Interspecies Freedom

Toward a Rethinking of Human-Animal Relations

Canavan, Jana

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Abstract: This dissertation interrogates anthropocentric conceptions of freedom and develops an account of interspecies freedom as a relational condition enabling humans and other animals to flourish without domination. Freedom is traditionally conceived as an exclusively human concept, grounded in hierarchical structures that legitimise the oppression of other animals. Drawing on critical animal studies, ecofeminism, and intersectional theory, this study problematises these assumptions and argues that the domination and exploitation of other animals is a form of unfreedom that constitutes a systemic form of oppression embedded in social, economic, and epistemic structures. Methodologically, the research combines normative political theory with grounded approaches, integrating visual testimonies of animal oppression and semi-structured interviews with animal advocates to situate conceptual analysis in lived realities. Three principal claims are advanced: first, dominant accounts of liberty are historically constructed through exclusion and hierarchy; second, animal oppression is structural and interlinked with other forms of domination; and third, interspecies freedom should be understood as a non-dominating, relational condition cultivated through recognition, interdependence, and the expansion of agency. By rethinking freedom beyond the human, this dissertation contributes to political theory and multispecies justice, offering a normative framework for transforming human–animal relations toward more inclusive and emancipatory futures.

Key words: human-animal relations, freedom, oppression, interspecies freedom, ecofeminism, critical animal studies, intersectionality, anthropocentrism

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Für Rio und Nora

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Jana Canavan

1 Introduction

We live in a multi-species world. As I write this, several different birds are singing outside my window. Suddenly, they hurried to hide in the hedge, chirping loudly. A warning sign. A dove sits still on the topmost branch of the birch, safely out of reach of the predator that has approached.

With a rumbling noise, Gustav leaps onto the windowsill in front of me, returning from his second morning walk. I startle a little, as I always do when he suddenly appears and jumps toward me while I sit at my desk behind the window. He knows my routines and comes to find me whenever he wants. Naturally, I open the window, and he marches across the papers spread out over the desk. His muddy paw prints are his contribution to this dissertation. He jumps down in his usual loud manner and curls up on the bed behind me after cleaning his paws. Our morning continues, side by side. Gustav comes and goes as he pleases. We provide him with food, affection, and a warm, safe place to sleep. Any day, he could choose not to return. Sometimes he likes to stay over with other human friends in the neighbourhood to enjoy their company, nap in their wardrobes, or ask for a treat. It is precisely these everyday choices he makes that I like to see as part of his individual freedom.

In contexts where cats are allowed to roam freely, like Gustav, one could say they enjoy a rather special status compared to many other animals we live with. The Swedish Animal Protection Act states that cats should receive daily social care and contact with humans, adapted to the cat's individual circumstances and needs (Jordbruksverket 2011). Their freedom of movement is also legally protected, and several court cases have ruled in favour of free-roaming cats' interests, finding that humans who complain about cats visiting their homes or gardens are themselves responsible for chasing them away without harming the cats. Interestingly, these laws are formulated to protect the innate interests and natural behaviours of cats as animals who like to move around independently. Are cats unique in that way? Or would the categorisation of cats as freedom-loving and independent species be applicable to other animals as well? Ancient Romans and Greeks already appreciated cats as graceful and independent, and it is believed that the Roman goddess Libertas was associated with a cat, reflecting beliefs about felines as

representations of freedom and independence (Nelson 2021). Some domesticated animals that have lived close to us for thousands of years, such as cats and dogs, are thus valued not only for the functions they fulfil "for us," but also because many people view them as friends or family members.

However, these types of interspecies relations are, of course, never ideal. Domestic cats have been described and criticised as "globally distributed invasive carnivores that markedly impact biodiversity" (Lepczyk et al. 2023), due to their being opportunistic hunters and obligate carnivores, which is very much to the detriment of the millions of birds, small mammals, reptiles, and insects that cats like to hunt. Shared spaces create ethical dilemmas as humans and cats navigate their needs autonomously. Notably, in many societies, laws, practices, and overall attitudes towards cats are shaped in ways that allow many to live their lives without fearing systemic harm and, ideally, to enjoy the privilege of moving about their day as they choose, although exceptions exist. In some places, it is not permitted to let cats roam freely, and many cats never go outside on their own for reasons their humans decide, for better or worse. The dangers of traffic and their general dependence on humans can thus impose clear boundaries on cats' freedom at large.

Nevertheless, cats and other "pet" animals we value as companions are often treated with respect, even though they represent a relatively small number of domesticated animals; it is mostly they that some of us recognise as individuals (Cudworth 2011). Human caretakers often learn about the needs and wishes of the animals they choose to live with, come to understand their personalities, and find ways of mutual understanding and communication. All in all, one could say that animal companions who have a safe home, are cared for, and have the option to choose how they spend their time hold a special status in human society.

Most other animals are far more immediately affected by the human–animal hierarchy and their categorisation as lesser beings. How we humans view and treat other animals is often inherently shaped by the usefulness we attach to their existence. This is reflected in human-defined categories that construct other animals as companions, family members, workers, colleagues, potentially lifesaving medical devices, experimental "model organisms," material resources, food sources, pests, or forms of entertainment or education. This instrumentalisation shapes most of our relations with other animals and is foundational to the oppression that produces animal suffering and denies them to be free.

1.1 Research problem and aim

Animal unfreedom is the condition of oppression in which other animals' lives, bodies, relationships, and movements are controlled by human systems of domination. Human domination frames the human–animal relationship as inherently hierarchical, categorically denying the subjectivity and moral standing of other animals. As a result, their lives are interfered with to such an extent that they can exercise only a very limited form of agency, if any at all, preventing them from flourishing as the subjects they are. Animal oppression can therefore be understood as a relational problem of domination in which humans subordinate other animals on structural, institutional, epistemic, and symbolic grounds.

By problematising this oppression as a form of unfreedom, this dissertation seeks to shed light on one of the most taken-for-granted and established forms of oppression. In many ways, other animals can be described as "the original out-group, the ultimate 'other'" (Leenaert 2021,18). They are trapped within the human–animal hierarchy and in their categorisation as property, thing, or resource, which frames their legitimate scope of freedom only in relation to the human-identified purpose they fulfil. Conversely, it can be argued that we deny other animals their freedom when we use them in ways that infringe upon their autonomy, including their rights to their own lives and bodies.

But do other animals even have a legitimate claim to freedom? The current reality of the human–animal relationship suggests otherwise. Freedom is, first and foremost, understood as a human-centred concept, designed to protect civil rights and the interests of political subjects. Its meaning is closely aligned with ideas of human subjectivity as something generally superior to, and separate from, the so-called "lesser beings" assumed to lack the rationality and other capacities historically attached to the heightened moral status of political agents. Consequently, the meaning of freedom appears deeply intertwined with long-established notions of human superiority. This study, therefore, asks:

What does freedom mean when extended beyond the human, and how can rethinking liberty help dismantle systems of oppression that shape human–animal relations?

As Adam Weitzenfeld and Melanie Joy have argued, "Anthropocentrism, which has narcissistically privileged humans at the centre of all significance, is not an innate disposition but a historical outcome of a distorted humanism in which human freedom is founded upon the unfreedom of human and animal others" (2014, 3). Anthropocentrism positions humans at the centre of existence and assumes that humans are the most significant or superior entity in the universe. In 1897, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defined it as a "primary or exclusive focus on humanity; the view or belief that humanity is the central or most important element of existence, especially as opposed to God or the natural world", a definition that still stands today, although the current entry adds that the original formulation also included "primary or exclusive focus on men, rather than women" (Oxford English Dictionary2023). As will be discussed later, this narrow focus on (certain) men is reflected in early ideas of the rational political subject, which excluded women, other human Others, and all other animals. While women are now subsumed under "humanity," this conceptual shift illustrates how ideas about moral standing and social hierarchy evolve over time. It also highlights that freedom was originally conceived with certain individuals in mind: the rational, male, human political subject.

Since freedom is generally understood as an affirmative and desirable value, this study investigates what rethinking the concept might offer to non-violent liberation struggles, specifically the liberation of other animals from human oppression. This problematisation is grounded in the view that other animals are denied their rights to life and bodily autonomy because anthropocentric notions of freedom grant humans a sense of entitlement to use them, for instance, as food.

Can we think about freedom as something that may exist for all beings? To approach this question, I interrogate the ties between freedom and human-centred hierarchy and rethink the concept in ways that challenge the oppression of other animals. I thus treat the systematic restriction of freedom as a core dimension of oppression, while understanding freedom as a potential for liberation.

Existing accounts of freedom rule out other animals as legitimate subjects deserving consideration beyond the human-defined purposes attached to their existence. Anthropocentric notions of freedom frame it as something that exists primarily for the human subject, excluding other animals as potential holders of freedom in the sense of not being oppressed by others. This construction also

positions human freedom as a privilege, in part founded on the unfreedom of other animals.

In seeking to include other animals within the purview of liberty, I propose an account of *interspecies freedom* that refers to the relational conditions in which humans and other animals can live and flourish without oppression. Viewing all beings as having an interest in living and directing their own lives, I articulate an inclusive conception of freedom that recognises other animals as subjects with legitimate claims. By and large, the dissertation is a critique of the status quo of domination. It challenges systems of oppression that systematically disadvantage or marginalise groups based on identity, culture, background, or species, and offers an intersectional analysis of human domination over other animals, exploring anthropocentric conceptions of freedom (or liberty; terms used interchangeably).

Why study the human–animal hierarchy through a problematisation of the concept of freedom? One might argue that such a theoretical approach is not the most straightforward way to address the real and pressing problems of animal suffering. While it is true that direct action and changes in behaviour, norms, and social structures are crucial for social change, such practical efforts can be strengthened and supported by critical thought and normative analysis. This study, therefore, approaches freedom from a normative stance that explicitly challenges oppression. This may seem unusual given that many emancipatory scholarly and social movements focus more closely on concepts such as equality or justice. Feminist scholars, for instance, analyse gendered oppression largely in terms of domination, with debates rarely framed through the lens of liberty (Halldenius 2001). Lena Halldenius suggests that the reluctance to use the term freedom may stem from the dominant view of liberty as non-interference and from a general perception that liberty and equality are somehow in conflict (Halldenius 2001, 15).

A similar hesitation is evident in critical animal studies (CAS) and broader animal advocacy work, where the concept of freedom appears largely absent, likely because of its association with liberal humanism. Nevertheless, the normative commitments of CAS implicitly advocate a notion of freedom understood as total liberation from oppression (Nocella et al. 2014). In animal liberation theory and activism, freedom for other animals is primarily invoked in calls to liberate them from human control and to expose the normalised exploitation and suffering they endure. This emphasis is understandable given the

pervasive nature of animal oppression. The central focus typically lies in securing a negative freedom for other animals to ensure that they are no longer exposed to violence, exploitation, and death.

Animal liberation theory and activism thus provide an important context for this inquiry. The animal liberation movement is a global social movement committed to the total abolition of animal exploitation. Its critique of structural oppression begins from the recognition that the domination of humans, other animals, and nature stems from interlocking violent ideologies that use social differences to construct hierarchies of moral worth (e.g. Nocella et al. 2014; Nocella and White 2023). The movement aims to de-normalise violence against other animals and to challenge the deeply rooted belief systems that frame them as beings of lesser moral value (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2018). While its demands to end human domination and control are clear, it is less clear what liberation itself entails beyond this negative aim. As will be explained later, animal liberation is often contrasted with welfarism. Whereas liberationists demand empty cages, welfarism merely seeks to reduce animal suffering and instead advocates for bigger cages and more "ethical" or "humane" forms of animal use. Yet even within liberationist discourse, the focus typically rests on securing negative freedom, the cessation of violence, exploitation, and killing. Given the pervasive immediacy of animal oppression, this emphasis is understandable. However, a positive account of what freedom might look like once oppression is removed remains underdeveloped.

This conceptual gap mirrors the broader hesitation within CAS to engage directly with the idea of freedom. Nevertheless, intersectional approaches within the movement indicate that liberation must be understood as social, relational, and shared, suggesting that freedom is not merely the absence of interference but a condition in which flourishing becomes possible in just relations. While the movement powerfully critiques structural oppression, much remains to be explored regarding the freedom it envisions and how this might be grounded in practice. This dissertation engages that question by considering how changes in human–animal relations could open the way to greater freedom. It does not claim to provide a final answer; rather, it offers one perspective within an ongoing, widely discussed conversation, building on and being informed by the work of others.

The aim of this study is therefore to challenge anthropocentric conceptions of freedom and to develop an account of interspecies freedom that understands liberty as liberation from oppression and as a relational condition in which humans and other animals can flourish without domination.

To provide a brief roadmap of the argument that unfolds throughout the thesis, three overall claims are advanced. First, anthropocentric conceptions of liberty are historically built upon structures of exclusion and hierarchy, revealing that dominant accounts of freedom have long depended on hierarchies that subordinate other animals and marginalised human Others. Second, animal oppression is not merely a set of isolated harms but a structural, intersectional, and epistemic problem that shapes how other animals are viewed and treated within human systems. Third, I argue for an alternative conception of interspecies freedom as a relational and non-dominating condition that can be cultivated through practices of recognition, interdependence, and the expansion of agency. This set of claims highlights the limits of anthropocentric liberty, explains the mechanisms of animal oppression, and outlines a normative outlook for more just interspecies relations.

1.2 Conceptual foundations for interspecies freedom

This section presents the conceptual groundwork for my problematisation of anthropocentric freedom, clarifying the assumptions, structures, and categories that shape how freedom is understood. It begins by interrogating anthropocentrism and the hierarchies of moral worth that legitimise human dominance over other animals. It then outlines the structural perspective on freedom adopted in this dissertation, distinguishing between anthropocentric, zero-sum understandings of freedom and relational, non-dominating forms of interspecies freedom. It then clarifies the core concepts of freedom, liberty, oppression, domination, and unfreedom that inform the analysis. The final sections situate the study in the broader literature and include a note on non-speciesist language use.

Anthropocentrism and hierarchies of moral worth

In analysing human oppression of other animals, a few central questions arise: why have we humans granted ourselves the right to exercise power over other animals by asserting supremacy within a rigid hierarchical order? What makes our species so exceptional that it should justify domination of other animals and the planet? Common answers refer to advanced cognition, linguistic capacities, cumulative culture, or our abilities for large-scale cooperation, as seen in our political systems. Humans indeed pursue open-ended knowledge accumulation (Morgan and Feldman 2024) and develop understanding through collective networks of diverse minds sharing information across time and place (Henrich 2021). Yet even if these capacities distinguish us in certain respects, do they entitle us to regard ourselves as the primary holders of moral worth and, by extension, the sole bearers of liberty? Anthropocentric bias would answer yes.

Anthropocentrism can broadly be defined as the centrality of humanity as the locus of moral significance. Distinctions are commonly made between forms of anthropocentrism that support legitimate human interests and those that foster prejudice and unjustified human privilege (Boddice 2011; Hayward 1997; Kopina et al. 2018). Rob Boddice captures this double meaning by noting that anthropocentrism is often expressed either as an accusation of human chauvinism or as an acknowledgement of human ontological boundaries (2011, 1). This tension highlights the core problem: although anthropocentrism has historically shaped ethics, politics, and the distribution of moral status, it simultaneously rests on a pronounced separation between humans and the nonhuman world. This separation has furnished a sense of human entitlement and superiority (Boddice 2011).

A further challenge is that the human–animal hierarchy is deeply embedded in systems of knowledge. The exploitation of other animals is so normalised that the violence inflicted upon them acquires an epistemic dimension as it structures what counts as legitimate knowledge in science, ideology, law, and social institutions (Wadiwel 2015; Meijer 2019). This epistemic order reinforces humans as the arbiters of moral and political value while framing human freedoms as reliant on the continued domination of other animals (Wadiwel 2015).

Moving towards a conceptualisation of interspecies freedom as liberation from oppression, therefore, requires problematising anthropocentrism and challenging its influence on dominant understandings of freedom. While it is true that we can only experience the world through a human lens, equating this epistemic limitation

with heightened moral standing is deeply objectionable. Conceptualised as a bias that privileges humans at the expense of other social groups (Hayward 1997; Kopina et al. 2018), anthropocentrism legitimises hierarchical orders of moral worth and naturalises the oppression of the nonhuman world. Charged as a form of human chauvinism (Boddice 2011), anthropocentrism disregards the interconnectedness of life and legitimises hierarchical orders of moral worth. As Martha Nussbaum bluntly observes, the claim that humans possess greater moral value than all other creatures is "arrogant, presumptuous, groundless, and just plain selfish" (2022, 97). Recognising how anthropocentrism legitimises and perpetuates domination invites a broader inquiry into the ways freedom is shaped by entrenched norms and hierarchies. To move beyond anthropocentric assumptions, the next two sections first outline the structural approach adopted to then clarify the core concepts of freedom, oppression, and domination.

Rethinking freedom to include other animals

Freedom is a multifaceted and contested concept that can be understood in various ways. In everyday usage, it is commonly described as the right or condition to act, speak, and think without unjust constraint, and thus as being free from inhibitions such as imprisonment, enslavement, or other forms of subjugation (Cambridge Dictionary 2025). More abstractly, freedom can be conceived as a self-determining concept, since it has no external referent and instead refers to agents' ability to determine their own behaviour (Yudanin 2020). According to Michael Yudanin, explanations of freedom are always simultaneously descriptions of how freedom is possible and how it is exercised by agents deemed free. Freedom can therefore not be neatly defined and then applied; it is, by necessity, both concept and enactment.

Although freedom is widely treated as desirable, it is never absolute. It is always balanced with responsibilities and boundaries necessary for coexisting with others. The familiar liberal maxim that one's freedom ends where another's begins captures this relational dimension. Yet, as already suggested, other animals are broadly excluded from such understandings of freedom, even when these understandings are framed in the most general terms.

This study approaches freedom through the lens of dominant norms, normalised hierarchies, and social structures. It does not aim to intervene in classic

debates in political theory on freedom; rather, it centres a problematisation of oppression. When freedom is framed through biases such as anthropocentrism, racism, colonialism, sexism, or speciesism, violence and hierarchy become legitimised as foundational organising principles for social life. I distinguish two overarching approaches to freedom:

Anthropocentric zero-sum freedom, conceived as a privilege-based account in which the freedoms of dominant groups depend on the oppression of Others, and

Interspecies freedom, a relational, social, and negotiated account grounded in opposition to oppression and aimed at fostering collective flourishing

In anthropocentric zero-sum freedom, freedom is treated as a finite resource that must be secured, protected, or hoarded, either through state authority or through individual assertion of agency over others. It is, in effect, freedom disguised as domination. Interspecies freedom, by contrast, is relational and evolutionary. It frames freedom as a condition arising from relations that enable flourishing rather than suppress it (Nedesky 1989). As such, it provides a counter-perspective that exposes the limitations and injustices embedded in anthropocentric models.

My reconsideration of freedom begins from the premise that all beings can be free in their own ways, and that everyone generally values not being oppressed. I reject any legitimisation of freedom as a privilege dependent on the domination of Others and instead explore shared spaces of freedom grounded in equity, diversity, and inclusivity. I take as a baseline that living beings wish to live and flourish and prefer not to be harmed, exploited, or unnecessarily constrained. At the same time, most humans recognise needless suffering as morally objectionable. Including other animals in our efforts to build social relations responsive to these values is therefore central to furthering animal liberation and may catalyse change in human attitudes and behaviour capable of supporting more just and sustainable social structures.

A direct example of how we humans infringe on other animals' freedom is when we farm, kill, and eat them. Consider the common argument that it would be one's personal free choice to eat animal products, which frames the issue of animal use as a private concern. While it is true that eating other animals is a personal decision, the same is true of stealing a car, abusing a cat, or setting a house on fire. The fact that an action stems from personal choice does not make it morally defensible. Ultimately, humans can eat animal products because the practice is legal and socially sanctioned, not because it is ethically justified. What is striking

is that freedom of choice is granted exclusively to humans, whose desires and food preferences are prioritised over the lives of sentient others. In most contexts, a "personal choice" ceases to be personal when it directly harms another. Eating other animals is an obvious case where the decision entails the fundamental violation of someone else's bodily integrity and life.

I highlight this example because it reveals a social context in which claims to freedom are premised on the oppression of Others. Considering the reverse scenario makes this more apparent, as the freeing of other animals from human domination could be perceived as an infringement on what is commonly framed as within the realm of the human agent's personal freedom. This inversion reflects human privilege and entitlement, which assume that other animals exist for human purposes and that their potential liberation threatens human autonomy.

A notable illustration is the reaction to the German Green Party's 2012 proposal that public canteens introduce one vegetarian day per week to promote the health benefits of plant-based diets, mitigate environmental harm, reduce demand for animal products, and counteract the inefficient and wasteful practices of animal farming, which exacerbate global food insecurity by contributing to hunger through the inefficient use of resources to feed farmed animals (Die Grüne 2012). The backlash was fierce. Several political parties accused the Greens of restricting people's freedom to choose what to eat. Although plant-based options are far more common today, the outrage triggered by the suggestion of one vegetarian meal a week revealed deep emotional investment.

This is, however, not merely an issue of individual lunch preferences. The animal agriculture industries actively shape and obstruct climate policy. Lobbying organisations invest substantial resources in downplaying the link between animal agriculture and climate change and in influencing political and scientific agendas so that climate-related policies are weakened or undermined (Lazarus et al. 2021). Eating "meat" is not merely a dietary preference but an ideology and cultural norm which Melanie Joy (2010) calls "carnism." Invoking freedom of choice in this context obscures the political and ethical reality that consuming other animals requires the exploitation and killing of sentient individuals simply because humans enjoy the taste of "steak," "cheese," or "bacon." Appeals to personal freedom function here as licences for harmful behaviour and imply an understanding of freedom as individual privilege. They clearly demonstrate how one group's freedom can rest on the denial of another's. Although humans are legally entitled

to kill and consume other animals, legality is not synonymous with moral justification. Stronger animal protection laws would indeed limit consumer choices, yet they would also expand the freedom of other animals. As Andreas Schmidt notes, "the freedom not to live in the torturous conditions of today's factory farms should plausibly be considered a more significant freedom than the freedom to consume cheap meat at every meal" (2015, 107).

At the same time, resistance to policies aimed at limiting animal consumption and agriculture is shaped not only by industry lobbying but also by ideological and political factors. Right-wing orientations, including social dominance and traditionalist values, are linked to opposition to plant-based diets and vegan advocacy (de Groeve, Bleys, and Hudders 2022; Van der Linden et al. 2025). These patterns illustrate how diet and climate policy are enlisted in broader conservative and far-right cultural-political narratives, portraying the regulation of animal agriculture as a threat to tradition, identity, or individual freedom. The logic of freedom as a form of privilege is not limited to human–animal relations. Just as appeals to personal choice and tradition in diet can obscure the exploitation of other beings, in many human contexts, freedom is similarly entangled with domination and the subordination of Others. Many human contexts, freedom is entangled with domination. For example, patriarchal structures often equate male freedom with women's subordination. In India, some men protested on social media by using the hashtag #MarriageStrike to complain against the possible criminalisation of marital rape (Fair Planet 2022). These men believe that by entering a marriage, women give their irrevocable consent to perpetuity, meaning that men can expect sex as a natural part of marriage, not least to fulfil obligations of procreation, which they view as the purpose of marriage. Marital rape remains legal in India, and as recently as 2025, it was reported that "a high court judge in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh set free a 40-year-old man who was convicted by a trial court in 2019 of rape and unnatural sex with his wife, who died within hours of the alleged assault" (BBC 2025). Here, men perceive their dominance as a form of personal freedom and view women's bodily autonomy as a threat.

This pattern recurs across other domains. Colonialism, for instance, has been described as a struggle for self-determination in which one nation secures its "freedom" by dominating another. As Graeber and Wengrow note,

> In this view, freedom was always defined—at least potentially—as something exercised to the cost of others. What's more, there was a strong emphasis in ancient

> Roman (and modern European) law on the self-sufficiency of households; hence, true freedom meant autonomy in the radical sense, not just autonomy of the will, but being in no way dependent on other human beings (except those under one's direct control) (2021, 67).

Similarly, Howes (2016) shows how appeals to freedom have been used to justify violence, such as at Guantánamo Bay, where the motto "Honour Bound to Defend Freedom" masks practices of torture, humiliation, and dehumanisation carried out in the name of safeguarding national freedom. What is problematic about these examples is that freedom is bound up with status, control, and hierarchy in a way that makes those in the more powerful position effectively oppressors. The starting point is that if you want to have a certain status to be free, you either have to be a certain way by default, which is arbitrary and could be beyond your control, or you have to assert your hierarchical position above Others in order to secure your rights to freedom and the privileges it provides.

Starting from this problematisation of freedom as entangled with hierarchy and domination, I turn to human oppression of other animals as the central site for examining violent logics, processes of liberation, and the meaning of freedom itself. Who is recognised as legitimately free often depends on valorised capacities such as rationality, language, and political participation. By interrogating the privilege and bias embedded in dominant understandings of freedom, we can better understand how oppressive structures operate. Just as analysing male or white privilege exposes mechanisms that uphold sexism or racism, examining anthropocentric privilege reveals how speciesist oppression is reproduced epistemically, structurally, culturally, institutionally, and psychologically. Asking what freedom might mean for other animals and how it could be conceptualised within interspecies social relations allows us to more accurately reflect the complexity and diversity of social life. Developing freedom as an interspecies concept serves a normative purpose: to rethink the social in ways that question human dominance and illuminate pathways towards less violent, less asymmetrical relations.

Core concepts

The terms freedom and liberty are often used interchangeably in everyday discourse, though in political theory they carry slightly different connotations. Freedom, derived from the Old English *freodom*, is historically associated with

self-determination and emancipation from bondage (OED 2025). Liberty, from the Latin *libertas*, tends to denote the absence of arbitrary external control and carries more explicit legal, institutional, and civic associations (Skinner 2012). While these distinctions are analytically useful, the concepts overlap significantly, and this dissertation uses them largely interchangeably. Both, however, are vital for conceptualising what it would mean to include other animals in moral, political, and social life, and for examining interspecies freedom as liberation from oppression and domination.

Within political theory, freedom has been articulated through several major traditions. Republican theorists such as Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit define freedom as independence (Skinner 2012) or as non-domination, understood as the absence of arbitrary subjection (Pettit 1999). Liberal theorists, by contrast, conceive freedom as non-interference, a negative liberty grounded in the absence of external constraints (Mill [1859] 2002; Berlin 1969). Positive accounts link freedom to autonomy, self-governance, and self-realisation, as seen in Berlin's positive liberty (1969), Rousseau's notion of collective self-rule [1762] 2004), and Hegel's idea of freedom as the embodiment of rational will (Pinkard 2000). Hannah Arendt offers a distinct perspective by conceiving freedom not as an inner state or a property of the will but as something that appears in the world through action and interaction. For Arendt, freedom is realised when individuals act in concert within a shared space of appearance, emphasising plurality and relationality as constitutive of political life (1958).

Despite important differences, these traditions share the foundational assumption that only rational human agents qualify as subjects of freedom. This thesis challenges that anthropocentric premise and develops an expanded notion of freedom as a condition of interspecies flourishing. It therefore draws on these traditions while also unsettling them by revealing how their conceptual boundaries exclude other animals and thereby reinforce human dominance.

Domination and *oppression* are two additional concepts central to this dissertation and are at times used interchangeably, though they refer to related but distinct phenomena. Domination describes a relational dynamic in which one agent directly controls or subordinates another (e.g., Pettit 1999). Oppression, by contrast, refers to the broader structural and systemic conditions that normalise, legitimise, and perpetuate such control (Cudd 2006; Frye 1983; Young 1990). For example, a cow is dominated when a farmer controls her reproductive capacities,

movement, or bodily integrity for human benefit. At a structural level, animal agriculture oppresses certain bovines as a collective through institutions, norms, and economic systems that render their exploitation routine and socially acceptable. Both domination and oppression are rejected throughout this study, though the terms are not always separated explicitly in the text. I sometimes use the term "unfreedom," but I treat oppression as the primary analytic concept and use unfreedom only as a descriptive gloss to highlight that oppression is a relational problem that produces a lack of freedom.

Understanding animal oppression as both relational and structural makes its interconnections with other injustices visible. This approach situates the subjugation of other animals within a broader matrix of domination and grounds the concept of animal freedom within projects of moral and political transformation. By emphasising the systemic character of oppression, the analysis developed here links interspecies freedom to broader intersectional struggles for justice.

By analysing the problem of animal oppression through a critical discussion of anthropocentric conceptions of freedom, I am not suggesting that freedom is inherently or necessarily tied to oppression. Rather, anthropocentric accounts of freedom and the rational political subject serve as illustrations of broader structural dynamics in which freedom has historically been constructed in ways that depend on hierarchy and exclusion. In these contexts, some actors secure their own freedom by restricting the freedom of Others.

This means that while freedom has often been associated with domination and privilege, such an association is not intrinsic to the concept itself. Oppression does not define freedom. Instead, oppression has at times been strategically used to construct and justify understandings of freedom, for instance, when the liberty of one group is premised on the subordination of another.

My argument, then, is precisely that freedom and oppression do not belong together. The task is to disentangle freedom from the hierarchical and exclusionary structures that have historically shaped it, and to reimagine freedom in a way that does not rely on the oppression of Others, human or nonhuman.

Existing critiques of anthropocentrism

Critiques of anthropocentrism have long been developed across diverse intellectual traditions. Indigenous worldviews, for instance, fundamentally

challenge Western assumptions of human superiority and instead emphasise relationality, reciprocity, and the co-existence of human and nonhuman beings (Deloria 1969; Kimmerer 2024; LaDuke 1999). Anthropocentrism has also come under increasing scrutiny within environmental ethics, where it is linked to ecological degradation and the intensifying climate crisis (Droz 2022; McShane 2016). These concerns have motivated calls for ecocentric perspectives that recognise the intrinsic value of all living beings (e.g. Naess 2009, Plumwood 1993). As Laÿna Droz (2022) notes, anthropocentrism intersects with a cluster of related concepts, such as human chauvinism, homocentrism, speciesism, human exceptionalism, androcentrism, capitalism, industrialism, human supremacism, and egoism, all of which illuminate the the roots of global harm.

Ecofeminist and posthumanist scholarship deepen these critiques by exposing the dualistic structures that separate humans from nature and other animals, thereby legitimising domination (Cudworth 2005; Cudworth and Hobden 2018; Haraway 2003; Latour 2004; Plumwood 2002; Wolfe 2010). This literature advances the ethics of care, interdependence, and relational agency that challenge human-centred worldviews. Within animal rights philosophy, anthropocentrism has been forcefully rejected by thinkers such as Peter Singer ([1975] 2002) and Tom Regan ([1983] 2004), who argue for extending moral and political consideration to sentient animals. Together, these bodies of work illuminate how human–animal hierarchies are constructed, normalised, and sustained, thus forming an essential foundation for the analysis developed in this dissertation.

This study contributes to these debates by offering a critique of anthropocentrism grounded in critical political thought, particularly critical animal studies (CAS) and ecofeminism. CAS, rooted in intersectionality, ecofeminism, and anarchism, seeks to develop explicitly non-anthropocentric and normatively engaged theory that opposes animal oppression and supports transformative social change (Nocella et al. 2014; Nocella and White 2023). As an interdisciplinary field influenced by critical theory and social justice movements, CAS positions itself against both anthropocentric forms of animal studies (including animal experimentation) and against less critical strands of human–animal studies that do not interrogate assumptions of human dominance (Glasser and Roy 2014; Taylor and Twine 2014). A central commitment of CAS is the pursuit of total liberation for humans, other animals, and the natural world, grounded in the understanding that

oppressive structures are interconnected and mutually reinforcing (Nocella et al. 2014; Taylor and Twine 2014; Matsuoka and Sorenson 2018).

By combining a normative critique of human domination with a conceptual analysis of anthropocentric theories of freedom, this dissertation rethinks a concept historically reserved for the rational human subject. Doing so reveals how deeply entrenched hierarchies shape our political imaginaries and legitimise the exclusion of other animals from moral and political consideration. Extending the conceptual architecture of freedom to include other animals provides a way to reimagine interspecies relations, recognise shared vulnerabilities and interdependencies, and challenge the structures that render animal oppression both normal and invisible. Problematising anthropocentric zero-sum freedom reveals the conceptual limitations of traditional humanist accounts and underscores the urgency of rethinking freedom from an interspecies, relational, and anti-oppressive standpoint.

Non-speciesist language

The oppression of other animals is embedded in our language and shapes how they are perceived and treated. Throughout this text, I strive to avoid objectifying and speciesist terms or, alternatively, to make them stand out by using quotation marks, signalling that these terms, although common, function to objectify or derogate. Referring to other animals as "it," as "farm animals," or as "livestock," for instance, diminishes their individuality and portrays them as mere material resources. I therefore attempt to write about other animals in ways that acknowledge their individuality.

Similarly, I use the term "farmed animal" to emphasise that farming is imposed upon them, not something they exist for by default. It is the product of a long history of domestication and human control (Cudworth 2017). I also avoid euphemisms that mask their suffering, such as "beef" or "pork," and instead use terms like "cow flesh" or "pig flesh" to make visible the reality of their death and the transformation of their bodies into "food products" (Adams 1990; Dunayer 2001).

Hierarchical thinking is reinforced in words such as "pet," which suggest that an animal's primary purpose is to serve human interests, perpetuating a power imbalance between humans and companion animals. Referring to companion species allows for greater recognition of the complex histories of co-evolution and

co-constitution that we share with these animals, because "there cannot be just one companion species; there have to be at least two to make one" (Haraway 2003, 12). We are deeply enmeshed in the animal world, and my intent is to question the normalised violence that so often defines human-animal relations.

Using the phrase "humans and other animals" seeks to challenge the human-animal binary and hierarchical thinking, emphasizing that humans are, of course, also animals (Cudworth 2011, 5). The animals we deem "less than" or exploitable are equally part of the social world, and their subordination is not an inherent fact of their being but the result of human domination. For these reasons, capitalising the word "Other" serves to highlight dynamics of social exclusion as when dominant groups are depicted as "normal" and positioned as default, while those abstracted by this lens are devalued as deviant, separate, or marginalised (Boddice et al. 2011; Plumwood 2002; Warren 2000).

When I write about the Other, my aim is to draw attention to commonplace objectification, perceived lack of subjectivity, and reductions of individuals or groups who are denied agency, voice, or moral value on equal footing with the dominant group. I do not suggest that those in the position of being an Other form a shared or homogenous group, as each type of social exclusion or oppression has unique circumstances. However, I am seeking to point to a shared set of dominant and violent logics that keep interrelated types of oppression going. For these reasons, I strive to use inclusive and respectful language, viewing this as a necessary step toward shifting perceptions of other animals and fostering more empathetic and equitable relationships. Next, I shall outline the study's contributions.

1.3 Contributions

This thesis makes three principal contributions, to political theory, critical animal studies (CAS), and the broader study of power and relational freedom.

First, it offers a theoretical contribution by developing a relational and political conception of interspecies freedom. Freedom is valuable because it enables autonomy, protection from harm, and possibilities for self-expression and fulfilment (Berlin 1969). However, when defined in strictly anthropocentric terms, the concept remains tied to a hierarchy in which the human political subject is

positioned as "more free" than those who fail to embody that ideal. In such formulations, freedom can become a privilege and a power position one holds over an Other.

In that sense, anthropocentric notions of freedom are closely connected to individualistic conceptions of liberty based on the autonomous human individual. By contrast, social understandings of freedom start from the premise that freedom is socially constituted and negotiated in relationships (Spicker 1985). My critique of anthropocentric freedom highlights how these individualistic models treat freedom as a seemingly unlimited privilege for those in dominant positions, while those in subordinate positions face heightened vulnerability and oppression. This study contributes to this by rethinking freedom as a shared condition grounded in the absence of domination and in relations conducive to flourishing, demonstrating that other animals are an integral part of political communities.

This reconceptualisation challenges welfare-oriented and human-centred accounts by showing that freedom concerns all beings who are vulnerable to structural and relational forms of oppression. Drawing together CAS, intersectional ecofeminism, and political theory, the analysis situates animal oppression within wider patterns of hierarchy and exclusion, thereby enriching existing debates about power, subjectivity, and the scope of political community.

Second, the thesis makes a methodological contribution through its use of normative grounded theory and its combination of theory with empirical methods, which yield a more relational and situated approach. By combining semi-structured interviews and visual materials with critical normative analysis, the study demonstrates how empirical insight can deepen and sharpen conceptual arguments. This approach shows that lived experiences and representational practices are not merely illustrative but can actively inform the development of normative political theory. Bringing empirical material into dialogue with theory broadens the methodological repertoire of political inquiry and strengthens the connection between scholarship, advocacy, and the material realities of oppression.

Finally, the thesis advances a political contribution by offering a framework for reimagining human–animal relations in non-dominating terms. Reframing freedom as an interspecies condition opens space for practical and policy-relevant applications. Considering our relations to other animals through a lens of interspecies freedom offers relational principles for rethinking institutional and

spatial arrangements in more inclusive ways. By foregrounding how similar logics of domination shape both human and nonhuman oppression, the study supports more comprehensive analyses of power and helps articulate pathways toward transformative, more-than-human justice.

1.4 Chapter disposition

Following this introduction*, chapter two* outlines the study's methodological framework. It explains the integrative approach of combining normative political theory with a grounded normative analysis of visual materials and semi-structured interviews. Together, these approaches provide the foundation for a politically and ethically situated examination of freedom in the context of human–animal relations.

Chapter three provides tangible context for the problem of animal oppression and turns our attention to the lived experiences of other animals. Visual material can sometimes communicate more powerfully than text, and this chapter uses it to bear witness and reveal how the realities of other animals are shaped by human actions and anthropocentric assumptions. The discussion engages with photographs from *We Animals;* a non-profit collective of photojournalists whose work exposes complex human–animal relations and seeks to create possibilities for ethical and cultural transformation (We Animals 2025). By examining how other animals are viewed and treated in a human-dominated world, this chapter highlights both the gravity and the structural complexity of their subordination.

Chapter four examines the concept of freedom itself. To understand how other animals were excluded from its purview, the chapter discusses examples from the history of Western philosophy that illustrate how the construction of the free human subject was, in part, premised on abstraction from nature and the "animal world." These examples help to identify some of the foundational assumptions that established a hierarchical human–animal divide and shaped conceptions of freedom as belonging primarily to the idealised human political agent. Revisiting these examples thus clarifies historical grounds of exclusion that have gradually solidified into a widely accepted anthropocentric narrative.

Chapter five then turns to the topic of oppression and develops the theoretical foundations of the study. Here, I problematise human domination over other

animals and explicate how animal oppression is entangled with broader systems, structures, and logics of oppression that sustain unjust hierarchies, violence, and relational dysfunction across species boundaries. This intersectional analysis demonstrates that the oppression of other animals is an integral part of wider systems of domination. Understanding these dynamics enables me to argue that the domination of Others is closely tied to conceptions of freedom as individual privilege or a zero-sum good.

Chapter six narrows the focus by engaging directly with scholarship on animal freedom. Mapping the trajectory of the animal-rights discourse and drawing on existing discussions of freedom for other animals, the chapter lays the groundwork for an interspecies understanding of freedom that moves beyond negative rights, capacity-based frameworks (e.g., Nussbaum 2022), and welfarist approaches (e.g., Cochrane 2012). It instead prepares the conceptual space for a relational account of freedom in human–animal relations.

Chapter seven discusses freedom in human–animal relations through a relational, grounded normative approach, drawing on 31 semi-structured interviews with animal advocates. The analysis reflects on the meanings of freedom in relation to the intersectional aims of animal liberation and identifies both the possibilities and the challenges involved in striving toward a shared interspecies freedom.

Finally, *chapter eight* formulates a conception of interspecies freedom understood as a condition in which humans and other animals can be free from oppression and live in relations and social environments that support their flourishing.

2 Methodology: Situated inquiry and normative engagement

The argument of this thesis is grounded in a commitment to reflexivity, situated knowledge, and normative critique. The chapter proceeds in two parts. Part one addresses the epistemological and theoretical anchors of the study, beginning with a discussion of reflexivity and situated knowledge and situating the project within feminist and critical traditions that emphasise the partial, embodied, and relational dimensions of knowledge production. It then turns to the intellectual groundings of the thesis, positioning the study within critical animal studies, ecofeminism, and intersectional feminist political theory to clarify its normative and analytical orientation.

Part two outlines the application of a grounded normative critical theoretical approach. Here, normative theorising is operationalised through sustained engagement with two forms of empirical grounding: visual material and semi-structured interviews. These materials are not treated as illustrative supplements but as constitutive methodological components that anchor normative critique in lived experiences of domination, resistance, and struggle. The chapter concludes by outlining a set of delimitations that further clarify the scope of the project.

This methodological architecture ensures that the empirical, conceptual, and normative dimensions of the thesis are systematically integrated. The subsequent chapters build on this approach to examine freedom and oppression across human and nonhuman contexts, conceptualising freedom both as a condition of non-domination and as a relational capacity shaped by situated relations of power.

2.1 Situated inquiry and theoretical anchors

Drawing on feminist and critical traditions that view knowledge as situated and contingent, this section foregrounds the role of reflexivity by acknowledging that this research is not a neutral exercise but is inevitably shaped and limited by my own social positioning and experiences. Whilst committed to challenging the

oppression of other animals within a broader context of intersecting relations of power and domination, I am aware that my ability to speak and be heard is shaped by structures that systemically silence both human and nonhuman Others. As a white, Western woman and academically trained researcher, I approach this work from within intersecting structures of privilege and marginalisation. My feminist orientation is informed by both personal and collective experiences of gendered power structures, which influence and inform my sensitivity to other forms of domination. As a human being, I occupy a position of privilege within a speciesist and anthropocentric social order, and I recognise that my capacity to speak and be heard is shaped by the very structures that systemically silence other animals. Whilst I am practising ethical veganism as an integral part of my everyday life to try and harm other animals as little as possible, this does not mean that I do not partake in normalised social practices that are problematic and that are part of ongoing negotiations of how to live life together with, and alongside, other animals. There are always challenges when living with other animals, both those in our immediate circles and those we affect simply by living in this world. Part of realising change is therefore also the realisation that the overall goal is much bigger than the already overwhelming incentive of challenging carnism.

