, Descartes to Hannah Arendt. And yet, as important as formal philosophy has been to him, Gaita frankly acknowledges that he has learned much about the nature of life from Gypsy and Jack and his courageously arrogant cat Tosca. In the end, he argues that love should be the essence of our bond with animals, the critical factor that guides how we treat them and think about their place in our world. In pondering the meaning and morality of his relationships with animals, and with the natural world more generally, Raimond Gaita has created a surprising masterpiece, a book of startling insights, spellbinding stories, meticulous observations, and wise reflection. At once engrossing and thought-provoking, The Philosopher's Dog is a supremely enjoyable book.

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Customer Reviews

Offering entertaining animal stories and delicate philosophical reflections on them, University of London philosopher Gaita (Romulus, My Father) begins with stories of animals from his rural childhood (Jack the cockatoo, Orloff the greyhound) and his adult life (Gypsy the German shepherd, Tosca the cat). As the book progresses, the stories become less dominant as serious philosophy takes the fore. On whether dogs feel sensations, for example, Gaita argues (on Wittgensteinian grounds) that "there is no room for serious doubt" that they do. Why we should pay respect to dead animals or care about butterflies and bees; the common "creatureliness" of people and animals; and how someone who loves animals can kill and eat them—all are issues that are raised at a leisurely pace. Throughout, Gaita develops the concept of a "realm of meaning" rooted in "the understanding of the heart." Literature, including stories, he argues, affords special access to this realm (and thus provides a rationale for the plan of the book). The premise and pace may lose some readers, and others may be alarmed by Gaita's dismissal of the doctrine of animal rights in preference for "[a]ttachment to animals and a disinterested love of nature." But what comes through most clearly is Gaita's appreciation for "the generosity with which animals give themselves to us... and the grace they bring to our lives." Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Although billed as addressing what we learn about animals from our relationships with them, this discursive inquiry is equally concerned with what we learn about ourselves. Gaita, a professor of moral philosophy at King's College, London, begins with stories about his dog, Gypsy, and the street cat, Tosca, that often teased Gypsy (eventually with catastrophic results). Extrapolating from these events, Gaita explores what (if anything) animals know, sense, and feel. As he reflects on how and why animals often become as close to humans as family members, his focus switches to humanity's view of itself and whether, from our point of view, we are the center of the universe. Despite the audience-friendly title, this is by no means pop philosophy. Gaita's writing is deep and provocative but requires a commitment from the reader. Those willing to make it will learn much about their relationships with their pets and with each other. Ilene Cooper Copyright © American

I lament not loving this book, because the concept seemed wholly compelling and Mr. Gaita is a fine writer. However, I found the animal sequences slanted toward the sorrowful, and the philosophic essays rambling. The philosophy, to the book's detriment, dominates the text. I've read Wittgenstein, Buber and Heidegger -- so I'm not unfamiliar with the rigors associated with philosophy. I've read many of the books by the foremost ethologists. I've read many books detailing the tensions and joys of relationships between humans and their non-human companions. By and large, this book has none of the pleasures and illuminations present in almost all of those genre's. Mr. Gaita's prose is lush and clear during the more elegiac sequences in the book, which is why I'm giving it a 3 out of 5. The book cover is unfortunate because it gives an impression of tenderness or sentimentality, depending on your point of view, which is not reflected in the book. And perhaps it is literal to say so, but I did not find a single mention of a Terrier. We often buy books because of the tone that a cover implies, and this cover was indeed misleading. There seemed no fresh insights or even new questions raised in this book. Nor did I feel that it was a book about dogs or friendships with animals. But its worst moments are spent denigrating the work of other writers (and in full disclosure I have never had any association with the writers he mentions). It's not that the book is without a moment's pleasure, but there are few -- it is that there are so many uninteresting contradictions which cloud its intentions to the point that I couldn't put it down quickly enough, and dreaded picking it back up.

I enjoyed this book very much. It's written in the style of an introduction to moral philosophy with application to how we think of and relate to animals, especially pets. Though I haven't read any of the philosophers the author references and so may not be the best judge, I don't think the philosophical discussions are dumbed down at all. Many times over the course of reading this book I had to read a passage more than once, and slowly, to try to figure out exactly what he is saying, not because the writing is unclear but because the concepts are not simple. He does a great job of weaving abstract arguments with compelling and heartfelt experiences in the real world. It was a rewarding experience to read an author whose commitment both to his subject and his audience is so clear. I may not agree with every conclusion or conjecture he offers, but I absolutely appreciate his efforts to demonstrate the value of clear thinking to deepen appreciation of things we love. Definitely a thought provoking book in the best sense. If you enjoy quality writing, philosophical dilemmas and the company of animals, I highly recommend this book. Note on one of the editorial

reviews: if he takes issue with the idea of a "doctrine of animal rights" he does not mean people should be free to do whatever they please to animals. Quite the contrary. His ideas are compassionate and carefully thought out, and well worth exploring. Thanks to this book, I've found myself accidentally thinking deep thoughts when I should be pondering the latest celebrity scandal or exciting product offering. Kudos to Mr. Gaita!

I am one of those people who love animals, hate to see anything killed and have at times had closer friendships with my dogs than some humans I know. Some call this weird but for me it is a way of life. When I first started this book I felt it would be a simple book with the concept of how 'human' animals could be; this was not so. Written by Raimond Gaita; a professor of moral philosophy in London, I found this was not a fluff work but one written with thought provoking material. The author shares stories of some animals he has encountered in his life, such as his dog Gypsy, and Jack, a cockatoo. Often heartbreaking, sometimes light-hearted, these stories showed their behavior in this world we share with them. He gives us some conclusions from others who have studied animals and also his own thoughts on the subject matter. Although I didn't agree with every conclusion in some matters the author did; I felt that he was giving us an opportunity to come to mull them over and make our own decisions about animals and I liked that. A very interesting read that will definitely give opportunity for thought.

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