My background in gender studies and feminist theory informs how I interpret concepts like power and oppression. As described above, my research is informed by (eco)feminism, critical animal studies (CAS), and ecofeminism, and I recognise that each of these perspectives stems from specific social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. Since I write from within a Western academic institution and from a position of relative privilege, I am acutely aware of the risks of speaking over or instrumentalising the perspectives I draw on. There are thus certainly limitations as to what I can grasp from within my own social position. My intention to formulate a notion of interspecies freedom has shown me that there are spaces, understandings, or situations of freedom that remain inaccessible, indescribable, or perhaps also not meant to be imported into human or Western academic discourse.

An important aspect of freedom is that one can act in accordance with one's abilities, interests, and social relations, and the vast social complexity and diversity that results is far greater than the human sphere. As humans, we will never be able to view the world through any lens but our limited human lens and will thus never experience the freedom to fly like a bird, to communicate over sense vibrations like spiders or moles, or to navigate using the Earth’s magnetic field with our own

bodies. We may have come up with other solutions to do similar things, but the biggest issues of our time, such as conflict, war, human-induced climate change, poverty, and inequality, are systemic problems that are related to questions of how we relate to each other, how we conduct ourselves, and how to organise power. I thus in no way wish to claim any neutrality or mastery of the topics discussed here, but would like to highlight that I view this work as part of an ongoing and ever-incomplete process of learning, unlearning, and trying to find new, or old and long-approved, complex ways of trying to be accountable and responsible in relation to Others.

Intellectual groundings

Situated in critical traditions that challenge the anthropocentric and hierarchical assumptions that currently underpin much of (Western) political thought, the project draws on literatures including CAS, ecofeminism, intersectionality, and normative critical theory broadly conceived. These perspectives provide conceptual and normative frameworks for analysing anthropocentric freedom and for developing an interspecies account of freedom.

CAS offers a foundational critique of anthropocentrism and animal oppression, and it openly promotes the liberation of all animals, including humans, and of nature (Nocella et al. 2014; Taylor and Twine 2014; Matsuoka and Sorenson 2018). Its interdisciplinary approach combines the critical perspectives of critical theory, (eco)feminism, intersectionality, and anarchism, and bridges the gap between research and activism. From this approach, this project takes the commitment to an intersectional and abolitionist ethics, which informs the interrogation of freedom as a human-only privilege. Applying this lens allows us to recognise that freedom must be understood in more inclusive and diverse ways.

Ecofeminism deepens the critique of anthropocentric accounts of freedom by foregrounding the relational and embodied character of all life forms and emphasising the interrelation of gendered domination with the domination of other animals and nature. Understanding the problem of anthropocentric bias in thought on freedom, and in the context of human-animal relations, in relation to male domination, contributes to a more complex understanding of how different types of oppression relate to and mutually reinforce one another (e.g., Cudworth 2005, 2011; Kheel 2008; Mies and Shiva 1993). Ecofeminist contributions,

moreover, offer a vocabulary to think about human-animal-nature relations in terms of interdependence and care (Adams 1990; Gruen 2009; Merchant 1980). Methodologically, ecofeminist insights also inform the study's epistemological stance, which acknowledges situated knowledges (Haraway 1988).

Intersectionality further informs the study by offering a specific approach or lens that shows how various systems and logics of oppression operate through interlocking categories of social differences such as gender, species, class, or race. Applying intersectional analyses to multi-species contexts enables a more complex understanding of animal oppression by illustrating how the oppression of other animals relates to, and sometimes further enables, the oppression and marginalisation of human Others. Intersectionality is foundational to CAS and furthermore relates to the ecofeminist lens applied. It is central to the methodological design of this project inasmuch as it guides how both theoretical texts and empirical materials are interpreted.

The normative-critical theoretical approach of this thesis combines the above perspectives and treats political concepts such as freedom as both normative and contested, meaning that freedom is not simply analysed as a philosophical idea but as a site of power, oppression, and exclusion, and as a potential site for inclusion and social transformation. The normative ambition of this dissertation is to articulate an account of interspecies freedom applicable to imagining lived contexts of human-animal relations, while the critical dimension of this project seeks to interrogate how existing anthropocentric ideas and concepts perpetuate domination by excluding other animals. Taken together, these bodies of literature provide the intellectual grounding for this study and guide how the canonical texts and empirical illustrations are read and interpreted, as well as how normative arguments are developed. The combination of these perspectives allows for a critical, relational, and justice-oriented research approach to move towards an inclusive understanding of interspecies freedom.

2.2 Grounded normative critical theory

The methodological approach taken here is informed by grounded normative political theory, which seeks to combine empirical and theoretical dimensions. Rather than deriving normative claims from abstract moral principles and rigorous

rational procedures, this study grounds them in the lived experiences and social struggles of interspecies relations. Performing normative theorisation is an undertaking that must be well thought through to avoid reinforcing the same dominant norms and logics that are being critiqued. To achieve this, the process of theorisation has been guided by a methodology of engaged and grounded normative theory, being an outwardly feminist methodology for political theory (Ackerly et al. 2006; Ackerly 2018). Brooke Ackerly argues that normative theory must be informed by the lived experiences of oppression, injustice, and resistance and should thus not be solely developed through abstraction (2018). To incorporate such a grounded approach, the analysis was led by the intent to conduct reflexive research in dialogue with others and was informed by the needs and struggles of those who experience the oppression the study seeks to oppose. This allows for a research approach that is situated, relational, and transformative, rather than detached or idealised.

Abstract political philosophy can potentially be understood as a top-down approach due to operating at a high level of abstraction and often relying on idealised assumptions about human agents, such as the concept of an ideal political subject. This may call for an epistemic starting point of detachment in which the theorist is a natural observer who makes universal claims. From a grounded normative stance, this approach may risk anthropocentrism and other partial biases, for instance, when culturally and historically specific values, such as the idealised autonomous and rational agent, are presented as universal.

A grounded normative theoretical approach is more bottom-up, deriving normative insights from a base of social and ecological contexts grounded in lived experiences. Visual illustrations of animal oppression and direct dialogue with fellow animal advocates provide some empirical elements that inform the otherwise primarily structural and conceptual focus of this study. Together, this integrated approach frames the epistemic starting point of this thesis as engaged and relational. Rather than deriving validity claims from universality, validity here stems from reflexivity, relationality, and accountability.

A core method of a grounded normative approach is therefore to begin with a diagnostic critique that analyses power relations. In this project, this is done by firstly clarifying the normative goals of research. Resisting the idea that research is an objective, value-neutral undertaking, I seek to treat political activism and scholarship as complementary elements that advance emancipatory theories and

social transformation. I therefore explicitly clarify the normative commitment of this study to oppose human domination over other animals to stress that theorising and writing are political undertakings (Drew and Taylor 2014; Nocella et al. 2014). Doing so is common in critical and normative scholarship and seeks to mark the political nature of conducting research (Glasser and Roy 2014).

By making the normative political commitment of this project explicit and up-front, research can contribute to activism and to critical and liberatory theory grounded in socially engaged forms of knowledge production. This approach to treating research as grounded and as a form of activism thus conceives of the role of theory as contributing to, and being informed by, action to nurture solidarity and collective action (Routledge 2009).

The goal of formulating theoretical arguments dedicated to opposing oppression in general and the exploitation of other animals in particular invites reflection on potential points of interaction that bridge the gap between theory and practice. This view and approach align with the openly normative commitments of CAS, which promotes total liberation and views the oppression of humans and other animals as interrelated and mutually reinforcing (Nocella et al. 2014; Taylor and Twine 2014; Matsuoka and Sorenson 2018). The goal of promoting animal liberation encompasses politically relevant developments in politics, social movements, and activism as well as lifestyle choices to be studied and advanced academically.

Critical scholarly work can thus be seen as a useful tool and platform to advance liberatory theories and approaches that can inform, be informed by, and be translated into action (Glasser and Roy 2014; Socha and Mitchell 2014). Disseminating the results of this study and sharing my conclusions with others interested in working towards animal liberation in an accessible manner is therefore of utmost importance, so that the knowledge produced here can be shared beyond the academic sphere. An important element of CAS research is also to acknowledge and support direct action, which underscores its role in making visible and minimising violence against animal life (Jenkins and Stanescu 2014). This does not necessarily translate into a universal mandate to engage in direct action but seeks to be attentive to the need for a diversity of tactics (Jenkins and Stanescu 2014). Together, the visual and interview-based materials function not as supplementary illustrations but as methodological components that anchor the normative analysis in lived experiences of domination and resistance.

Empirical groundings: visual and interview-based sources

This being a predominantly theoretical dissertation, I sought to balance the individualistic endeavour of conducting research by including the perspectives and experiences of fellow animal liberation activists and scholars. Images were included to represent the lived experiences of other animals, here specifically focusing on representations of animal domination. Besides that, others who also work with a normative commitment to promote the liberation of all animals were included through conducting a series of semi-structured interviews. The inclusion of interview material and images was intended to conduct research through a dialogical approach, in which all those involved in the process become co-creators of knowledge. Such an openly collaborative and co-creational approach has been described as an activist and social justice-oriented methodology (Drew and Taylor 2014) and provides an important basis for the grounded approach of this study.

Studying oppression and freedom as liberation from oppression calls for a critical approach to normative theory. Critical social enquiry aims to move beyond mere conceptual analysis to understand phenomena in their full complexity (Harvey 2022). This means viewing social phenomena as structurally interrelated, analysing them within their historical contexts, and examining how dominant ideologies reflect the worldviews and interests of powerful groups, which are then deconstructed and reconstructed with a clear practical commitment to emancipation (Harvey 2022). Since this thesis focuses on the concept of freedom, which is largely bound up with the human agent, I sought to deconstruct influential cornerstones of the Western narrative of liberty to locate and unpack its inherent anthropocentric bias. Building on this framework, the following section turns to visual presentation as a site for both constructing and contesting animal unfreedom.

Visual material: representations of animal oppression

Normative theory is empirically grounded and is therefore informed by the lived experiences of those who have encountered oppression and resistance first hand. By drawing on various sources beyond abstract theoretical texts, the intention is to develop theoretical arguments in dialogical engagement to connect testimonies of real struggles with more abstract calls for change. To try to give

space to the lived experiences of other animals, images from the animal industries are included in chapter three.

Founded by photojournalist Jo-Anne McArthur, the group of photojournalists *We Animals* made it their mandate to expose how other animals live in the human-dominated world (We Animals 2024b). *We Animals* produces images and films that document how other animals are treated. Their aim is to show the individual animals that are otherwise so easily lost out of sight, to encourage people to bear witness, and to call the ethics with which we treat the other sentient beings into question (We Animals 2024). Paramount for socially engaged methods of normative research is that situated actors who are experiencing oppressive struggles first hand are listened to, as abstract political theory otherwise risks failing to engage with the realities of oppression and inequality (Ackerly 2020). Citing the work of *We Animals* allows drawing on a vast array of activist work that would have exceeded the scope of this study, and my own abilities to collect such material, by far. Actual images provide more tangible illustrations of this study's problematisation of animal oppression, and using these images allows making some direct interconnections between the hands-on approaches of documentation by *We Animals* and this study's theoretical contributions to thought on freedom as liberation from oppression for all. Using images that are made with the normative goal of documenting, exposing, and opposing human domination of other animals is thus in line with the normative goals of this study and is furthermore aligned with the grounded normative theoretical approach taken. The intention to show these images is thus to direct the readers gaze to the realities of oppressed animals and to also contribute to the increased documentation of how humans treat other animals, since one of the most important activist practices is to raise awareness (Meijer 2019). The in chapter three included images should thus be seen as testimonies of animal unfreedom. They depict individuals who are vulnerable and who have been confined, mutilated, trapped, estranged, exposed, or hidden away.

The choice of material was guided by the intent to represent various examples that allow me to discuss different ways in which other animals are made unfree. This allows me to enrich my theoretical discussion to provide some illustrations of the issues I problematise, but it does not do justice to the diversity of topics included in the *We Animals* stockpile. The selected images are all openly available at the *We Animals* stock site galleries, and a license for non-commercial academic

use has been obtained before downloading the items. The specified usage to be included in this research study and its clarified aim has been declared upon download to assure that the material is utilised in line with the normative goals of the *We Animals* advocacy work. Since I focus my discussion on freedom and oppression in the context of human-animal relations and not on the problem of violence specifically, I have decided to not include many of the absolutely harrowing images that are displayed on the *We Animals* stockpile which are available online. That said, all the images shown do expose violence as they depict the violent realities of human domination over other animals. The violence and oppression inherent to the global system of animal use has many faces that all are important to expose and challenge. Showing a selection of images in chapter three as illustrations of animal unfreedom becomes part of the grounded normative approach of this study, revealing how images both reflect and contest taken-for-granted hierarchies that currently structure human-animal relations.

Semi-structured interviews: activist voices

To enrich the theoretical research process with multiple perspectives, the empirical element of semi-structured interviews was integrated into the research design to inform the theoretical arguments. Viewing research as a form of resistance seeks to provide alternative perspectives and lay the groundwork for structural change, and is generally participatory, conducting research with participants rather than on or for them (Drew and Taylor 2014). Interviews with others working on animal issues were thus conducted to make the necessarily individualistic process of writing a theory-based dissertation more engaged and grounded (Ackerly 2020), and to situate this study within the collaborative efforts of the animal liberation movement. Implementing a relational approach to research aligns with the normative aims of this study, as the goal of promoting liberation from oppression for all animals implies values of interconnectedness, inclusivity, and collaboration.

During the summer and autumn of 2019, 31 interviews were conducted with 32 individuals engaged in some form of animal advocacy, including scholarly work, direct activism, and/or working or living with rescued animals. The interviews were conducted in English or Swedish, and depending on the participants' location, they took place either in person, online, or by phone. Most participants were based in European or North American countries, and some were in the Middle

East. The duration of the interview conversations was usually between 45 and 60 minutes each.

Ethical clearance has been obtained by the review board of the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, which was required because discussing political issues such as animal liberation may involve that participants shared their individual political, philosophical, or religious views or could potentially disclose information about legal concerns connected to their activist engagements, which are all classified as sensitive personal information and must therefore be protected under ethical research regulations.

Any interview inquiry raises moral and ethical considerations, as the human interaction in the interview setting affects the participants. All risks were declared and explained prior to the interview, and the participants were provided with an information sheet and an informed consent form that explained the interview process, data handling methods, and a clear statement to ensure their anonymity (see Appendix A for the full informed consent form).

While protecting the anonymity of all participants is of utmost importance, it is also worth mentioning that the decision to anonymise the participants at times contradicts the relational approach of this study, as it means that the participants' individual contributions to the conversation are not specifically stated and credited to them personally, as would be the case when published academic work is cited. To balance the challenge of protecting anonymity with the value of participants lived experiences, the varied backgrounds and experiences of participants can be described to demonstrate the diversity of perspectives and experiences.

All participants had some previous experience with animal advocacy work, in the form of direct or street activism, and about a third had experience working at animal sanctuaries as volunteers or in their full-time occupation. Out of all participants, 20 also used their scholarly work as a platform to oppose animal oppression, representing all levels of academia. The different scholarly fields represented include philosophy, sociology, gender studies, social anthropology, human geography, religious studies, political theory, media, and communication studies, ethology, and psychology.

There was a lot of variation in the types of activism that participants were engaged in. Advocacy efforts that participants had experience in included leafletting, protesting, holding workshops, and volunteering for different NGOs or animal rights organisations, and several participants had given workshops, public

talks, spoken out in the media, or were engaged in different educational activities, such as organising events and handing out free vegan food and information to the public. Others had experiences with hunting sabotage, rescuing animals from farms, or entering facilities of the animal industry to document the realities of animals farmed for meat, dairy, fur, or eggs. Yet others were engaged in providing homes for rescued animals, either in their own households or in animal sanctuaries. Some participants had experiences with rehoming companion animals, and many reported living with adopted animals. A great majority of participants considered their veganism an important part of their activism.

While there was generally strong opposition to animal oppression, each participant had a unique perspective on what freedom means to them and what their thoughts were about animal liberation and possible solutions for transformed human-animal relations. Those who also opposed animal exploitation in their academic work tended to problematise questions of freedom and human-animal relations in more abstract ways than others who focused primarily on direct action and aimed to communicate the issue of animal oppression to the public or to rescue individual animals. The different foci of people's activism provided rich accounts of how to think about freedom in the context of human-animal relations. Individuals working at animal sanctuaries, for example, offered reflections on many practical issues and solutions as they sought to support and live alongside other animals in ways that challenge dominant speciesist hierarchies.

Being able to draw on these experiences and perspectives has immensely enriched my otherwise much more limited individual experience. My limited experiences mostly concern critical research and teaching on human-animal relations, as well as public talks, street activism, and protesting, and my personal experiences of living with animal companions. By interviewing others engaged in a wide variety of animal advocacy work, I aimed for a more grounded approach, writing from within a particular struggle to learn from others in a situated, collaborative research setting (Ackerly 2020; Routledge 2009).

Through the shared basic interest in working against human domination over other animals, the interviews can therewith be described as a site of mutual exchange where we reflect together on questions of domination and freedom in the context of human-animal relations. While the main interview questions were posed by me as the interviewer, I tried to be open to any discussion that emerged to integrate the participants' perspectives and experiences and to allow for a lot

of variation in how interview conversations unfolded. Those involved in daily practical work at animal sanctuaries had a very different approach to thinking about abstract questions of human and animal freedom than those who might have studied human domination over other animals academically, for instance. This allowed me to enrich my understanding of the topic and to reflect on the range of challenges and hands-on problems that arise when actively trying to support other animals and to intentionally create greater spaces of, and for, interspecies freedom.

Openness to learning from a range of other perspectives on the topic of freedom in human-animal relations was only mediated by the baseline normative commitment of this project to challenge and oppose treating other animals as means to an end. The project's theoretical lens is firmly grounded in questioning anthropocentrism and thus does not engage in debates about whether or how using other animals as resources for food production could be ethically appropriate. For that reason, the selection of participants was limited to those challenging animal oppression and working towards positive change through academic research, various forms of activism, and/or the direct care and support of rescued animals saved from the animal industries.

The key method of analysis was a theoretical reading and interpretation of the material. Brinkmann and Kvale refer to this as a "theoretically or paradigmatically informed reading of interviews," through which selected statements are interpreted from a theoretical position (2015, 269). To analyse interviews through theoretical reading, no specific methods or techniques for analysis are used, but repeatedly reading the material paired with theoretical reflection on specific themes of interest is applied to arrive at my own interpretations (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). The analytical process already began during transcription, fostering sustained engagement and preliminary reflection on the material. In reflexive qualitative research, transcription is not understood as a neutral task but as an interpretative and meaning-making process since analytical reflection begins (Kvale and Brinkmann 2015), and because the positional and ethical commitments of the researcher shape how the material is rendered and understood (Ackerly et al. 2006).

Through repeated reading of the interview data, I developed thematic summaries that helped me to develop the discussions in chapter seven. Since the problem formulation and research questions of this study are theoretically

informed, recourse to more specific analytical tools is less important, as the aim is to draw on and contribute to critical theoretical understandings of the subject matter (Brinkman and Kvale 2015). This reliance on my own theoretical interpretation entails a risk of bias, as the phenomena of human-animal relations will be viewed through my normative lens. To counteract this, the normative lens of this study is clarified as stated above, and it is made explicit that this study relies on intellectual groundings that shape the interpretation and reading of both previous literature and empirical material to arrive at normative theorisations.

In the later stages of the interview analysis, I used AI-assisted software (Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT) for limited supportive tasks, including generating further thematic summaries of anonymised excerpts and translating selected anonymised quotations for inclusion in the text. AI was also used in the final stages of the project to identify additional literature, proofread, organise text, refine articulation, and assist with reference management. These tools functioned solely as aids. All conceptual development, argumentation, and substantive analytical work are my own, and the use of AI adhered to the principles of academic integrity set out in the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA 2023). I reviewed and verified all AI-generated outputs to ensure accuracy and academic integrity.

Having outlined my methodological approach to interviewing and the key epistemological considerations of this study, the final section of this chapter discusses delimitations.

Delimitations

Since the concept of freedom is highly contested in political thought, and because extending freedom to other animals opens an especially vast field of debate, clear boundaries must be drawn to clarify the scope of inquiry. These boundaries are not intended to deny the significance of perspectives that fall outside the scope of this study, but rather to ensure a coherent and focused exploration of how interspecies freedom can be approached through interdisciplinary critical inquiry.

By discussing some delimitations of this project, I aim to specify how the argument is situated within the broader landscape of political theory and the discipline of political science. This thesis contributes to political theory by extending the conceptual boundaries of debates around freedom, oppression,

and the political beyond the human. Through engagement with the field of CAS and animal politics, it challenges the anthropocentric assumptions that have traditionally shaped political science, where institutions, governance, and political standing are conceptualised as exclusively human concerns. By shifting attention to interspecies relations, I show how freedom can take on new meanings when extended beyond the human realm.

Theoretically, this dissertation is delimited by its use of intersectionality, CAS, and ecofeminism as overall guiding perspectives. These approaches foreground an understanding of various types of oppression as interrelated and mutually reinforcing, providing a crucial conceptual foundation for the normative analysis of this project. Although drawing on multiple perspectives, the engagement with theory is selective and does not attempt to provide an exhaustive review of all philosophical or political positions on freedom. Accordingly, this dissertation does not present itself as a comprehensive theory of freedom, nor does it align with classical political philosophy. Instead, the focus lies in using selected concepts, particularly freedom and oppression, to illuminate the problems of animal domination and to begin conceptualising a shared interspecies condition of freedom, understood as liberation from oppression and the enabling of greater flourishing.

While structures of capitalism, industrial production, and global political economy play a significant role in shaping contemporary forms of animal exploitation, this dissertation does not provide a systematic critique of capitalism as such. Economic systems are treated as part of the broader structural context that enables and normalises domination, rather than as the primary object of analysis. This focus does not deny the importance of economic factors but clarifies that the central aim here is to explore freedom as a relational and normative concept. Similarly, the dissertation does not develop concrete policy proposals, institutional designs, or governance models, nor does it advance a comprehensive legal theory of animal rights or personhood. Rights-based frameworks and debates on legal recognition are engaged selectively where they illuminate broader dynamics of domination and liberation, without forming the central focus.

The intellectual grounding of this thesis leads to a clear normative stance that both drives and shapes the developed arguments. Focus lies on problematising human domination and oppression over other animals, and on drawing connections between animal oppression and the subjugation and exploitation of

human Others and nature. Inter-animal relations that do not involve humans are not discussed, and violence occurring in such contexts falls outside the scope of this study. Similarly, considerations of potentially legitimate circumstances for consuming other animals are excluded from the scope and normative aims of this work. The emphasis is on human morality, specifically on challenging how we treat other animals.

Although this approach may leave room for interpretation and questions about the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, no specific moral line is drawn based on features such as rationality, language, sentiency, intelligence, or other capacities. Since the focus lies on problematising arbitrary domination and oppression in a human-dominated society, a key step in dismantling the anthropocentric hierarchy supporting it is to avoid measuring other animals by human standards. The world of other animals is rich and diverse, and I choose to begin from a position of appreciation and recognition of this multiplicity, rather than engaging in exclusionary line-drawing exercises. Narrowing the examples to primarily reflect on our relations with domesticated animals we live with and wild animals we hunt, and capture serves to highlight the most prevalent contexts of human-animal interaction and the largest domains through which other animals are rendered unfree by human dominance and exploitation. This does not imply that other contexts of human impact on other animals are less important; it is merely a matter of focusing on what I perceive as most pressing in the context of theorising freedom for humans and other animals.

The grounded normative approach to theorising adopted here is limited by the thesis's primarily conceptual focus. While visual material and interviews provide important empirical grounding, more extensive empirical work that would have been possible in a larger research setting was omitted. Another limitation is that other animals were not more directly involved in my discussions on reimagining co-constituted human-animal relations, which remains a largely abstract and theoretical endeavour. Fieldwork methods that allow direct engagement with and learning from other animals could have enriched the study by incorporating more lived experiences, but were not incorporated due to time constraints. To mitigate the risk of human projection, the analysis triangulates three sources: visual testimonies documenting the lived realities of oppression, interview material reflecting activist perspectives, and theoretical frameworks providing normative grounding. These combined lenses reduce reliance on any

single standpoint and allow for a more balanced interpretation. The limitations of this approach, and the risk of anthropocentric bias, will be revisited reflexively in chapter eight when proposing practices for interspecies freedom.

These delimitations, while necessarily selective, provide a foundation for the theoretical and normative explorations that follow and guide the inquiry into how freedom might be reimagined as an interspecies concept and a condition enabling shared flourishing across species boundaries.

3 *We Animals* and the visual testimony of animal oppression

> Freedom has always depended on our ability to identify systems of injustice. (We Animals 2024a)

Animal oppression is everywhere. The scale of violence is vast, and yet so often hidden and out of sight. The purpose of this chapter is to present images of other animals who are dominated by humans to illustrate how their lack of freedom is manifested. In doing so, the chapter contributes to the aim by illustrating how the domination of other animals manifests in practice, grounding the critique of domination in the lived realities of other animals.

With the help of *We Animals*, a nonprofit organisation founded by Canadian photojournalist Jo-Anne McArthur, some of the actual circumstances of animal oppression are here brought to the foreground (We Animals 2024a). Using images of animal domination and oppression aims to show how other animals are interfered with and rendered unfree, while also providing an opportunity to ground my theoretical arguments in illustrations of real experiences of oppressed animals and in the efforts of fellow animal advocates.

Other animals are exploited for many "purposes", such as the production of food or clothing, entertainment in zoos and aquariums, and use in scientific experimentation and testing. Animal agriculture is by far the most extensive form of animal exploitation, as the food industry accounts for 99 percent of all animals killed by humans (Leenaert 2021, 8). The concept of the "animal-industrial complex" refers to the complex system of globally interconnected industries, institutions, and cultural norms that facilitate the continued and systematic exploitation of other animals for human ends (Noske 1989, Twine 2012). Revenues are not only generated at farms, fisheries, and slaughterhouses, but also through transportation services, the production of feed for farmed animals, companies manufacturing farming equipment and machinery, the pharmaceutical industry, veterinary services, zoos, the companion animal sector, food inspectors, supermarkets, and restaurants (Leenaert 2021; Twine 2012). By using other animals

as "livestock" or as resources to be "harvested," we routinely exploit and harm them. During their lifetime, animals used as resources for food, research, or entertainment are confined, mutilated, abused, deprived of their natural behaviours, and ultimately killed to be either disposed of or turned into a final "product". This fundamentally negates their freedom. Problematising the domination and oppression of other animals in the animal-industrial complex allows for a critical assessment of the economic, social, and political structures that sustain and normalise their subordination and exploitation as material resources.

Because the vast majority of other animals killed by humans are those that are used to produce food, I have decided to start this discussion by showing a selection of images depicting farmed animals. Before doing so, let me provide you with some figures to illustrate the scale at which we utilise other animals for food. More than 85 billion land animals were killed in 2023 for human use, and this number has been rising continuously over the past several decades (Faunalytics 2025). What is difficult to grasp when looking at these statistics is that each and every one of those animals is an individual with their own subjective experience of life. Eighty-five billion is such a large number that it is almost impossible to comprehend. To put this into perspective, there are currently 8.2 billion humans on this planet, and the 85 billion individual animals killed each year refers only to those living on land. In addition, it is estimated that 1.1 to 2.2 trillion individual finfish were caught from the wild annually in recorded global fisheries captures during 2000 to 2019, a figure that excludes other marine animals, unrecorded fish captures such as illegal fishing, discarded bycatch, and ghost fishing (Mood and Brooke 2024, 1).

Breaking down the total number of affected land and sea animals by species shows that wild fish are most targeted, with approximately 7.3 billion individuals killed each day, followed by chickens, farmed fish, ducks, pigs, rabbits, geese, turkeys, sheep, goats, and bovines (Sentient Media 2019). Each of these killings is made possible because these animals are categorised as commodities. Approximating the global economic market value of farming marine and land animals amounted to between 1.61 and 3.3 trillion US Dollars in 2018 (Schrobback et al. 2023). These figures refer only to the direct use value of animal products for human consumption, such as "meat," eggs, milk, and farmed aquatic animal species. Revenues are much higher and span a wide range of sectors when the profitability of the animal industry is considered more comprehensively.

3.1 Bearing witness to the oppression of farmed animals

In the face of these widespread and systemic constraints on animal freedom, the intention of this chapter is to interrupt human-centric biases that dictate that our relation to other animals should be defined by a hierarchy in which humans are subjects and other animals are objects existing for our purposes. Instead, the intention here is to bear witness and listen. When it comes to human-animal relations, we can learn to listen to other animals by learning about their ways of communicating with care, humility, and responsiveness (Meijer 2019). This does not only mean that we must understand their voices and languages, but that we need to be open to non-human ways of knowing and being in the world (Meijer 2019). Listening to other animals thus requires that one immerses oneself in their world and values their perspectives when navigating interspecies relations. Such immersion is the core of the *We Animals* collective's work. In the book *The Animals are Leaving Us*, by Martin Rowe and Jo-Anne McArthur, the introduction features McArthur's intention to document animal oppression:

> My work and mission are one and the same; to immerse myself in the experience of others; to try to understand and show something real. I get close—physically, emotionally, and intellectually—and in doing so I better understand the experience and the life of that "other". Over time, I've learned that all others are deserving of freedom from harm and should receive our support to pursue peaceful lives of their choosing. I know this because I wish these things for myself, as I am, like them, a complex, sentient being, with a desire for safety and joy. The emphasis of an animal photojournalist is on all others. My circle of concern includes all sentient beings, not just those of greater status in a hierarchy that prioritizes their species' "charisma", our opinion of their species, and their use to us or to an ecosystem. (McArthur 2021, Introduction)

Led by this sensitive commitment, the work produced by McArthur and the wider group of photojournalists connected to the *We Animals* collective provides an extensive archive of depictions of other animals in agriculture, laboratories, circuses, zoos, aquaria, markets, sanctuaries, and the natural environment. Including their visual material in this text will, I hope, help turn our gaze towards the lived experiences of other animals.

Denial of dignity and basic freedom

To illustrate how farmed animals are oppressed and thus rendered unfree individuals, I have chosen images from pig farms and from bovines at an agricultural fair. Including images from these two settings demonstrates commonplace practices of animal agriculture, even if limited to only two sets of examples from a wide array of contexts in which other animals are held captive for human use. The following shows a young pig looking up from a dirty and crowded enclosure on a factory farm in Sweden (McArthur, Djurrättsalliansen, We Animals 2009). Concrete floor, walls, manger, and the pigs themselves are covered in dirt and faeces, and there is no enrichment or bedding material such as straw. Intensively farmed pigs, such as those shown in the image, will never enjoy the freedom to roam in a field or lie in the sun.

Image 1: A juvenile pig looks up from a filthy and crowded enclosure on a factory farm where they live with several others. Sweden, 2009.

Rather, they are confined in these stalls for their entire lives, until they are picked up and transported to a slaughterhouse. Their confinement marks their lack of freedom, as does the way they are treated and controlled. From birth to death, the existence of farmed pigs is highly managed. Their reproductive abilities are turned into production tools, and their freedom, relations, sociality, and natural behaviours are systematically suppressed. In the image, the pigs' ears are marked with plastic ear tags and have healed cuts in several places. In Sweden, where the picture was taken, it is permitted to tag pigs with ear-tags or tattoos for identification purposes. Alternatively, it is also allowed to notch the ears and thus cut into the ear to mark the pigs, although this is not an officially approved identification method (Jordbruksverket 2014, Djurskyddsbestämmelser Gris, 13).

The pigs in this stable have thus presumably been marked on multiple occasions, first by cutting and later with the official plastic tags. The marking of farmed animals with ear tags is a common practice to identify the holding or farm they come from, enabling traceability to prevent and contain potential disease outbreaks. It is a very visual testament of their classification as property and can be seen as one fundamental sign of their oppression and unfreedom. Besides this systematic marking of farmed animals, they can also be directly marked with their final intended purpose of use, as can be seen in this image (Jayne, Bear Witness Australia, We Animals 2017):

Image 2: A pig with the word "spit" painted on their back lies crammed in a slaughterhouse holding pen with several other pigs who bear various scrapes and scratches. The word on this pig's back denotes the intended use of their body. Australia 2017.

Shown is a pig with the word "spit" written on her back with spray paint, denoting the intended use of her body to be roasted over an open fire after the dead body has been pierced by a long metal rod. This pig might not know what is written on her back or understand the level of degradation implied by such a label, but it nevertheless illustrates how other animals are devalued. Being treated as a living resource, this image is a strong visual representation of the many ways in which farmed animals are abused before they are killed. The pigs shown in the image are lying crammed in a slaughterhouse holding pen and bear scrapes and scratches on their skin (Jayne, Bear Witness Australia, We Animals 2017). The marks on their skin result from them being locked up in small holdings and tightly crowded during transport, leaving them no choice but to injure one another as they manoeuvre the confined spaces. Because factory farming is about making profit, as many animals as possible are kept in the smallest possible space. This can lead to stress and frustration for the animals, and even to cannibalism, which is why certain farming practices are carried out preventively to enable large herd sizes while still maximising profit. Examples of such measures include preventive tooth filing and tail cutting of piglets, as shown in the following two images. If their tails are cut off pre-emptively, the pigs cannot chew on each other's tails out of boredom, stress, or frustration. The first picture shows a piglet's tail being cut off by a worker in a factory farm in Poland, and the second image depicts a piglet whose teeth are filed down by a worker in the same facility (We Animals 2020). Teeth filing is carried out to reduce injuries to other piglets and to the sow while the piglets are still nursing. These examples illustrate how farmed animals are harmed not only in the final stages of killing when their bodies are "harvested" but also endure abuse throughout their lives because they are effectively defined and treated as living commodities. Male pigs are moreover often castrated to prevent boar smell, an unpleasant odour and sometimes flavour in the flesh of uncastrated males slaughtered after sexual maturity, described as resembling urine, onion, sweat, and manure when heated (Werinder 2003, 7). In Sweden, castration is permitted if performed before piglets are seven days old. Regulations vary globally, and in many places the procedure occurs without anaesthesia. While some countries enforce stricter welfare standards, the practice itself exemplifies structural oppression. Pigs are mutilated to fit human preferences for taste and marketability. This shows that even before slaughter, other animals are subjected to invasive procedures that prioritise profitability and consumer demand over any claim to bodily integrity or freedom. Ultimately, it is the

farming systems and the killing itself that remain the core problem for farmed animals.

Image 3: A piglet's tail is cut off by a worker at a factory farm in Poland. Poland, 2020.

Image 4: A piglet's teeth are filed down by a worker at an industrial farm in Poland. This is done to reduce injuries to other piglets and to the sow while the piglets nurse. Poland, 2020.

Similar logics apply in the egg industry, where technological and economic imperatives dictate the lives and deaths of newborn chicks. The ban on killing male chicks can be seen as a response to concerns raised for animals farmed in the egg industry. Since only female chickens lay eggs, it is common practice to sort newly hatched chicks by sex and kill the males, who are considered a by-product of the industry. This results in around 330 million male chicks being killed in the European Union each year (European Parliament 2022). Controlled breeding and intensified farming have made it more profitable to keep specialised laying breeds for egg production and so-called "broiler" breeds for meat. Laying hens are bred for maximum egg output, while "broilers" grow rapidly on minimal feed to maximise slaughter weight. Killing male chicks immediately after sorting is therefore economically advantageous (European Parliament 2022). This practice exemplifies gendered oppression, since chicks are killed because they are male, while females are exploited for egg production before being slaughtered for meat. Profitability thus outweighs any claim to freedom.

Approved methods for killing day-old male chicks include gassing with argon or carbon dioxide and maceration using high-speed grinders. Public outrage focused especially on the shredding of fully conscious chicks, and the European Food Safety Authority found that maceration often fails welfare standards due to risks such as slow blade rotation, overloaded machines, or wide roller settings, leaving chicks conscious and in pain, distress, and fear (European Parliament 2022). Macerated remains, along with chicks that survive the process, are discarded or used as animal feed. This illustrates the incompatibility of animal welfare principles with the speed, scale, and profitability of industrial farming. Sex sorting, chick killing, and the exploitation and slaughter of females all reinforce systemic oppression and animal unfreedom. Recent technological interventions are presented as welfare improvements, but primarily serve economic efficiency. These technologies do not dismantle domination but deepen the commodification of animal life by engineering bodies to fit industrial logics rather than enabling autonomy or flourishing.

Proposed solutions include in-ovo sexing, which identifies male embryos before hatching so fertilised eggs can be repurposed as feed before pain perception develops (European Parliament 2022). In Germany, male chick culling was banned in 2022, and raising male cockerels for meat, the so-called Bruderhähne, or "brother roosters," emerged as an interim solution. This practice

is more expensive than fattening so-called "meat breeds," so egg prices rose by one cent to cover expenses. Meat from these cockerels is labelled "Bruderhahn Aufzucht," meaning "brother rooster bred," and is common in organic farms, which are legally prohibited from using in-ovo sexing (Bundesinformationszentrum Landwirtschaft 2024). The following image shows cockerels in a fattening farm during the final days of their ten-week rearing cycle (Skowron 2023). In industrialised "meat" and egg production, these procedures are presented as "necessary" to meet demand and profit margins. The real-life circumstances of farmed animals are structured to prioritise profit and maximised production, requiring the negation of their freedom. In such settings, there is almost no room to express natural behaviours, make choices, or form relationships and shape their own lives as they could if they were not incarcerated and farmed. Even when pigs and other farmed animals are allowed access to pastures, they remain controlled, mutilated, castrated, forcibly bred, and slaughtered, all of which provides serious grounds for their lack of freedom.

The oppression of farmed animals is also interrelated with other types of oppression. Pioneered in the Global North, intensive animal agriculture has been exported worldwide, expanding colonial and extractive ideas about commodifying animal life across global structures. Pig farming, for instance, produces toxic waste and contributes to air pollution, which has been shown to disproportionately affect already marginalised communities (Wing and Wolf 2000; Wilson et al. 2002). The industrialisation of animal agriculture has also meant a masculinisation of the enterprise (Sommestad 1994), and the exploitation of reproduction has meant added exploitation of female animals, from which parallels can be drawn to the exploitation of women's reproductive bodies (Adams 1990).

Image 5: In the last days of their 10-week rearing cycle, thousands of cockerels live tightly packed together at a fattening farm. The cockerels' bodies are dirty from their excrement-saturated straw bedding. Poland, 2023.

Denial of one's own relations and bodily autonomy

The following examples illustrate another layer of oppression and show how the farming of bovines can be promoted as educational, natural, and romanticised. They take us to a large agricultural fair in Syracuse, New York, and make the position of "dairy cows" as exploitable resources even clearer.

Dairy production and consumption can be said to be more convoluted than the production of meat, where the necessary act of killing is an undeniable element of production, because the production of dairy involves an added route of oppression in which female reproductivity is used to create profit. Many continue to believe that milk production can occur without harming the individuals who produce it. However, "female and feminised animals are bred, incarcerated, raped, killed, and cut into pieces, and this tale of becoming-meat is very much a story of commodification" (Cudworth 2008, 43). It is, above all, profitable to milk cows, sheep, and goats to produce cheese and to use their offspring as an extended opportunity to sell their flesh. Looking at the underlying processes of commodifying these other animals shows how they are subordinated to human structures of control and violence.

Dairy farming is a highly gendered type of oppression that relies upon the systematic exploitation of female reproductive abilities. Elsewhere, I have discussed how the dairy industry categorises various constructions of bovine "identity" to denote their utilisation while alive, until they receive their final label, destined to be turned into "meat" (Canavan 2017). At birth, the biological sex of a calf determines how he or she will be valorised and treated. Female calves will likely be kept at the farm to be raised for "dairy" production, while male "bobby calves" will be sold off as surplus product to be raised at a "meat farm". The difference of biological sex is thus used as the distinguisher to construct the economic use value of farmed bovines. To produce cow's milk for human consumption, bovines are sub-categorised into different areas of use. Growing up, a female bovine is called a "heifer" to signal the pre-production phase during which she is supposed to grow and develop physical features appropriate to withstand multiple pregnancies and prolonged periods of lactation. As soon as a "heifer" has given birth and is milked, she will be described as a "dairy cow," centring focus on the bovine's production purpose and objectifying her as a means to an end. If the cow's body does not live up to desired standards or the pregnancies, delivery, or offspring are not perceived as effective or profitable enough, she will be sold off to the slaughterhouse to be turned into "meat" and be replaced (Canavan 2017).

Anthropomorphic depictions of "happy cows" frolicking in green pastures portray cows as good workers or good mothers and suggest that they happily share their abundant milk with humans. This means that the dairy industry overall enjoys a much more positive image than the "meat" industry, even though it is more appropriately understood as two different strands of the same industry. Cow's milk is commonly promoted with positive connotations such as purity, nurture, life, comfort, nutrition, and goodness, all of which describe female attributes that are used to justify the oppression of human and nonhuman females (Adams 1993; 1997; Gaard 2013; Otomo 2015). However, positively constructed images of cow's milk are disconnected from the female labour that produces it, which is why "the question of who controls the circulation of (whose) milk in our economies, and how, is a deeply political one" (Otomo 2015, 224).

The life of a "dairy cow" has a clear purpose, which is to "give" milk for human consumption. For that to happen, cows' reproduction is closely monitored, and most cows are artificially inseminated. Artificially inseminating a cow is an invasive

procedure in which a farmer inserts one arm into the cow's rectum to adequately position the so-called "AI pistol" into the uterus to eject the sperm, a process that can cause cows to experience stress and pain (Humane Society of the United States 2016, 2). A cow is pregnant for nine months, and for productivity reasons, she is impregnated every year and milked up until two months before the birth of her next calf (Canavan 2017). This means that the body of a "dairy cow" is under continuous strain. In many ways, her existence is defined by her status as a resource, leaving little to no room for individual agency and subjectivity, which are important markers of the lack of freedom for farmed animals.

The examples below from the agricultural fair show bovines in vulnerable states. For entertainment and educational purposes, the fair features a dairy cow birthing centre where pregnant cows are artificially induced to give birth, without privacy and in front of a live audience (McArthur 2024c). The process is filmed and displayed on screens next to advertisements for dairy businesses and corporations (McArthur 2024). The primary purpose of such birthing centres is thus to inform the public about the dairy industry whilst showcasing the calving process. The following image shows a cow giving birth so that the fair's attendees can watch (McArthur 2024c).

These scenes make visible how what is sold as "natural" and educational is, in fact, a gendered machinery of unfreedom where bovines' maternal relations and bodily autonomy are controlled, exploited, and value is extracted. Cows naturally thrive in low-stress environments such as fields, and interfering in the birthing process can lead to complications that may risk the safety of the calf or mother cow. Displaying cows in such a vulnerable state and artificially inducing labour is a significant encroachment on the cows' privacy and bodily autonomy. In image seven, one of the newborn calves, still wet from birth, is shown as he is removed from his mother and placed in a makeshift sleigh to be weighed and then taken to the opposite side of the birthing centre tent, where the calves stay in separate enclosures. The calves born at the fair remain with their mothers for about 30 minutes, after which they are separated, thus denying them the opportunity to bond and form close social relationships as they would autonomously (McArthur 2024d).

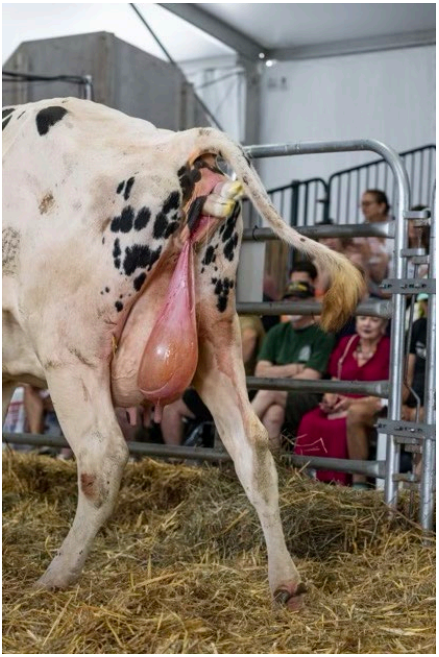

Image 6: A dairy cow at a large agricultural fair gives birth to a calf in front of a live audience at an agricultural fair. She and other pregnant dairy cows in the fair birthing center are induced into labour at the fair so that attendees can watch. New York State Fair, Syracuse, New York, USA, 2024.

In the dairy industry, it is common practice to separate mother and calf, as this allows for smoother handling when calves are kept separate and bottle-fed while their mothers are milked regularly. This enforced separation not only disrupts social bonds but also illustrates how industrial logics override the interests of other animals. Although open farm events are often intended to reinforce narratives of transparency and ethical farming and seek to allow consumers to see where their "food" comes from, such events have been criticised as affective and performative marketing strategies that function to maintain consumer trust and legitimise dairy consumption (Linné and Pedersen 2016). Within a relational understanding of freedom, such practices constitute domination and should thus be seen as testimonies of structural oppression and unfreedom.

Image 7: A dairy cow at a large agricultural fair gives birth to a calf in front of a live audience at an agricultural fair. She and other pregnant dairy cows in the fair birthing center are induced into labour at the fair so that attendees can watch. New York State Fair, Syracuse, New York, USA, 2024.

The examples discussed above demonstrate how the lives of farmed animals are organised through coercive dependence, reproductive control, and the systematic removal of opportunities that would allow them to live in ways that align with their needs, interests, agency, and species- and individual-specific preferences. Bearing witness to these select examples of industrialised animal agriculture shows how these practices leave farmed animals with little more than an undignified existence of suffering and a fundamental lack of freedom.

3.2 Erasing freedom in the "wild"

Farmed animals are not the only ones deeply affected by human domination. Wildlife is in crisis globally, and wild animals experience infringements on their freedom when their ecological and social relations are disrupted by human interference. Even spaces often thought of as "wild" are frequently highly managed by humans through conservation programs, hunting regulations, and land-use policies that shape animal populations and habitats (Donaldson & Kymlicka 2011; Cioc 2009). Many species are threatened with extinction due to environmental degradation and climate change (UN SDGs 2019). The natural habitats of many wild animals are destroyed by deforestation, pollution, and

urbanisation. Habitats are moreover often fragmented due to fencing and roads, making it more difficult for wildlife to migrate, find food or mates, or fulfil other ecological or social needs. This limits freedom of movement and infringes on the customary ways of life of wild animals in these areas.

The expansion of human control also takes more direct forms and may involve killing, removing, or harming certain animals, whether for wildlife management, food production, or illegal activities. Poaching and illegal wildlife trade constitute a multibillion-dollar global industry, as wild animals are captured from remote areas, national parks, and protected zones for sale in markets, with Asian markets being the primary drivers of both the commercial exploitation and consumption of wild animals (Oswell and We Animals 2012).

Captured lives and severed relations

The following image depicts a rhesus macaque in a cage, wearing a chain around his neck, ready for consumption by customers at the Kings Roman Casino in Thong Pheung, Laos (Oswell and We Animals 2012).

Image 8: A rhesus macaque is chained ready for consumption by customers at the Kings Roman Casino, Thong Pheung, Bokeo Province, Laos 2012.

Along the transboundary regions of Laos, China, Thailand, Myanmar, and India, wildlife trade is an integral part of special economic zones that have emerged to facilitate wildlife trafficking and money laundering (Oswell and We Animals 2012; Uhm and Zhang 2022). Within these zones, casino towns have expanded beyond effective state governance, providing sites where large criminal networks operate largely undisturbed, channelling money gained from gambling, narcotics, and wildlife trafficking to supply the demand for wild animals' flesh, bear bile, gall bladders, and paws (Oswell and We Animals 2012). An on-site observational study conducted in shops, markets, casinos, and restaurants in Laos confirmed the open sale of tiger bone wine, tiger teeth, ivory, rhino horn, pangolin scales, bear bile, and various live animals (Uhm and Zhang 2022). This demonstrates how animal unfreedom is produced through intersecting systems of oppression. Animals such as monkeys, bears, and tigers are commodified within transnational criminal economies, linking their oppression to broader structures of violence and inequality. Illegal hunting is not only an issue for wildlife conservation but constitutes a form of structural violence against other animals, tied to wider systems of oppression.

Poaching should thus not be understood in isolation, but as part of a wider structure that combines various oppressive practices. For instance, an intersectional analysis of poaching in Southern Africa has shown how the illegal hunting and killing of other animals overlaps with oppressive structures of class, gender, race, and colonialism (Massé et al. 2021). Participation in poaching is highly gendered, and many men risk their lives to kill wild animals. Militarised conservation practices responsible for the death or incarceration of male poachers can increase the vulnerability of women and families and heighten risks of sexual violence (Massé et al. 2021). This shows how violence directed against certain wild animals can trigger a chain of events with negative effects on various marginalised individuals or groups, demonstrating that wildlife crime is interconnected with other forms of oppression.

It is not difficult to imagine that similar negative effects occur in the social context and relations of other animals affected when one individual is killed or disappears. Rhesus macaques, for instance, are highly social animals who form close group bonds and exhibit complex social behaviours such as cooperation, reconciliation, and resource sharing (Thierry 2007). They are not too different from humans, as they also organise their social relations through strict dominance

hierarchies (de Waal 2009). Other animals have social lives that are destroyed when they are removed from their environments and social bonds. This does not apply only to animals described as highly social compared to humans.

The next example of a trapped duiker shows that wild animals suffer when they are pulled into the human world of control and consumption. Duikers are small antelopes living across sub-Saharan Africa, generally solitary or in small units such as pairs or mother-offspring dyads. They are careful, secretive forest-dwelling animals, experts at hiding, foraging, and subtle coexistence with surrounding species (Houngbégnon et al. 2020). The following image shows a duiker found trapped in a snare in the Budongo Forest in Uganda (McArthur and We Animals 2009).

Image 9: This duiker was found trapped in a snare. She was alive but had already been partially eaten by scavengers because she could not escape. The anti-poaching unit euthanised and buried her. Budongo Forest, Western Region, Uganda, 2009.

Still alive but already partially eaten by scavengers, as she could not escape, the anti-poaching unit euthanised and buried the female duiker (McArthur and We Animals 2009). The expression on the duiker's face shows how stressed and frightened she must have been, lying there in pain, wounded, and trapped. Her freedom was taken away as soon as her leg touched the snare. She might even have had a calf hidden somewhere in the forest who will now be left to die.

Wild animals who lived relatively undisturbed by human interference and who were living social lives together with their conspecifics and others are obviously bereft of that life when they are trapped, caught, and killed. Even if many wild animals live solitary lives, such as most duikers, they are still relational beings whose social relations matter to them and whose freedom depends on these and on wider ecological relations. Freedom is thus meaningful not only to highly social animals such as chimpanzees and humans. The two images above are examples of singular incidents showing how direct human interference establishes total control over other animals' lives.

The fact that these two individuals are bereft of their freedom and ultimately lose their lives to serve human interests illustrates the human–animal relation I seek to challenge here, which is founded on the idea that other animals are of lesser moral value than humans and may therefore be exploited for human ends. By extension, we sometimes frame it as part of our individual freedom to use other animals as means to an end, thus inherently negating their right to freedom.

What the examples discussed here also show is that the exploitation of other animals is interconnected with other issues of domination. Regardless of whether trading animal bodies occurs in legal circumstances, such as the examples of pigs and cows above, or in the context of illegal wildlife trafficking, all these activities establish human dominance over other animals and effectively manifest and normalise human control. Poaching, as well as legal forms of hunting, represent extreme unfreedom for the animals who are caught, shot, trapped, or otherwise "sourced" by human hunters. The fact that poaching is illegal makes no difference to the suffering endured by hunted animals when they are chased, shot, or caught. Discussing examples that highlight illegal hunting activities should therefore not suggest that legalised hunting is somehow better or more morally justifiable. Let us therefore consider two more examples.

Celebrations of violence: where legality meets oppression

In many societies, rituals and traditions surrounding hunting often serve as public displays of power, control, and human dominance over other animals. The first example I would like to discuss here is of an officially organised hunt and shows dead pheasants laid out by human hunters in a traditional circular arrangement (Vincour and We Animals 2023).

Image 10: Hunters lay out dead pheasants killed during a paid hunt in a traditional circular arrangement. Approximately 1,000 birds were killed that day. Undisclosed, Czechia, 2023.

During this organised, driven hunt in Czechia, about 1,000 birds were killed after being released from a pheasantry before the shooting began (Vincour and We Animals, 2023). Many of these birds were bred in a facility only to be set free and shot on the same day to facilitate organised hunting. The event is an annual tradition in which outfitters offer packages to locals and foreigners who pay thousands of euros for one to two days' participation, enabling them to hunt pheasants, hares, deer, and wild boars (Vincour and We Animals, 2023). Workers flush large numbers of birds from their hiding places towards the waiting hunters, with groups of twenty hunters shooting as many as 2,000 pheasants in a single day (Vincour and We Animals, 2023). After the hunt, the dead birds are arranged on the ground, with males and females separated in a layered, circular display.

This example clearly illustrates animal unfreedom on multiple levels. Since most of the killed pheasants were bred in captivity only to be released into an artificial hunting scenario, their lives were controlled by humans throughout. This means they had no meaningful choice in determining their own movement or relationships. The fact that they were driven towards the shooters highlights their complete lack of control over their own lives. The birds were simply props in a human fantasy. The ritualised display of their dead bodies can be seen as a symbolic celebration of human dominance, as the corpses are presented as a bountiful resource that has been "harvested". All these points reiterate that these

birds carried little to no moral value and that their agency and relationality were disregarded and unrecognised. This example also illustrates intersectionalised oppression. Since these organised hunts are expensive and exclusive, they link the exploitation of other animals to human privilege in terms of class. Furthermore, the workers employed at the hunts face a high risk when flushing and retrieving the birds. In broader contexts, hunting is often regarded as a masculine enterprise and an elite leisure activity or sport that revolves around romanticised notions of nature.

Let us turn to a final example. All the above cases concern animal oppression on land; yet, as mentioned earlier, the number of finfish caught from officially recorded global fisheries amounted to 1.1 to 2.2 trillion individuals between 2000 and 2019, excluding other marine animals and illegal or unrecorded fishing (Mood and Brooke 2024, 1). This means that most of the individual animals falling victim to human consumption are aquatic. The next image shows a display of fish tethered for sale at a fish market in Taipei, Taiwan (McArthur and We Animals, 2019). Sold as so-called "bow fish" at traditional Taiwanese wet markets, these fish are bound with nylon thread to keep their gills exposed and allow greater access to air, thereby prolonging their survival on land and supposedly maintaining the "freshness" of their flesh (EAST, 2015).

Image 11: Tethered fish for sale at a fish market in Taiwan. Taipei, Taiwan, 2019.

This method of fish binding "involves breaking the fish's bones, bending their body into an unnatural position, and tying it in place with a piece of twine from the mouth to the tail. This forces the gills open, keeping the fish alive and breathing on land for hours longer than it would survive if lying flat" (McArthur/We Animals, 2019). Not only have these fish been removed from their natural surroundings, but the method of binding their bodies in this position causes them to suffer for eight to twelve hours until they finally die of suffocation (EAST, 2025).

There is a growing body of empirical research confirming that fish possess nociceptors and exhibit complex avoidance and stress behaviours, which demonstrates that they suffer and feel pain (Sneddon et al., 2003; Braithwaite and Boulcott, 2007; Sneddon, 2015; Brown et al., 2014). The Environment and Animal Society of Taiwan further reports that the method is inefficient, as the extreme stress and struggle for survival lead to increased lactic acid in the fish's body, causing contamination of the flesh and a decrease in flesh quality, thereby producing the opposite effect of its purported justification (EAST, 2025).

This example is a clear case of animal oppression. Removing fish from their natural environment effectively denies them autonomy and life. Fishing interrupts migration, foraging, and reproduction, thereby disrupting species-specific life cycles. Farmed fish are similarly hindered in their ability to move, as they are confined to enclosures that force them to live in tight spaces and prevent them from engaging in natural behaviours or participating in their ecological communities. The method of binding fish into an unnatural position extends their suffering even further by inflicting pain, denying bodily integrity, and preventing a natural death.

Fishing constitutes a form of animal oppression that emerges from the global animal-industrial complex, which revolves around the commodification and exploitation of other animals. The specific method of fish binding represents an exaggerated form of such oppression, aimed at maximising profits while entirely disregarding ethical implications. The perceived demand for "freshness" in this example can be understood as linked to a fetishised idea of nature and other animals as endlessly exploitable and malleable to satisfy human desires and perceived needs.

Taken together, the examples discussed in this chapter demonstrate variations in how humans curtail the freedom of other animals. In the cases of farmed pigs and cows, their entire lives are determined by human control. They are born into

a system where their existence is entirely predicated on the planned profitability of their death. As living resources, they have little to no opportunity to exert agency and thus extremely limited chances to live freely or pursue lives they might have had outside the confines of industrialised animal agriculture. The examples of the rhesus macaque and the duiker differ in that these animals were deprived of the freedom they previously possessed until they came into contact with humans. The final two examples of the pheasants and fish illustrate how the oppression of other animals can be artificially staged, marketed, and presented to fit consumer interests.

Even within highly oppressive environments, other animals exhibit forms of agency and resistance that signal the possibility of relational freedom. Escaping pheasants, mother–calf bonding, and subtle communicative gestures reveal that other animals actively navigate, negotiate, and sometimes subvert the constraints imposed upon them. Recognising these signals complicates narratives that depict other animals solely as passive victims and anticipates discussions in chapter eight, where expanding agency will be presented as one of the pillars for cultivating interspecies freedom through the recognition and amplification of such forms of agency.

All the examples of domination are interconnected with other forms of oppression and uphold the notion that other animals exist for human-defined purposes. In all cases, the animals' perspective is disregarded. Using other animals in such ways denies their agency by symbolically, historically, and structurally viewing them "from above," thereby pressing them into a uniform theoretical category (Hribal 2007). The removal of agency and subjecthood is one of the central mechanisms of the animal-industrial complex (Noske 1997).

While the images shown here depict violence and rather obvious systems of domination, it is important to emphasise that other animals can also experience a lack of freedom in less violent contexts, where harm may be more subtle, normalised, and even understood as care (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Meijer 2019). Since other animals are legally constructed as property, their status implies a default subordination to human owners. This is also true when animals are treated kindly, such as when companion animals remain under human control insofar as human caretakers generally decide when and what they eat, what opportunities they have for movement and exercise, whether they are allowed to reproduce, and whether they can form bonds with other animals. Humans also

frequently decide when their animal companions die, which is a difficult decision often made after weighing the perceived quality of life. Even with the best of intentions on the part of humans, these interspecies relations are never ideal, as they are shaped by a fundamental asymmetry between owner and property.

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In a human-dominated world, other animals are generally viewed and treated as lesser beings with no, or extremely curtailed, rights to freedom. By bringing the often-hidden realities of animal oppression to light, this chapter has aimed to make visible the ways in which animal unfreedom manifests through human domination. These visual testimonies do more than document suffering since they moreover expose the structural and systemic nature of oppression and challenge the anthropocentric assumptions that render such violence normal and invisible.

Grounding the theoretical arguments of this thesis in the lived experiences of oppression, the images discussed here strengthen the normative basis for dismantling anthropocentric freedom and imagining interspecies liberation. They underscore the urgency of questioning the broader structures that sustain hierarchical relations and of rethinking freedom as a shared, relational condition. To do that, we must first understand on what conceptual foundations freedom has been constructed as a privilege for some while excluding Others. The next chapter addresses this issue by unpacking the anthropocentric bias inherent in dominant ideas of liberty.

4 Anthropocentric freedom: excluding "the animal"

> Civilized man says: I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is Other — outside, below, underneath, subservient. I own, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matter is for. I am that I am, and the rest is women and the wilderness, to use as I see fit.
> (Le Guin 1989, 161)

This quote by Ursula K. Le Guin offers a powerful critique of the dominant human-centred and patriarchal mindset that has shaped much of Western thought. It encapsulates ideologies of mastery, dualism, hierarchy, and the prioritisation of a rational self as positioned over Others, such as women, marginalised human groups, nature, and other animals. The underlying ideology expressed in this declaration of superiority reflects anthropocentric, androcentric, and rationalist biases that fuel multiple forms of oppression. Understanding how these oppressive mindsets operate and identifying their shared foundations can help challenge systems of oppression (Joy 2023).

How did freedom come to be defined so narrowly as a human-only concept? To address this question, this chapter outlines key grounds of exclusion that positioned humans as superior beings and other animals as outside the realm of freedom, rendering them less morally valuable. There are many ways to reflect on this development, as ideas of freedom became bound up with anthropocentrism through diverse philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions that placed humans at the centre of moral and ontological frameworks. The approach here is to examine influential examples of how the human political agent was constructed alongside hierarchies that depended on the exclusion of other animals and of human Others. Through a critical reading informed by ecofeminist and intersectional perspectives of ancient philosophical and Christian thought, as well as selected works from the Western canon, the chapter unpacks how political

philosophy has constructed the human subject as above and separate from animality and nature.

It is important to note that the argument presented here is neither a comprehensive historical tracing nor a complete study of the history of liberty or anthropocentrism. Only a small selection of texts is discussed, chosen for their influence on the Western narrative of freedom, to illustrate how conceptions of liberty were formulated alongside ontological hierarchies between humans and other animals. The selection represents my own construction of a narrative that demonstrates how ideas of freedom became bound up with anthropocentric bias. I do not make sweeping claims about entire traditions of thought but seek to identify a particular kind of bias in specific texts to exemplify how freedom has been developed through the exclusion of other animals. Understanding some of the roots of this exclusion connects to broader systems of domination and hierarchy through an intersectional analysis.

While I may expose underlying anthropocentrism or sexism, these ideas were produced within very different social and historical contexts from those of today. Highlighting their limitations is not intended to discredit their intellectual contributions but to recognise that ideas about freedom continually evolve alongside changing social conditions. There is consequently potential for concepts of freedom to become less anthropocentric and more inclusive in the future. Tracing how logics of oppression developed and became normalised as "truths" is one step toward transforming them. Although canonical writings are not the sole source of animal oppression in modern societies, political philosophy has shaped how humans understand themselves and their relation to other animals. Looking back at how normative ideas were formulated can thus help explain how political ideals and social practices have evolved and continue to influence contemporary thought.

In this sense, this chapter stands out by offering an intersectional and critical analysis of how freedom came to be defined as an exclusively human attribute, showing that the modern ideal of autonomy is inseparable from speciesist, patriarchal, and colonial hierarchies. This conceptual and philosophical examination complements and deepens the work of other critical animal studies scholars (e.g., Sanbonmatsu 2011; Deckha 2021; Nibert 2013) by revealing the underlying frameworks that their critiques engage with. At the same time, it redirects that critique toward a constructive and relational redefinition of freedom that anticipates the discussion of interspecies freedom in the following chapters.

4.1 Freedom as based on exclusion and hierarchy

The discussion begins in Ancient Greece and Rome, where anthropocentrism started to take root and where ideas about freedom were frequently debated. These will be connected to early Christian influences and teachings about human uniqueness and freedom as a spiritual concept. Human-centred thought flourished particularly during the Enlightenment, which will be illustrated through the work of René Descartes, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill. The aim is to locate human-centred inclinations that rest upon the exclusion of animal Others and to highlight theoretical and conceptual spaces where the meaning of liberty became interwoven with justifications of hierarchy and oppression.

Ancient beginnings of human-only ontological hierarchies

In Ancient Greece, being free meant not having a master, as the Greek notion of freedom (*eleutheria*) was primarily understood as the social and political condition that opposed slavery (*douleia*) (Cleary 2005; De Dijn 2020). Before this, words for freedom existed in Mesopotamian languages and were also discussed in Hebrew culture, although there, freedom was conceived more as liberation from bondage in a personal rather than political sense (De Dijn 2020, 17). For the Greeks, freedom became the most important political value, associated with self-rule and used to distinguish themselves from their Persian, Egyptian, Thracian, and Scythian neighbours (De Dijn 2020). While Persians were subordinate to absolute rulers such as Xerxes and seemed to accept their submission placidly, the Greeks viewed such accession as slavish and were the first to use terms like "free" and "slave" in a political sense to describe and evaluate different types of government (De Dijn 2020, 17–18). The longstanding confrontation between Persians and Greeks shaped the Greek political imagination and self-realisation, as they began to think in terms of collective identity as a self-ruled people (De Dijn 2020). Freedom was largely seen as the absence of domination and as self-governance, practised through direct democracy. Almost all adult male citizens of Athens had an equal voice in most decision-making, and all key public offices were either elective or allotted.

One major caveat was that freedom was real only for a significant minority of individuals and not Others, since slaves, women, and resident aliens called *metics* had no political rights. Even Aristotle, who was born in Stagira, could not

participate in Athenian democracy as he was also considered a metic (De Dijn 2020). Aristotle followed the same logic and constructed citizenship in ways that included only certain propertied males, who were viewed as citizens and sovereigns because they were least burdened by animal instincts or natural needs (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015). Women and slaves were therefore prohibited from entering the Pnyx, the hilltop where political assemblies were held, and they were not considered independent human beings (De Dijn 2020). Their political exclusion was hardly ever questioned by Greek thinkers. In *Politics*, Aristotle described women and slaves as "natural inferiors" to men, claiming they were less intelligent and lacked the ability to think rationally, and thus needed to be ruled by men (De Dijn 2020, 39). This shows that freedom existed alongside social hierarchies and lines of inclusion and exclusion. Liberty was seen as something that could only be exercised in a certain way and only by those deemed fit to do so. This reflected the common belief in a natural hierarchy of human ability, which justified oppressive systems such as enslavement and the denial of citizenship, equal rights, or fair treatment (Cudd 2006).

Examples from Plato's work and his reflections on the tension between external rule and individual independence illustrate early ideas about the need to harness and protect the scope of liberty. They also show how separations between the private and the political, as well as between human and animal, were used as demarcations. His philosophy was fundamentally based on a critique of the Greek ideal of democratic freedom. Although Plato valued liberty and agreed that individual independence resulted from democracy, he also discerned risks in democracy and viewed it as self-defeating and unsustainable if applied to all members of society, as this would lead to chaos, licentiousness, and disorder (De Dijn 2020). This idea was based on the view that liberty belonged in the polis and was exercised through active participation in public life and thus had little to do with private autonomy.

In a dialogue with Socrates documented in *The Republic*, Plato argued that too much liberty would lead to tyranny because if there were no clear rulers, people would begin to see themselves as rulers, and if everyone did so, it would spill over into the private sphere and dissolve all forms of order and stability that social hierarchies provided. To make his point, Plato illustrated that fathers would descend to the level of their sons, and sons would rise to the level of their fathers, resulting in a loss of respect for parents (Plato [375 BCE] 2002, 422). Too much

democracy, understood as individual independence, would therefore destabilise power relations, as clear hierarchies provide both stability and identity. Plato's argument was that individual independence, understood as the freedom to do as one wants, could not and should not be accessible to everyone. Rather, he argued in *The Republic* that such freedom should be limited to ensure social order enforced by rulers.

Since Plato did not favour the wealthy elite as legitimate rulers, he suggested that "philosopher-kings" should govern, meaning highly educated individuals trained from a young age in martial arts, astronomy, and mathematics (De Dijn 2020; Plato 375 [BCE] 2002). We should bear in mind that Plato's main goal was to identify the best political regime to engender true human happiness, upheld by the "best man" fit to rule and lead his subjects to a good life (De Dijn 2020, 52). Although the values of freedom and democracy were appealing, he balanced this appeal with a perceived risk of anarchy and chaos if freedom for all were applied to all members of society. This explains an emphasis on liberty as non-domination from outside rule, which was valued more highly than personal freedom as individual independence. Liberty was seen as an ideal in the higher political sphere, not as residing within the private sphere. Social demarcations and hierarchies were thus understood as providing stability and order to emerging conceptions of democracy, which generated tensions around social differentiation and heightened fears of disorder accompanying greater equality.

Plato even made satirical remarks to criticise exaggerated ideas of democratic liberty:

> how much greater is the liberty which the animals who are under the dominion of man have in a democracy than in any other State: for truly, the she-dogs, as the proverb says, are as good as their she-mistresses, and the horses and asses have a way of marching along with all the rights and dignities of freemen; and they will run at any body who comes in their way if he does not leave the road clear for them: and all things are just ready to burst with liberty. (Plato [375 BC] 2002, 423)

By comparing humans and other animals in this way, Plato mocks the idea that freedom could be exercised by anyone outside his definition of the rational agent. By eradicating distinctions between the master and his subjects or between the human and the animal, Plato warns of the disorder that excessive liberty would bring and the erosion of hierarchy. Referring to the absurd notion that other

animals could behave like free citizens, he argues that authority and social order would be challenged as distinctions collapse. Underlying this critique of freedom understood as individual independence and licence is Plato's conviction that hierarchy is a fundamentally necessary feature of social life. In this framework, dominion is presented as a source of order. According to this rationale, freedom should to be limited to those who are fit to exercise it, namely the freemen. It is implied that freemen have greater rights and privileges than those beneath them, and it is taken for granted that other animals and women are naturally inferior to men. Plato clarifies his warning against unbounded liberty by stating that:

> The ruin of oligarchy is the ruin of democracy; the same disease magnified and intensified by liberty overmasters democracy—the truth being that the excessive increase of anything often causes a reaction in the opposite direction; and this is the case not only in the seasons and in vegetable and animal life, but above all in forms of government. (Plato [375 BC] 2002, 423)

Unlimited or excessive liberty would thus threaten democracy when it turns into unbounded licence, thereby becoming tyranny. Since Plato advocated the rule of a select few who could conduct rational governance, the superiority in capacity and standing of these philosopher kings was inevitably constructed against the hierarchy that defined it, excluding non-citizens, women, foreigners, and, at the most basic level, other animals.

I understand Plato's argument about a healthy balance of liberty and rule as based on the belief that not every being can be trusted to govern themselves, since what is needed to qualify as a free political agent is a set of capacities that slaves, women, or other animals were not believed to possess. As for the exclusion of some Others from the purview of liberty, this line of argument makes sense in the context of how liberty was understood in ancient Greek society, as neither a slave nor a woman would have walked up the Pnyx to cast a vote on the latest matter of politics, and certainly not a donkey or a dog. To that end, other animals and those defined as human Others were used to exert superiority by demonstrating and celebrating domination over those deemed inferior.

Practical examples of this exclusion in relation to other animals can be seen in the Ancient Roman Colosseums, where the *venationes* were held. These comprised games, animal exhibitions, and hunting simulations intended for entertainment (Karivieri 2020). The *venationes* included the public execution of

other animals to symbolise and declare Roman domination over human and nonhuman nature (Colling 2021). Humans were also subjected to these deadly spectacles, often forced to fight or face execution as part of the games, demonstrating that the exercise of power and the normalization of violence was intertwined across species (Colling 2021). The games relied on the animals' will to live while subjecting them to systematic torture and domination (Colling 2021). A wide range of species, including elephants, bears, lions, dogs, leopards, bulls, and others, were captured, hunted, and used in public shows or brought to the battlefield to create an intimidating spectacle and demonstrate wealth and power (Colling 2021). The staged hunts of the Roman *venationes* exemplify deeply problematic continuities in how human societies construct, exert, and normalise violence both against other animals and against human Others, revealing a relational logic of domination. These spectacles illustrate how oppression and suffering were mutually reinforced across species, a pattern that continues in different forms today.

This historical legacy is echoed in later cultural practices, where public spectacles of violence continued to assert human dominance and reinforce the marginalisation of other animals. Erica Fudge (2000) shows that spectacles like bearbaiting were far more than popular amusements as they functioned as cultural rituals that asserted human dominance and animal inferiority, both reinforcing and enacting an anthropocentric worldview in which freedom was imagined as the exclusive privilege of the rational human subject. Today's bullfighting is one example of how other animals are selectively bred and produced for ritualised and celebrated public torture in arenas. These examples represent cultural practices founded upon human domination of other animals, in which violence is celebrated as spectacle.

In these contexts, animal freedom is denied because the animals used are deprived of their own lives, ecologies, and social worlds. Instead, they are imported into a world of human force that reproduces hierarchical structures and normalises violence systematically under the guise of tradition and culture. These examples of animal oppression can also be tied to other forms of oppression. The *venationes* can be problematised as reinforcing violent notions of empire and class, as human slaves and prisoners were often forced to fight other animals as part of the entertainment. Similarly, bullfighting carries dimensions of class and gendered oppression as a performance of not only speciesism but also machismo

and national pride (Zanardi 2012). This shows how the animal hunts in the Roman Colosseum interconnected various types of oppression and structural domination, recalling the example of wildlife trafficking and poaching discussed in chapter three. Interlocking oppression exists in multiple contexts.

As we have seen so far, the exclusion of other animals and certain human Others was presented alongside notions of social hierarchy and was manifested in culture and social life. The exclusion of other animals and certain groups of human Others appeared to be justified because freedom was defined in a particular way, meaning not everyone was considered able to exercise it properly. Inherent in this interpretation of freedom is the belief that liberty is a good that may easily be abused and that there is a risk of licence and misconduct when limitless behaviour is permitted in the name of freedom. Plato held that freedom in the hands of the wrong individuals would lead to chaos because social dynamics would deteriorate as everyone felt entitled to act as they pleased, and basic respect towards others, especially those above them, would disappear. Plato's abstractions of father and son, citizen and metic, or human and animal, are clear examples of how different statuses entail different privileges, suggesting that questioning these boundaries would be absurd. To be free contradicts the definition of a slave, and the binary categories of ruler and ruled depend on differences in privilege and access to political agency or influence to sustain the relation between them.

It is precisely these ostensibly self-evident assumptions, which Plato regards as undermining the foundations of democracy and freedom, that constitute the focus of my critical inquiry. Plato fears that if other animals or marginalised human beings were to assert freedom, they would destabilise order. In contrast, I argue that such assertions of freedom would ultimately lead to greater freedom overall, as domination would diminish. I will return to this argument later. For now, the focus will be on understanding how anthropocentrism and the rigid human–animal hierarchy became naturalised.

God-given definition of the anthropos

One explanation of how a clear human–animal hierarchy became normalised and a central feature of how human subjectivity was founded upon an abstraction of the animal world can be found by looking at early Christian teachings. The examples discussed above, which emphasised social hierarchies as providing

order, were taken up and developed further in Christian thought. The Great Chain of Being was an influential medieval Christian conception that originated in the work of Plato and Aristotle and was adopted by the Roman Catholic Church to depict a clear hierarchy among all forms of life. The copperplate engraving by Diego Valadés illustrates the *scala naturae*, which is Aristotle's concept that life on Earth exists in a ranked order of importance (Encyclopedia Virginia 2020). Born to an Indigenous mother and a Spanish father, Valadés joined the Franciscan religious order and travelled to Spain and Italy, where he received a humanist education from Pedro de Gante and worked on a series of copperplate engravings, including the illustration of the Great Chain of Being. These engravings made the *Rhetorica Christiania* known as one of the first publications on the evangelisation of Indigenous Americans (Porras 2024).

In Valadés's illustration, God in heaven is at the top of the hierarchy, followed by the angels. Humans are depicted beneath the angels, followed in rank by birds, then fish, and then all the other animals, including mystical creatures such as a unicorn, which appears next to a dog and a deer. Below the ranks of animals, Valadés drew plants and minerals, and finally, at the bottom of the hierarchy, Satan and other demonic creatures are depicted in hell (Encyclopedia Virginia 2020). Subordinate only to God and the angels, humans were thereby depicted as the highest form of life on Earth and were granted stewardship over all other animals and the natural world. The logic of this hierarchy was that so-called lower creatures existed for the benefit of higher creatures, providing a clear sense of place and purpose for each form of life (Svärd 2015).

The example of the Great Chain of Being illustrates how early ideas about social order were used to develop Christian ideas about the order of divine and earthly life. Aristotle's hierarchical view of the "ladder of nature" ranked beings based on their capacities, with reason carrying the highest value. Other animals, seen as instinct-driven creatures, were deemed only of instrumental value (Steiner 2005). It is also interesting to note that birds and fish were valued higher than other land animals, perhaps because their capacities to fly and live underwater were seen as distinguishing them from other animals. The Great Chain of Being thus explains the assembly of a cosmic hierarchy that was useful both to the Church and for the development of social order through hierarchy.

Image 12: Illustration of the Great Chain of Being, published in 1579 in Rhetorica Christiania by Diego Valadés (Encyclopedia Virginia 2020).

While ancient Greek philosophers distinguished the ideal of freedom as the protection from attack and the ambition of the group to develop itself as much as possible, it was the Stoics of Ancient Athens and Rome who developed the idea of individual liberty further by defining the self-realisation of the individual as the primary objective of human endeavour (Lutz 1950). Building on Aristotle's hierarchy, the Stoics conceptualised the universe as a rational and divinely ordered whole, with humans taking centre stage as rational agents (Steiner 2005). To argue for human self-realisation, the Stoics relied on the anthropocentric prejudice that only humans possess rationality, self-awareness, and language, and that other animals can legitimately be exploited because they are less morally valuable (Steiner 2005). From this, it can be argued that reason was increasingly taken to be a defining trait of moral worth.

Steiner's historical analysis of anthropocentrism in ancient philosophy illustrates that the narrative of the Stoics became a dominant voice in the West regarding other animals and their attribution of lesser moral status, as thinkers such as Aristotle, Plato, Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, and Kant, among others, all appealed to this strict dividing line between humans and other animals (Steiner 2005). Over time, the image of the human as a superior being and the animal as a lower creature became an omnipresent truth, and the inherent hierarchy became a solidified defining factor that made higher-ranking human standing an integral part of human subjectivity. With this social hierarchy firmly in place, the resulting superior positioning of human beings could later provide a basis for the revolutionary questioning of the Church as the primary source of moral authority. This early separation of human and animal became a defining factor for the Western narrative of liberty and for ideas about what it means to be a human being, as:

> Plato's insistence on the primacy of reason over emotion [...] branded the serene supremacy of rationality onto the surface of the Western cultural ethos, and gave rise to the notion that it is via (theoretical) reason that human beings step above animality (a notion that Aristotle was to develop and accentuate). Its consequence has been striking: the emergence of humanity defined as a wholly rational being [...]. Plato thereby laid the grounds for a cultural heritage that includes a double dualism—that between reason and emotion, and (by implication) between humans and other animals—which has had an astonishingly strong impact on the Western psyche, and which inevitably has played no small part among the historical causes of anthropocentrism. (Aaltola 2015, 38)

Human subjectivity was thus aligned with assigning a distinct superior political and moral status to the human species based on the capacity for reason, which set humans apart from all other beings. This hierarchical logic of superiority and inferiority also provides a framework for understanding how other forms of exclusion have historically been articulated. Building on this, the examples discussed above demonstrate how such hierarchical thinking laid the early foundations for a valorisation of human rationality, a process that unfolded in tandem with the cultivation of social hierarchies. The distinction between humans and other animals was explained as God-given, and the natural order that followed provided the foundations for anthropocentrism as we know it today. The following part of the chapter will move to the Enlightenment period of the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries to examine further examples of how anthropocentric notions of freedom began to thrive because of transformative shifts in science, philosophy, and politics.

4.2 The age of reason and the ideal human subject

The Enlightenment was a European intellectual and philosophical movement that celebrated reason and rationality as distinguishing features of humanity and as the highest form of authority. With this development came a strong belief in progress and the idea that society could continually be improved through science, education, and political and legal reforms (Nisbet 1994). The Enlightenment was also a time of rising secularism and universalism, and as scientific inquiry advanced, the mechanistic worldview of the period led to nature being increasingly seen as a resource for exploitation, a view grounded in anthropocentrism and justified in the name of human development and freedom. These developments enabled a range of groundbreaking, momentous intellectual, material, and political advancements. As it would be beyond the scope of this discussion to analyse a wide variety of Enlightenment thinkers, I have chosen to limit my discussion to a few selected examples to illustrate how liberty was defined along anthropocentric lines and to outline the major grounds for excluding other animals.

The examples discussed below stem from René Descartes ([1637] 1995), John Locke ([1689] 2017; [1690] 2007; [1693] 2005), and John Stuart Mill ([1859] 2002). All three thinkers were foundational voices in Western political philosophy and shared core intellectual commitments to rational individualism and anthropocentrism that developed throughout the Enlightenment. Descartes' philosophical statement "I think, therefore I am" became a prominent celebration of human rationality and fundamentally shaped mind–body dualism, which laid important epistemological foundations. Locke was one of the most influential thinkers of the Enlightenment, commonly described as the "father of liberalism," and he contributed greatly to political thought on liberty and liberal democracy through his writings on natural rights, property, and consent of the governed. Mill's work centred more directly on articulations of individual liberty, through which I illustrate how the then largely unquestioned human–animal boundary was used as an ontological divide that explained and legitimised human standing and ideas

about the ideal political subject, from which justifications of the domination of nature and of those Others who did not live up to the ideal followed.

In looking for anthropocentric ideas about freedom in their work, I aimed to include a variety of examples to highlight that anthropocentrism developed over time and was established by influential thinkers. Further thinkers could also have been included, such as Immanuel Kant, who argued that only rational beings are ends in themselves, while other animals were merely means to an end ([1779]1997). A compelling and thorough discussion of Kant in the context of human–animal relations has been offered by Christine Korsgaard (2018). Thomas Hobbes is likewise relevant for his exclusion of nonhuman animals from social contract theory, as articulated in *Leviathan* (1651/1996), where he maintains that only rational agents capable of consent can enter into such agreements (see also Sætra 2014).

The following discussion should therefore not be misunderstood as a generalisation but as an examination of a select set of readings intended to illustrate how other animals were excluded from the purview of liberty and to provide examples of how they were devalued as morally less significant compared to humans. Dissenting voices to such accounts have existed throughout and will be discussed further below.

Animals as soulless automatons

Against this backdrop, one prominent example of how a strict human–animal hierarchy was applied to serve human interests is found in the work of René Descartes. He argued that the human self, as a thinking subject, became the starting point for knowledge and embraced a mechanistic worldview, believing that other animals were machine-like automatons lacking a soul and therefore unable to suffer (Descartes [1637] 1995). Descartes' view of animals as machines void of mind and rationality is foundational for many exclusionary logics that constructed other animals as lesser beings. For Descartes, consciousness was coextensive with rationality, and because humans were regarded as rational beings, they were considered beings with moral worth (Descartes [1637] 1995; Steiner 2005). He believed that other animals lacked any kind of awareness and were incapable of feeling anything since they lacked consciousness (Steiner 2005). Other animals were also constructed as inferior because they lacked human

speech and were therefore seen as irrational. Consequently, Descartes argued that what set humans apart was that the human mind and soul were of an entirely different nature from the body, thus distinguishing humans from pure mechanism, which he believed nature to be (Steiner 2005). The Cartesian dualism underlying these rationales provided a foundational exclusionary logic for "us versus them" thinking and can therefore be said to legitimise the hierarchisation of social differences and the positioning of certain elevated social groups against those deemed inferior (Plumwood 2002).

To demonstrate his medical experiments, Descartes publicly tormented fully conscious animals by nailing them onto boards and performing vivisection procedures to learn about bodily functions. While Descartes was not the first person to perform such experiments, his mechanistic view of other animals was a major philosophical influence. Taken together, his methods and convictions can be seen as practical and ideational performances of anthropocentrism and speciesism that laid some groundwork for the exploitation and wider oppression of other animals for experimental purposes.

Animal experimentation likely began during the third century BCE and was carried out sporadically, mostly on dead animals (Guerrini 2022). The Roman physician Galen worked on both dead and live animals to learn about the human body and explain its form and function (Guerrini 2022). It was not until 1600 to 1640 that vivisection became a common experimental practice, when English physician William Harvey dissected and vivisected hundreds of animals, mostly pigs and dogs. Harvey's experiments included ligating vessels to study blood flow, inflating organs, and injecting various substances (Guerrini 2022).

Descartes' thesis about animals' inability to feel pain was not accepted by most researchers of the time; however, advances in knowledge of the human body were seen as justification for inflicting pain (Guerrini 2022). It is not my intention here to discuss the assets and drawbacks of this development. Such experiments were both cruel and pain-inflicting as well as highly influential for modern medicine. My concern here is that what allowed humans to decide to treat other animals as means to an end was the belief that humans are fundamentally of a different nature and order from other animals. The example of Descartes' mechanistic worldview and the anthropocentric bias it holds illustrates how beliefs in humans heightened moral status were used to license certain actions and to further establish

underlying hierarchies to not only conceptually but also practically subordinate and exploit those deemed inferior.

If we recall the argument above about anthropocentrism existing on a fine line between demarcating human ontological boundaries and becoming a case of human chauvinism, I would argue that the anthropocentric separation and hierarchisation of humans and animals can be seen as an early example of how the subordination and oppression of other animals was used to profit from their perceived instrumental value and to bolster human superiority. The prejudiced support for human interests went beyond a simple demarcation of defining what the human is, as it also strengthened ideas about human standing through the ideational and practical domination of the nonhuman. This does not only relate to the example of animal experimentation or the animal hunts of the Roman *venationes* but can be seen in a wide variety of ways in which human–animal relations are shaped when other animals are used for human ends. It is the human perception of ourselves as granting the freedom to make such decisions to devalue and use Others for our own benefit that shapes the human–animal relation as oppressive. Such an understanding of freedom is inseparable from the liberal ideal of the rational and distinctly human political subject, which has long excluded other animals from moral and political consideration.

Freedom as belonging to the ideal political agent

Locke formulated the idea that humans are born into a state of nature, in which they are naturally free and equal, a condition mediated only by reason. His principles on natural rights, government by consent, and the right to revolution laid influential groundwork for ideas about national sovereignty and the rejection of absolute monarchy (Locke [1689] 2017). Beyond Locke's contributions to conceptions of political and individual freedom, his texts were influential for theories of the mind and his conceptualisation of the autonomous "person" as based on an epistemology centred on unique human faculties and perception. Locke's prioritisation of the liberty of the autonomous subject, derived from his conceptualisation of the state of nature, helps us understand one influential foundation of how freedom came to be understood as a human-only concept, which provided normative guidelines for structuring the social through hierarchy.

The discussion of Locke's ideas begins by considering his conception of the state of nature. Locke held that humans are naturally free and therefore enjoy the natural rights to life, liberty, and property. This stood in contrast to the then-prominent belief that people were naturally subjected to a monarch through the rule of God (Tuckness 2016). Besides conceptualising a natural right to freedom that granted privilege to men, Locke's conception maintained that the rights gained through freedom come with a set of duties to act within the state of nature, from which both rights and duties derive. A free subject was seen as having the liberty to act or refrain from acting, but such action had to be conducted in accordance with the law of nature and under appropriate moral judgement. Those who fulfilled the requirements of a legitimately free agent were therefore granted privileges and powers, while those excluded from the purview of freedom were denied such benefits.

Locke's main definition of the purview of freedom was that "liberty, which is a power, belongs only to agents, and cannot be an attribute of the will, which is only another power" ([1690] 2007, 76). What follows is that Locke believed that, due to the state of nature in which all men exist, everyone has the prerequisite to think rationally, but not everyone possesses the required set of capacities to fulfil the requirements of a valid and fully rational agent. To define the rational political subject and agent, it needed to be abstracted against what it is not. To better understand how Locke constructed who counts as a legitimate agent, a discussion of further examples is in order. In what follows, I shall reflect upon his thoughts by taking a closer look at his notion of natural law, his ideas on the faculty of perception, the measure of language and communication, and ultimately his conception of male personhood.

Under natural law, Locke argues that men are "perfectly free to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and themselves, in any way they like, without asking anyone's permission—subject only to limits set by the law of nature" (1689/2017, 3). He frames his concept of actionable freedom by stressing personal autonomy and private property as important moral rights. Notable here is the proposed ordering principle of natural law, which may restrict someone's range of liberty. Accounting for questions of social difference, Locke goes on to state that natural law:

> [...] is also a state of equality, in which no-one has more power and authority than anyone else; because it is simply obvious that creatures of the same species and status, all born to all the same advantages of nature and to the use of the same abilities, should also be equal ·in other ways·, with no-one being subjected to or subordinate to anyone else, unless ·God·, the lord and master of them all, were to declare clearly and explicitly his wish that some one person be raised above the others and given an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty. (1689/2017, 3)

The state of equality is thus derived from (a) equal access to power, which interrelates with (b) the naturally given boundary of all humans belonging to the same species and status, imposing social order and equality in ways that can only be interfered with by (c) the law of God, which can impose hierarchies and rightful dominion. Statement (a) about equal access to power and authority is therefore mediated by statements (b) and (c), imposing the general precondition for a free agent to belong to the human species in general and certain human groups specifically, and to be within the realm of those whom God clarifies as legitimately raised above others to justify supremacy. Inherent in Locke's statement about the state of equality is the assumption that species is a valid category for social demarcation, as it is implied that different species have different statuses. The question then becomes: how is the law of God defined, and who claims to be its legitimate initiator?

Historical examples of colonialism and imperialism provide some answers, illustrating how European quests for "discovery" were exercised through violence and arbitrary domination in ways represented as the natural order of things to increase and spread the "freedom" of the West. One explanation for how (religious) laws are made sense of is through the classification of natural differences between humans, or the basic distinction between humans and other animals. This development has shaped Western consciousness in a way that structural violence and inequality have become normalised and naturalised parts of society.

Let us recall that the very idea of the city, and by extension the idea of the political subject, is based upon a movement away from nature. The city is grounded in nature and motivated and legitimised by it; yet it is also the very distinction from nature that defines the city (Brett 2011). The state of nature is thus a space in which individuals exist without political authority. This distinction provides the foundation from which Thomas Hobbes formulated his philosophy of the social contract, where freedom was conceived as the philosophical sphere that

had risen above simple nature, a state of war against all (Brett 2011). Part of the social contract is to limit individual liberties for the sake of collective security and to rely on sovereign power as the structure of political authority, and on religion as providing the boundary between the human and the divine (Brett 2011).

The Western idea of equality before the law stems from the notion that everybody is equal before God, the king, or the emperor. We are thus all equal in our common submission to those, or to the one, who is invested with absolute or overriding power over all Others (Bookchin 1982/2005; Graeber and Wengrow 2021). From this general hierarchy, sub-hierarchies can be constructed and may be perceived as "natural" and as a logical outgrowth. It can therefore be argued that political space and agency were constructed through a complex dynamic of inclusion and exclusion. The binary opposition of man and animal, and rational and irrational, provided clear lines of division and strong foundations for stable concepts from which to make sense of the world. Ecofeminist analyses of such divisions will be discussed in the following chapter (e.g., Plumwood 2002; Merchant 1980).

While large overarching categories such as the divine and the worldly, or human and animal, provided clear dividing lines for accepted or normalised hierarchies during much of human history, the development of the human as a political subject came to apply similar logics of distinction and binary opposition to establish and justify human hierarchies. Freedom thus belongs to the proper human agent. Another key ground for excluding other animals from the purview of freedom lies in the long-standing philosophical association of freedom with rationality and language.

Reason and language as boundaries of the political subject

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke situates the foundation of knowledge and moral agency in perception and language. Regarding the faculty of perception, Locke describes it as providing the mind's first way of engaging with ideas. Perception, he defines, is the faculty that "distinguishes the animal kingdom from the inferior parts of nature, that is, from plants" (Locke [1690] 2007, 36). This shows that Locke categorised humans and other animals as both residing in the animal kingdom, yet he is careful to emphasise the superiority of humans over other animals, stating that:

> perception occurs to some extent in animals of every sort, though it may be that in some animals the inlets that nature provides for receiving sensations are so few, and the perception they are received with is so dark and dull, that it falls far short of the sharpness and variety of sensation in other animals. (Locke [1690] 2007, 36)

In Locke's thought, perception can thus be identified as a basic organising principle of what constitutes the foundations of a conscious mind. This alone, however, remains rather inclusive of a wide range of animal species. A further distinguisher of reason, as defined by Locke, is the measure of language and communication, in which he explains the exceptional capacities of rational men by contrasting them with other animals, as lacking the shared ability to communicate. He, for instance, states that while many lower animals make sounds, mute humans can use sign language that other animals cannot. This assumes the human being as the primary standard by which to judge others' abilities and ultimately depicts other animals as less intelligent. Human communication and language are thus taken as measures of intelligence to denote who qualifies as rational and therefore as a morally valuable being.

This anthropocentric centring of human abilities denies similarities between humans and other animals and fails to acknowledge that intelligence is not one-dimensional but should be understood as a diverse set of traits and behaviours that each species adapts and specialises in accordance with its respective ecological and social needs (Bridle 2022; de Waal 2016; Bräuer et al. 2020). What I seek to underline here, by example of Locke, is that certain sets of capacities are selected which then grant privilege and elevated standing to some whilst excluding Others. In a similar vein to the above example of language, Locke presents the complex ideas of mathematics as a shared mode of communication through the use of numbers, which he signifies as a sophisticated ability of reason. He then contrasts this with examples of the perceived lack of ability among Native Americans and children, arguing that their presumed inability to use mathematics or otherwise to express their intellectual capacities in understanding the complexity of knowledge excludes them from the purview of rational free agents (Locke [1690] 2007, 60–61).

The example of using human language or mathematics as measurement criteria for a certain level of intelligence to mark social inclusion or exclusion illustrates how selected capacities can be used to denote social difference between humans and other animals, but also to devalue various human groups.

Although Locke's conceptualisations illustrate anthropocentric bias, it is noteworthy that he spoke out against animal cruelty, holding that tormenting other animals would harden one's mind even towards other humans (Locke [1693] 2005). Arguing that an anthropocentric demarcation was implied to think about social hierarchy and the purview of freedom does not necessarily mean that other animals were excluded deliberately in a target-oriented manner with the specific intent to devalue them. Rather, I would argue that this exclusion was part of a long process of considering social boundaries, human identity formation, and human interests to justify the use of other animals. In all this, the apparent differences of nonhuman beings were likely taken as obvious grounds of differentiation and thus justified their exclusion.

Considering the exclusion of other animals alongside demarcations that abstract the rational subject from human groups deemed inferior, this illustrates a clear logic of hierarchisation, ascribing more or less moral standing to respective social groups. This way of thinking is equally reflected in Locke's conception of "personhood," with which he articulated his notion of personal identity. Here, Locke defined personhood as belonging to someone who is an intelligent being concerned for himself, conscious of both pleasure and pain, and able to reason, reflect, and be self-aware, all together providing the basis for the "self" (Locke [1690] 2007, 115). This idea of personal identity was truly revolutionary for his time and provided a significant contribution to philosophy (Uzgalis 2018).

However, the establishment of self-identity is also based on a process that emphasises separation and overcoming, carrying certain logics of domination that mark the formation of the human individual through a divorce from nature and the rejection of naturalistic characteristics. It can therefore be argued that this development rests on a set of justifications that make the process of separation seem a necessary and desirable step towards defining the human as a free, autonomous being.

The question then becomes whether it is truly necessary to construct one category based on the abstraction and submission of another category. If the dominant category from which Locke argues is accepted as the archetype of a free and rational being, it follows that inferior states of being, such as childhood or indigenous ways of life, viewed as emotional, "animal-like," or closer to nature, are perceived as hurdles to human development that must be overcome in order to become a full human being. Moreover, a perceived need to overcome such

lower-valued states of being can come with a perceived need to control those who are viewed as less developed, able, or rational groups, laying possible grounds for their oppression.

This way of conceptualising frames social hierarchy as articulated along demarcations that start from already established dominant positions. Because such criteria of capacities are rather arbitrary, I reject the comparison of abilities or social differences of beings to determine their moral standing. The effect of anthropocentric reasoning is thus similar to other forms of bias, favouring the perspective and experience of those in more powerful positions as truth or a law of nature, thereby devaluing the experience and identity of all those viewed as lesser subjects.

Appropriation of the world as a path to freedom

As argued above, Locke viewed humans as capable of evaluating their desires and making rational decisions by suspending their will, whereas other animals were seen as operating only on instinct. In addition, humans were able to interpose appropriation between their desire for subsistence and its satisfaction, defining freedom as partially relying on external action and the repression of internal nature (Stephens 2001, 8). Stephens argues that in both cases the result is an increase in value and a manifestation of a distinctively human autonomy (Stephens 2001, 8). Locke's examples of perception and personhood help to clarify how this empirical idea about the nature of the mind and rationality was developed.

In conceiving of this state of natural equality between men as all residing within the state of nature, Locke viewed reason as the law that governs human action, enabling individuals to act within the privileges and duties that natural freedom brings. This law of reason provides a logical explanation for the hierarchical organisation of who can be regarded as rational and thus fully human or as a free agent, and, implicitly, also of who is to be excluded. According to Stephens, Locke viewed the moral key as lying in the acquisition of the right desires and in being trained adequately to further successful economic production whilst respecting Christian natural law, thereby creating an ideal type of the rational agent (Stephens 2001). This can be said to have produced a vision of how the proper human subject is, or ideally should become, thereby establishing implicit benchmarks and divisions of nature and ethics (Stephens 2001).

"In appropriation, the atomised agent projects themselves onto the world, annexes a spiritual domain of initiative onto Newtonian matter, making it an owned productive object, and natural acquisitiveness, tempered by self-control, should promote this 'only spur to Humane action'" (Stephens 2001, 9). In other words, the logic that emerges from this is that human appropriation of nature and the world is guided by reason rather than instinct, which is taken as a distinguishing feature and source of heightened moral standing for human beings, as this "intentional rationality (…) creates a history of the self that alienates the human from mere nature" (Wadiwel 2014, 159).

Humans thus gave meaning and value to the world by claiming parts of it as their own, especially that which was previously unowned and considered "wild" or "brute" nature. By viewing the human as part of nature but, due to the capacities of rationality, above nature, the inert and passive physical world is given meaning as it is ascribed value in relation to the human. Through this process and the hierarchy, the human subject becomes the ruling agent, whilst the outer world, other animals included, comes to be seen as something created for and rightly owned by humans. The key point, then, is that this human impulse toward acquisition and ownership must be regulated and properly managed by reason.

The Lockean self is commonly described as individualistic, acquisitive, and somewhat detached from social relations, shaped by an emphasis on instrumental reason (Stephens 2001). This conception is problematic insofar as it legitimises logics of oppression, domination, and hierarchical social structures that systematically exclude those who fail to embody the ideal. At the same time, it positions all other animals and nature as devoid of agency, reducing them to exploitable resources for production or for the fulfilment of human ends. The categorisation, appropriation, and utilisation of other animals as property thus establishes a chain of domination that defines the human–animal relation (Wadiwel 2014). Wadiwel concludes that this is all to say that "in 'essence' there is nothing that separates human and animal beyond a violent force that generates the distinction, and simultaneously positions the human in the position of a knowing, authored, violent subject, and the animal as simply that which is to be mastered" (Wadiwel 2014, 158).

This violent force that generates the distinction between humans and other animals is thus a man-made construction that translates into the application of power and the establishment of social structures and beliefs that revolve around

hierarchy. The underlying logic of domination is that other animals exist for human-defined purposes and that humans can use them as they see fit. What Wadiwel underlines in his reading of Locke is that human superiority is not simply established by a presumed innate superiority but by the application of force (Wadiwel 2014).

Locke's theory of property provided important grounds for liberal Enlightenment thought and underpins central conceptualisations of human rights, such as the right to bodily integrity (Wadiwel 2014). Wadiwel discusses Locke's arguments on the human natural right to one's own body and to use one's body to perform transformative work through which the outside world can be appropriated as property (Wadiwel 2014). The world, including entities such as other animals, can thus be appropriated and possessed through the transformation of work, such as the force used to capture, control, or butcher another animal. Wadiwel argues that this "primordial" connection between subjectivity and property, which essentially consists of "to be and to own," is a priori to the juridical apparatus (Wadiwel 2014, 150). This explains the direct connection between owning an animal and being able to dominate it.

The explication of the Lockean framework of human natural rights to their own body and the right to property can thus be used to explain the ontology of what sits at the very centre of property rights and provides a direct and physical explanation of how humans establish themselves as having dominion over the Earth and how that superiorisation of the human self is materialised through the subordination and oppression of the animal Other (Wadiwel 2014). From this logic and act of dominance, it also follows that human beings are the only beings who are legitimately free. Through reading Locke, it can be identified how the human drive or will for self-preservation plays a fundamental role in defining the human–animal relation, as humans use the conceptual, ontological, and practical domination of other animals to utilise them as property (Wadiwel 2014).

In that process, Locke differentiated between having (divine) dominion over others and having full property as an owner, of which the latter can be taken by force (Wadiwel 2014). Wadiwel explains that: "It is because the Hare does not simply give itself to the human, but must be chased and appropriated through labour, in a risky process wherein the animal may well evade capture, that a human property right in the captured animal is established" (Wadiwel 2014, 153).

To this, Wadiwel adds that Locke argued God had not simply "given" dominion to man but had, through endowing man with the capacity to reason, provided the voice of God to rise above pure instinct and to discover and pursue lower creatures to appropriate and utilise them for self-preservation (Wadiwel 2014). Through the establishment of this relation between the human and the natural world, a social order could transpire. Wadiwel sums this up by stating that "the political order requires the conquest of the non-human to sustain a human freedom from the absolute equality of nature; the human social and political order is the victory prize" (Wadiwel 2014, 155).

His critical discussion of Enlightenment political thought aligns with the critiques advanced by CAS and ecofeminist scholars, which will be discussed in further depth as the discussion unfolds. This allows us to show how the exclusion and oppression of other animals go hand in hand with anthropocentrism and ideas about the rational and autonomous subject. The ideas of freedom that stem from this underlying separation define liberty in opposition to nature and animality by establishing and emphasising property, sovereignty, and the rule of law. Animal oppression is thus foundational to dominant ideas of social organisation, and freedom can be said to emerge through appropriation and control, framing it as a privilege of the dominant human species.

From individualism to hierarchy and control

To make this point even clearer, we shall also consider some arguments of John Stuart Mill, which will further illustrate the just-described hierarchy and exemplify how the focus on the human individual as a privileged and heightened being can be explained. With his book *On Liberty*, Mill contributed a key source for conceptions of individual and political liberty by discussing the boundaries of social authority and individual sovereignty ([1859] 2002). Mill appreciated personal freedom as essential to individual and societal progress and promoted the freedom of thought, expression, and action (Mill 1859/2002). In the same manner, he was very concerned about oppression, problematising the control of government and society.

Mill's influential discussions on the harm principle state that individual liberty should be curtailed only against the will of any other member of a civilised community if it risks harming others (Mill [1859] 2002, 8). Equally, individuals

should only legitimately coerce others to defend themselves or others from harm. Mill's formulation of the harm principle can be seen as an early formulation of the above-stated saying that one's freedom ends where another's freedom begins, an everyday saying that is still acclaimed today to describe the boundaries of freedom and to point to the responsibilities that come with acting freely. While today's modern meanings of freedom are much more complex regarding who can be seen as a free individual, the proverb can still be seen as a general principle to consider the balance between individual liberty and responsibility towards others.

By looking at the example of Mill's work, I seek to understand (1) how he defined the purview of freedom, and (2) if and how the definition thereof affected legitimisations of domination of those not included as legitimately free individuals. Mill states that:

> It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children, or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. (Mill [1859] 2002, 8)

Mill's qualification of the purview of liberty reflects that certain sets of capacities are needed to fulfil the requirements of sensible citizens who can take responsibility for their own actions and act reasonably. Other animals and children are excluded here, and I perceive his exclusion of other animals as based on making a general ontological statement about the sphere of freedom as pertaining to human beings only. Animals are seen as so obviously different from humans that their exclusion does not need to be explained or justified any further; they are, in a way, only used to make a point in defining the sphere of rational and irrational beings.

Regarding children and minors, Mill explains that their exclusion is warranted for their own protection and to shield them from outside interference. Those groups excluded from the purview of liberty are thus those deemed immature because they require care from others. This aligns with the idea that to be a free agent, one needs to be "developed" to a certain standard. Liberty is inherently political and therefore calls for political agency; those who fall short of qualifying as rational political agents cannot be entrusted with proper individual liberty

either, as absolute independence could harm them, given that they have not (yet) reached their potential in terms of status and faculties. Mill thus has a specific idea of how liberty can be properly exercised, making personal freedom something that must be earned or can be entrusted only to those mature and educated enough.

Mill clarifies the boundaries of liberty even further when he goes on to exclude "backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage" (Mill [1859] 2002, 8). With this, Mill applies the same view of having to develop and mature toward a certain ideal of a rational adult, albeit here applying it to entire groups of people. Those constructed as others stemming from "backward" or "barbarous" societies must thus be excluded from the purview of freedom as they are, by definition, behind, and perceived as not as advanced as the rational and idealised political agent. Mill goes on to qualify the relation between these two constructed groups further when stating that:

> Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually affecting that end. Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion. (Mill [1859] 2002, 8-9)

Mill thus legitimises absolute rule over others deemed inferior because of a perceived level of cultural development and intellectual maturity. He applied the same logic to individuals who were incapable of rational thought due to mental illness or cognitive variations in ability (Mill [1858] 2002). Seen in the context of the time, Mill's arguments may have been perfectly logical formulations that reflected common European beliefs about social organisation. Rather than problematising exclusion, social and cultural differences were instead seen as providing logical explanations for the way society is, or should be, organised. Equal discussions were led between equals, referring to groups of individuals of similar rank and capacity. Certain social differences were thus used to define social ranks and statuses, inscribing a certain usefulness to keeping these categories apart and in hierarchical relation to one another.

Such rationales also make sense from an anthropocentric understanding of freedom, where liberty exists for certain humans, since the very idea of what freedom means and how it can and should be exercised is so deeply bound up

with ontological starting points of separation and distinction between opposing categories.

There is a notable tension between the anthropocentric bias inherent in the examples discussed here and the remaining possibilities to extend their contributions to include other animals. As stated above in the context of Locke, anthropocentrism is perhaps best described as an undercurrent that established human supremacy whilst subordinating other animals and nature by default. It is noteworthy, for instance, that Mill's arguments can be used in favour of other animals as well. In Mill's correspondence with William Whewell, for example, he argued that other animals, as well as human others, should not be judged by perceptions of likeness to some idealised rational agent, as doing so would be highly manipulable (Nussbaum 2022, 54). Mill's intention to consider ethical decision-making by asking whether causing more pain to an animal other than would justify the pleasure it gives to man (Nussbaum 2022, 55) reveals that he was not indifferent to the oppression of other animals. Mill also decided to leave his fortune to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Nussbaum 2022, 40).

Dissenting voices

Thus far, I have discussed how other animals were constructed as lesser beings within a hierarchy and how the human capacity for reason was singled out and celebrated to argue that humans are not only distinct from other animals but are the sole bearers of moral and political standing. I have argued that this firm hierarchy was partially rooted in the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato, which celebrated reason as the highest ability, setting humans in general, and certain male members of Greek society in particular, apart. The Church later conflated these ideas with Christian teachings to create a divine hierarchy in which all beings found their place under God, each with its own moral worth.

My discussion of anthropocentric conceptions of freedom thus far sought to show and exemplify how a clear human–animal hierarchy was manifested in political thought and in the formation of human subjectivity. However, history also holds other examples of viewing other animals in ways that reflect some recognition of their subjectivity and agency, even though they were still viewed and treated as less morally valuable beings.

Ambivalence toward the human–animal boundary appeared early in Roman mythology. The empire's founders, Romulus and Remus, abandoned as infants, were said to have been saved and nursed by a female wolf (*lupa*) after she discovered them (Bremmer 1987). Some accounts also mention a woodpecker (*picus*) feeding the twins, thus representing a small network of animal care before human intervention, which occurred when the brothers were found by a herdsman who raised them (Bremmer 1987). Beginning with these blurred boundaries between human, animal, and divine worlds, one could interpret that Roman thought acknowledged a degree of interspecies interdependency and liminality.

However, the pastoral transition from wild care to domestic upbringing mirrors Rome's ideological move from nature to culture, reducing these animals to mere symbols rather than recognising them as active agents. In this way, the myth ultimately reasserts anthropocentrism, as the symbolic framing of animal care becomes a mechanism of divine providence, subordinating animal agency to human theology. Violence is also integral to the narrative, as Romulus and Remus were born to Ilia, a Vestal virgin raped by Mars, and Remus was later killed by his brother Romulus during a dispute over the spatial boundaries of the city that later would become Rome. The story illustrates how human identity formation, and, by extension, human conceptions of liberty, involved both the exclusion and the rendering of other animals as lesser beings.

During medieval times, animals of many different species were put on trial as they were seen to have broken laws with calculation and intent, revealing contradictory views towards other animals (Colling 2021). In 1314, a bull escaped from a farm and ran into a road where it attacked and killed a man, upon which the bull was imprisoned and sentenced to death by hanging by the Parliament of Paris (Colling 2021, xviii). Since other animals were assumed to have the same moral responsibilities as humans and were in some regards perceived as conscious beings who could act upon intent and were motivated by greed, jealousy, or revenge, they often faced the same forms of punishment as humans, such as torture, lashings, mutilation, live burial, imprisonment, and execution (Colling 2021, xviii).

Sarat Colling critiques these trials as highly anthropocentric in that they failed to account for the imbalanced power dynamic between humans and other animals and assumed that other animals needed to abide by human-created social

systems, even though animals can be said to have their own language and moral codes (Colling 2021, xviii).

Later developments brought about a change during which the agency and subjectivity of other animals were outrightly denied as binary categorisation took stronger hold, as discussed above. During these processes, social hierarchies were established that offered rights to certain men and the wealthy, whilst subordinating women, other marginalised human groups, and other animals. Some of the contradictory views about other animals were rectified by the clear-cut distinction between humans and other animals, and the value hierarchisations that followed made it easier, or even necessary, to view other animals as irrational, primitive, lacking agency, and thus exploitable.

However, even as the hierarchy between humans and other animals intensified, cracks emerged in the anthropocentric narrative and the social order it produced. Although other animals were certainly not a principal theme of discussion, perceptions of other animals began to shift slightly, and views came to attribute nonhuman animals with a greater range of capacities, eventually leading to increased moral consideration. David Hume, for instance, argued that other animals can learn from experience, and Jeremy Bentham rejected rationality as the relevant marker for defining moral standing, instead asking: "The question is not, can they reason? Nor, can they talk? But, can they suffer?" (Bentham 1789; Duncan 2019, 15, emphasis original). By pinpointing the problem of animal suffering, Bentham's intent was to emphasise that the consequences of actions are important, rather than the capacity for rationality.

John Stuart Mill further developed Bentham's ideas into utilitarian philosophy (Duncan 2019). Utilitarianism is the doctrine that actions are right if they are useful or beneficial for the majority, to promote the greatest possible amount of good or happiness and avert the greatest possible amount of pain or suffering. This set of beliefs has become a widely accepted model for moral consideration and ethical decision-making, and is applied when considering the treatment of other animals. The thematisation of animal suffering would later become one of the most central concepts of the animal rights debate.

As discussed above, Mill defined the purview of freedom as referring to rational and "civilised" mankind, reflecting a belief in a strict hierarchy that also implies that those in lower social positions need to be governed authoritatively by those whom he describes as in the "maturity of their faculties" (Mill [1859] 2002,

8). This directs status and access to power towards identifiable capacities and social differences through which social groups are defined. Whilst this excludes other animals from the purview of liberty in Mill, it does not mean that they were entirely disregarded. In my understanding, Mill's work was more about human improvement and moral sophistication, whereas Bentham placed greater emphasis on problematising animal suffering.

Several others spoke out against unnecessary cruelty towards other animals as morally wrong—not directly for the sake of the animals, but because it would harm the animals' human owners or risk violating man's duty towards himself. Locke, for instance, spoke out against the torment of other animals as it would harden one's mind even towards other humans (Locke [1693] 2005). Immanuel Kant also argued that other animals should not be mistreated because we have indirect moral duties to them, as the cruel treatment of other animals could also lead to cruelty towards humans (Korsgaard 2018). Kant perceived other animals as lacking rationality and autonomy, and concluded that they have no intrinsic moral worth. Kant's speciesism was later critiqued as an arbitrary distinction, whilst the core of Kantian ethics can be extended to include other animals as ends in themselves when sentience is taken as a sufficient condition for moral consideration (Korsgaard 2018). Kant's deontological reasoning can be said to lay the groundwork for several other animal rights theories and debates.

This chapter problematises the idea that anthropocentric accounts of freedom are based on an epistemological construction of a human–animal hierarchy established through violence. I have focused largely on exemplifying how the Western narrative of freedom excluded other animals from moral consideration and on how the construction of the animal as ultimate other served as a setting for other social hierarchies. However, concern for other animals was also present during these early times discussed here, and it can be said that philosophical, ethical, and moral foundations for animal advocacy work can be traced back not only to Eastern religions such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism but also to Western philosophers such as Pythagoras, Hesiod, and Draco, who all called for the protection of other animals in some regard (Nocella et al. 2014).

4.3 The drawbacks of anthropocentric freedom

Based on the above discussion, I will now articulate more clearly how and why anthropocentric conceptions of freedom can be problematic. Because my normative aim is to critique the oppression of other animals, I approach the concept of freedom from a perspective that seeks to uncover and destabilise inherent logics of domination and normalised hierarchies that favour the human subject by diminishing animal subjectivities and moral worth.

The distortion of human subjectivity

Anthropocentric accounts of liberty have shaped the Western humanist subject as a rational, neutral, and universal ideal historically centred on a Eurocentric, white, male citizen, excluding all others upon whom it was constructed. Its foundations rest on an ontological hierarchy that defines the human subject through a clear separation from nature and animality. The subsequent subordination of all that is nonhuman or irrational was inevitable, given that the development of instrumental reason and the Enlightenment subject was motivated by a fundamental sense of lack and by fear and anger toward a merciless external world. In this world, human beings perceived the need to either become stronger and more cunning to control nature or risk being threatened and controlled by it (Bell 2011). This dynamic illustrates how freedom can be understood as zero-sum or as a privilege that must be maintained through force or hierarchical organisation.

Critical theory, feminism, and CAS have exposed how this anthropocentric model normalised the human–animal divide, shaping broader systems of meaning and power (e.g., Benton 2011; Cudworth and Hobden 2018; Bell 2011; Weisberg 2011; Johnson 2011). Many argue that animal domination provided a template for oppressing human others (e.g., Johnson 2011; Nocella et al. 2014; Sanbonmatsu 2011; Painter 2016). These critiques call for de-centring the human subject (Salleh 2008, 2016; Twine 2010) and embrace feminist politics and principles of nonviolence (Aristarkhova 2012) to provide grounds for including those otherwise excluded or devalued (e.g., Nocella et al. 2012; Gamerschlag 2011; Donovan 2011).

Viewing other animals as mere means to human ends not only established a clear human–animal hierarchy but also distorted human self-understanding. By aligning subjectivity with hierarchy and domination, anthropocentrism legitimised violence toward both humans and other animals and internalised it as human

chauvinism as part of human identity. By seeking to overcome nature and animality, it can therefore be argued that we have not only negated our social interconnections but have moreover aligned our subjectivity with justifications of violence and oppression and have thereby harmed, or at the very least limited, ourselves and each other.

Recalling ecofeminist Susan Griffin (1978), the same logic discussed in chapter four underpins the fantasy of the rational male subject as a construct that claims to transcend nature and animality, framing them as overcome yet requiring control to justify imagined superiority. Believing in this fantasy, Griffin argues, fosters the illusion that the human condition can escape mortality and the limits of nature (Griffin 1978). The underlying fear of death echoes the logic that positioned the political subject and the city as opposite and above nature, portraying the natural world as a threat to be subdued and consumed. Within that fear lies a perceived threat from the dangerous natural world, which we must control and consume to avoid being destroyed by it. Power structures then appear as remedies to chaos, offering order and rational explanations for an unpredictable world. Yet this pursuit of security through hierarchical "natural" orders is illusory and costly since it sustains oppression and prioritises status over reciprocity. Ultimately, fear of mortality and chaos drives injustice, fostering the belief that freedom must be secured through superiority. This dynamic enacts freedom as a privilege dependent on the unfreedom of others, as seen in the earlier-discussed example of animal use conceived as a matter of human personal free choice.

This dynamic parallels hegemonic masculinity, which enforces dominance through arbitrary hierarchies and emotional estrangement (Connell 2005; Plumwood 2002). Both systems normalise domination, perpetuate inequality, and hinder ethical reflection. Hegemonic masculinity is founded upon arbitrary hierarchies of social difference, subordinating and marginalising those who fail to meet its standards (Connell 2005). In modern Western contexts, masculinity is constructed through "its identification with a rationalist concept of reason whose opposition to emotion estranges men from many aspects of their emotional lives" (Plumwood 2002, 98). These exclusionary logics legitimise toxic practices such as physical and emotional violence and impose social expectations of male dominance. While those in privileged positions may not perceive this harm, studies show that many men experience constant fear masked by aggression, reinforcing an untouchable image of strength, rationality, and extreme self-reliance (Connell

2005; Ford 2019). The effects of toxic masculinity manifest in harmful behaviours such as shame, emotional dissociation, and avoidance of vulnerability. To defend a heightened status, women and marginalised men are denigrated, creating a system harmful to all.

Similarly, the overemphasised separation of the human subject from the animal object positions humans in a dominant role upheld through practices that violate the nonhuman. While anthropocentrism and hegemonic masculinity differ in their specific norms and attitudes, both are harmful constructions of social identity that normalise domination and perpetuate inequality. These patterns hinder critical reflection on how we perceive and conduct ourselves individually and collectively, shaping how we treat others.

Ideas about freedom are thus interlaced with legitimations of hierarchical moral worth and determinations of which subjectivities, agencies, and moral standings are recognised. Being considered "free" entails privileges denied to those outside dominant categories, such as the rational political subject.

On an ideational level, the human–animal relation has influenced conceptualisations of freedom as tied to social hierarchy, privileging the human animal. Such hierarchisation, favouring those deemed most rational, developed, or powerful, represents arbitrary domination serving entrenched power structures. In Pettit's (1999) terms, these cases exemplify relations of domination. While I do not advocate abolishing social categories, I argue for destabilising hierarchical logics that uphold undifferentiated, binary categories such as "human" and "animal." Currently, naturalised hierarchies determine structures and legitimise systems of violence and oppression. Critical interventions offer a radical questioning of taken-for-granted "truths," which I see as essential for developing emancipatory theory and reflecting on potential practices of interspecies freedom.

Human superiority complex and the oppressions that follow

Anthropocentric subjectivity fails to capture the complexity of human and nonhuman lives. Categories such as "human" and "animal" are not uniform but socially constructed and fluid (Cudworth 2011). While species lines are biologically defined, the binary opposition of human and animal falsely suggests that humans are not, as we indeed are, animals. To rethink inclusion and agency for other animals, Wadiwel (2014) urges us to shift focus:

> perhaps rather than exploring the ways in which animals might be said to be like us—in reasoning, in emotional ability, in capacity for suffering—in order to award them moral equivalence, we might do better to examine the way in which human violence towards animals establishes our own superiority as a contingent 'truth'. (Wadiwel 2014, 160)

This perspective highlights systemic violence as foundational to human domination. In his discussion of Locke, Wadiwel illustrates how Locke's ideas of property and political order rested on self-preservation through the use of animals as means to an end (Wadiwel 2014). The need to claim subjective status through declaring others as property reflects hierarchical social relations in which status, power, and the securement of the self and human self-interest are attained through conquest (Wadiwel 2014). What is defined as "human" thus often entails domination.

Political inquiries into human–animal relations must therefore move beyond debates about moral status and instead examine structural violence. Anthropocentric liberty frames freedom as a finite resource, accessible primarily to dominant groups, while others are excluded and subordinated. Challenging this bias requires rethinking social relations toward less oppressive, more reciprocal interspecies coexistence.

There is nothing innate in us as human beings that makes us truly exceptional in ways that would legitimise superior standing compared to all other living beings (Gray 2002). In light of the complex problems that have been shown to follow from anthropocentric bias, it is worth questioning whether the use of human rationality to violate, destroy, or extinguish life is defensible. John Gray instead urges us to accept our own animality and the limits that come with being human (Gray 2002). The story we tell ourselves about

> […] humanity as a chosen species, destined to conquer the Earth and defeat mortality, is a modern formulation of ancient faith. Platonism and Christianity have always held that humans do not belong in the natural world. When they imagined that humanity could rid itself from the limits that surrounded all other animal species, the thinkers of the Enlightenment merely renewed this ancient error. (Gray 2002, 137-138)

As Gray argues, the belief that humans can master the Earth is nothing more than a fantasy, and the freedom imagined in this supposed mastery is ultimately self-

destructive (Gray 2002). The notion of human superiority has fuelled ecological destruction, domination over other animals, toxic social relations, and an illusion of autonomy that is undue privilege and tyranny in disguise. Anthropocentric bias has perpetuated a long-standing transmission of species narcissism, constructing society as exclusively human (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015). Yet society is not exclusively human. We depend on other animals and on nature, and we are a part of it. It is both arrogant and unfounded to assume that other animals, or those devalued as human others, are "lesser beings." As Gray states at the opening of his book: "Most people today think they belong to a species that can be master of its destiny. This is faith, not science. We do not speak of a time when whales or gorillas will be masters of their destinies. Why then humans?" (Gray 2002, 3).

To counter the perception of humans as separate and superior, Hobden (2015, 253) proposes that we recognise the embodied character of our existence within the natural world and "highlight suffering, not only within our own species but across the species boundary." Both points will be explored later, but for now it is important to emphasise that categories such as nature and social differences such as class, gender, or race have tangible effects and physical referents (Cudworth 2005). I argue that the same applies to constructions of freedom, which are rooted in anthropocentric narratives and the human subjectivity they produce. The Western narrative of human supremacy is speculative and can be described as a story rooted in mythical hierarchies and perpetuated by dominant voices.

From the outset, boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are arbitrary, making freedom hierarchical by default. This creates a zero-sum logic where the privilege of some depends on the subordination of others. Taken together, this discussion of the drawbacks of anthropocentric bias has provided illustrative examples and problematised how "freedom was always defined—at least potentially—as something exercised to the cost of others" (Graeber and Wengrow 2021, 66). This underlying logic first drew my attention to the concept of freedom when people claimed that eating animal products is a matter of personal choice, signalling a belief that other animals have no real claim to any form of freedom relevant to them. Although concern for animals existed historically, it often served human spiritual interests rather than genuine recognition of animal agency (Nocella et al. 2014).

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The limitations of anthropocentric freedom identified relate to a problematic social hierarchy that demarcates social differences by contrasting them with a dominant subject. This subject's superior status is legitimised as the natural order of things and strongly shapes conceptions of who counts as a legitimate and morally valuable being. Such logic produces vertical relationships defined by competition, comparison, and hostility. Anthropocentric freedom is zero-sum, status-dependent, and property-mediated. It hinges on arbitrary lines drawn to justify exclusion and to gatekeep freedom as a privilege. This is incompatible with my account of interspecies freedom, which explicitly seeks liberation from oppression and rethinks liberty as a shared condition of mutual flourishing.

To think about freedom as an interspecies social relation, individual capacity, and shared political ideal, it is necessary to challenge underlying violent ideologies such as anthropocentric entitlement. Questioning anthropocentrism and renegotiating the social boundaries of animality, within which we all reside, holds the potential to transform social relations. As Nira Yuval-Davis appositely observes:

> […] the global wave of the call of freedom, which is spreading in spite of many attempts at repressing it, would be able to benefit from an encompassing and empathetic intersectional approach to politics of solidarity as […] there is no 'end to politics' (as well as history) and that new constellations of power will emerge, requiring new struggles or reviving old ones just when it seems things are finally getting better. (2011, xiv)

Guided by this call for intersectional solidarity, I argue that questioning our anthropocentric superiority complex and turning toward the other animals with whom we share this planet is essential. Interlinking the hierarchical bias identified here with oppression leads us to the next chapter, which examines the structural and relational mechanisms that maintain animal oppression, showing how domination is embedded in social, legal, and economic systems. By analysing these dynamics, chapter five lays further theoretical groundwork for strategies of resistance and for imagining interspecies freedom as both relational and emancipatory.

5 Dismantling oppression

> If men bore children, we imagine, they would burst from their heads, not their asses, and be fully grown, and dressed, and godlike, with no need to eat, no substance pouring from their substance. But we are mothers. (She is a great cow. She stands in the midst of her own soft flesh, with hips wide enough for calving; who lays open her flesh, like a drone, for the use of the world.) And we labor. We labor like … (Griffin 1978, 75)

These words by Susan Griffin lay bare a well-established symbolic order in which domination is elevated, legitimised, and sanitised, while dependency, vulnerability, and embodiment are relegated to the realm of the exploitable. Her metaphor of the cow exposes gendered and speciesist hierarchical logics through which certain bodies are rendered available for use, extraction, and consumption. It is precisely such logics of naturalised subordination that drive and uphold structures of oppression, which constitute the main focal point of this chapter. Anthropocentric conceptions of freedom are inseparable from oppression because they rely on hierarchical, exclusionary, and exploitative frameworks that reserve freedom as a zero-sum privilege for some through the subordination of Others.

To recapitulate, the overall aim of the study is to challenge animal oppression through a critical examination of anthropocentric conceptions of liberty and to develop a notion of interspecies freedom as liberation from oppression. In what follows, I clarify the theoretical perspective underpinning this work and explore how the underlying systems, structures, and logics of oppression sustain unjust hierarchies, subordination, violence, and relational dysfunction. By examining the mechanisms, I aim to demonstrate how oppression is deeply interconnected with dominant ideas about freedom.

To effectively challenge the culturally and politically justified use of other animals, normalised anthropocentric views of human-animal relations must be scrutinised. This chapter argues that the oppression of other animals is intricately woven into broader systems of hierarchy and domination. It further contends that

naturalised forms of oppression are often conflated with notions of freedom as individual privilege or as a zero-sum good.

The discussion will shift to a more abstract exploration of domination and oppression, engaging with theoretical frameworks from intersectional feminism, ecofeminism, and interdisciplinary research aligned with critical animal studies (CAS). Understanding the nature and mechanisms of domination and oppression will help illuminate how the criticised forms of human dominance reinforce social hierarchies, framing dominant human positions as more morally valuable and more entitled to the privileges of freedom than those in subordinate positions.

5.1 Theorising oppression

As I have shown thus far, my approach to discussions about freedom is through a problematisation of domination and oppression. This part of the chapter turns to a more abstract theoretical discussion, demonstrating how the domination and oppression of other animals are interrelated with other forms of persecution. It connects to the discussions in chapter four by explicating how oppressive hierarchies and social structures can lead to anthropocentric conceptions of freedom and to ideas of freedom as an individual privilege grounded in the subordination of an Other.

Whilst domination can be understood as the relational exercise of control in which one is directly subjugated by another (e.g., Pettit 1999), oppression refers to broader systemic conditions that normalise and sustain such control (Cudd 2006; Frye 1983; Young 1990). Domination is thus a key part of how oppression operates in practice, making these two problems inseparable and leading to the terms being used interchangeably in this text at times. The distinction between the two terms is nevertheless important to keep in mind, even if the main focus of the following discussion centres on oppression to conceptualise animal unfreedom as systemic, relational, and interconnected with other forms of injustice. Oppression can therefore be identified as the primary driver and manifestation of injustice, leading to enormous suffering and serious environmental problems (Joy 2023, 17). Joy argues that: "rape, war, genocide, child abuse, poverty, climate change, factory farming, terrorism, racism, casteism, patriarchy—oppression is

manifested in any behaviour that mirrors and supports the unjust exercising of power and control over another or others" (Joy 2023, 17).

To fully grasp the problem of oppression, the following section will examine different conceptualisations and analytical lenses that explain how oppression operates and sustains itself. Specifically, it will consider oppression as a structural condition, as a social and institutionalised practice, and as a psychological and political force.

Oppression as normatively wrong

To explain the meaning of oppression, Marilyn Frye employs the metaphor of a birdcage to demonstrate that oppression consists of interlocking barriers. If one looks at a single wire of the cage in isolation, it may not appear to pose much of a barrier to freedom; however, when we adopt a macroscopic view and observe the entire cage, the bird's entrapment becomes obvious (Frye 1983). With this metaphor, Frye seeks to illustrate why oppression can be difficult to recognise when our attention is confined to a single element of an oppressive structure or its wider context. Taking a step back to perceive the systemic aspects of oppression reveals how each element forms part of a broader network that has real inhibiting effects on individuals who are caged within it:

> The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in. (Frye 1983, 12)

Frye thus clarifies that oppression is not merely the experience of suffering but identifies it as a structural condition that systematically inhibits, restricts, or harms individuals or certain social groups. Such constriction of the ability to live one's life is therefore a key aspect in understanding how oppression entails unfreedom. Frye's structural understanding of oppression represents a relatively new interpretation, and, like the concept of freedom, the notion of oppression is continually evolving in how it is commonly understood.

In her book *Analyzing Oppression*, political philosopher Ann Cudd traces a genealogy of how understandings of the term evolved over time (2006). Ancient

philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle believed in a natural hierarchy of ability that granted different statuses to humans and justified systems such as slavery or the denial of rights to certain social groups (Cudd 2006). We already saw examples thereof in chapter four, when discussing anthropocentric conceptions of freedom, where I illustrated how women and foreigners were excluded from political participation and how slavery was regarded as a legitimate system of subjugation at that time. Such forms of oppression were then seen as normal and largely unquestioned parts of society. This changed over time, and once the topic of oppression became more central with the advent of liberalism, the idea that all humans are equally valuable gained traction (Cudd 2006). Modern political philosophers such as Hobbes and Rousseau, for instance, questioned how it could be possible for one person to allow themselves to be dominated or enslaved by another if all humans were considered roughly equal in their natural endowments (Cudd 2006).

Early uses of the term 'oppression' were frequently synonymous with terms such as 'domination' or 'tyranny' and often connoted arbitrary rule leading to economic deprivation, the abrogation of rights, or physical violence (Cudd 2006). From there, Cudd describes conceptual shifts in how oppression was understood during the nineteenth century. These shifts are reflected in the development of oppression being purely understood in a political sense of a relation between ruler and ruled, to increasingly consider social aspects of oppression where oppressor and oppressed are social groups which relate in less politically formalised ways, and where social conventions or traditions are increasingly seen as sources of oppression (Cudd 2006). Moreover, Cudd identifies Hegel's discussions of human slavery as introducing an understanding of oppression as the failure to recognise the equal moral worth and dignity of another, and highlights Marx's analysis of oppression as rooted in the economic system (Cudd 2006).

These conceptual shifts demonstrate that problematising oppression can lead to questioning previously taken-for-granted oppressive systems (as in the example of slavery) and highlight how oppression is systemic, partially manifested in economic structures. As a result, understandings of oppression became more complex, and the concept broadened to refer to a wider range of relations beyond those of ruler and ruled. Similar to Frye's, Cudd's definition of oppression is also structural, describing it as harm through which some social groups are

systematically and unfairly or unjustly constrained, burdened, or diminished by indirect or direct material and psychological forces (Cudd 2006).

Cudd goes on to define oppression as those circumstances in which the following four conditions are fulfilled: First, the harm condition, meaning that harm results from an institutionalised practice. Second, the social group condition describes harm as being carried out through a social institution or practice against a social group whose identity exists independently of the oppressive harm identified in (1). Third is the privilege condition, referring to the existence of another social group that benefits from the institutional practice of harm in (1). Lastly, the coercion condition refers to unjustified coercion or force that causes the harm (Cudd 2006, 25).

This understanding of oppression can be applied to our treatment of other animals. The harm condition (1) applies in many different contexts, but for the sake of the argument, I will focus primarily on institutionalised practices such as carnism and related practices such as intensive animal farming, where affected animals are clearly harmed in the process of becoming "meat". This focus is not a delimitation but serves as one example of animal domination and oppression used to advance the present argument, while other contexts of human harm to other animals have been discussed in chapter three.

Regarding the social group condition (2), many farmed animal species could also exist without the oppressive harm we inflict on them. However, the level of control is so extensive that we also directly determine how they are brought into existence. We should therefore be mindful that humans have altered and "created" certain groups of other animals, such as broiler chickens, through controlled breeding and genetic modification. In this example, their entire being is directed towards fulfilling human-defined profit and production margins, to the extent that their bodies are so profoundly interfered with that a life without suffering is often impossible, even if they are rescued from the industry. This leads to specific complexities of oppression that will be discussed shortly. For now, it suffices to state that many of the species categorised as farmed animals could exist if we ceased farming and thus ceased harming them.

As for the privilege condition (3), humans benefit from the institutionalised harm associated with farming other animals. Beyond profiting from the consumption of the "products" generated, animal farming produces enormous financial gains (FAO 2018). The perceived superiority of human beings over other

animals is also advantageous, providing a wide range of privileges for humans as primary holders of moral standing and as the most powerful and agentive beings on the planet. This superiority allows us the privilege of acting as we please and of having nonhuman beings and nature at our disposal.

The final condition (4), concerning coercion, also applies and refers to the acts of control and violence routinely performed in animal agriculture. As illustrated by the examples of cows and pigs discussed in chapter three, farmed animals are controlled and violated by being incarcerated, deprived of their natural environments and social relations, and subjected to bodily manipulation and mutilation.

Cudd highlights that oppression is a normative concept, signalling that it identifies something that is always morally wrong and thus that one cannot coherently hold that some types of oppression are justified (Cudd 2006). This is particularly thought-provoking when other animals are concerned, since sceptics of extending Cudd's structural view of oppression to the treatment of farmed animals might object that the systemic farming and killing of other animals is not, in fact, unjust, due to dominant moral and social frameworks. If one does not perceive anything wrong with the farming and killing of certain other animals to produce everyday goods for consumption, the question of animal use might even seem like a non-issue that carries no moral or political relevance. Some might even feel threatened or repulsed by attempts to extend empathetic concern to other animals (Twine 2010). Such a stance, however, reveals the extent to which anthropocentric moral norms shape and limit our understanding of justice.

Understanding oppression as normatively wrong thus underpins the aim of conceptualising freedom as liberation from oppression. The belief that animal oppression could somehow be justified rests on the prior assumption that other animals are excluded from the moral community, suggesting that their interests in living and enjoying freedom carry less weight simply because they are not human. Yet, if we take Cudd's and Frye's normative claims about oppression being, by definition, wrong seriously, then we must also recognise that structural systems such as carnism and the animal-industrial complex, which normalise and institutionalise the exploitation of other animals, fit precisely within their definition of oppression. This, in turn, corresponds to a duty to oppose it.

To develop this argument further, the next section turns to two complementary perspectives that help to deepen and conceptualise the concept of oppression in

relation to other animals. First, feminist scholar Iris Marion Young's (1988) analysis of the term' oppression' as a politically contested and socially situated concept highlights how language itself shapes the recognition of injustices. Building on Young, ecofeminist Lori Gruen (2009) extends Young's five faces of oppression to the lives of other animals to show how their appropriation as resources for food, entertainment, clothing, or labour exemplifies systemic oppression.

Structural oppression across species

Iris Marion Young pointed out that the use of the term *oppression* is part and parcel of the political struggle over the language employed to describe social and political experiences. In her 1988 article, she notes that most people in the United States would have refrained from using the term oppression when discussing certain injustices in society (Young 1988). This reluctance may stem from the traditional use of the term to describe oppression by an external Other, as in the context of war or colonial domination, where one's own society was under threat from the dominance of another society or outside tyrant (Young 1988).

The social and political shifts of the 1960s and 1970s, however, brought an uprising of new liberation movements in which feminists, socialists, Indigenous, Black, and queer activists made oppression a central concept for problematising and analysing social practices and structures within our own societies (Young 1988). The meaning of oppression thus expanded to encompass disadvantages and injustices suffered by some people due to normalised everyday practices, structures, and norms. Young argues that the discourse of oppression offers much to understanding the complexities of social relations and experiences. She defines oppression through five key structures: (1) exploitation, where domination occurs through the transfer of labour benefits from one group to another; (2) marginalisation, referring to the exclusion of meaningful participation in social life, along with material deprivation and being made a dependant in society; (3) powerlessness, such as lack of authority, social status, privileges, and sense of self; (4) cultural imperialism, as when a dominant norm is imposed and depicted as universal while other groups are devalued; and (5) violence, as in direct violence such as rape, hate crimes, or police beatings (Young 1988).

Building on Young's framework, Gruen explicates how these five categories of oppression apply to other animals (Gruen 2009). She argues that other animals are

exploited when they are used for food, labour, clothing, or entertainment. Their marginalisation consists in their exclusion from moral and political consideration, while anthropocentric and speciesist views render them as a social group of considerably lower value than humans. Other animals are also made highly dependent on humans through controlled breeding and domestication.

Moreover, other animals are rendered powerless when the level of control over them is so extensive that they are denied the ability to make choices affecting their own lives (Gruen 2009). For example, a calf separated from their mother and confined in a small enclosure grows up in conditions of powerlessness and complete dependency on human care, whereas a calf raised in a free-roaming herd experiences a richer social life and greater opportunities for interaction with their conspecifics and environment (interview 15). Regarding cultural imperialism, Gruen argues that representations of other animals in human-dominated culture reinforce their oppression, as commonly accepted narratives depict them as inferior beings or mere resources, thereby justifying their use (Gruen 2009). Their legal classification as property further entrenches their perceived lack of autonomy and any claim to being treated as free subjects.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that freedom must be understood as the normative and relational opposite of oppression, which provides some answers to my goal of conceptualising freedom as liberation from oppression. If oppression is always wrong, as Cudd (2006) maintains, and if it shapes which injustices are recognised (Young 1988), while also encompassing the systematic subordination of other animals (Gruen 2009), then animal freedom cannot simply mean the absence of direct domination. Rather, to approach animal freedom, the social, economic, and linguistic structures that sustain animal oppression must be opposed and transformed. In this light, freedom appears as a diverse interspecies condition, grounded in transforming oppressive relations into relations of mutual recognition and shared flourishing. The following section deepens this view by turning to the ontological dimensions of oppression.

Ontological dimensions of oppression

The next step in understanding oppression and the lack of freedom it brings lies in examining how it operates at the level of being itself. Katharine Jenkins argues that oppression is not only structural but also ontological, shaping social reality

(Jenkins 2023). Her account provides a framework for analysing how social realities construct certain beings as wrongfully constrained kinds. Jenkins's work is particularly relevant for highlighting how humans define what other animals are and for showing how these definitions often enforce their oppression. In particular, her concept of *ontic injustice* lends itself to scrutinising the oppression of other animals as an ontological distortion. Jenkins defines ontic injustice as follows: "An individual suffers ontic injustice if and only if they are socially constructed as a member of a certain social kind where that construction consists, at least in part, of their falling under a set of social constraints and enablements that is wrongful to them" (Jenkins 2023, 24).

Ontic injustice occurs when someone is wronged by their social construction as a member of a certain social kind. "Social kinds" are defined as groups of things that help explain and predict the world while being constituted through social arrangements (Jenkins 2023). As an example, Jenkins discusses the issue of marital rape in the legal context of Great Britain. Prior to 1991, it was not considered rape if a husband had non-consensual sex with his wife, even if force was involved, because it was deemed that the wife had consented to perpetual sexual relations by virtue of marriage (Jenkins 2023). The socially constructed kind of "wife" thus lacked the entitlement to refuse sex with her husband and was therefore denied full control over sexual access to her own body. In this example, a married woman was not recognised as a victim of oppression, even though she was sexually violated. This illustrates that one must hold a certain moral status in society to be recognised as susceptible to victimisation (Joy 2023).

Jenkins argues that this is clearly morally wrong because everyone is entitled to full control over sexual access to their own body. There is thus a mismatch between the moral entitlements of wives and the social constraints and enablements that constituted what a wife was. In other words, the wrong Jenkins highlights is that "an individual is a certain sort of social being, where what it means to be that sort of social being is to be subject to morally inappropriate constraints and enablements" (Jenkins 2023, 23). She is not referring to the possible effects of such classification, such as harm to self-esteem, but identifies the problem of ontic injustice as lying in the construction of someone in a certain way, which subjects them to subjugation or to being treated as morally less valuable. Being classified as a slave, for instance, is wrong and harmful in itself because it implies categorisation as inherently of lesser moral value and as

exploitable, even if such classification does not immediately result in harmful treatment.

The conception of ontic injustice can be extended to the oppression of other animals. While the social kind "animal" is broad and may not immediately qualify as ontic injustice, it is important to emphasise that someone can be devalued through animalisation. A key element of dehumanisation, for example, is comparing a constructed Other, such as an enemy, to other animals, who are already accepted as lesser beings (Keen 1942). Beyond this, specific social kinds such as "dairy cow" or "hog" carry particular ontological assumptions and inherent definitions that shape harmful treatment. Being defined as a "dairy cow" means being seen as existing to produce "dairy", implying that one's entire purpose is to produce calves, milk, and ultimately meat. Delivering these "products" necessarily involves harm because profitability requires, for example, the removal of calves from their mothers and overbreeding to maximise milk production, which strains cows' bodies and ultimately leads to their slaughter. Similarly, a "hog" is a male pig castrated and reared for slaughter. In both cases, certain kinds of other animals are, by definition, at risk of being devalued as mere means to an end, resulting in physical and psychological harm. Their categorisation renders them subordinate to humans, who are socially licensed to treat them in ways that are morally inappropriate. Being labelled a "dairy cow", "hog", or "broiler chicken" can thus be considered an ontic injustice because their ontological status is shaped to justify their oppression. How other animals are seen thus determines how they are treated. Historical practices such as bearbaiting illustrate that cultural representations did not merely reflect animal subordination but actively produced it, framing other animals as objects of entertainment rather than subjects with agency (Fudge 2000). This perceptual framing persists today in linguistic and conceptual constructions that reduce other animals to functional categories such as "livestock," "poultry," and "dairy cow," thereby erasing individuality and legitimising exploitation. In this sense, ontic injustice is reinforced by cultural and epistemic practices that shape how animals are understood, collapsing their subjectivity into roles defined by human interests.

Ontic injustice is therefore a form of conceptual and ontological oppression that helps explain human domination of other animals by highlighting how they are defined and recognised within human-centred social systems. How one is viewed and how one's group is defined in relation to other groups and social

structures matters profoundly. Conceptual cases of ontic oppression lay the groundwork for depicting Others as fundamentally subordinate and unfree, thereby legitimising claims to privilege-freedom for those in more powerful positions. On a larger scale, the mass killing of other animals for food can be problematised as oppression, since other animals are denied rights to their own lives and bodies and have virtually no options for directing their own existence. Similarly, practices such as hunting, animal testing, and the use of other animals in entertainment exemplify systemic oppression, as they rest upon the normalisation of human domination and the objectification of other animals' bodies, movements, and capacities for agency.

Some illustrations of this were discussed in chapter three, such as the entrapment of the duiker in a Ugandan forest. The duiker's direct domination, being trapped by human poachers, can be seen as a concrete manifestation of oppression. This example shows how animal oppression is relationally enacted through the exercise of power and control over individual beings. My discussion of oppression adds to this problematisation of domination by calling out the broader structural and systemic conditions that legitimise and uphold such cases of domination. Recognising this dynamic clarifies how animal unfreedom is both immediate and systemic. In chapter three, I also briefly discussed how poaching not only harms the animals who are trapped and hunted but also negatively affects women, children, and other marginalised human groups.

The next part of the chapter extends this analysis by situating animal oppression within wider frameworks of intersecting systems of power. Drawing on intersectional and ecofeminist perspectives, it explores how the logics of domination underlying human–animal relations are interrelated with those structuring hierarchies of gender, race, class, and other social differences as part of a broader network of interlocking injustices.

5.2 Intersectionality and ecofeminist analyses of oppression

Oppressive systems are interlocking in that they overlap and mutually reinforce one another. Thus far, we have examined how oppression operates on a wider structural level and how its meaning has evolved over time. Various intersectional understandings of oppression have greatly influenced the theoretical outlook of

this dissertation. A useful starting point for unpacking these is the feminist analytical framework of intersectionality.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that examines how multiple social identities, such as race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class, intersect and shape individual experiences. The intellectual project of intersectionality seeks to understand the relationships between these categories and to render visible what is otherwise invisible or unaddressed in dominant frameworks (Hancock 2016). Applying an intersectional lens enables us to understand oppression in its interrelated forms and can be utilised to better analyse the anthropocentric human–animal hierarchy and its connection to conceptions of freedom, as it highlights taken-for-granted privilege and makes underlying logics of domination visible. To formulate an interspecies account of freedom, I thus understand intersectionality as both a theory and a tool for advancing theoretical and political inclusivity and for studying processes of domination.

Intersectional approaches are advantageous for critical research due to their interdisciplinary and broad focus on how belonging to multiple social identities impacts social dynamics, political access, and exclusion (Martinez et al. 2014). The concept of intersectionality originated with Black feminist scholars and activists who sought to highlight that the unique experiences of Black women who are marginalised due to both sex and race were overlooked and called for more inclusive modes of analysis (Combahee River Collective 1977; Yuval-Davis 2011). The term was popularised by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who examined the interrelated domains of identity politics and violence against women within the fields of women's studies and critical legal studies (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Early intersectional scholars stressed the importance of intra-group differences, arguing that racialised women experience multiple forms of oppression. Postcolonial feminists later expanded the identity-driven focus of intersectionality to include North–South identity and Eurocentric bias as politically relevant categories of difference and privilege, a move that strongly influenced human rights work and the adoption of intersectional approaches in policymaking (Hancock 2011).

Intersectionality has since become prevalent in various fields of research beyond feminist theory (Davis 2008; Lykke 2011; Yuval-Davis 2006). Examples

include environmental politics (Kaijser and Kronsell 2014), political science (Hancock 2011, 2016; Magnusdottir and Kronsell 2014), psychology (Walsh 2015), sociology (Yeon Choo and Marx Ferree 2010), and critical animal studies (CAS) (e.g., Cudworth 2014; Nocella et al. 2014; Matsuoka and Sorenson 2018). As an analytical tool, intersectionality provides a widely applicable framework for understanding complex social phenomena, making it a useful lens for studying the oppression of other animals. The framework highlights the importance of contextual specificity by showing that each unique social positioning gives rise to distinct experiences of both privilege and oppression, while also revealing how these are sustained by broader, interlocking structures of power.

But how can intersectionality be used to study the oppression of other animals? First, it is crucial to note that referring to "other animals" in the context of the human–animal binary does not denote a singular or monolithic category. The animal world comprises a vast array of species and individual beings. Since the category of "other animals" encompasses such diversity, calls to extend rights or moral consideration must account for wide-ranging interspecies differences (Cudworth 2011, 38), unlike discussions of social inequalities among human groups, where shared capacities and social structures can be more readily compared. Before considering what inclusion might mean in specific social or political contexts, it is crucial to acknowledge the overarching category of animality itself, which has so often been excluded from moral and political consideration. While extending empathetic concern to other animals can be met with indifference or even disgust (Twine 2010), widening the intersectional approach to include nonhuman animal Others strengthens the logic that intersectionality represents (Deckha 2008; Fitzgerald and Pellow 2014; Hovorka 2012).

Lynda Birke contends that other animals matter for our politics, both for their own sake and for how we think about the world, because their oppression is linked to environmental concerns and because their exclusion and subordination are deeply entangled with nature/culture and body/mind dualisms, which have historically provided grounds for excluding women and other marginalised groups (Birke 2007). Including nonhuman oppression on the agenda of justice-oriented research does not detract from human-focused projects but can improve intersectional research by addressing its own logics of exclusion (Fitzgerald and Pellow 2014; Hovorka 2012). If we revisit the origins of intersectionality, which began with a specific focus on Black women as "quintessential intersectional

subjects", we see how their marginality provided theoretical added value by enabling scholars to take the standpoint of the Other and expose the workings of racism and sexism (Nash 2008, 89). Similarly, centring the standpoint of other animals can aid in challenging other animals' lack of freedom and in understanding how various forms of oppression interrelate across species boundaries. Although the usefulness of this theoretical perspective-taking should not be underestimated, there are also possible shortcomings that warrant attention, as they themselves reveal underlying power dynamics.

The first problem is that centralised positioning risks treating Black women, for instance, as a unitary and monolithic entity (Nash 2008). It is therefore crucial to be cognisant of and acknowledge the various layers of identity that one might group into the category of "Black" (Martínez 1993). Categorising entire groups in such a way also risks pitting groups against each other in a dichotomous fashion, as though the category of "Black women" were opposed to the groups of "whites" and "Black men," for instance (Martínez 1993). Hence, what Nash and others identify in this regard is that defining intersectionality as an analytical tool may risk simplifying the complex and situated experiences, stories, and narratives with which Black feminists have long sought to make the shortcomings of binary categorisation and classification visible (Crenshaw 1991; Nash 2008).

One of the weaknesses of intersectional analysis is thus that it rests on dichotomous sense-making when abstracting levels of privilege and oppression through categories like "Black" and "white" or "lesbian" and "straight." Being aware of this potential pitfall makes it even more relevant to underline the need to recognise diversity (Bottici 2022). Besides the issue of possibly unifying entire groups as suggested by Nash, glossing over differences can be problematic, as it may rely on the production of an Other (Puar 2012, 52). However, it is important to keep in mind that part of the intellectual project of intersectionality is the demand for a re-articulation of the relationships between analytical categories of difference traditionally conceived as conceptually distinctive (Hancock 2016, 122). So even though binary categories are still used, one needs to be mindful that the intention is to make interconnections visible and highlight the complexities and grey areas of social identity. As the term intersectionality became popularised during the 1990s and beyond, the specific position of Black women that had originally been highlighted became increasingly obscured. The concept then became more generalised to include additional categories of difference and to

serve as a widely applicable tool for analysing all forms of oppression. Following this development, it is still important to underline the origins of this theoretical approach to highlight the specificity of Black women's struggle and to avoid appropriating a term that appears inclusive (Bottici 2022).

Intersectionality can thus be used to analyse overlapping types and logics of oppression that affect the lives of both humans and other animals. Being central to the aim of this study, intersectionality reveals how systems of domination, such as sexism, Eurocentrism, speciesism, and carnism, are interconnected, enabling a critical challenge to the anthropocentric structures that uphold animal oppression. Intersectionality thus helps to expose how conceptions of freedom grounded in human exceptionalism depend on broader logics of exclusion and hierarchy. At the same time, it provides a methodological and ethical framework for developing a counter-perspective on interspecies freedom, as it is applied here, with the goal of making power structures visible and questioning the underlying logics of domination. The critical potential of the concept of intersectionality thus lies in making visible how social differences are valued differently in arbitrary social hierarchies. Simultaneously, it needs to be clear that even though a literal understanding of intersectionality suggests that human identity is multi-layered, it does not follow that everyone is in equal need of recognition, since social hierarchies affect certain individuals and groups very differently and grant privilege to some while excluding and marginalising Others (Bottici 2022). Relatedly, the emphasis on intersectionality in human identity is a problem that may be exclusive as well. Making visible the different categories and layers of social difference and privilege aims to deconstruct the hierarchical logic of binary oppositions that tend to skew in favour of those in more powerful and privileged positions.

What this chapter has hitherto shown is that all forms of oppression share a "politics of domination," exhibiting a belief in hierarchy and in the superiority of some over Others, which legitimises the subordination and exploitation of those deemed inferior (hooks 2015; Bottici 2022). Recognising the category of species as social difference highlights the privilege automatically granted to us through human association and identification, a privilege nurtured and reinforced by the abstraction of humanness as the opposite of animality. A related field that anticipated many of these insights and similarly explores the interconnections among the subordination of women, other animals, and nature is ecofeminism, to which we now turn.

Ecofeminist analyses of oppression

Roots for species-inclusive intersectional research perspectives were laid by ecofeminism, a philosophical orientation, political theory, and movement that links feminism with ecology and problematises the interconnections of women's oppression and the exploitation of the environment. This section builds on the critique of anthropocentric freedom developed in chapter four by applying an intersectional analysis informed by ecofeminist perspectives.

The term *ecofeminism* was first coined by François d'Eaubonne, who argued that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are fundamentally linked through patriarchal, capitalist, and industrialised structures (d'Eaubonne 1974). Within ecofeminist debates, the interconnections between women, other human Others, and nature have been explored in their historical, conceptual, empirical, socioeconomic, linguistic, symbolic, spiritual, epistemological, political, and ethical dimensions (Warren 2000, 21). The most important contribution of ecofeminism lies in its intersectional understanding of multiple types of oppression and processes of social exclusion and inclusion based on various hierarchies of social difference (Cudworth 2005).

Ecofeminism and intersectionality both focus on making connections to study and critique systems of oppression, and both start from standpoint perspectives that aim to bring marginalised voices to the fore and promote normative research that advocates for social change. This leads us to epistemological dimensions of interrelated oppression. Notable here is Donna Haraway's article on "situated knowledges," in which she criticised the "god trick," which is the idea of knowledge as created "from above" and the belief that scientific knowledge is fully objective and somehow detached from, and independent of, the observer (Haraway 1988). She instead claims that knowledge is always situated, since all meaning is contingent on the knower's social, cultural, and historical positioning (Haraway 1988).

To make the connections between gendered oppression and environmental degradation visible, early ecofeminists critically examined the association between women and nature, not only as serving to oppress women but also as denying the simple fact that human existence is inseparable from, dependent on, and immersed in nature (Griffin 1978). In her book *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, Susan Griffin provocatively writes about the underlying logics of

patriarchal oppression, which depict women and nature as lesser categories that justify their subordination:

> They said that in order to discover truth, they must find ways to separate feeling from thought *Because we were less* That measurements and criteria must be established free from emotional bias *Because they said our brains were smaller* That these measurements can be computed *Because we were built closer to the ground according to universal* laws Because according to their tests we think more slowly, *because according to their criteria our bodies are more like the bodies of animals, because according to their calculations we can lift less weight, work longer hours, suffer more pain, because they have measured these differences* and thus these calculations, they said, constitute objectivity *because we are more emotional than they are* and based they said only on what *because our behavior is observed to be like the behavior of children* is observably true *because we lack the capacity to be reasonable*. (Griffin 1978, 86)

Through her unconventional style of switching between prose and poetry, Griffin accounts for how rationality was constructed to convey that women are "less-than," closer to nature, and like other animals or children. Her writing has been acclaimed as an impactful testimony to the power of language and literature to convey fundamental attitudes toward women and nature (Warren 2000, 29). Griffin's intellectual contribution is to challenge binary thinking and map the connections among multiple forms of domination grounded in assumptions of difference (Cudworth 2005, 113).

With her contrast in style, Griffin shows how men used arguments of rationality to judge women's abilities as inferior to the idealised world of rationality and measurability, which allows one to "prove" that the found or constructed differences between men, on the one hand, and women, children, other animals, and nature, on the other, are verifiably true. This alignment of women with nature thus served to manifest beliefs in the divisions that binaries generate and from which a scale of superiority and inferiority could be constructed (Griffin 1978). On this scale, matter and nature are inferior, while spirit and rationality are separate and superior. The (eco)feminist identification of interlocking forms of oppression affecting women, other human Others, and nature illuminates conceptual connections that can already be found in some classical Greek philosophical accounts and in the subsequent Western rationalist tradition.

Separation, fear, and self-enclosure

A further key contribution from ecofeminists is to point out the cultural and scientific changes that produced mindsets and relations of power underlying and supporting oppression. In her book *The Death of Nature*, for instance, Carolyn Merchant unfolds how older organic worldviews of a nurturing Mother Earth were replaced by the mechanistic worldview of the Scientific Revolution, which established a view of nature in purely physical and deterministic terms and allowed it to be constructed as a resource to be controlled and exploited for human purposes (Merchant 1980). Merchant, and later Mies and Shiva, criticised Francis Bacon, commonly described as the father of natural science, for interlinking natural discovery and knowledge production with power, and argued that his philosophy "called for the subordination, suppression, and even torture of nature, to wrest her secrets from her, analogous to the witch-hunts which also took place in the sixteenth and seventeenth century" (Mies and Shiva 1993, 43).

The underlying mindset of separation came with justifications of violence and power understood as power-over, when nature came to be viewed as an extractable resource, similarly to how European quests for freedom involved the "discovery" and colonisation of Indigenous peoples and lands of the Americas and the Caribbean (Mies and Shiva 1993). Nature and natural phenomena, as well as other human cultures, could thus not be understood while leaving them intact within their given environment, as modern concepts of science made violence and force intrinsic methodological principles when *homo scientificus* set himself apart from, and above, nature, and all the Others that were seen as subsumed under the natural and emotional category (Mies and Shiva 1993). Through their historical tracing of these causal interconnections of unjustified oppression, ecofeminists have thus come to criticise rationalist, androcentric, anthropocentric, and colonialist ideologies.

As discussed in chapter four, René Descartes' mechanistic philosophy was based on separations such as mind/matter, human/animal, and nature/culture, which justified the abuse of other animals in medical experiments. In a way, it can be argued that binary thought has generally made it easier to support hierarchical beliefs that conflated social differences with rankings of moral worth, thereby favouring ideals of the rational and male subject and the human quest for progress. Such dualistic thinking was heavily criticised by Val Plumwood in her conceptual analyses of interrelated oppressions. Plumwood argues that

dichotomisation plays a major role in legitimising control over women and nature (1993). She is critical of the celebration of rationality as the defining factor for the political subject against which various Others are abstracted, and argues that:

> Rationalist culture has fostered a version of human-self enclosure and human-centredness: to the extent that rationality is taken to be the exclusive, identifying feature of the human, (or as Aristotle tells us in the Nichomachean Ethics 'reason more than anything else is man') and that the rational is identified with what is worthwhile, reason-centredness implies human-centredness and its correlate, human self-enclosure. (Plumwood 2002, 98)

Plumwood then continues to argue that the derived "master perspective" at the top functions through a top-down, hegemonic, and centric structure that justifies oppression by making it appear natural and invisible, so that a false universalism is created in which the dominant centre perspective is rational, and the experiences and perspectives of those seen as subordinate are rendered irrational or less important (Plumwood 2002, 99). This dynamic was already illustrated in chapter four through the example of the Great Chain of Being, which illustrates how the Western narrative of freedom functions as a framework legitimising a hierarchical top-down structure in which the natural logic assumes that lower creatures exist for the benefit of higher ones, and those in superior positions are endowed with greater power, including the authority to manage those beneath them.

Over time, such "truths" come to be taken for granted, as underlying prejudices are cultivated and discrimination becomes normalised, further entrenching the status quo (Nibert 2002, 14). As a result, the category of the nonhuman is the always-already taken-for-granted Other, on whose subordination anthropocentric superiority is based. Anthropocentric beliefs rest on the assumption that humans are fundamentally different from, and therefore somehow more morally valuable than, other animals. The fear of being devalued like other animals confirms that human privilege is based on the subjugation of other animals. A more inclusive and responsible relation with the Other is therefore often hindered by this aspect of fear.

The self–Other binary can be re-examined and renegotiated by critically assessing the constructed boundary that sustains it and the fear embedded in it. Judith Butler relates this dynamic to what she calls "self-enslavement": the clinging to oneself out of absolute fear ("fear of the law," of being objectified, or

of being violated) and the refusal of that fear (Butler 1997, 43). This fear, Butler argues, is thus to be dominated like the Other, and it is directly tied to the desire to survive, or "to be," a desire that is deeply exploitable (Butler 1997, 7). Since the very condition of "being" can be said to be a prerequisite for any form of freedom, the ways in which existence becomes controlled or denied must be central to theorising interspecies freedom. This point will be developed further in chapter eight. For now, emphasis lies on highlighting the paradox that this fear of domination reinforces the same oppressive logic it derives from, because in response to the fear, the subject distinguishes itself from the Other as superior to secure its own existence. For example, when comparisons of suffering rely on "us versus them" boundaries, the fear of being condemned like the Other is present (Birke 2007, 308; Butler 2005, 46). The outrage provoked by comparisons between humans and other animals, and the refusal to identify with them or with dehumanised or otherwise devalued human Others, is thus founded on a fear of becoming subject to the very "inhumane" logic of control that constructs "humanity" as superior (Birke 2007; Spiegel 1997; Twine 2010).

The key point is to confront the underlying fears that surface when established hierarchies between species are challenged. Letting go of beliefs in anthropocentric species hierarchies requires that humans step down from their grandiose self-image and relinquish the sense of entitlement that accompanies claims of human superiority. Abandoning the need to view ourselves as better or more morally valuable than those we perceive as different opens the possibility of more affirmative outlooks on social relations.

Considering why we so persistently uphold structures of oppression and hierarchy, fear can be seen as a plausible underlying factor. When connected to anthropocentric understandings of freedom, the fear of being "less than" may foster a view of freedom as a zero-sum resource or privilege to be defended and secured. Including "obvious Others" in our analyses challenges the habitual devaluation of animal Others and invites us to question the automatic subjugation that follows from such views. By letting go of the perceived need to reaffirm hierarchy and control, alternative and more co-constituted ways of relating to Others can emerge. A crucial step in dismantling anthropocentric hierarchy is thus to renounce human entitlement and to recognise those who differ from us as legitimately free and agential beings.

So far, we have seen how intersectionality, as a feminist concept, challenges binary understandings of gender and other social differences to call for more complex understandings of social identity and processes of social inclusion and exclusion, while ecofeminism was shown to interconnect feminism and ecology to challenge the exploitation of women, marginalised human Others, and nature. Moreover, ecofeminists have problematised many of the dichotomous divisions of Western dualism and have interconnected oppressive systems to form critiques of androcentrism, anthropocentrism, sexism, rationalism, colonialism, and capitalism. From that, we can see that "difference is not only human" and that formations of difference are both fluid and relational (Cudworth 2005, 11). Furthermore, understanding and appreciating the complexity of social life means recognising that social formations are based in multi-species diversity, continually produced and reproduced by varied social-natural systems (Cudworth 2011). Analysing the legacy of histories of human exceptionalism shows that what it produced is a social system of power that is based on, and renews itself through, the human domination of other species (Cudworth 2011). One effect of such systematic subordination of nonhuman species is that the oppression of other animals is often not recognised as such.

5.3 Manifestations of animal oppression

Building on the preceding theoretical and ecofeminist discussions, this final part of the chapter turns to concrete mechanisms by which animal oppression is sustained and reproduced. The conceptual foundations of anthropocentric hierarchy, rationality, and binary thinking discussed above materialise in specific logics and practices that legitimise domination and exploitation. By examining underlying logics of domination (Warren 2000), the erasure of animal subjectivity (Adams 1990), and the ideology of eating animals (Joy 2010), this final part of the chapter outlines how animal oppression operates on discursive, ideological, and material levels. To illustrate how these dynamics are enacted in practice, I will conclude with a brief discussion of dairy farming as an example in which these interlocking structures of domination and oppression converge.

Logics of domination

A useful overview of the rationales at play here was put forth by Karen Warren, who defines what she aptly calls "logics of domination" as frameworks that explain, sustain, and legitimise unjustified relations of domination (2000). These frameworks can be identified by their common features: value-hierarchical thinking, oppositional value dualisms, power as "power over," privilege as belonging to "Ups, not Downs," and the perception of these measures of exclusion and domination as "logical" and "normal" (Warren 2000, 46–47). By highlighting the underlying logics of justifications of oppression, Warren elucidates the role of dualisms and criticises how Western thought is structured around hierarchical oppositions such as culture/nature, reason/emotion, or man/woman (Warren 2000). The resulting patterns of reasoning construct differences and assign value in hierarchical ways that justify oppression.

While the conceptual analyses and theorisations of Plumwood and Warren have been enormously influential for the development of ecofeminist philosophies, Marti Kheel warns that the rational connotations of the term "logic" may unintentionally suggest that oppression primarily derives from a conscious ideology that is acted upon (Kheel 2008, 210). With this observation, Kheel seeks to underline that one should also bear unconscious influences in mind that contribute to aggression, abuse, and other types of oppression. As an example, she refers to feminist discussions on the issue of rape, where some argue that men do not only rape women for sexual satisfaction but also for other reasons, such as the act being an end in itself as a demonstration of power and control, or because it can be seen as an act of revenge or punishment against women (Kheel 2008, 210). Rape, being such an extreme example of aggression coded as a hyper-masculine act of dominance, leads Kheel to point out that object relations theorists hold that what lies beneath this hatred are deep feelings of fear and conflicted yearnings for connection (Kheel 2008, 210–11). Kheel is careful to note that her argument on the influence of the unconscious should not in any way deny the agency of rapists, nor should it suggest that men who rape are "out of control" (Kheel 2008, 254). Rather, these reflections on the complexities of male violence aim to show that such acts can be used as a tool for intimidation while there may, at the same time, be larger unconscious factors involved (Kheel 2008, 254).

Kheel's appeal to consider both conscious and unconscious influences that lead to aggression is certainly valid, even though I disagree that the term "logic"

necessarily suggests that acts of oppression derive primarily from conscious ideology. Rather, I perceive "logics of domination" as an explanatory tool for better understanding the structures of ideologies and biases, whether consciously or unconsciously, at play as oppressive social relations unfold.

The erasure of animal subjectivity

What keeps us from seeing the subjectivity of the individual animals behind the final products we buy and consume is explained by ecofeminist scholar Carol J. Adams, who used standpoint theory to study the oppression of other animals. With the concept of the "absent referent," Adams describes how language and cultural practices aid in erasing the individuality of other animals so that their suffering and the cruel treatment inflicted upon them become invisible (Adams 1990). The first way in which other animals become absent referents is in a literal sense: they are absent because they are dead (Adams 1990, 21). Moreover, animals become absent when we change their definitions linguistically, as is the case in the abstracted labelling of animal products as "poultry" or "beef," for instance, which effectively disconnects people from seeing the individual birds and cows that were killed and thus diverts attention away from the ethical implications of commodifying sentient beings.

What I sought to accomplish by showing some documented cases of animal exploitation in chapter three is to disrupt our all-too-common turning away and instead try to turn our focus towards the other animals that are farmed and killed for our consumption. This is done to make the otherwise hidden animal Others visible. Part of making the individuality of oppressed animals visible is also to turn towards, and to problematise, the violence that is used but equally kept out of sight. Naming violence enables the overcoming of invisibility. In the words of activist and public speaker Ed Winters:

> If cruelty is defined as causing unnecessary and intentional physical and mental harm, what we do to animals must constitute acts of cruelty. We cut off their tails, we castrate them, we forcibly impregnate them, we take their babies away from them, we lock them in cages where they can't turn around. We load them into trucks and take them to slaughterhouses where we cut their throats or force them into gas chambers—and these are just the standard, legal practices. But perhaps even more insidious than that, we don't just ignore that these acts cause physical and mental harm, we go so far as to call them humane. (Winters 2022, 14)

Calling animal farming practices "humane" is another example of how violent acts are presented and effectively concealed in euphemistic ways to justify animal oppression. We will return to this topic in chapter six, when discussing animal freedom, as one common framing of other animals' rights to freedom is couched primarily within these frames. For now, the focus lies on elucidating the theoretical and ideological building blocks that allow for these normalisations of using other animals as means to an end.

Adams argues that normalisations of animal oppression reinforce a culture of violence in which cruelty and exploitation are normalised. In this culture of violence, other animals also become absent referents in metaphorical ways when people describe their own experiences of devaluation and victimisation (Adams 1990, 21). Adams explains this by referring to the experiences of rape victims or battered women who claim that they "felt like a piece of meat" (Adams 1990, 21). In such descriptions of how it felt to be faced with male violence, the metaphor of the "piece of meat" refers indirectly to the death experience and subjugation of the animal and focuses specifically on its objectification. The animals have thus become absent referents whose fate is metaphorised as someone else's existence or suffering.

The ideology of eating "meat"

What this shows is that we do a lot of cognitive heavy lifting in order to look the other way and not see the oppression of other animals as such. Social psychologist Melanie Joy explains the psychology of meat eating in her book *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs and Wear Cows* (2010). She coined the earlier-mentioned term carnism to refer to the ideology and psychology of meat eating, which denotes the framing of the eating of certain species of other animals as something that is "normal, natural, and necessary"; both culturally, as a social practice, and as an important part of human identity (Joy 2010). The thought of eating a cat would likely feel wrong to many people and likely provoke disgust or emotional discomfort. This is, as Joy notes, because we are culturally conditioned not to typically see cats or dogs as "food," since we have learned to view them as companions instead (2010). Our perceptions of other species are thus shaped by social constructions, manifested in customs, belief systems, and actions.

Sociologists Mathew Cole and Kate Stewart build on Joy's concept of carnism by extending a sociological framework for explaining childhood socialisation as a foundational stage for internalising carnist beliefs (2014). They enrich Joy's focus on individual psychology by further explaining how carnism is transmitted culturally and structurally in society, examining how carnist beliefs are reproduced during childhood (Cole and Stewart 2014). Whilst carnism may appear invisible to most adults, Cole and Stewart explain that this invisibility is produced early on, when children are taught not to empathise with animals constructed as edible and thus killable (Cole and Stewart 2014). Their analysis thus shows that children are not born speciesist, but that they are conditioned to value some animal species such as cute bunnies, foxes, dogs, and cats, and consume others that are described in sanitised language when being presented as "meat," rather than explaining that a piece of flesh is a part of a dead pig or cow, for instance. Anthropocentrism and speciesism are further taught and reinforced through media representations of other animals and through the educational system, where speciesist ideology is either silenced or presented selectively (Cole and Stewart 2014).

The case of dairy farming

Chapter three has already discussed the romanticisation of dairy farming as cozy and informative, presenting birth in the agricultural farm's birthing centre as a natural event. Another illustrative example can be found in the promotion of cow's milk as a healthy and natural drink for children, as well as in the widespread practice of schools offering free access to cow's milk in school canteens. In Sweden, for instance, where corporate advertising is generally prohibited in schools, an exception is made for dairy companies, which are permitted to display images of cows on green pastures on milk dispensers and to organise social and educational visits for pre-school and school children to dairy farms, where they learn how cows' milk is produced. This exception dates back to Sweden's industrialisation during the 1930s, which went hand in hand with the industrialisation of dairy farming and the establishment of the Milk Propaganda Association (MPA) which promoted cow's milk as a symbol for racial purity, industrial progress, and health to strengthen notions of white supremacy (Jönsson 2005, 37-41) and which first implemented and financed school milk programs to

propagate health benefits for human children by organising lectures, film screenings, and competitions (Jönsson 2005, 33).

This example shows how the oppression of other animals is embedded in political trajectories and ideas about social progress, as the use of cows' milk as a nutritious foodstuff is seen as a valuable, natural, and useful resource to nourish a growing population and contribute to economic growth and development. As we can see, dominant beliefs about other animals as existing for human purposes are an intricate part of wider processes of socialisation and are embedded in the political. By constructing certain other animals as edible, for instance, their human-defined "purpose" becomes what defines them, hindering efforts to view and treat other animals as agentive beings with an interest in being free and living their lives.

Any extension of our moral concern to include other animals, therefore, needs to recognise the diversity of social differences and their specificity, while not abusing these differences as grounds for their exploitation. Other animals might not be able to theorise or speak like humans, but this difference is of no real importance when considering their moral worth. To empathise with another being, it is not necessary to fully "understand" the Other's way of experiencing the world. What is important is that we can see and acknowledge another's subjectivity and recognise their suffering without devaluing or discrediting it.

Moreover, it is crucial to note that attempts to define and label processes of social exclusion in terms of identity and social difference are always already limited, insofar as they require positioning oneself outside the situation being analysed. This is an impossible task as we can never fully escape our own positionality and individual biases. Trying to view social relations from a distance to valorise the level of exclusion, or to determine whether a certain type of exclusion counts, puts us in a position that runs counter to the inclusionary ethos of intersectionality. It is thus crucial that we understand the workings of power and the related modes of social inclusion and exclusion that accompany it. This is what intersectionality allows us to do.

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Animal oppression is not a series of isolated acts, but a systemic phenomenon rooted in cultural, political, and economic structures. Attempts to exclude species as a meaningful category of difference fail to acknowledge that hierarchies of

suffering cannot be sustained, since all forms of oppression and the suffering they produce are destructive (Nash 2008; Hancock 2011). Forms of oppression are interlinked through shared origins in economic power and relations of control (Nibert 2002, 6–7; Pharr 1997, 53). Excluding species as a category of difference thus reflects an entrenched anthropocentric bias, one that is often reproduced within intersectionality when critiques of domination remain confined to the human.

The implication of this analysis for interspecies freedom is that it requires conditions of non-domination and a reconfiguration of human–animal relations that supports mutual flourishing. The following chapter develops this argument by situating the discussion within broader debates on animal advocacy and by mapping existing scholarship on animal freedom.

6 Animal freedom

Freedom is primarily considered a human concept, bound up with ideas about the human political subject as capable of reason, rational thought, language, and other capacities deemed necessary for political participation. Chapter four unpacked some of the ties between the concept of freedom and anthropocentrism by reflecting on the establishment of the free human political subject and its relation to social hierarchies, while chapter five explicated the intersectional and ecofeminist lens applied in this study to analyse oppression. Thus far, I have argued that anthropocentric conceptions of freedom rest on the exclusion of other animals, both from the purview of freedom and from being considered as inherently morally valuable beings. This exclusion demarcated the human subject from the animal world and was further extended to exclude certain human groups by devaluing the idealised image of the rational agent. The last two chapters operated at a broader level of abstraction, and the discussion now begins to narrow, turning more directly to the question of animal freedom.

This chapter continues to challenge the assumption that freedom is an exclusively human concept and argues that freedom carries meaning beyond the human political sphere. Moreover, I suggest that understanding freedom as a relational concept can help dismantle oppressive structures and practices by inviting an ethos of interconnection and mutuality. Widening the purview of freedom to include other animals requires transcending the traditionally human-centred view of liberty and recognising and respecting their well-being and interests.

To develop this discussion, the first part of the chapter traces the trajectory of the animal rights discourse, drawing on political philosophy, animal ethics, CAS, and other interdisciplinary perspectives on multispecies justice. The second part turns to direct discussions of freedom for other animals and how this is conceptualised in the literature. Drawing on existing scholarship, this chapter makes the case for an expanded understanding of freedom as an interspecies concept that goes beyond discussions of negative rights or capacities for considering animal freedom and, by extension, freedom in human-animal relations. The following discussion unfolds in two main parts: first, by tracing the

animal rights discourse and its implications for freedom, and second, by examining conceptual approaches to animal freedom and their relevance for conceptualising interspecies freedom.

6.1 The animal rights trajectory

To discuss the concept of freedom for other animals, this chapter first explores the overall trajectory of the animal rights and liberation discourse and maps some of its core arguments. By tracing this development, I aim to provide background and context to show how earlier perspectives have influenced conceptual shifts in ethical thinking about other animals. Over time, debates have evolved from being concerned with indirect duties (Kant [1785] 1996), to utilitarian perspectives on suffering (Singer [1975] 2002), to inherent rights (Regan [1983] 2004) and abolitionism (e.g., Francione 2020), and further into frameworks of political inclusion (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011) and co-constitutive multispecies relations (e.g., Corman 2017; Meijer 2019).

These discussions reveal several tensions within the field, including those between welfare and abolition, the emphasis on suffering versus rights claims, the status of other animals as property, and debates over legal reform versus political inclusion. Highlighting these shifts and tracing the main developments in contemporary animal rights debates shows how our common conceptions of, and relations to, other animals are ever-changing. Understanding these changing conceptions of considering other animals is essential for rethinking freedom in interspecies terms.

Modern animal rights discourse: suffering versus rights

Chapter five began by discussing dissenting voices that reflected on the moral treatment of other animals and thematised animal suffering. Among these early conceptualisations, Jeremy Bentham's argument that the capacity for suffering should be the criterion for moral consideration proved particularly influential for later developments. A decisive turning point in the discourse on animal rights and the moral worth of other animals came with the publication of *Animal Liberation* by moral philosopher Peter Singer. Drawing on Bentham's utilitarian argument,

Singer contends that the ability to suffer, rather than rationality or language, should serve as the basis for moral consideration (Singer [1975] 2002).

Singer popularised the term "speciesism" to describe the human bias that privileges the moral standing and interests of the human species over those of all others (Singer [1975] 2002). Condemning the treatment of other animals in the food industry and scientific experimentation, he questions the real necessity of such practices and advocates for ethical vegetarianism. His utilitarian framework promotes moral consideration of other animals based on their interest in not suffering and argues that recognising other animals as morally considerable beings would strengthen our broader understanding of justice and equality. Singer's work was highly influential in both the animal rights movement and animal ethics scholarship. It laid much of the groundwork for contemporary debates and convinced many individuals to reconsider their relationships with other animals, often leading to the adoption of vegan lifestyles.

Although Singer's applied utilitarianism has been important in drawing attention to the suffering of other animals in farming and experimentation, the framework is not without shortcomings. Preference utilitarianism risks weakening the protection of individual rights by justifying their violation in the name of reducing overall suffering (Regan [1983] 2004; Cochrane 2012). This can be problematic in the context of human–animal relations, as the underlying hierarchy is not necessarily challenged and other animals are still viewed as having comparatively less or no moral value (Plumwood 1993, 2002; Nibert 2013). As a result, harmful forms of animal use can be justified, since other animals are not necessarily considered as valuable in and of themselves but are instead treated as resources whose interests may be overridden through outcome-oriented moral reasoning (Francione 2020). Such an approach might thus fail to account for the moral wrong of farming and killing someone and thereby infringing on their freedom, even if doing so would be perceived as justified as humane or for a greater good.

The problem with utilitarian perspectives more broadly is that they may, even if unintentionally, reflect anthropocentric bias by focusing on outcomes within a top-down relation rather than interrogating the social categories, norms, and structures that allow us to view and treat other animals as means to human ends (Adams 1990; Plumwood 2002; Meijer 2019). I find this problematic because it fails to recognise other animals as inherently morally valuable individuals (Regan [1983]

2004; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). It could even be argued that reasoning along these lines further strengthens anthropocentric privilege, as the decision-making process of determining whether a situation is justified is always filtered through a human lens and interpretation.

Since utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory, the effects of an action must be better than the available alternatives. One should therefore question whether refraining from consuming industrially manufactured animal products is better than continuing the practice, given that the animal-industrial complex is a massively successful and profitable business (Allegri 2019; Noske 1997). The fact that farmed animals outnumber human beings by far is easily forgotten, which strengthens the critique that this line of reasoning is anthropocentric, as human interests are prioritised over those of other animals. One, if not the most fundamental, interest every being has is to live. However, in the context of animal farming, the beginning and end of animal life are entirely controlled by human rulers. I would posit that the real cost of continuing to farm and eat other animals is far greater than the perceived benefit. To realise this, one must consider the issue from the perspective of the farmed animals. This does not only apply to farmed animals, which is the most obviously wrong case, but equally to any situation in which other animals are used and killed for human ends.

Above all, I find that the emphasis on animal suffering fails to adequately address the power imbalance between humans and other animals. The outcome of animal suffering is horrendous and morally wrong, but the first step to ending that suffering is to rethink human supremacy, the privileges it brings, and the inherent devaluation and subordination of other animals. Overall, utilitarian approaches are lacking insofar as they may permit harming or even killing individuals in pursuit of a construction of the greater good.

Tom Regan challenged Singer's utilitarian approach and argued instead that animals have inherent value, proposing a rights-based framework (Regan [1983] 2004). His argument is that those animals who have desires, beliefs, perceptions, and memories, as well as a sense of the future, are "subjects-of-a-life" who care about their own welfare and are therefore entitled to rights so as not to be exploited or harmed (Regan [1983] 2004). He discusses the harm principle to emphasise that it is wrong to harm or kill other inherently valuable beings because it deprives them of their future and their life, which they value (Regan [1983] 2004). Since other animals should be viewed as inherently valuable, Regan argues, it

cannot be permissible to treat them as means to human ends, as they have the right to be respected and not harmed. Regan, therefore, strongly opposes practices such as factory farming, hunting, and animal experimentation, and holds that it would only be legitimate to harm or kill another animal for matters of self-defence or extreme necessity (Regan [1983] 2004).

I agree with Regan on this point, but I suggest placing less emphasis on specific capacities to define who qualifies as a morally valuable subject-of-a-life, and instead focusing more on the qualities of relations. A common critique of Regan's conceptualisation is that the focus on capacities such as desires, memory, and a sense of the future still excludes many animal species, as these requirements—viewed from our limited human standpoint—are often applied mainly to other mammals (Regan [1983] 2004). In this regard, I perceive it as more beneficial to extend regard for other animals not on the basis of specific capacities, but rather on their being living beings. This would align with a life-affirmative ethic of relating to others in a caring manner, consistent with much of the ecofeminist thought discussed in chapter four.

The rights-based framework can thus be said to be too rigid when trade-offs are prevented, and it may reinforce anthropocentric bias when capacities for moral consideration are formulated through a human lens. For example, according to Regan, it would be impermissible to sacrifice one being in a medical experiment to save millions of lives (Frey 1983). When comparing these two accounts of animal rights theory, we can see that Singer focuses on reducing suffering, whilst Regan argues for other animals' inherent rights. It can thus be argued that Singer problematises the outcome of human oppression of other animals, whilst Regan concentrates on engaging the frameworks of rights to change our view and treatment of other animals. What both perspectives could benefit from is a greater de-centring of the human subject, advocating for a more humble and situated interspecies context of relating. While Singer leaves room for the use of animals under humane conditions, Regan rejects all such use. In both cases, it is still the human agent who is predominantly in charge and responsible for finding solutions.

As the discussion unfolds, I will reflect on ways to foster more co-constitutive human–animal relations centred on increasing freedom from oppression. For now, we can appreciate the contributions of Singer and Regan as highly influential for the foundations of animal rights theory, from which a myriad of useful perspectives followed. Both offer critical contributions to reconsidering our view and treatment

of other animals. What I take from their contributions for the purpose of this study is that anthropocentric accounts of freedom must be questioned at their core, both in terms of how we humans define our own subjective status in relation to others, and how ethical decision-making, the formulation of rights, and wider processes of social relations need to be grounded in an appreciation for life, connection, and kinship. This allows us to perceive others as inherently valuable and agential beings. The following section will continue this discussion by providing an overview of the manifold animal rights positions by locating them on a spectrum.

Spectrum of views on animal rights approaches

The problem of animal oppression has long been addressed by animal advocates and scholars as an ethical issue, with a primary focus on our treatment of other animals. The focal point has increasingly shifted toward employing a more structural analysis that treats animal oppression as a political and social problem, reflecting on the use, exploitation, commodification, and systemic killing of other animals (Wyckoff 2016). A structural understanding of oppression is useful for thinking about freedom as the absence of oppression and as relationally constituted. I will discuss this in further depth in chapter eight, but an intersectional understanding of freedom as non-domination (Halldenius 2001) is based on the insight that oppression is systemic and mutually reinforcing, and that the structural denial of moral agency directly influences someone's ability to direct their life. Recognition is thus a central condition for being free. How, whether, and to what extent other animals should be recognised, protected, respected, liberated, and included is up for debate.

Wyckoff describes the competing positions on animal rights and animal welfare as lying on a spectrum, ranging from "radical exceptionalism" at one end to "abolitionism" at the other (Wyckoff 2016). Radical exceptionalism refers to those views that hold that other animals have no moral status whatsoever and that it is viable to categorise and treat other animals as property (Wyckoff 2016). On the other end of the spectrum are abolitionist views, which argue that other animals have moral status and that all use of them should be opposed and ultimately ended. The field of CAS, for instance, can be identified as abolitionist in the sense that it calls for the liberation of all animals, humans included, and seeks to dismantle all systems of oppression to approach the goal of "freedom for all,"

which will be discussed in further depth in chapters seven and eight (e.g., Nocella et al. 2014). Whilst views within CAS are certainly diverse, the field is clear in its call for animal liberation to end the systematic oppression of other animals in institutions of violence, including factory farms, animal laboratories, and zoos.

Jason Wyckoff splits abolitionist positions into two camps: "radical abolitionism," describing those who are against all reforms that fail to challenge the animals-as-resource paradigm, and "pragmatic abolitionism," housing those views that see abolition as a long-term goal but are open to short-term reforms that leave the basic structure of the resource paradigm intact (Wyckoff 2016). Between these countervailing perspectives of viewing animals as property and as morally valuable beings lies the position of "welfarism," which holds that other animals have no direct moral status and does not reject their classification and treatment as resources (Wyckoff 2016). Such welfarist positions are often aligned with utilitarian frameworks and hold that while other animals matter morally and their suffering should be taken into account, killing them might be permissible if it maximises overall happiness (Tännsjö 2015). The main focal point of such welfarist positions is that unnecessary suffering should be avoided, and that animal exploitation in itself is not necessarily problematic as long as it is done "humanely." Debates within such a spectrum or scope of differing positions address questions and disagreements about animal ethics, politics, and activism.

Regan, for instance, would fall on the abolitionist side, as he opposes the use of other animals and advocates equal moral rights for all beings with inherent value. Singer, on the other hand, would be closer to the welfarist tradition, even though he opposes the animal industry and advocates for vegetarianism to promote a morality of human–animal relations that would greatly improve the treatment of other animals. Wyckoff's description of a spectrum of approaches is useful for forming a mental image of the fluctuation in where and how different issues concerning human treatment and views of other animals could be placed. Given the complexity of the multispecies world, I would be reluctant to place my own views at either end of the spectrum when it comes to animal rights in general. While I am strongly opposed to radical exceptionalism, which leads to oppressive mindsets and ways of relating to others, I am also hesitant about radical abolitionist views if the strong opposition to animal use entails that humans should stop relating to other animals altogether.

Gary Francione, on the other hand, argues that we have no moral justification for using other animals at all and proposes ending all our relations with them to spare them from human domination (Francione 2020; Francione and Garner 2010). This position would entail the eventual extinction of animals that have become dependent on humans, such as farmed animals. Francione maintains that humans should care for those animals who currently exist while ceasing to breed them for any purposes. However, this approach remains human-centric insofar as it is humans who decide which relations ought to end, which other animals may continue to exist, and which forms of life are permitted to disappear (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Cochrane 2012). Moreover, by framing separation as the primary route to ending oppression, this view risks overlooking the co-dependencies and co-constituted forms of life that have emerged through long histories of interspecies relations (Haraway 2008). Even if motivated by a concern to end domination, a model that seeks to eliminate human-animal relations altogether may therefore reproduce human supremacy by retaining unilateral human control over the conditions of other animals' lives and deaths. In addition, such an approach forecloses the possibility of transforming existing relations into non-dominating ones and neglects the productive, mutual, and joyful ways in which interspecies relations can contribute to shared flourishing (Meijer 2019, 116).

Francione's abolitionism, therefore, underestimates the relevance of human–animal relations for both humans and other animals and moreover fails to acknowledge animal agency (Meijer 2019, 116). While the strong opposition to animal use inherent in the abolitionist position is understandable given the realities and extent of other animals' oppression, Meijer argues that the complexities of human–animal relations introduce important nuances. For instance, abolitionists' calls to stop using other animals could imply that they should cease to exist altogether, which would entail not only ending breeding but also controlling procreation (Meijer 2019, 116). I agree with Meijer that these issues are not as black-and-white as the abolitionist solution of ceasing to produce domesticated animals suggests. Certain aspects of our treatment and use of domesticated animals are ethically indefensible and warrant abolition, such as intensive animal agriculture. While the morality of forced breeding should indeed be questioned, the abolitionist strategy of "phasing out" these animals to end oppression underestimates the moral and relational significance of interspecies relations for all involved (Meijer 2019, 116–117).

This example illustrates that it is crucial to identify oppression where it occurs, while also recognising that being oppressed does not define the entirety of a being's existence, nor should liberation be equated with disappearance. In the context of human–animal relations, ending oppression should not require the extinction of those formerly oppressed, because many domesticated animals exist only through human management, a concern that does not typically arise in discussions of human liberation. We must therefore distinguish between practices of domination that sustain oppression and relations of coexistence that could be reimagined to support mutual flourishing. As Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka point out,

> for domesticated animals to be 'phased out of existence' would not just require a cessation of human creation of animals, but a massively increased (and probably impossible) human effort to forcibly sterilize and/or confine all domesticated animals. It would mean not just limiting the procreation of domesticated animals, but preventing it entirely—denying them the opportunity ever to mate and raise a family. It would, in short, involve precisely the sort of coercion and confinement that AR (animal rights) theorists say makes domestication unjust, and in that sense compounds rather than remedies the original injustice. (2011, 80-81)

From the perspective of interspecies freedom, liberation cannot mean separation but rather the reconfiguration of our shared relations. Freedom here is not an individual escape from entanglement but the transformation of those entanglements toward reciprocity, autonomy, and care. Recognising domesticated animals as beings with their own claims to bodily integrity, access to space, and possibilities for self-determined lives opens up an understanding of freedom as relational and co-constituted. Considering what it means to live freely together across species in such a way will be taken up further in chapter eight, where I develop the notion of interspecies freedom as liberation from oppression and as something reached through and within relations, rather than by ending relations.

What I wish to highlight for now is that while the term "use" depoliticises animal abuse that should be abolished, there is still room for interspecies engagement that involves relying on one another for support, cooperation, or mutual benefit. Social relations, regardless of the species of those involved, sometimes entail taking hold of another to accomplish something (Wayne 2013). There is, however, a crucial distinction between interspecies engagement

understood as relying on someone to give or receive help, enjoy mutual benefit, or cooperate on a task, and situations that cross the line into (ab)use, where one's boundaries are crossed or violated. Incarcerating a bear in a tiny cage to extract bear bile for medicinal purposes is a straightforward example of one-sided, cruel animal abuse.

Whilst remaining mindful of the structural hierarchies embedded in our relations with many domesticated animals, these relations offer the potential for interspecies engagement that is more balanced, allowing for mutual benefits, shared bonds, care, and protection. Abolitionist approaches, therefore, differ in their views on whether human–animal relations should be transformed or ended altogether.

To imagine interspecies relations that move toward more just and functional ways of living together, I agree with the strong opposition to using other animals as material resources. However, I do not consider it either necessary or feasible to end all relations with domesticated animals or with other animals more broadly. Francione's stronger abolitionist position rests on the claim that humans cannot be trusted to transform their relations with other animals; in contrast, I take a more optimistic view. I argue that we can treat other animals as morally significant subjects and recognise their basic interests even while acknowledging the burdens of domestication. Doing so requires rethinking how human–animal relations are organised, and, as I will later suggest in chapter eight, one path forward is to conceptualise social relations through freedom, understood as an interspecies concept.

While abolitionist and rights-based approaches challenge the legitimacy of animal use, they often leave intact the broader structural logics that commodify other animals. To see this more clearly, the next section turns to animal welfare frameworks, which are ostensibly designed to protect animals, and examines how they paradoxically sustain systems of domination and deny meaningful freedom.

6.2 Animal welfare: a system of managed unfreedom

Animal welfare is frequently portrayed as a moral advance, promising to safeguard other animals from unnecessary suffering. Yet when examined through the lens of freedom, welfare reforms reveal deep contradictions because they regulate the

conditions of exploitation rather than dismantle its foundations. This section interrogates these contradictions to show why welfare cannot deliver meaningful freedom for other animals.

Welfare reforms exist for companion animals, free-roaming wildlife, and farmed animals in many jurisdictions. Some countries and regions are introducing or considering bans on devices that can harm companion animals, such as electric shock collars for dogs, and generally promoting responsible care and exercise requirements to reduce suffering and improve well-being for pets (European Commission 2025; Andersen et al. 2021). Regulations on companion animals also increasingly emphasise traceability and minimum standards for breeding, handling, and housing, as seen in proposals for the first EU wide legal framework on the welfare and traceability of cats and dogs (Consilium 2024). Welfare reforms for free-roaming animals take the form of conservation programmes and legal protections, including bans on practices that cause undue harm during sensitive periods (Defra 2025). In the context of farmed animals, the European Union has long-standing legislation requiring minimum standards for protection, transport conditions, and humane slaughter practices, and many member states are now moving toward stricter controls on confinement systems such as laying-hen cages and pig farrowing crates (European Commission 2025a). Together, these reforms illustrate the broad existence of welfare-oriented regulation across different categories of animals and uses, aimed at limiting suffering and improving living conditions under current legal systems.

With the aim of caring for farmed animals while simultaneously infringing on their bodily autonomy and ultimately ending their lives prematurely for use as various products, this conflict of interest generates multiple tensions and challenges. Nevertheless, production goals consistently take priority. The question of animal welfare regulations for farmed animals is therefore not whether they should be farmed and used as resources, but how best to farm them. This distinction highlights that the core interest of animal industries and legislative bodies is to maintain the broader assumption that certain animal species "exist for" the production of animal products. Because such speciesist and carnist ideas are deeply embedded in societal norms, the underlying ideologies and hierarchies supporting them remain largely unquestioned.

Animal welfarism is often presented as aiming to provide other animals with rights, but it is important to distinguish between the two approaches. The core

rationale of animal welfarism is to protect other animals from "unnecessary" suffering. In a carnist world where killing animals for food is considered "normal, natural, and necessary" (Joy 2010), any rights afforded to farmed animals are framed within the ongoing view of them as resources. As discussed above, carnism is inherently a violent system. Attempting to consider an animal's welfare while simultaneously violating and exploiting them does not change the fact that they are used and killed and are thus treated as material resources. This approach, therefore, inherently negates any meaningful claim to freedom, and intensive animal agriculture is thus the precise opposite of animal freedom.

Historical episodes of reform illustrate this paradox vividly. Public concern often prompts regulatory changes, yet these reforms rarely challenge the underlying assumption that animals exist for human use. To understand why welfare reforms fail to secure freedom, it is useful to trace their historical emergence and the social forces that shaped them.

Historical catalysts for welfare reforms

Public outcry over the violent production methods of the animal industry resurfaces regularly, and animal welfare regulations are often presented as a remedy. Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* is an early example of such a development [1906] 2002). In the novel, Sinclair illustrates the harsh working conditions and everyday struggles of immigrants in industrialised US cities. By exposing unsanitary practices and inadequate work standards in slaughterhouses and the meat-packing industry, Sinclair sought to reveal the exploitative and appalling working conditions there (Burt 2006). Public response to Sinclair's novel, however, was more concerned with food safety issues, given its descriptions of rotten flesh, the use of toxic chemicals, and meat sold for human consumption contaminated with sawdust, rat droppings, and dirt (Sinclair [1906] 2002). Following public pressure, the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA) was enacted in 1906, making the contamination and misbranding of meat products sold for human consumption illegal and ensuring that farmed animals were killed and processed under strictly regulated sanitary conditions (FMIA 1906).

This example illustrates that the exploitation of workers and farmed animals is closely interrelated, but also that initial interest in changing production measures was motivated by end consumers' desire to keep profits rolling, rather than by a

desire to advance conditions for all sides involved. Sinclair's main intention was to highlight the suffering of human workers and to instil solidarity, and his detailed descriptions of the industry make a clear case for how the exploitation of humans and other animals goes hand in hand. Viewing such sites of interrelated exploitation through an intersectional lens allows us to understand the underlying mechanisms of power and structural violence. It is sobering to note that the exploitation of the animals killed and processed there was not considered in a sense relevant to them, and equally, how the exploitation of humans working at these factories was overlooked.

Still today, the problem remains that humans who grow animal feed and who work in factory farms or slaughterhouses often work under unacceptable conditions, and slaughterhouse work especially can cause severe emotional trauma and has been shown to increase PTSD, mental health issues, suicide, and drug and alcohol abuse (Dillard 2008; Hemenway 2018; Victor and Barnard 2016). This shows that underlying logics and practices of domination are harmful not only to the exploited animals but also to humans involved in sustaining the system of exploitation, connecting the issue to wider structural impediments that exacerbate poverty, social segregation, and unsustainable economic and ecological systems. The prioritisation order of product safety, human working conditions, and lastly animal welfare, as in Sinclair's example, is telling. Yet with that in mind, I still wish to highlight the extent of public outcry over how other animals are treated in the food industry and how that can be a catalyst for change.

Ruth Harrison's book *Animal Machine* is another example of a text that had a lasting impact on public opinion and the regulation of animal agriculture. Harrison criticises the suffering of farmed animals as she describes the conditions of factory farming. In her chapter on broiler chickens, for instance, she sheds light on the various negative subjective states the chickens are made to endure during their short lives, from hatching to subsequent sorting (Harrison 1964). She criticises the way chickens are confined in overcrowded barns, with a lack of enrichment and no natural light. Instead, artificial lighting is used to control the birds' feeding and sleeping cycles to maximise unnaturally fast growth, which puts enormous strain on their bodies and leads to heart issues, lameness, and skeletal deformities (Harrison 1964). Unfortunately, not much has changed in common chicken farming methods to date, as discussed with examples from the interview material later.

During the 1960s, Harrison's book led to significant public outcry, so much so that condemnation of such industry methods was so great that the UK government felt obliged to take consumer concern for other animals seriously and published the Brambell Report, which stated that "an animal should at least have sufficient freedom of movement to be able without difficulty, to turn round, groom itself, get up, lie down and stretch its limbs" (Brambell 1965). This description of freedom of movement is still well short of the bare minimum.

Thinking about farming systems such as farrowing crates for sows or battery cages for egg-laying hens shows that there are limitations to the goals of farmed animals' freedom of movement described there. These limitations persisted for decades to come and are still used as normalised practices in many parts of the world. In the UK, sow gestation crates were outlawed in 1999 (RSPCA 2025), and although traditional battery cages were outlawed EU-wide and in the UK in 2012, hens are now kept in "enriched" cages, which give birds about as much space as a standard sheet of paper. Instead of being completely barren, they are close to barren, typically offering only a perch and a small scratching pad. In short, they represent only a bare minimum welfare improvement over traditional battery cages (The Humane League 2023).

These incremental changes show that industries do respond to public critique and political demands for improved animal welfare, but only to the extent necessary to keep farming as many animals as possible. Enriched cages are still cages, and cramming birds into tight spaces negatively affects them and limits their freedom, whether in cages or in so-called free-range stables where space is still highly limited and the environment is controlled to increase production. These reforms culminated in the Five Freedoms model, a framework that invokes the language of liberty while institutionalising confinement.

The illusion of the "Five Freedoms" framework

From the publication of the Brambell Report, the welfare assessment model of "Five Freedoms" was developed by the UK Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) and has since been adopted by many professional groups within the animal industry, as well as a number of organisations working against animal cruelty. The FAWC was renamed the Animal Welfare Committee (AWC) in 2019 and continues to provide advisory services under that name (GOV UK 2025). The AWC still refers

to the 2009 FAWC report, which first outlined the animal welfare model known as "Five Freedoms" (GOV UK 2025).

The "Five Freedoms" framework functions as an assessment tool to analyse animal welfare and to ensure that "all farm animals should have a life worth living, from their point of view, and that an increasing proportion should have a good life" (GOV UK 2025). So defined, the goal of the framework could be understood as seeking to approach a positive account of freedom for other animals. However, a question that comes to mind is how we as humans should adequately determine what a life worth living means from the perspective of a farmed animal. The use of other animals as farmable resources negates any claim to be acknowledged or treated as free beings, yet the industry uses the term' freedom' to describe animal welfare standards.

The above-cited description of the "Five Freedoms" model as existing to ensure that farmed animals should have a life worth living "from their point of view" (GOV UK 2025) is nonsensical in the context of animal farming. Nobody wants to be incarcerated, forcibly removed from their family, or killed. All of these and many other everyday methods of animal farming constitute cases of unfreedom. The more clearly defined Five Freedoms the framework seeks to work towards are:

> Freedom from hunger and thirst, by ready access to water and a diet to maintain health and vigour. Freedom from discomfort, by providing an appropriate environment. Freedom from pain, injury and disease, by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment. Freedom to express normal behaviour, by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and appropriate company of the animal's own kind. Freedom from fear and distress, by ensuring conditions and treatment, which avoid mental suffering. (FAWC 2009, 2)

All these negative states of freedom are certainly important to consider when thinking about animal freedom, but it is notable that the previously positively defined goal of the framework is articulated solely through negative accounts of freedom—all of which are routinely ignored and violated in animal agriculture. The problem is that the FAWC/AWC statement starts from the assumption that other animals exist to be farmed, directing the focus once again to the *how* of farming methods rather than questioning whether farming should occur at all. This framing denies any meaningful case of animal freedom.

To make this point clearer, let us consider a more detailed account of how the "Five Freedoms" model is defined. The most detailed definition of animal welfare featured in a FAWC report is one cited from the World Organisation for Animal Health, which reads:

> An animal is in a good state of welfare if (as indicated by scientific evidence) it is healthy, comfortable, well nourished, safe, able to express innate behaviour, and if it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear and distress. Good animal welfare requires disease prevention and veterinary treatment, appropriate shelter, management, nutrition, humane handling and humane slaughter/killing. Animal welfare refers to the state of the animal; the treatment that an animal receives is covered by other terms such as animal care, animal husbandry and humane treatment. (FAWC 2009, 3)

This statement clearly highlights that killing is part and parcel of the frame in which the "Five Freedoms" are defined. Killing somebody who wants to live is, however, incompatible with freedom. The starting point of constructing certain other animals as farmable resources is not interrogated, leaving an inherently biased assumption unquestioned. The FAWC report then adds that "In our view, welfare principally concerns both physical and mental health, which is largely determined by the skills of the stockman, the system of husbandry and the suitability of the genotype for the environment" (FAWC 2009, 3).

The bottom line is that the decision on an adequate level of animal welfare is based on human-developed scientific standards and farming methods, as well as the individual judgment of the stockman overseeing the animals. The categorisation of other animals as production units thus remains unquestioned because human interest is the overriding factor. Within these carnist and speciesist lines of thought, good physical health and high production levels are often described as acceptable measures to determine whether animals are happy and have a "good life." However, judging an animal's happiness by the quality of their health or the quantity of the "products" they produce oversimplifies the real context of how farmed animals are used in the industry.

Through highly controlled breeding and hormonal treatments, farmed animals are virtually "designed" to produce high quantities of milk or to grow disproportionately large bodies so that they cannot even stand up and walk as they approach "slaughter weight," as is the case with some breeds of broiler

chickens. My point is that if humans were subjected to similar practices, it would be utterly clear that such treatment constitutes oppression. Treating other animals in such ways is only possible because their moral worth is reduced or outright denied, making it impossible to recognise them as legitimately free beings compared to their human counterparts. Beyond these conceptual contradictions, economic imperatives further constrain welfare reforms, prioritising profitability and consumer reassurance over genuine liberation from oppression.

Economic drivers behind welfare standards

All this demonstrates that considering how farmed animals are treated within the framework of animal welfarism becomes problematic when underlying anthropocentric and carnist biases are questioned. Nevertheless, progress in welfare reforms since the Brambell Report has been continually assessed in reports by the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC). After listing major economic developments in livestock farming since 1965, the report states that these achievements should be weighed against current animal welfare standards. It identifies problems such as the limited availability of independent information about the actual welfare of farmed animals, perceived inconsistencies in the enforcement of standards, "a static level of non-compliance with legislation over the past decade," and limitations in controls at European ports (FAWC 2009, i). It further states that there is:

> insufficient progress in the resolution of lingering problems of poor welfare, e.g. lameness in cattle and broiler chickens; continued reliance on (lawful) mutilations and behavioural restrictions in some systems of husbandry; lack of confidence amongst British farmers to invest in their businesses to improve standards of welfare through new technology or husbandry systems due to poor profitability and foreign competition; and failure of market mechanisms that allow the concerned consumer to make an informed choice about the welfare provenance of animal products because of an absence of welfare labelling. (FAWC 2009, i)

All this shows that the economic incentive to farm other animals is a decisive factor in the design of welfare reforms. Even if concern for animal welfare is partially reflected here, it is also made clear that this concern is primarily addressed to reassure the concerned consumer, who needs to feel confident in continuing to consume animal products without questioning their consumption habits per se.

This is clearly expressed when stating that the motive to drive progress in welfare reforms further is "such that British citizens can be assured that each and every farm animal has had a life worth living" (FAWC 2009, ii). What stands in the foreground here is the effort to maintain business as usual and to avoid deeper questioning of the legitimacy of supporting the animal industry. Because the majority of consumers are expected to be interested in purchasing animal products, it follows the logic that as long as animal farming is ethically justifiable and the animals live "a good life," it is the most logical social contract we could make "with" the animals to ensure the best outcome for the majority of those who count morally. This line of reasoning makes sense if the hierarchy of humans as above other animals is accepted and the issue is viewed from an anthropocentric, speciesist, and carnist perspective. But even if adherence to this generally accepted hierarchy continues to produce human supremacy in decision-making and judgment, growing concern for other animals nevertheless requires the industry to confront a number of moral questions that arise when beings increasingly perceived as individuals are bred, farmed, and killed for profit. One such deliberation appears in a report by the Farm Animal Welfare Committee (FAWC), which reflects on the question of how to determine an adequate lifespan for farmed animals:

> There is disagreement as to the moral significance of the quantity – i.e. duration – of life for farm animals. On the one hand it seems to many people to be common sense that healthy animals, experiencing a good quality of life, lose out by having their lives prematurely terminated. On the other hand, farm animals clearly cannot imagine the future to anything like the extent that humans can. In that sense, it is widely held that they lose very little by having their lives prematurely terminated so long, of course, as that is done humanely. (FAWC 2009, 4)

FAWC's claim rests on the assumption that farmed animals lack the capacity to anticipate their future in morally relevant ways. However, this assumption is increasingly contested. Research in animal cognition suggests that many other animals exhibit forms of future-oriented behaviour, planning, and episodic-like memory, even if these capacities differ from those of humans (Healy et al. 2024; Roberts 2002). Moreover, as Balcombe (2010) argues, human confidence in claims about what other animals cannot know or experience is often presumptive rather than evidentially grounded. In light of this epistemic uncertainty, the inference that

other animals suffer little when their lives are prematurely terminated appears normatively fragile. Even where other animals are understood to have an interest in continued life, that interest is discounted on the basis of contested assumptions about their cognitive limitations.

Since other animals are thus depicted as less able to anticipate their future than humans, cutting their lives short is presented as morally justifiable, provided it is done "ethically." Emphasis is placed on ensuring that farmed animals experience good welfare during their lives and that they are killed "humanely." The claim that they would "lose very little" by being killed prematurely reveals how economic profit margins and concerns with maintaining a particular standard of product quality ultimately outweigh the moral significance of an animal's continued existence, determining the point at which an animal's "good life" is deemed less valuable than the product it is intended to become.

What these examples show is that the underlying reasoning reflects human privilege and perceived entitlement or "freedom" to farm and eat other animals as overriding any relevant freedom for the affected animals not to be farmed and killed. Anthropocentric and speciesist bias allows the construction of views about other animals as lesser beings that are comparatively less harmed by being killed because they are depicted as less capable, less complex, and less intelligent, and thus as having simpler lives that are worth less than human life. This reasoning elevates the human desire for animal products above the general desire of other animals to live, because humans are seen as rational and free agents, a sphere from which other animals are excluded.

As we have seen, regulating animal welfare concerns how they should be treated while being farmed, transported, or slaughtered. Even if welfare reforms are based on the recognition that animals can suffer, this does not remove their categorisation and treatment as "food" and therefore fails to recognise animal freedom. The formulation of farmed animals' "Five Freedoms" has little to nothing to do with actual freedom for the animals that are oppressed within the animal industrial complex. If we note the parallel between the term "Five Freedoms," as used in human rights to ensure the freedoms of petition, speech, assembly, religion, and the press, it becomes especially clear how animal freedom is conceived in completely different terms. Human freedom concerns safeguarding the civil liberties of the political subject, whereas welfarist animal "freedoms" are better described as a euphemistic construction that legitimates the total

exploitation of animal bodies. This is because the extent of the "freedoms" provided by welfarist regulations is determined by the boundaries of profitable production and ultimately ends when the animal is killed. In its most basic form, the line of political inclusion and exclusion is drawn in the distinction of other animals as the property of the human political subject.

When animal agriculture is concerned, it is therefore safe to say that farmed animal freedom ends where human consumer freedom and entitlement begin. Welfarist beliefs are thus more about upholding human complacency in accepting and supporting the oppression of other animals for human privilege and profit (Svärd 2015, 8). If we question the anthropocentric bias on which such reasoning is grounded, the welfarist idea of seeking to protect other animals' welfare does not justify the human-imagined arrangement of mutual benefit, where one might like to think that the animals live a good life and die painlessly while humans consume their "products."

This romanticised social contract is not an accurate depiction of the conditions of intensive animal agriculture in the twenty-first century. All in all, these insights show that welfare discourse does not dismantle domination but repackages it in moral terms, leaving animal freedom fundamentally out of reach because it fails to challenge its structural foundations. By framing care within systems that commodify animal bodies, such discourse obscures the deeper question of what it means for other animals to live as free beings.

This analysis underscores a central tension relevant to the study's aim. If we seek to rethink freedom as a relational concept that resists domination and enables flourishing across species, this discussion of animal welfare reveals how anthropocentric norms and economic imperatives shape human–animal relations in ways that deny autonomy and perpetuate hierarchy. These insights reinforce the need to move beyond incremental reforms and toward conceptual frameworks that recognise other animals as subjects with their own interests and capacities for agency.

In sum, the perspectives examined thus far illuminate different dimensions of how other animals are rendered unfree and offer partial resources for reconstructing a more inclusive account of interspecies freedom. Utilitarian approaches highlight suffering and the moral urgency of reducing harm, yet they risk instrumentalising individuals by subordinating their interests to collective welfare. Rights-based theories insist on inherent value and protection but often

reproduce capacity-based gatekeeping that excludes many other animals. These limitations point to the necessity of developing an account of freedom that is not confined to human-centric criteria but is grounded in relationality, recognition, and shared conditions for flourishing. The following section turns to direct considerations of how freedom can be conceptually relevant for other animals and explores approaches in political theory that inform this reimagining.

6.3 Conceptual pathways to interspecies freedom

Asking what freedom looks like for other animals and how conceptions of freedom change when they are conceived as existing within the realm of interspecies social relations aims to more accurately reflect the complexity and diversity of the social. This also reveals one of the greatest challenges when writing and thinking about human–animal relations. It is impossible to know with certainty what an individual animal or a group of animals would require to be free. I therefore avoid making sweeping claims about the perspectives, wishes, perceptions, or needs of entire groups of other animals. Instead, my goal in developing a conceptualisation of freedom as an interspecies concept is to reimagine freedom as a social concept that questions human dominance and explores possible pathways and goals for less violent, less one-sided human–animal relations.

Within the discourse of animal liberation theory and activism, freedom for other animals is primarily invoked in calls for liberation from human control to expose the normalised exploitation and suffering of other animals. Given the urgency of large-scale human domination over other animals, animal liberationists seek to achieve negative forms of freedom for other animals so that they are not exposed to violence, exploitation, and death. This is certainly an important step toward establishing greater freedom for these particular animals. However, to view and treat other animals differently within wider human–animal relations, it is also necessary to consider ways in which they can be perceived and respected as positively free agents in their own right. Increasingly, more focus is placed on understanding animal agency (e.g., Colling 2018; Corman 2017; Hribal 2007; Blattner et al. 2020) and on thinking about possibilities for transforming human–animal relations so that other animals can realise their individual interests and life plans (e.g., Cudworth 2014; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 2012, 2015, 2016;

Nussbaum 2022). These inquiries can be seen as explorations of how other animals can be free in the positive sense so that they can realise their interests and life goals independently of human-identified purposes. In what follows, the question of animal freedom will be discussed in the context of these evolving literatures.

The "political turn" in the literature on animal rights marks a shift in scholarly engagement that focuses on the essentially political nature of human–animal relations (e.g., Cochrane 2012; Hobson 2007; Milligan 2015; Wissenburg 2014). For simplicity, I shall follow a few others in referring to this "political turn," which forms a new research agenda in political theory, as "animal politics" (Ahlhaus and Niesen 2015). Animal politics enquires into the possibilities and consequences that arise for politics and other animals when they are conceptualised as holders of political standing. This makes discussions about animal politics broad in scope and perspective, as they revolve around theorising relevant attributes, rights, and obligations that are affected when considering our relations to other animals in the context of the political. The animal question is relevant for political science and theory, and vice versa. Human–animal interactions are embedded in the political, and including a focus on the position of other animals in politics brings to the surface how processes of inclusion and exclusion are established in relation to social differences that include, and are directed towards, individuals and groups of other species.

While mainstream political science has largely neglected the moral status of other animals (Hamilton 2011), more substantial contributions can be found in political theory (Garner 2002). Notable examples include Nussbaum's capabilities approach, which aims to secure justice for other animals by safeguarding their species-specific capacities for life, health, bodily integrity, play, thought, practical reason, emotion, affiliation, and control over their environment (2022), and Donaldson's and Kymlicka's book *Zoopolis*, which offers a liberal political theory on extending citizenship to other animals (2011). Discussing these two examples in the following sections highlights two accounts that move beyond negative liberty to consider how animal freedom could be embedded in political and justice-oriented paradigms.

Animal politics and citizenship

The book *Zoopolis* marked a shift from species-egalitarian arguments for animal rights to an approach that asks what our political obligations are towards other animals. Rather than focusing on broad arguments for equality among species, which are often analogized to struggles for gender or racial equality, the liberal political theory of animal rights proposed by Donaldson and Kymlicka foregrounds the rights claims of different groups of animals. Drawing an analogy to human political structures, they distinguish three types of political relationships with other animals: citizenship for domesticated animals living in relatively closely integrated relations to humans, denizenship for other animals living alongside humans without being integrated into human political communities, and sovereign status for wild animal populations, which are treated as independent political communities with rights to self-determination (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). *Zoopolis* illustrates how an otherwise human-only concept, in this case citizenship, can be extended to apply to other animals while aiming for more harmonious human–animal relations. Donaldson's and Kymlicka's importation of citizenship theory into animal-inclusive political theory has been criticised as still anthropocentric and as undermining the concept of citizenship (Wissenburg 2014). They responded:

> "Conceptual overstretch is a legitimate worry, but the main problem in the history of Western political theory has been the opposite tendency to arbitrarily constrict concepts of citizenship and sovereignty due to classist, sexist, racist, and ableist assumptions about capacities and interests". (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015, 321)

I argue that the same applies to the concept of freedom, which is closely bound up with anthropocentric notions of the human political subject and ideas of freedom as a zero-sum phenomenon. Reading *Zoopolis*, it becomes clear that their political analysis of animal rights could create space for animal freedom by politically including other animals in the moral, legal, and political community and by holding space for a positive freedom to flourish within supportive political communities (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). Simply leaving other animals alone to grant them negative freedom as non-interference might apply to some relations with sovereign animal communities, but Donaldson and Kymlicka also emphasise that the territories of these animal communities would need to be protected and

discuss how they should not be abandoned entirely, such as when aid could be needed in times of disaster (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011).

Donaldson and Kymlicka therefore argue that freedom necessitates support infrastructures that allow other animals to exercise autonomy and agency, recognising the many relational dependencies that exist in human–animal relations, particularly in the context of domesticated animals. Since the latter should be treated and recognised as co-citizens, they argue, they should enjoy freedom from abuse and exploitation, as well as the freedom to be in relationships, express wants and preferences, and engage in everyday choices and activities meaningful to the individual animals. Liminal animals, on the other hand, should enjoy the freedom to be respected and accommodated as co-inhabitants of human spaces, which involves both recognition and non-assimilation.

As we can see, the citizenship model of Donaldson and Kymlicka seeks to provide political and conceptual space for various groups of other animals by recognising their overall group-based needs and relations with humans, thereby respecting the individual animals within each group. Their understanding of animal freedom does not merely imply protection from unnecessary harm or suffering but explicitly aims to create space for positive freedom to flourish by respecting the animals' way of life and relationships. This is precisely what is needed to transform human–animal relations and allow for greater freedom from oppression. The interspecies politics that would arise from extending citizenship to other animals, as Donaldson and Kymlicka suggest, would inherently challenge the anthropocentric social and political order and promote political structures that advance justice, care, and interspecies freedom.

Justice and capabilities

While Donaldson and Kymlicka offer a political model for interspecies inclusion that grounds animal freedom in supportive and relational structures, Martha Nussbaum approaches similar questions from the perspective of justice. In *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibilities,* Nussbaum argues that all animals, human or nonhuman, are subjects of justice who deserve to flourish (Nussbaum 2022). She writes: "We are all animals, thrown into this world together, striving to get the things we need, and often thwarted in the attempt. We are all Animalia,

and that family likeness is important in making sense of our experience" (Nussbaum 2022, 13).

This statement positions her work in opposition to anthropocentrism and the species-based moral hierarchy it upholds. Although Nussbaum focuses on the concept of justice, her work offers valuable insights for understanding animal freedom in a positive sense. Her framework is useful for thinking about animal freedom because it shifts attention from mere non-interference to enabling conditions that allow animals to live, act, and flourish in accordance with their own ways of life, thus highlighting important factors for conceptualising animal freedom positively. Her capabilities approach, she writes, "does not single out human moral powers as more crucial than other aspects of animal living, and it sees all human powers as parts of the equipment of a mortal and vulnerable animal who deserves a fair shake in life—as do all sentient animals" (Nussbaum 2022, 81). Nussbaum's recognition of sentience and her challenge to strictly anthropocentric hierarchies represent significant advances in the theorisation of justice. These insights also hold important implications for rethinking human–animal relations and for understanding positive freedom.

Nussbaum's list of capabilities includes the ability to enjoy good health, protect one's bodily integrity, have the opportunity to plan a life, engage in social relations, play, and enjoy pleasure, interact with other animal species and nature, and control one's own environment in ways that are important in key respects (Nussbaum 2022, 81). The general outlook of her capabilities approach is promising inasmuch as it seeks to value and recognise the diversity of animal life and to learn about each individual's and species' needs and way of life in order to understand what they value and require to survive and flourish (Nussbaum 2022, 101). These insights provide important pointers for transforming human–animal relations in practice by actively challenging human top-down hierarchy and fostering openness to receiving, understanding, and responding to what other animals communicate, as integral to their needs and way of life. Nussbaum also argues that the pain humans inflict on other animals must be eliminated and that we should map out the goal of what complex interspecies social relations could look like to enhance capabilities that stand for "a real, substantive freedom, or opportunity to choose to act, in a specific area of life deemed valuable" (Nussbaum 2022, 86).

Nussbaum's capabilities approach offers valuable insights into the enabling conditions that support flourishing, yet it remains within a welfare paradigm that legitimises the humane use of animal products. While she argues that both humans and other animals are subjects of justice who deserve to flourish, she later legitimises welfarist claims, stating that she has "no principled objection to the human use of animal products, so long as the animal is able to carry on its characteristic animal life" (Nussbaum 2022, 221). I find this reasoning problematic because it seems to begin with the question of what forms of animal use can be justified, rather than reflecting more deeply on how our relations with domesticated animals could be transformed to avoid reinforcing exploitation and instead enhance interspecies autonomy and flourishing. Starting with considerations of legitimate use risks, leaving commodification and property relations intact and risks reinforcing hierarchical structures rather than dismantling them. This is not to say that mutual benefit is impossible, but approaching the discussion from the incentive to justify utility risks, maintaining the human–animal relation as one driven by access to the Other's "products," thus potentially leaving the categories of subject versus property intact.

This contradiction in Nussbaum's account highlights the broader challenge of transforming fundamentally hierarchical human–animal relations into a co-constituted interspecies social. To approach such social transformation, we must shift from thinking *about* other animals to thinking *with* them (Meijer 2019). This is where interspecies freedom becomes useful when asking how human–animal relations can be approached in ways that maximise liberation from oppression and freedom to flourish.

From negative rights to agency

The discussions on animal rights approaches outlined so far have mostly been advanced by moral and political philosophers, who contemplate animal behaviour and capacities to develop arguments about moral status and rights. This work has undoubtedly improved our understanding of other animals and has drawn more attention to "the animal question" in public and legal debates. However, these debates risk conceiving other animals as moral objects to be studied, leading to an overall focus on negative rights (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). Emphasising negative rights alone risks repeating the anthropocentrism these approaches seek

to challenge and obscures opportunities for building new relations (Meijer 2019). Recognising animal agency can enrich animal advocacy and human–animal relations by emphasising that other animals are not merely recipients of welfare or protection but active beings with legitimate claims to freedom. As Nussbaum observes:

> But although pain is very important, and ending gratuitous pain is an urgent goal, animals are agents, and their lives have other relevant aspects: dignity, social capacity, curiosity, play, planning, and free movement among others. Their flourishing is best conceived in terms of opportunities for choice of activities, not just states of satisfaction. Let us, then, learn from the Utilitarians, but move onward. (Nussbaum 2022, 56)

By conceptualising flourishing as actionable opportunities, animal agency becomes a central category for envisioning interspecies freedom. To think not only about liberation from oppression but also about conditions that promote flourishing, it is crucial to recognise agency.

Agency is commonly defined as "the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power," focusing on the ability to operate in the world, or more instrumentally, as "a person or thing through which power is exerted, or an end is achieved" (Merriam-Webster 2025). In other words, agency is the ability to act intentionally and bring about change, to realise one's goals, needs, and preferences, or to influence the world using one's abilities. While agency depends on certain capacities, it is also socially constituted and recognised, making it inherently relational.

Animal agency has been discussed from different angles in the literature. Some argue that animal communication is a form of political and social agency (Meijer 2019), while others see agency in acts of resistance (Colling 2020; Hribal 2010; Wadiwel 2016) or emphasise subjectivity, emotional expression, and lived experience (Castricano and Corman 2016; Jensen 2018; Midgley 1983; Adams and Gruen 2014; Cudworth 2011).

To illustrate the importance of recognising agency, consider the case of human children. A newborn infant may not be seen as a political agent in the sense of possessing a full range of capacities for participation, yet she is still respected as a morally significant being. Anyone who has cared for an infant knows they are effective at communicating their wants and needs. However, earlier examples from

Mill ([1859] 2002) and Locke ([1690] 2007) reveal how liberal thought constructed childhood as a state of incapacity, excluding children from the domain of liberty and reinforcing a normative hierarchy of rational autonomy. This framing positioned children as beings whose lack of reason justified paternalistic control, shaping assumptions about who counts as a political subject.

Before childhood was recognised during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a distinct phase requiring protection, children were largely seen as small adults and as moral liabilities in need of control (Ariès 1965; Fass 2016). This perception shaped how children were treated across contexts such as culture, class, mortality, social policy, and education. While variations exist across cultures, over time, children came to be viewed more widely as vulnerable beings with emotional needs. Parenting practices gradually shifted from authoritarian rigidity and physical discipline to more responsive care and emotional attunement (Key 1900; Fass 2016; Schrumpf 2022). Children increasingly came to be depicted as competent agents who should be treated with respect and relational equality (Juul 2001).

As a result, we began to recognise and protect the interests of children in political and ethical decision-making, in institutional structures, and in concepts that apply to them, such as children's rights. Ideas about children's freedom, for instance, are understood and protected as rights to express themselves, participate in decision-making, learn, play, explore the world, and be protected from harm (United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). It was not the behaviour or capacities of children that changed over time to "earn" them the status of agents in their own right; rather, what changed was the dominant view of childhood. By rethinking and restructuring the relationship between adults and children, children came to be increasingly recognised as beings with needs, agency, and rights. This example demonstrates that agency is not simply an intrinsic trait, but can be supported, recognised, and fostered by social, political, and environmental conditions (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Goodley 2013). *Zoopolis* extends this idea to nonhuman animals, showing that our political obligations can facilitate their participation, self-determination, and flourishing while acknowledging them as social and political beings.

This stands in contrast to applying an anthropocentric notion of agency defined through a perceived superior human subject from which all other beings are judged and classified. I strongly oppose the idea that other animals must

"prove themselves" to be recognised as agents or as morally valuable beings based on human-defined thresholds of legitimacy. The issue lies more in how we see and treat them than in what or how they are. Applying this lens reinforces the idea that our perception and treatment of other animals must change. Differences in capacities will always exist, but rather than highlighting these as markers of moral worth or attributes of hierarchy, emphasis should lie on relationality and awareness of interdependence.

My problematisation of animal oppression has shown how other animals are viewed and treated as objects and how their subjectivity is diminished or denied, cancelling out any meaningful claims to freedom. When animal bodies and lives are controlled by humans, their agency is not sufficiently recognised. Their treatment is often framed solely in terms of harm minimisation while upholding productivity goals and protecting human interests. By recognising other animals as agents, we can foster more balanced relationships by shifting the focus to what they want, what they do in their lives, and what they might value from their perspectives and within their own social contexts. Doing so is an essential part of restructuring human–animal relations to be free from oppression and conducive to co-created social settings in which both humans and other animals can flourish. I will deepen this discussion in chapter eight, where I clarify how the maximisation of agency provides a foundational pillar for interspecies freedom.

Having established agency as central to interspecies freedom, the following section examines debates that question whether other animals have an interest in liberty and shows why these discussions often remain constrained by anthropocentric assumptions.

Do other animals want freedom? Debating interests and value

In 2009, an article titled "Do animals have an interest in liberty?" by Alasdair Cochrane sparked a debate about animal freedom. Cochrane argued that other animals have no right to freedom since they merely have an instrumental interest in liberty, and that while they do possess preference autonomy, he does not view them as autonomous in the relevant sense (2009). Instead, Cochrane derives human freedom from the kind of mental capacities that provide a foundation for an intrinsic interest in liberty, while animal freedom is viewed only as the animals'

ability to exercise their natural functioning (Cochrane 2009). I perceive Cochrane's position as problematic.

First, the question of whether 'animals' have an interest in liberty (Cochrane 2009) seems at first glance to group all nonhuman animal species into one group. Cochrane does narrow his focus down to vertebrates, as he perceives these to possess the capacity for conscious experience, but reflecting on the sometimes human-like abilities of great apes and cetaceans, he is careful to define that it is the particular "higher-order thought consciousness" through which he defines the proper autonomous agent (Cochrane 2009, 668). This means that other animals would have to prove their interest in liberty by being and thinking like human beings do. Both within human and nonhuman individuals and social groups and categories, there are obviously various circumstances, needs, contexts, and social differences that would all influence one's interest to be free in whatever way a particular being practices and values freedom, but this complexity in claims to freedom is not considered. Asking whether other animals have an interest in being free in the way a rational human does reinforces a strict human-animal dichotomy and overlooks the complexity and diversity of how freedom may be lived in a multitude of contexts. This is not to say that I have a clear-cut answer on how to describe or understand that complex diversity, but I think it is safe to assume that individual animals may have various interests in, and requirements for, being free in their own way. I will return to defining this complicated scope of interest to freedom further below.

The second issue I have with Cochrane's question and the answer he provides is that it is formulated with qualifications that automatically exclude all those who do not fit his idea of an autonomous agent. Cochrane argues that most human beings have an intrinsic interest in liberty because they are autonomous agents capable of "framing, revising, and pursuing one's own conception of the good" (Cochrane 2009, 665). This, he maintains, is more than merely pursuing and satisfying desires, and in making this claim, he constructs a higher-order interest in freedom that aligns with a narrowly defined, anthropocentric notion of autonomy. Cochrane derives a legitimate interest in freedom from a certain set of mental capacities, constructing an idealised image of the autonomous, rational agent. The way this category is defined is ableist at the very least and, overall, speciesist in its exclusion of all other animals.

By contrast, Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) offer a framework in which other animals can be recognised as political subjects through the social, legal, and political relationships they participate in, rather than solely through their cognitive capacities. Even other animals that do not meet the human-centric standard of autonomy can have enabled agency, with their interests in freedom and self-determination supported by political and institutional structures. Incorporating this perspective highlights how Cochrane's focus on intrinsic cognitive capacities risks maintaining anthropocentric hierarchies, whereas a relational or citizenship-based account opens the door to more fully recognising the political and ethical significance of nonhuman animals.

Objections to Cochrane's position were also raised by Robert Garner, who proposes that, instead of focusing on mental capacities, sentience should be viewed as a shared ethical baseline for moral consideration, which can then help determine whether a being has an interest in being free (2011). Garner highlights that Cochrane's dismissal of arguing for marginal cases does not consider human beings who, due to cognitive impairments or young age, for instance, fail to live up to the definition of the free subject on which Cochrane relies (2011). Because not all humans are able to frame, review, and pursue their own conceptions of what is good for them or how their interests in liberty are defined, Cochrane's argument, if applied consistently, would mean that those humans also do not possess an intrinsic interest in liberty and, by extrapolation, life (2011). Another point of critique, which Garner raises, concerns the use of other animals, arguing that, particularly when they are used for experimentation or food production, the infliction of suffering is unavoidable (2011). These objections show that employing a limited framework of the legitimate political subject is likely to generate a limited scope of who can be included in the realm of freedom. A further objection was raised by John Hadley, who agrees with valuing sentient life rather than rational capacities, and adds that the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental interests conveys the idea that those with intrinsic interests are generally considered more important than those with only instrumental interests (2013). Cochrane's question about whether animals have an interest in liberty is essentially asking "do animals have an interest in human freedom?", to which the answer naturally is that they probably do not. Although I believe the line drawn by the category of sentience is still too inaccurate, as it requires a human judgment of

another's ability to feel or perceive, I think the points raised by Garner and Hadley are overall valid.

Comparisons of capacities, such as rationality, are thus not useful for determining whether an individual has an interest in being free. Overly focusing on capacities that reflect one's own idealised social category reflects the anthropocentric egotistical illusion that humans are exceptional beings. Being able to frame, revise, and pursue one's own conception of the good may be a part of what makes us human, but it does not make humans morally superior. Cochrane's judgment of nonhuman capacities or interests through a distinctly human, rationalist lens brings Gray's argument to mind, holding that other animals should not be judged through human moral frameworks, as they are not lesser beings for lacking what human beings value or perceive (Gray 2002). Being preoccupied with defining one's own superiority can be a hindrance in learning to perceive capacities and experiences of freedom that are external to us.

Cochrane's account remains caught within this anthropocentric framework. By grounding freedom in welfare protection and rational capacities, he reduces it to a condition that must be granted to those deemed sufficiently like humans. This welfare-oriented approach misses that freedom is not simply an individual possession or a safeguard against suffering, but a relational good that arises within interdependent ecological, political, and social contexts. My account of interspecies freedom instead understands freedom as co-created through relationships that resist domination and oppression, and which affirm mutual flourishing. In continuing to define freedom through anthropocentric criteria, Cochrane's theory inadvertently reinforces the very hierarchies and logics of control that a truly interspecies conception of freedom seeks to dismantle.

Andreas Schmidt also engages in the debate by critiquing Cochrane's position, arguing that even if other animals have only an instrumental interest in freedom, freedom still has a non-specific instrumental value for them (Schmidt 2015). Moreover, since he holds that freedom carries significance as a social ideal, it is an important goal for navigating human-animal relations. In other words, freedom can serve as an ideal guiding our relations with others. To support this conclusion, Schmidt examines three concepts of freedom: psychological freedom, freedom as an opportunity, and freedom in the sense of one's social and legal status, that is, having recognized social standing in relation to others and having one's liberties respected (Schmidt 2015). He then argues that freedom is non-specifically and

instrumentally valuable for humans because (1) individuals' desires and sources of enjoyment change over time, (2) we often do not know what we want or what might be good for us, making freedom valuable as a social ideal, and (3) freedom presupposes personal control, which is particularly important for enabling individuals to alter adverse circumstances that might otherwise leave them helpless or depressed (Schmidt 2015, 99). Schmidt further shows that all three of these considerations apply to both humans and other animals, since (1) individual desires and needs of other animals change over time, (2) freedom as a social ideal is perhaps even more valuable for other animals because it is more difficult for humans to know what they want or enjoy, and (3) the helplessness that stems from a lack of control affects individuals regardless of species, so it is prudent to be cautious about limiting the freedom of other animals, as doing so may be more harmful to them than to humans, given that they may lack the cognitive capacities to understand the constraints imposed on them (Schmidt 2015, 102–103).

Although Schmidt continues to lump humans and other animals into two overarching social groups and thus fails to address specific species differences and complexity, his argument can be understood as a response to Cochrane's specific inquiry. Instead of seeking to determine whether animal freedom is intrinsically valuable, Schmidt thus distinguishes between specific and non-specific value. While there may be some specific instrumentally valuable freedom to, for instance, have the opportunity to choose as one pleases at a specific time, the non-specific value of freedom refers to its value not being "reducible to the good brought about by specific instances of it" (Schmidt 2015, 99). In other words, freedom is non-specifically valuable because it is not only a means to other valuable ends (as posited by Cochrane), but is changing as a being's desires, enjoyments, wishes, and intentions change over time, and because a basic reason for valuing one's freedom is that it presupposes personal control (Schmidt 2015). Hence, even if freedom should be nothing more than a means to an end, one cannot reach for these goals directly, meaning that freedom has a non-specific value in its function as a social ideal (Schmidt 2015).

Schmidt therefore turns the question around, not asking whether someone has an interest in freedom, but whether freedom is valuable as a social, interspecies ideal. He argues that it certainly is for the reasons outlined above and adds that the goal and good of freedom can be valuable for guiding us in relationships. Schmidt exemplifies this by arguing that extending freedom to include other

animals addresses the concern that animal protection policies might undermine humans' freedom, because valuing freedom gives us a moral reason to respect and protect the freedom of other animals through stronger policies (Schmidt 2015). Valuing freedom as a social ideal can therefore provide principles that can shape how power relations unfold. Focus is thus less on who is included and on what basis, and more on assessing social relations to ask how they can be organised to approach freedom as a shared social ideal, thereby increasing the good that comes with social freedom.

This basic idea of freedom as facilitating social relations aligns with the relational approach to interspecies freedom that I develop in chapter eight, as it shifts the focus toward freedom as a shared condition. Schmidt's argument highlights the social and relational dimensions that any concept of freedom must take seriously. This perspective prompts a more ambitious inquiry: rather than asking whether and how other animals can fit into human frameworks, the question becomes what kinds of human-animal relations could support a shared ideal of interspecies freedom. Achieving this requires a fundamental recognition of the Other and their specific way of being in the world. If Yudanin is correct that freedom is about defining oneself and that free action involves being the source of one's own causes rather than being determined by external factors (2020, 1), then the starting point for thinking about freedom becomes far more open to diverse contexts than those defined by anthropocentric accounts. Anthropocentric conceptions of liberty presuppose and require a rational human agent capable of fulfilling the ideal of the "proper" political actor, who supposedly acts purposefully and rationally. In contrast, non-anthropocentric, multi-species understandings of freedom begin by considering the unfolding of freedom and free action within individual and species-specific contexts, abilities, and environments.

What this discussion has shown is that debates over whether other animals "want" freedom hinge on whether they possess the cognitive abilities, future-oriented preferences, or reflective capacities that are specific to human beings and have long been used to gatekeep the purview of liberty. While these discussions rightly challenge anthropocentric assumptions, they risk reproducing a narrow, human-centred model of agency in which only beings who articulate or conceptualise freedom in the ways humans do are deemed eligible for it. Chapters seven and eight will highlight the empirical record of how nonhuman resistance, avoidance of confinement, exploratory behaviour, and social bonding suggest that

many other animals express forms of self-directed activity that are ill-captured by overly human-focused criteria. More importantly, grounding freedom in human-like rational autonomy overlooks the political function freedom serves: protecting individuals from domination and securing conditions in which their agency, however it may be expressed, can flourish. Closing this chapter, it can be highlighted that freedom is a non-specifically valuable condition across species because it shields individuals from arbitrary control and enables them to pursue the goods that matter to them. For this to be applicable in practice, oppressive hierarchies must be dismantled. I will discuss this in more detail in chapter eight, where I argue that freedom is relationally enacted through practices of recognising other animals as subjects with their own perspectives and forms of agency.

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Chapter six has discussed both the limits and the possibilities of existing scholarship and approaches to animal freedom. Considering these debates in light of the aim of this study to think about freedom as a condition conducive to interspecies flourishing, without oppression, my discussion thus far shows that freedom should be understood as applying to more than just the human category. This chapter thus laid important conceptual ground for rethinking freedom as something that emerges through shared relations rather than exclusive human agency. The following chapter turns to the empirical material, examining how animal advocates articulate, negotiate, and reflect upon the meaning of freedom and liberation from oppression in the context of human-animal relations. These insights and accounts of lived experiences will provide an important foundation for the account of interspecies freedom that follows.

7 Activist voices on animal freedom

To ground the theoretical inquiry, this chapter incorporates an empirical dimension based on semi-structured interviews with individuals engaged in diverse forms of animal advocacy. Including interviews in the research design and analysis strengthened the normative dimension of the study's aim by grounding it in lived experiences. These perspectives helped me better understand how freedom can be conceptualised as a more-than-human concept and illustrated what interspecies flourishing could entail.

Conducted in 2019, the interviews involved 32 participants active in pro-animal scholarship, various forms of activism, sanctuary work, and other types of direct care for rescued animals. The purpose of the interviews was to explore how animal advocates understand freedom for both humans and other animals. This empirical engagement enriched the theoretical endeavour by grounding it in a more situated normative approach (Ackerly et al. 2006; Ackerly 2018).

Guided by a relational and participatory ethos, the interviews were approached as sites of mutual reflection on domination and liberation from oppression in the context of human-animal relations. Speaking with individuals whose lived experiences and practices of resistance exceeded my own deepened the theoretical scope of this study, offering nuanced insights into the challenges and possibilities of conceptualising freedom as a shared interspecies condition.

The interview questions were organised into three parts, and this chapter is structured to broadly reflect that thematic structure (see Appendix B for the full interview guide). The first part explored participants' thoughts on the meaning of freedom in the context of human-animal relations. For example, I asked about potential differences in the meaning of freedom for humans and other animals, encouraging reflection on the general concept of freedom and how it might be conceptualised in more-than-human contexts. Participants were prompted to consider societal obligations to ensure that all beings can live not only free from harm but also fulfilling lives, reflecting on freedom as both a political ideal and a social relation. This highlighted the need to conceptualise interspecies freedom in both positive and negative terms.

The second part of the interview questions focused on the discourse and goals of animal liberation within the movement, prompting reflection on the role of intersectional activism and scholarly work. Here, participants also considered the use of the concept of freedom in animal advocacy work.

In the final set of questions, I opened a more utopian and exploratory inquiry, inviting participants to imagine a world in which the goal of liberation from violence and oppression is fully realised. The following discussion interprets selected themes from these conversations through a theoretically informed lens, in line with the overall normative stance of this thesis, situating the voices of interviewed activists and scholars within the broader argument for interspecies freedom.

7.1 Freedom in the context of human-animal relations

Based on the above outlined inquiries, the first part of the chapter examines how participants conceptualised freedom for humans and other animals. Participants were first asked "*What do you think freedom means for human beings?"* The question is framed in a general, open manner to invite personal reflection on how humans define or interpret freedom. Thereafter, I asked "*How do you understand or define the meaning of freedom for other animals?"* This second question introduced a comparative dimension and invited participants to consider how freedom could be defined from the perspective of other animals or from the broader perspective of animal advocacy. The responses reveal a diversity of perspectives and angles on how freedom was conceptualised for humans and other animals, and also illustrate a shared emphasis on relations, responsibility, and mutual recognition as essential components of freedom. Both inquiries are addressed below, followed by a short summary of how free human-animal relations were conceptualised.

Human freedom

Many participants began with conceptualisations of human freedom that emphasised civil rights such as self-expression, the right to vote, and the ability to make personal life choices. However, they also highlighted that the scope of civil and political rights associated with freedom is always constrained by structural

forces like capitalism, class hierarchies, and gender norms. Many reflected on the interplay between freedom and privilege, and understood genuine freedom as requiring community, equality, and care, arguing that one cannot be truly free while oppressing Others. Human freedom was discussed in both negative and positive terms, emphasising negative freedom as not being incarcerated or controlled by others, and positive accounts of freedom as the capacity to flourish, make choices in life, express oneself, and live authentically.

As noted in the Introduction, carnistic bias frames the killing and eating of other animals as a private concern, supposedly residing in the realm of human personal freedom and therefore beyond ethical scrutiny. Questioning this presumed human "right" to eat Others exposes how such views exclude other animals from the very purview of liberty and reinforce the perception that human freedom entails domination. One participant articulated this clearly:

> Carnists, people that eat meat…They think that if we ban meat that is going to limit our autonomy. But I think there is a fallacy there, in that you are not allowed to go and murder your brother if you want to. And that is not limiting your freedom, that is just us being limited by the rights of other people. Like, no right is absolute, no ability we have, is absolute. You cannot just do whatever you want, it is more about doing what you want within the bounded rights of other people. And those people should include nonhuman animals as well. So, people should not have the freedom to eat meat in the first place, for instance. (Interview 6)

Across the interviews, human freedom was therefore generally seen as a relational condition rather than an absolute state in which a free individual could do anything they wanted. As one participant explained: "I think that as a concept, freedom makes sense within relations, within communities, and is something that is always necessarily situated" (Interview 11).

Emphasising freedom as a social condition grounded in good relations, rather than an individual privilege rooted in hierarchical, top-down relations, frames the concept as one grounded in community and mutual responsibility. Reflecting on the various understandings of freedom and its relation to hierarchy and privilege, it was stated in Interview 22 that:

> Some people, you know, depending on your definition of freedom, are much more free than others. And that is based on these historical trajectories of marginalisation and oppression that various human beings have experienced. And I think in some

> ways it is relevant to political science because if we take at its heart that kind of question of political agency and what constitutes the public in which politics are engaged in, then who has been considered a full human subject has been tied to the very notion of what it means to be human. And we have seen series of exclusions about lots of people who have not been seen [as] human, or fully human. And that have been cast into the category of the animals. And so, their expression or their desire for freedom, which get tied up with rights, in this, you know, this notion of subjectivity, is trying to move away from this category of the animal, which is the category of the object and property. (Interview 22)

This observation articulates the realisation that ideas of freedom are bound up with anthropocentric hierarchies of moral worth. The social hierarchies that follow are all based on a taken-for-granted exclusion and devaluation of animality. As was demonstrated in chapters four and five, the interlinkage of freedom to the ideal of the rational, autonomous human agent paved the way for dominant liberal frameworks that have historically defined freedom through contrast, hierarchy, and binary categorisation. Several participants' reflections further exposed the tensions between freedom as an inclusive ethical and relational condition and goal, and freedom as a privilege constructed through hierarchy and exclusion.

Structural constraints were thus frequently discussed as a limitation to freedom, with several participants critiquing capitalism, social norms, and institutional power as barriers to genuine liberation. For example, one participant argued that: "We are not free because capitalism dictates that we must sell our time in order to earn a wage, so we are controlled in that way" (Interview 7). This statement underlines how freedom can be perceived as illusory within socio-economic systems that rest on dependency and control. Observations such as these pointed to tensions between freedom as self-determination and the potential inhibitions imposed by structural forces. Emphasising the need to challenge such systems of structural domination, the participant reflected that moments of perceived shared freedom might be found in spaces of shared values, and that meaningful freedom is inherently connected to community (Interview 7).

In a similar vein, another participant argued that neoliberal culture shapes our understanding of freedom in ways that conflate it with consumption, stating that: "I think we are very conditioned by the ideas of capitalism and liberalism and think of freedom just in terms of the freedom to consume different things or in having a certain level of life…Like, yeah, a certain level of privilege" (Interview 1).

Their critique highlights how dominant cultural narratives can distort the meaning of freedom by reducing it to materialism and individual status, rather than collective empowerment. This problematisation of freedom resonates with my own initial questioning of the notion that eating other animals is a matter of personal free choice; a perspective that implicitly relies on the taken-for-granted subordination of other animals within carnistic consumption.

In this sense, reflections such as those above point to a need to reclaim freedom from anthropocentric and (neo)liberal framings caught up with the human political subject, consumption, and the taken-for-granted subordination of other animals, and instead ground it in values of interspecies interdependence, equality, and responsibility. Several participants suggested that genuine freedom cannot be realised under systems of domination. This understanding shifts the notion of liberty from a possession of autonomous, rational individuals to a shared ethical and political condition that depends on dismantling structures of domination. Another example of how freedom was discussed as being limited by structural constraints came from Interview 5:

> When we think we are free, we are actually quite restricted and bound by our institutions and social norms. I am free as a human, but I also experience gendered oppression, all the time…Class is also a question. I mean, now I am a university professor, but I grew up poor, so I am just very aware of that. (Interview 5)

Relatedly, another participant emphasises that freedom becomes meaningful for human beings when true autonomy is possible: "I think for humans, freedom means to be in an environment where you can develop yourself as you wish. And take your own decisions about your life. But without having to buy yourself in in some ways" (Interview 2).

By this, the participant meant that access to meaningful opportunities should not be conditioned on financial means or other forms of economic privilege. This reflection suggests that true freedom depends not only on freedom from external control but also on opportunities that enable self-development and flourishing. Structural inequalities, such as poverty, can therefore act as significant obstacles to experiencing the full range of freedom.

In this way, freedom was frequently described as not absolute but bound by structural constraints, social hierarchies, and moral boundaries. Several participants explicitly linked freedom to intersectional analyses of oppression,

emphasising that one cannot be free while oppressing others. Consequently, freedom was often conceptualised as a collective good rather than an individual privilege. Others underlined that the experience of freedom depends on social connection and belonging, suggesting that relationships, care, and community are prerequisites for genuine freedom.

Human freedom was thus discussed both in negative terms, understood as freedom from domination and constraint, and in positive terms as a realisation of oneself, one's capabilities, and the ability to flourish within wider communities that recognise mutual dependence. Within these reflections on what freedom means for human beings, human subjectivity was taken as a given, understood as tied to autonomy, self-expression, and moral responsibility.

Animal freedom

When asked about the meaning of freedom for other animals, participants rejected the anthropocentric notion that freedom is a human-only concept. A common initial response was that animal freedom, in its most fundamental sense, should mean the same for humans and other animals. Many participants emphasised negative freedom from domination, exploitation, and bodily harm, but also reflected on the various differences that would apply in the context of different species and contexts of oppression. To provide an example, when asked what freedom is for other animals, one participant reflected:

> Well, I think that is a difficult question to answer because there are so many ways in which we exploit other animals. And freedom for a captive Orca is in a sense fairly straightforward. They need to be liberated from their captivity. And hopefully, if they have not been in captivity since they were born, they can survive in the ocean. So that is kind of almost like a straightforward case. But when we are talking about animals that have been domesticated for many generations, then freedom becomes a more complicated topic to talk about, I think. […] So with farmed animals, their freedom would obviously involve not being subjected to slaughter, and not being subjected to being controlled, having their reproduction controlled… And I think also, clearly, that the numbers [of farmed animals] are artificially high because of capitalism. (Interview 7)

The quote clearly shows that animal freedom is here conceptualised as liberation from human oppression. A captive Orca can, hopefully, be released into the ocean

and live a free life. In contrast, the situation of domesticated animals presents a more complex challenge. Their unfreedom is not only immediate but also deeply embedded in long-established structures and relations that have shaped their biological and social makeup through dependency. This makes the question of liberation significantly more complicated. Securing the absence of external control and violence, and bodily integrity, would be primary concerns, but that still leaves a manifold of issues to be considered, to which we will return. What is important to emphasise, however, is that animal freedom was by and large understood as fundamentally inhibited by human domination.

Unsurprisingly, many participants argued for an understanding of animal freedom as liberation from human control, thus echoing the general overall goal of animal advocacy efforts. One participant pointed to a basic foundation of animal freedom, namely the recognition of their moral standing. They noted that:

> It's probably not efficient if we have a charter of rights and freedoms for animals if people don't follow them. Freedom for animals will not work unless there's a big group that's making sure that the rights of animals are respected. […] We need to change the way we see animals. […] And I guess, as long as there are financial incentives to use animals, then their freedoms are significantly going to be limited. (Interview 13)

This observation highlights how the idea of animal freedom is linked to moral recognition, as well as to the structural and institutional conditions that sustain the oppression of other animals. The participant reflects that freedom cannot simply be legally or politically declared but requires a fundamental transformation of the political and economic systems that surround the normalised use of other animals as means to human ends. Several participants problematised how other animals are characterised as property and treated as commodities, identifying the underlying objectification and subjugation as foundational to the sustenance of animal unfreedom.

At the same time, participants did not only frame animal freedom in negative terms as the absence of exploitation, but also in positive terms as the presence of certain possibilities that allow flourishing and self-determination. One participant explained that:

> So, the richer the alternatives in your life, the better the alternatives in your life, the greater the extent of your freedom. And the less you are under the constraint of

> other agents, the greater the intensity of it. So different animals, we can see it in a broad sense, are affected in these two aspects of freedom differently. So, in the case of nonhuman animals under human control, they are unfree mostly because of how they are unjustly constrained by the actions and by the political institutions established by human beings. (Interview 9)

In this account, freedom is defined by the richness of one's available choices and the absence of external constraints. Other animals are unfree when they are restricted by human actions and anthropocentric political systems, and these constraints diminish both the range and the intensity of their freedom. I have provided some examples of this earlier in the text, and this links directly to my earlier discussions of agency. For example, noting that intensively farmed pigs have little to no agency in making everyday decisions that a free pig would, it becomes clear how the structures of control affect the lives of farmed animals.

Exploring positive interpretations of animal freedom, many participants emphasised that other animals should be able to live in ways relevant to their specific species and contexts. For example, one participant held that:

> Yes, I often think about how people rarely reflect on what animals actually want. There's a lot of talk about animals' needs—that they should have behavioural and physical needs met—but not so much about what animals want to do. So, freedom for animals is really about having the opportunity to be the animal they are. And also having the chance to have their will respected. […] If you're a sheep, you're always so alert and watchful, so maybe it's not about active choices as expressions of will, but rather that their will is to be left in peace. So it's perhaps not an active doing, but an active being. Whereas a dog, who has a strong drive to run, sniff, be off-leash, and explore their surroundings, might have a stronger will to act. (Interview 19, translated from Swedish)

In this consideration of other animals' positive realisation of liberty and species-specific needs, interests, and will, emphasis is put on respecting their individual being and action. My reflection on the participants' discussion of sheep and dogs is that the "active being" of a sheep should be considered equally important as the "active doing" of a dog, a human, or any other animal. An active being can perhaps be imagined as a foundational property of true freedom, where someone just is. The active being of a sheep likely involves the unhindered ability of that sheep to be in relations with their flock of fellow sheep and other beings they may

choose to be and interact with. It may involve the peace of roaming around unhindered, grazing, resting, having access to water, shade, and perhaps shelter. Sheep freedom may not be centred on abstract political rights or ideals, but rather on the lived condition of freedom as a shared good: belonging, safety, autonomy, and freedom from harm and exploitation.

The realisation of such freedom can be endlessly extended to apply to all sorts of species. One participant who works at an animal sanctuary argued that: "Freedom means a lot to the animals; it's something that every living being that is part of this earth has, this is the basic thing." (Interview 28). Reflecting the view that freedom is something inherent to all living beings, freedom is here understood as a universal condition of life. Such an understanding was shared by several participants, providing a clear counter perspective to the anthropocentric idea of freedom as an exclusive property or privilege of (certain) entitled humans.

If freedom is understood as intrinsic to all living beings, the ontological starting point is that freedom is not something granted to an individual or earned through acting or being in a particular way. Rather, freedom is simply a condition shared by all living beings. Conceptualised in this way, freedom can either be allowed to unfold in individual, group, and social contexts, or it can be diminished through relations of power. This echoes Yudanin's (2020) point that the essence of freedom lies in self-determination, which here can be extended to the ways a being of a certain kind or species chooses to govern its own behaviour. Consequently, many participants equated the denial of freedom with the denial of their subjective status, autonomy, and moral worth. This aligns with my own analysis of animal unfreedom as rooted in human privilege and illustrates how freedom can be constrained by power.

To answer the last question I posed in the first part of the interview questions- "*What characterises free human-animal relations?"*-the participants emphasised that free human-animal relations are characterised by the absence of domination and oppression and by mutual flourishing. Taken together, the reflections from the interviews illustrate that animal freedom transcends the narrowly defined anthropocentric and liberal framing of liberty as a human-only concept, granting individual autonomy or rights. Instead, animal freedom emerges as a relational, contextual, and grounded social condition that depends on the social, material, and ecological conditions which allow animals to express their agency, maintain relations, and live in accordance with their species-specific ways of being. Such

interspecies freedom is a political question in the sense that it requires dismantling systems of oppression. It is moreover a relational practice that is grounded in respect, recognition, and care for other beings and nature. These reflections resonate with the central argument of this thesis; namely, that freedom should be rethought as a shared, interspecies condition that acknowledges interspecies vulnerabilities and interdependence as integral to the realisation of interspecies freedom.

7.2 Intersectional animal activism and scholarship

Having explored how participants understood freedom in the context of both humans and other animals, this section turns to consider how the concept of freedom itself was negotiated within activist and scholarly discourses. Noting a certain reluctance to use the term within contexts of animal advocacy, I now examine how participants critically engaged with freedom as a political and rhetorical term, and how these reflections can be embedded in broader visions of animal liberation.

Many participants rejected liberal notions of freedom as individual autonomy or non-interference. Some viewed the concept as an odd focus when seeking to advance justice issues, particularly in efforts to dismantle human domination over other animals. It thus became apparent that there was a general scepticism toward the concept of freedom. Participants often associated it with liberal politics and anthropocentric ideas of the rational, autonomous human subject. For instance, one participant reflected:

> Freedom as a category hasn't been something that's informed a lot of my activism or work, but I guess in some ways you could argue it's like a thread that, of course, runs through everything. The very notion of liberation is often tied to an understanding of freedom. (Interview 22)

This ambivalence was echoed across several interviews, signalling a broader discomfort with the term's ideological connotations. Another participant expressed a clear opposition to the concept of freedom, noting that: "I don't think that the concept of freedom is that useful or important. Both for animals and for any other cause. It doesn't make the world a better place" (Interview 4). This statement rejects

the concept of freedom in liberation struggles. They further added: "[…] those who speak about liberty are those who are defending the interests of those who are not like the...most of the human population" (Interview 4).

These reflections align freedom with hierarchy and superiority, offering a pointed critique of its political baggage. Many participants noted that freedom is deeply entangled with liberal and neoliberal discourses, which emphasise individualism, private property, and non-interference; often at the expense of equality and justice.

Collectively, these insights underscore a recurring theme: while freedom may be conceptually present as a backdrop to activist goals, it is often overshadowed by more relational and explicitly politicised terms such as liberation, which frame freedom as liberation from oppression or domination. This linguistic shift signals a critical stance toward the individualistic and exclusionary histories embedded in dominant discourses on freedom.

A similar reluctance to use the concept of freedom in structural analyses of power and domination has also been noted in feminist theory, likely due to its association with liberal notions of non-interference and individualism (Halldenius 2001). The liberal tradition's interpretative authority has tied freedom to the rational, autonomous, and often male subject as the only legitimate bearer of liberty. Chapters four and five illustrated how this framing excludes those not seen as possessing such capacities, who are then portrayed as Others. In this context, freedom can thus be seen as a politically ambiguous and ideologically loaded term capable of legitimising inequality and masking structural domination. Yet participants also acknowledged the potential to reclaim and redefine freedom in more relational and transformative ways, seeing value in connecting the term to struggles for justice and collective, intersectional liberation. With this ambiguity in mind, I set out to better understand how conceptualisations of freedom are embedded within broader visions of animal liberation. To approach this endeavour, I examined activist slogans in the animal liberation movement that reflect the idea of total liberation. With that, I sought to explore the utopian aspiration of "freedom for all" that underlies total liberation struggles. Whilst theoretical approaches to animal rights vary, as discussed in chapter five, the message of what is being opposed is, at first glance, rather clear when the stance of animal liberation is concerned. Envisioning freedom as non-domination, I chose to highlight calls for total liberation as part of the wider commitment to animal

liberation, which served as a backdrop to my conceptualisation of interspecies freedom. My initial interest in the concept of freedom emerged in part through the framework of total liberation, a core principle in critical animal studies (CAS).

"Freedom for All" and the idea of total liberation

Total liberation envisions a kind of freedom that requires the complete dismantling of all systems of oppression, including those that oppress humans and other animals (e.g., Nocella et al. 2014; Matsuoka and Sorenson 2018; Nocella and White 2023). It is a political philosophy and movement that extends the fight for justice beyond single-issue campaigns, promoting a holistic, intersectional struggle against all forms of domination. Its core principles include the intersectionality of oppression, an abolitionist ethic, holism, eco-centrism, and the integration of direct action with research and activism. This framework provides a political foundation for understanding why animal freedom cannot be separated from broader challenges such as anthropocentrism, capitalism, and colonialism. It thus frames freedom as relational and shared rather than individualistic, shaping how many interview participants understood the interconnectedness of shared liberation struggles.

While freedom and liberation are certainly distinct concepts, they are related, since some notion of freedom is implied in the idea of animal liberation. But it is important to note that "they are not equal, those two terms. Because freedom is much more than that." (Interview 3). This highlights freedom as a state in which liberation from oppression has been achieved, and new possibilities for self-realisation have emerged. In this sense, liberation may secure negative freedom from constraint or harm, while freedom, understood more broadly, also encompasses positive dimensions, including the capacity to flourish and to exercise agency. One participant described liberation as a tactic responding to a sense of timely urgency:

> Animal liberation is a kind of a call to direct action in many ways in the here and now. […] Liberation is far more of a tactic that is in the here and now. So, it's something that demands an immediate sort of response, whereas other forms of animal studies work on research. (Interview 31)

This understanding situates liberation as both an ethical stance and a political practice aimed at transforming the status quo. In this sense, my focus on the concept of freedom seeks to bring the emergence of the animal liberation movement into dialogue with political thought and a structural analysis of power, in order to explore possibilities for a future that has yet to unfold. The call for total liberation, understood as the absolute dismantling of animal oppression, with humans and other animals included, risks totalising tendencies insofar as its absolute goal remains far removed from present realities. This potential limitation to the total liberation discourse was also observed during the interviews, where several participants called for more context-specific and humble imaginations of what "freedom for all" could look like. In this light, the notion of a shared interspecies freedom may offer a more open-ended outlook, one that emphasises not only the cessation of harm but also the fostering of mutual flourishing.

Asking the participants how they understood the goal of animal liberation, one of them spoke from a stance of CAS and argued:

> CAS traditionally, historically […] has had an axiomatic ideology against animal welfarism, larger cages, free-range, humane farming, or any other system that seeks to confuse actual animal liberation with simply decreasing suffering. Of course, that doesn't mean that we don't think less suffering is better. Of course it is better. It is, you know, to say that they are fundamentally different enterprises. Decreasing suffering doesn't ever equal any form of actual animal liberation, or as you might phrase it, animal freedom. Bigger cages will never equal no cages. (Interview 10)

This quote exemplifies a clear critique of animal welfarism, highlighting that reducing suffering alone does not constitute full animal liberation. Liberation is here described as the end of domination, which would at least entail the negative freedom not to be incarcerated or made to suffer. Such critiques reflect a recognition that human control over other animals underpins much of their oppression.

However, participants also emphasised that the concept of liberation itself is not straightforward. As one participant reflected:

> Liberation would be the end, or maybe the process towards the end...it can have both meanings...of human oppression over nonhuman animals. […] I mean, it sounds very simple, but it is very hard for a number of reasons. First, as I said before. It is not clear what liberation means. Second, I don't think I...at least me, and many other

> people...that our goal is liberation. I would say that my goal is a better world. […] Another issue is that we are talking about a movement here. I wouldn't really know what the movement would be. Is animal studies a movement, or critical animal studies a movement, or is animal liberation a movement? Or is anti-speciesism a movement? What is it? I mean, it is very hard to define that. And what you have there is people working with different ideas. And in some cases, their idea somehow converges and you can speak very vaguely about movements when many people are struggling for similar things. (Interview 4)

This response captures the difficulty of defining liberation as either an endpoint or an ongoing process. While the ending of oppression remains a clear objective, it is challenging to specify what "total" liberation would look like in practice or how it would be achieved. Framing liberation as an ongoing process allows for a more inclusive, plural, and flexible understanding that acknowledges both diversity of context and the continuous nature of ethical and political transformation.

To explore the relationship between freedom and liberation, I asked participants to reflect on slogans such as "Animal freedom is human freedom" and "None are free until all are free". These slogans reflect an intersectional understanding of freedom as relational and interconnected, challenging individualistic liberal notions that frame liberty as a privilege for some or something that depends on the marginalisation of others.

Participants generally agreed with the principle that oppression is interconnected. One participant described freedom as "entangled in others," observing that if some people are suppressed, our own freedom is constrained (Interview 31). Another emphasised that animal exploitation is deeply intertwined with other forms of oppression, highlighting the ways in which social and ecological injustices intersect (Interview 8).

At the same time, participants also noted potential limitations. Several pointed out that such slogans risk overgeneralisation, potentially obscuring differences in power and marginalisation. One participant argued that while the slogans capture the connections between oppressions, they can inadvertently render invisible the specific experiences of those most affected, producing a superficial equality that overlooks ongoing systemic inequities (Interview 1; 10). In practice, slogans like "total liberation" can be misinterpreted as a completed goal rather than a process, substituting symbolic achievement for the continuous work of challenging oppression in its many forms.

Overall, participants suggested that while these slogans are rhetorically powerful and can communicate key insights of intersectionality, true engagement with liberation requires attention to social differences, power relations, and the ongoing, reflective work of dismantling oppression. Crucially, this includes recognising the autonomy and agency of other animals, whose freedom is co-constituted with human freedom, and ensuring that animal liberation remains central to intersectional praxis.

A similar scepticism about the totalising potential of the concept of total liberation was voiced by another participant:

> I think that the sentiment is positive but I am sceptical about any one assumption that that is even a possibility. Like, what liberation is going to mean for one person isn't necessarily what it will mean for another. […] Because it almost closes down the possibility of learning about other forms of manifestations of oppression that you hadn't anticipated. To me, there is no total liberation because I have been working on these issues for over 20 years and I am still learning about how oppression functions and how marginalisation happens. […] As soon as you presume from total perspectives and claim to know what total liberation is, then I feel like you close yourself down from learning. And isn't the whole point of an intersectional perspective that you always try and pursue and understand how oppression functions? So I don't think that it is possible, and it concerns me how close that language is to totalitarianism and also totalising discourse. Where you take a cookie cutter and you put it on the rest of the world. One of the things that my activism has shown me and the theory that I have done is how people navigate their lives and makes sense of their lives as often very specific to their geographic and cultural context. […] I think it has a potential to be a very arrogant position. (Interview 22)

This reflection moves toward a more reflexive, grounded, and forward-looking discussion by defining the goal of liberation from oppression as a continuous and self-reflective practice. Opposed to the potentially subsuming rhetoric and the possible oversimplification of calls for total liberation, the participant advocates viewing liberation as an ongoing ethical and political orientation grounded in attentiveness, humility, and openness to learning about the various meanings of liberation in their specific contexts. Translating that to conceptualisations of interspecies freedom as liberation from oppression as a condition of shared flourishing, such freedom is here viewed as situated, relational, and contingent upon others' ability to flourish and realise themselves.

The examples discussed here show that the goal of total liberation is a call for the complete dismantling of all systems of oppression and domination. This commitment translates to an understanding of freedom that goes beyond individualistic understandings of liberty or those that merely emphasise the absence of interference. Instead, total liberation envisions freedom as liberation from oppression that extends to all humans, other animals, and nature.

This collective understanding of freedom as something shared and created in relations is useful for countering the idea of freedom as a zero-sum concept achievable through violence or in isolation. While the underlying idea of freedom as an all-encompassing state of being free from systems of domination may paint an idealised image, it nevertheless helps to visualise the multiple layers of liberation that can strive for freedom on individual, social, and ecological levels. Although not always explicitly articulated, liberation struggles also create space to envision a positive freedom, one characterised by conditions that enable beings and systems to flourish and to pursue their own ways of being in the world.

Analytically, we can at this stage identify a point of intersection between the conceptual understanding of freedom as connected to hierarchy and oppression, and the social transformative project of actively changing such hierarchies. If the aim is to create freedom from all forms of oppression as much as possible, and to engage in the ongoing process of striving for a shared goal to increase "freedom for all", we must cultivate new relationships, both on broader structural levels and in our individual lives. To envision what interspecies freedom could look like, a series of forward-looking questions was posed during the interviews, which are discussed below.

7.3 From harm to harmony: envisioning interspecies freedom

To dive deeper and encourage reflection on freedom within human-animal relations that support mutual flourishing, I asked participants: "*What positive obligations should society uphold so that everyone has the chance to live not only a life free from harm but also a satisfying life?"* This question aimed to explore both moral and policy-oriented perspectives on transforming anthropocentric

social norms and structures, inviting reflections on how interspecies relations could be reimagined.

Many participants reiterated the importance of safeguarding other animals' negative freedom from harm, including the abolition of industrialised animal agriculture and the ending of exploitative practices. The most commonly emphasised point was that the use and commodification of other animals must stop. One participant articulated a position that balances the abolition of harmful practices with ongoing relational engagement: "We should abolish animal husbandry but not abolish all relationships with animals. It should be a mutual give and take" (Interview 24, translated from Swedish).

This statement captures a challenge central to contemporary human-animal relations and highlights a tension discussed in chapter six. While abolitionist theorists such as Francione (2020; Francione and Garner 2010) advocate ending human-animal relations to prevent domination, controlling or terminating relations can itself constitute a form of oppression. As discussed previously, the lives of domesticated animals have been shaped by humans, yet they possess agency and capacities that warrant recognition (Meijer 2019; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). Jenkin's (2023) concept of ontic oppression clarifies that, while other animals are shaped by oppressive systems, their capacities, including reproduction, are expressions of autonomous being rather than inherently wrong.

Another participant reflected on these questions with a stronger emphasis on ecological responsibility:

> We should take care of the animals that are dependent on us. Bred animals should not reproduce further. We should return land to the animals. Reduce intervention and let nature guide development. We should not play God. (Interview 26, translated from Swedish)

This statement underscores ecological ethics and a reorientation of power away from anthropocentric management. Returning land to other animals and letting nature guide development resonates with rewilding discourses (e.g., Thulin and Röcklinsberg 2020; Moyano-Fernández 2025) and frames freedom as acknowledging nonhuman autonomy while reducing human control. At the same time, this suggestion echoes the abolitionist strategy of "phasing out" domesticated animals (Francione 2020). As discussed in chapter six, limiting or controlling reproduction can itself constitute oppression, since reproduction is

part of animals' ontic being and an expression of agency (Meijer 2019; Jenkin 2023; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). The tension highlights the need to distinguish between ending exploitative practices and denying fundamental capacities.

Participants also reflected on bodily autonomy and relational choice as essential to meaningful freedom. One participant elaborated:

> …that we also need to be able to talk about freedom in a different sense than just the utopian, ideal type. That is, a kind of freedom that is maximised […] Freedom is always limited in various ways. But I think of freedom as having control over one's own body, being able to decide what relationships one wants to have... not having one's fertility or sexual reproductive capacity interrupted or destroyed. (Interview 21, translated from Swedish)

This perspective aligns with Donaldson and Kymlicka's (2011) political theory of animal citizenship, which positions domesticated animals as members of interspecies communities. Citizenship entails not only protection from harm but also facilitation of individual life projects. Participants' reflections indicate that fostering interspecies freedom is a collaborative, ongoing process: recognition, response, trust-building, and negotiation are central to enabling other animals to exercise agency within shared social contexts.

The participants' responses highlight the normative dimension of interspecies freedom. Positive obligations should not be seen as a prescriptive checklist leading to an absolute end state but as patterns of commitment to transform social structures, beliefs, and practices. By cultivating respectful, reciprocal relations in the ethos of co-flourishing, humans can actively engage in relational freedom that is shared and negotiated rather than imposed.

In sum, participants' reflections illustrate a core insight of interspecies freedom: liberation cannot mean isolation or unilateral control, nor should it equate to the erasure of dependent or bred animals. Ending oppressive practices, such as industrialised breeding and exploitative use, is necessary, but freedom also requires recognising and facilitating the capacities, choices, and social bonds of other animals. By treating domesticated animals as morally significant subjects with claims to bodily integrity and relational participation, we move toward a shared flourishing where freedom is co-constituted rather than imposed, and liberation is realised through transformation rather than separation.

Imagining free interspecies relations

Seeking to take more imaginative paths to envision interspecies freedom, I asked the participants to reflect on the future by posing the following questions: "*Let us imagine a world that comes as close as possible to the goal of liberation from violence and oppression for humans and other animals. What do you think such a world would look like? What solutions would you like to see? How do we get there?*"

Asking these admittedly very large and difficult questions, it was unsurprising that the participants found it hard to imagine a world free from oppression. However, they also saw great potential in imagining pathways to liberation. Many possible solutions were already mentioned above and included the ending of animal use, such as in intensive animal agriculture, and the dismantling of oppressive structures, such as patriarchy, colonialism, speciesism, and capitalism, as well as the transformation of anthropocentric attitudes and values to become more compassionate, humble, and responsible. Imaginations of mutual flourishing and care involved human-animal interdependency, rather than isolation and hierarchy. Relatedly, the mutual constitution of agency was lifted as an important condition to approach greater relational freedom:

> So to be able to be free, to navigate relationships, to determine one's parameters for relationship, certainly things like bodily integrity, but being able to co-constitute relationships in a more equitable manner that isn't based on a presumed hierarchy by those who are often in positions of power, I guess would be part of how I would consider freedom to be able to come into relation in a way that is agential and is not predetermined by a script that is entrenched within a property paradigm in which you typically have humans in the position of the subject and animals in the position of object, and then the relationships that are allowed within those parameters are typically understood as unidirectional in which the human imposes their will on the animal and the animal must submit or modify themselves in relationship to the human. (Interview 22)

In this account, freedom emerges through the navigation of relationships, insofar as all involved beings actively contribute to shaping the interaction. Key conditions enabling such relations include negative freedoms, such as the enjoyment of bodily integrity, but the participant emphasises the relational, co-creative process through which these interactions can move toward greater freedom.

I refer to this dynamic as a mutual constitution of agency because an individual's actions, intentions, or expressions acquire relational significance when they are perceived, interpreted, and responded to by another. This process requires that all parties recognise one another as morally valuable beings. Drawing on Boyer's account of how empathy and moral recognition can be blocked by dominant relational structures that foster destructive patterns (2018), this mutual constitution of agency through shared attention, response, and recognition offers a mechanism for transforming basic relational ontologies of the human and the animal, of us and them.

As an important part of this transformation, several participants suggested structural interventions, such as establishing animal sanctuaries, habitat restoration, and reconfiguring urban and rural spaces to better accommodate other animals. As one of the participants fittingly summarised:

> There is a lot that would need to be done in the city in terms of spatial re-arrangements. So, how can we make the city safe for the other animals that we share this place with? [That concerns] not just the domesticated animals but also the liminal animals. And this goes way beyond just stopping with poisoning mice and rats, which would respect their right to life, but actually finding out how we can make this a greener place and allow dogs to be able to walk off leash. And all of that would require a very different attitude from humans. So, very practically, I think, one of the important things is sharing space differently. And accepting the presence of other animals. And maybe even inviting them in, in certain places. (Interview 11)

Spatial re-arrangements were taken up by many participants, signalling a need to consider the material shifts required to dismantle human convenience and control, and to rethink the use of land, cities, and other environments in more inclusive ways.

Naming liminal animals, a term introduced by Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011), the above-quoted participant considers how the other animals that live on the margins of human-dominated spaces could be acknowledged and included in shared efforts to radically rethink interspecies coexistence. "Going way beyond" involves both stopping the killing of other animals to respect their right to life and rethinking human social and material practices in ways that allow for their presence and agency. For instance, this could include redesigning parks and streets to create safe corridors for urban wildlife, creating more dog-friendly zones where

dogs can roam off-leash, installing green roofs and urban gardens to support pollinators and birds, or introducing traffic-calming measures to reduce harm to other animals in cities. It could also mean shifting everyday human behaviours, such as reducing pesticide use, leaving some areas unmanaged rather than intensively maintained, or acknowledging and responding to the needs of liminal animals, such as birds, hedgehogs, or squirrels, in local planning decisions.

Ultimately, what the above quote underscores in the context of interspecies freedom is that ethical principles alone are insufficient; meaningful freedom requires active transformation of infrastructures, attitudes, and everyday practices, so that shared spaces are designed and inhabited with the presence and flourishing of all animals in mind. While such transformations can be imagined at the scale of cities and everyday environments, participants also pointed to more contained and already existing spaces where alternative human–animal relations are actively practised.

As examples of such a transformation, animal sanctuaries were often named as micro-utopias. Animal sanctuaries are places where rescued animals are provided with a safe and permanent home. Even if they were not seen as perfect solutions, sanctuaries were often cited as crucial and useful sites for social transformation. Sanctuaries focus on providing safety from the pursuit of being killed or exploited and to rehabilitate formerly oppressed animals and provide them with medical care, enriching environments, opportunities for social relations and physical and emotional healing. In the face of the massive killing and destruction of trillions of land and sea animals for food every year, critics might argue that a sanctuary caring for a relatively small number of animals is not a very effective form of resistance. However, the value of sanctuaries lies precisely in refusing a quantification metric for success that prioritises the most cost-effective promotion of abstract notions of animal wellbeing, instead insisting on radical care for particular individuals, beings with distinctive histories, associated vulnerabilities, and unique relationships (Crary and Gruen 2022).

In other words, the care work of sanctuaries depends on responding to the animals' needs and on being in relationship *with* them, thus putting co-constitution and reciprocal relations into practice. Asking what they understand as free human-animal relations, they explained:

> It is those that are made by choice. We have animals here who don't appreciate human contact. They don't like to do a tour. We do educational tours here and there

> are some animals that will come running into a group of people and they love it; they want to get petted and get attention. And then there are others that don't like it. So here, those animals we don't have out in the pen where people go. We allow them their privacy, because that is what they choose. So, I think the characterisation would be...on their own terms...when there is no benefit...when no animal must do something for the benefit of the human. (Interview 29)

This reflects how freedom as non-interference is practiced at the sanctuary. Through being in close relationship with the animals living there, it becomes possible to understand what they value and to respect their choices. Free interspecies relations develop in this context when the relation can unfold consensually, on the terms of those involved. Since sanctuaries are still human-led spaces that may involve physically holding animals in enclosures and making both minor and inherently difficult, life-altering decisions for them, the relationship is not on entirely equal footing but involves an asymmetry of power. This was also reflected upon in Interview 29, when the participant stated:

> I think of myself as their caretaker. It is not our animals, but they are the residents here and we take care of them. […] We must make the choice for them the same way as we would for a child or an elderly parent. In the situation we are in now, the best we can do is to make decisions on their behalf. (Interview 29)

When asked how they try to best facilitate animal freedom at the sanctuary, given this relational dependency, they replied:

> By paying attention to companionship and friendship. […] Not separating animals from another who have bonded relationships. They have a lot of interspecies relationships. The pig wants to sleep with the goats. They should be able to make their own choices during the day so they have plenty of room to roam around in a herd full of different kinds of personalities so they can choose who to hang out with, who they like to share a barn with at night, when they want to get up, when they want to go to sleep...They generally have that freedom at the sanctuary, within its limits, obviously. I don't think there should be interference with wild animals, but these animals here have been bred to not be able to survive in the wild. We have turkeys that should be able to live 17 years, but they are bred to live, maybe, two years...even at a sanctuary, if you are lucky. You have pigs where you see wild boars fully capable of running around but farmed hogs bred in the industry to grow so much so fast that they are getting arthritis at seven and eight. So as far as

> domesticated animals, I think they do need a caretaker. But these are species that shouldn't exist. (Interview 29)

What this sanctuary context illustrates is how the reciprocal constitution of agency can unfold within relations of care, dependence, and structural constraints. The interspecies freedom lived in such a context is not one of absolute independence or the unlimited realisation of individual free will, but a relational practice grounded in responsiveness, attentiveness, and mutual recognition. Through daily interactions and sustained attentiveness to the interests, preferences, and social bonds of the animals living at the sanctuary, human behaviour can be adjusted accordingly to foster the mutual constitution of agency among all involved.

At the same time, the participant's assertion that domesticated animals are "species that shouldn't exist" echoes abolitionist arguments discussed in the previous chapter, particularly the view that ending oppression requires the eventual disappearance of domesticated animals. As argued earlier, however, such claims risk collapsing the injustice of the systems that produced these animals into judgments about the animals themselves. While domesticated animals are undeniably shaped by histories of selective breeding and exploitation, this does not render their existence inherently flawed, nor does it justify denying their ongoing claims to care, sociality, or the exercise of agency (Meijer 2019; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011).

Seen in this light, sanctuaries complicate abolitionist logics of disappearance. They make visible that even those other animals whose bodies and capacities have been profoundly altered by human domination remain relational beings with preferences, attachments, and forms of agency that can be cultivated. Although these relations remain asymmetrical, since humans retain control over resources, space, and key decisions, this asymmetry does not negate animal agency. Rather, it foregrounds the ethical responsibility to transform relations of control into relations of care, where dependence is acknowledged without being equated with moral inferiority or disposability.

It is precisely in this context that agency becomes a crucial dimension of co-constituted interspecies relations. Sanctuaries offer one concrete example of how agency can unfold through intersubjective encounters between beings who affect and respond to one another. Within such spaces, animals are afforded opportunities for choice, relational engagement, and withdrawal, allowing

freedom to emerge not as separation from others but through responsive and empathetic relations.

Thus, while sanctuaries do not resolve the structural injustices that shape domesticated animal lives, they exemplify how interspecies freedom can be practiced within conditions of constraint. They enact, in situated and imperfect ways, the possibility of co-constituted freedom through lived negotiation rather than through erasure or the denial of continued existence. What the interviews demonstrate more broadly is that interspecies freedom must be understood as a shared and ongoing process of dismantling hierarchical relations of power and transforming them into more balanced and sustainable forms of coexistence. This process relies on mutual recognition, respect for interests and boundaries, and the continuous reworking of social relations across species. As one participant fittingly expressed: "That's what freedom would be to me...the situation where all of us would have the opportunity to flourish in whatever ways we decide." (Interview 14)

This articulation resonates with positive interpretations of freedom as flourishing rather than domination. It mirrors Martha Nussbaum's (2022) capabilities approach, in which true freedom entails the opportunity to develop and express one's capabilities in meaningful ways. Looking toward another sanctuary context represented in the interviews will provide a closing story for this chapter that illustrates the transformation of a group of hens previously farmed for egg production to become rescued and undergo the process of discovering a new life at the sanctuary:

> When they could touch the ground with their legs for the first time... First of all, it's a strange feeling for them because they used to be in a battery cage and they had all these wounds on their legs. So, you can see how they walk, and they can't believe it! And then they take their wings and start to open their wings, and then they start to have dust baths […]. It was amazing to see that, because *this is freedom,* you know, that they can they feel the sun for the first time. [It is] basic stuff you know, to feel the sand, to touch the ground, to open their wings…and they couldn't do it. So, when you see that… this is how I feel about freedom; you see a creature that couldn't do any basic thing that they deserve to do or feel. And then at the sanctuary, you see how they react. And of course, that they were, they were shocked. […] So, they didn't really understand their freedom in the first weeks, you know, it took them some time. And after a while they started to act normal, and now they are sleeping on the fences, on the trees and do things that they should do. (Interview 28)

Their testimony of the process of the chickens getting used to their new way of life shows how they slowly adapt to their new living situation and start to show behaviours such as bathing in the sand and sleeping on tree branches, which they were hindered to do when living in cages. The story shows that even though animals like chickens, whose lives, bodies, and genetic makeup are highly altered by humans, can identify "use values," they can become free from being treated as resources and live their lives in ways that are meaningful to them.

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What the interviews with animal activists and scholars have shown is that interspecies freedom can be envisioned as a shared condition that is situated, relational, and grounded in practices of care, attentiveness, and mutual recognition. Reciprocal relations lie at the heart of transformed social arrangements through which interspecies freedom can emerge, even under conditions marked by asymmetry, dependence, and structural constraint. In this respect, the interview material both affirms and complicates the arguments developed in the preceding chapters. While earlier analyses of animal domination, anthropocentric accounts of liberty, and intersectional oppression emphasised the depth and durability of hierarchical power relations, the interviews foreground how freedom can nonetheless be practiced in partial, fragile, and context-specific ways. Rather than resolving the tensions between autonomy and dependence, liberation and care, or abolition and continued coexistence, participants repeatedly returned to these tensions as sites of ethical responsibility and political work. At the same time, strong synergies emerge as the interviews resonate with critiques of individualistic and human-centred conceptions of freedom, reinforce the importance of relational and intersectional analyses of oppression, and support an understanding of animal freedom as something that must be lived, negotiated, and sustained in everyday practices. All in all, the reflections of the interviews and the preceding theoretical chapters provide the foundation for the following chapter, which develops an account of interspecies freedom as a shared, co-constituted, and justice-oriented condition, attentive to both structural critique and the possibilities of transformation within existing relations.

8 Interspecies freedom

This chapter develops the dissertation's constructive core by rethinking freedom as a relational and multispecies achievement rather than an exclusive human entitlement. Interspecies freedom refers to the relational conditions in which humans and other animals can live and flourish without oppression. Approaching this concept from a relational perspective means that interspecies freedom emerges from relationships and environments that dismantle oppression and enable mutual flourishing. It is not an attribute possessed by individuals or social groups, nor a privilege granted by humans. Rather, it arises through relationships and should be understood as a shared achievement that becomes possible when we actively work to dismantle our oppression of other animals and practice accountability, care, and responsibility. Such freedom is always situated. There is no universal blueprint for living freely together across species boundaries. What can be articulated, however, are orientations that reject domination and affirm diversity, care, and responsibility to foster mutual flourishing.

This approach began from a critique of anthropocentric traditions that have historically restricted freedom to humans, framing it as a zero-sum privilege and legitimising the exploitation of other animals. Moving beyond these hierarchies requires reconceptualising freedom as a shared condition grounded in interdependence and responsive relations. Interspecies freedom is therefore not a fixed model but an open-ended practice that unfolds through ongoing encounters with other animals whose life worlds exceed human conceptual frameworks.

The following sections develop this account in three steps. First, the conceptual foundations are outlined by identifying the relational pillars of interspecies freedom. Second, the chapter explores how these ideas materialise in human–animal relations. Third, it synthesises the normative and political implications of this framework.

8.1 Pillars of interspecies freedom

Interspecies freedom does not arise spontaneously but is built upon relational and material conditions that allow humans and other animals to live without being oppressed and enable their flourishing. The overall foundation of interspecies freedom, therefore, lies in relationality.

Relationality is both the ontological starting point and the practical foundation of how beings live together or alongside one another. Rather than conceiving freedom as an individual possession, relational approaches understand it as something shared and emergent, shaped by the quality, structure, and justice of social relations (Nedelsky 1989; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). From this perspective, freedom is embedded in material, social, and institutional contexts and depends on relations of recognition and justice (Young 2011).

This relational orientation binds together the three pillars of interspecies freedom, which are recognition, interdependence, and agency. All three pillars are relational and should be seen as interrelated, meaning that they cannot be understood or realised in isolation. Each pillar describes a different dimension of how interspecies freedoms are co-created and upheld, and together they form the relational architecture of interspecies freedom.

Recognition establishes the relational space in which other animals appear to us as morally valuable beings with their own voices, needs, and aspirations that make ethical and political claims.

Interdependence emphasises the diversity and interconnectedness of all beings and highlights that our lives are ecologically, socially, and materially entangled. Freedom thus only becomes possible when these shared interconnections are balanced, non-dominating, and life-affirming.

Agency underscores that all animals participate in this shared life through their own actions and behaviours, which are socially significant and play crucial roles in shaping social relations and ecological structures.

Together, these three dimensions provide important political, moral, and ecological bases for relationships in which other animals are acknowledged and valued as co-creators of shared social worlds. Interspecies freedom is incompatible with domination, oppression, instrumentalisation, or systemic violence. Consequently, it demands not only the removal of constraints but also the cultivation of relationships and structures conducive to balanced, responsive, and

life-affirming forms of more-than-human coexistence. It is therefore both a political aspiration and a lived, relational practice.

Recognition is the first step

Interspecies freedom cannot begin without recognising other animals as subjects. For too long, other animals have been repudiated, disregarded, and excluded. This exclusion is foundational to the anthropocentric order that legitimises other animals' domination and erases their individuality and lived realities. The first necessary step toward dismantling anthropocentric hierarchies and animal oppression is thus to recognise other animals as fellow beings with moral value and the capacity to shape their own lives within the relations they inhabit (Corman 2017; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Deckha 2021).

Recognising other animals is central to interspecies freedom because it establishes the ethical and political foundation for dismantling domination and creating relationships in which all beings can flourish according to their own ways of being. As chapter three illustrated through *We Animals'* photographs, the denial of individuality renders other animals invisible. Recognition as a pillar of interspecies freedom directly responds to this erasure. Other animals are not mere living resources; they are morally valuable beings with their own desires, embedded in social and ecological relations (Cudworth 2011; Haraway 2008). Their particular sets of relationships influence their lives and interests, and recognising that means that both their individual and relational needs must be taken into account.

Recognising other animals in such a way demands that we, as humans, confront uncomfortable truths about the role we play in upholding systemic oppression. It requires acknowledging that freedom is not a privilege bestowed on us, nor something earned through violence or the possession of particular cognitive or linguistic capacities. Rather, interspecies freedom should be understood as a condition that emerges in contexts where oppression is dismantled as far as possible and where human-animal relations are organised in ways conducive to flourishing.

Being cognisant of the interconnected character of oppression, i.e. breaking this cycle, requires recognising how these systems overlap and mutually reinforce one another (Adams 1990; Adams and Gruen 2014). Taking the oppression of other animals seriously thus means recognising them as targets of structural

domination and understanding that their devaluation is integral to the very logics that sustain broader systemic relational dysfunction (Joy 2010, 2023). Examples from chapter four illustrate early ways in which other animals were constructed as lesser beings and used for entertainment in spectacles that displayed wealth and power, where marginalised humans and animals were employed as props to publicly exert and normalise violence and hierarchy (Colling 2021; Zanardi 2012). Continuing to accept the marginalised status of Others serves to reproduce and sustain cycles of oppression. Believing that it is natural, normal, and necessary to farm and kill other animals to eat them is based on a consent to viewing certain other animals as having the sole purpose of being bred, utilised, killed, and sold as "food" (Joy 2010).

By bearing witness to examples of some individual animals caught in oppressive relations with humans in chapter three, I sought to show that it is individuals we are talking about. It is individual piglets who are estranged from their mothers and siblings to be mutilated, incarcerated, and controlled in factory farms to then be killed and "processed" at slaughterhouses. It is individual monkeys, pheasants, deer, and countless more individuals living in the wild who are captured, trapped, or shot. It is difficult to truly grasp the gravity and breadth of systemic animal oppression, but it is crucial to recognise that other animals *are* oppressed for human-defined purposes and interests, and that this very oppression is what constitutes their unfreedom.

In the same vein, it is important to acknowledge that the vulnerable position of these animals does not define them. They can live rich, social lives that are valuable to them, and recognising this is important to any account of interspecies freedom. We must try to see other animals for who they are, rather than imposing human norms or "use values" on them (Jensen 2018). This involves recognising other animals as different from us and realising that this difference is, in fact, something to be welcomed and celebrated (Meijer 2019). Embracing diversity allows for a plurality of flourishing forms because difference is not only acknowledged but also celebrated, rather than used as a hierarchical category.

Positive recognition thus enables processes of transformation. Recognising other animals as morally valuable beings not only means they are seen differently and treated better, but also enables the reconfiguration of human-animal relations, institutions, laws, and practices, and thus the dismantling of structural oppression. Recognition is, in this sense, not simply an individual act or a personal

shift in attitudes, but a shared, relational, and political undertaking that challenges deeply rooted logics of domination and the normative frameworks and biases that sustain them. As such, recognition is the normative and relational foundation on which processes and conditions of interspecies freedom can be built, enabling more balanced relationships, structures, and practices in which humans and other animals can flourish. It requires responsive relationships and an openness to being attentive to the ways in which other animals express agency, set boundaries, and participate in our shared world. Building on this foundation, the next foundational feature of interspecies freedom to discuss is interdependence, which highlights the interconnected relations through which freedom is co-constituted.

Interdependence: freedom as coexistence

Interdependence is what grounds us. It directly counters the familiar alignment of autonomy with individualism. Instead of emphasising self-reliance, sovereignty, or abstract ideals of independence, recognising our interdependence foregrounds connection and opens the possibility of free social relations built on trust, friendship, care, loyalty, and responsibility (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 6). Interdependence is an ecological, relational, and political foundation of freedom as it highlights that freedom is never absolute but always realised through mutual reliance and community. From this perspective, autonomy is not an isolated state of the individual but should be recognised as a socially embedded achievement (Barclay 2000).

Because identities and choices are shaped in and through relationships, freedom arises from supportive social conditions rather than from attempts to insulate the self from others' influence. Interdependence, therefore, becomes essential to understanding autonomy itself (Barclay 2000). This entails that: "Dependency, though highly variable, is an inescapable fact of life for us all. Indignity does not arise from this fact. Indignity arises when our needs are belittled, exploited, and/or unmet by those who should know better. And indignity arises when the fact of dependency is used to occlude or stifle opportunities for agency" (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 84).

The ecofeminist analyses in chapter five revealed how domination thrives on dualisms that deny interconnection. The pillar of interdependence counters this by reframing freedom as co-constituted rather than oppositional. Ecofeminism

explicitly links interdependence to values such as diversity, sustainability, cooperation, and renewal to emphasise core aspects of the 'replacement paradigm' it offers to dominant power structures (Vance 1993). Ecofeminist Lynda Birke is highlighting our interconnection to other animals and other forms of life: "There are a great many nonhumans in the webs that create our world. We owe it to them and to ourselves to pay heed to what they contribute and to what they say, and to recognise that a large part of the knowledge we have (whether or not it is knowledge we acknowledge, such as embodied understanding) emerges from our engagement with a multitude of nonhumans." (Birke 2007, 316)

Putting this into practice thus requires continual attentiveness to relationships across species boundaries. This means repeatedly asking whether any party is being disadvantaged and whether any such imbalances can be reconciled with commitments to nonviolence, diversity, cooperation, and sustainability (Vance 1993, 134). Such attentiveness must also extend to larger structural forms of domination, which must remain open to transformation.

Approaching interspecies freedom with the intention to dismantle oppression and enable greater flourishing, therefore, requires building new kinds of relationships at both personal and societal levels, in which other animals are recognised and treated as morally significant beings. Crucially, other animals do not need to do anything or be a certain way to earn standing within these relations. Their moral worth is not conditional on active participation, reciprocity, or co-creation with humans. What is required instead is that humans confront and dismantle their own privilege and anthropocentric bias, recognise their role as historical and ongoing aggressors, and actively transform the violent practices and institutions that sustain human dominance.

In practice, this process extends beyond abstract moral reflection and takes the form of concrete, situated engagements, for instance, through altering infrastructures and land-use practices to reduce harm, restructuring legal and political frameworks to recognise animals' basic interests, and developing everyday practices of attentiveness, restraint, and responsiveness in interspecies encounters. Sustained reflection, in this sense, is not a unilateral human exercise but an accountable, relational practice that remains open to being challenged, corrected, and reshaped through embodied interactions with other animals and through attention to those other animals whose needs, vulnerabilities, or ways of life are least aligned with human preferences. By grounding reflection in

responsiveness rather than projection, interspecies freedom becomes a practical and ongoing effort to transform how humans live with others, rather than a reaffirmation of anthropocentric ideals of who or what is worthy of freedom.

Yet such relational transformations do not easily emerge in the current social order, and it is crucial to recognise the systemic resistance to interspecies freedom. The normative infrastructures that shape human-animal relations rest on taken-for-granted assumptions of human centrality, thereby elevating human interests by default. More concretely, these infrastructures are upheld by institutions that depend on exploitation and inequality, including legal frameworks of other animals as property, and thereby legitimise their exploitation. The kinds of relationships required for interspecies freedom are not only largely absent but actively discouraged by these structural arrangements. Routes toward interspecies freedom thus require political and institutional transformation that extends beyond personal morality or individual choices.

We need to ask what kinds of institutions, economies, and modes of relational coexistence are conducive to forms of interaction grounded in respect, reciprocity, and non-harm. Dismantling the structures of domination inherent in the anthropocentric social order requires examining how these logics are interwoven with broader social, economic, political, and symbolic systems. Only by recognising and rethinking these interconnections can we begin to approach genuine multi-species futures.

While no singular blueprint for such futures can be offered, existing political, ethical, and activist scholarship points toward several concrete directions. These include challenging legal frameworks that position other animals primarily as property rather than as members of shared communities (Deckha 2021; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011); reimagining urban planning and land use practices so that the presence, movement, and needs of other animals are taken into account rather than excluded from city spaces (Hinchliffe et al. 2005); and cultivating political, ethical, and communicative frameworks that centre interspecies relations, agency, and mutual responsiveness as conditions for shared flourishing (Meijer 2019; Whyte 2018). Together, these shifts call for political and ethical frameworks that recognise other animals as participants in shared social worlds rather than as resources for human use.

While the magnitude of this systemic challenge reminds us that individual intentions and actions alone are insufficient to bring about far-reaching change,

this should not undermine their significance. An emphasis on interdependence underscores the power and importance of individual beings. Cultivating spaces where other animals can live freely may require institutional and structural transformation, but it always begins with situated actions grounded in practices of responsibility, care, and attentiveness toward those with whom we share our lives (Crary and Gruen 2022). What this might entail in more practical contexts of interaction is discussed in the following section on expanding agency. Such everyday situated practices not only lay the groundwork for social transformation but also shape the dispositions required for it.

One of these dispositions is humility. Relational freedom begins from an understanding of our limits and of the dangers inherent in assuming epistemic or moral authority over Others. A humble stance refuses to speak for other animals as if they were voiceless, and resists casting them solely as passive victims. Instead, humility acknowledges that other animals communicate, exert agency, and possess rich forms of sociality which we can acknowledge if we make the effort to attend to them (Corman and Vandrovcová 2014, 140-141; Meijer 2019). Interview participants underscored this and called for humility as a practice that recognises other animals' perceptions, understandings, and perspectives as neither inferior nor superior to our own (interviews 10, 15). Interpersonal relationships with other animals, therefore, need to begin from a willingness to communicate in co-constituted, rather than unilateral, processes (interview 22). Practising humility thus requires stepping down from privileged social positionings by relinquishing claims to exclusive epistemic authority, recognising other animals as contributors to shared relational contexts, and allowing their expressed preferences and behaviours to shape human action. Interdependence becomes one of the primary ways through which such relations can come about.

Our interactions with other animals should be guided by a commitment to value their existence and subjectivity, as well as an intention to enhance their agency, giving them space to exercise their innate abilities, make choices, and exert control over their environments and relationships. As one participant put it, freedom means inhabiting an environment where one can develop as one wishes and make one's own decisions, and that such freedom should exist as a baseline for all beings rather than something granted or "given" by others (Interview 2). This requires mutual respect for one another's agency and moral worth.

Indigenous scholars provide powerful relational perspectives on freedom that emerge from lived practices and cultural traditions, offering alternatives to purely abstract philosophical approaches. Writing from within Potawatomi traditions, environmental justice scholar Kyle Whyte describes reciprocal relationships that cultivate interdependence through values such as consent, diplomacy, trust, responsibility, and adaptation strategies as qualities that support freedom, sustainability, cultural integrity, and economic vitality (2018, 132). Humans, other animals, and all forms of life are members of this community, where cultivating trust includes genuinely taking others' interests to heart. Importantly, Whyte notes that, "there is also no privileging of humans as unique in having agency or intelligence, so one's identity and caretaking responsibility as a human includes the philosophy that nonhumans have their own agency, spirituality, knowledge, and intelligence" (2018, 127). These ideas translate into an understanding of interspecies freedom as something that emerges from ongoing, situated relationships in which humans are accountable to other beings, take their interests seriously in decision-making, and recognise nonhuman animals as co-agents rather than resources or dependents.

Structuring the social in such non-anthropocentric ways opens space for relational freedom to unfold through mutualism, collective attachment, trust, and shared confidence (Whyte 2018). Interdependence thus marks a strong counterpoint to anthropocentric ideas of human superiority, isolated autonomy, and freedom understood through the lens of hierarchy and naturalised oppression. It emphasises interconnection and allows us to steer toward an understanding of freedom as constituted through relationships characterised by respect, reciprocity, and mutual constitution of each other's subjectivity. My discussion of animal freedom in chapter six ended with a call to recognise animal agency, an argument to which I now return.

Expanding agency to enable the freedom to flourish

Agency refers to the ability to act, make choices, and shape one's own life. Without agency, freedom remains little more than an abstract ideal, disconnected from actual lived experiences and opportunities. To speak of animal agency is to reject the passivity and objecthood commonly ascribed to other animals and to affirm that they can be free when not subjected to oppression. Expanding agency can

be seen to realise freedom in more concrete terms through actions, relationships, and contexts that enable beings to shape their own lives and environments in relation to others. As both the activist testimonies discussed in chapter seven and the theoretical debates in chapter six underscore, recognising animal agency beyond human-centric criteria is crucial. Agency is thus a central pillar of interspecies freedom as it provides the practical basis for enacting freedom. Respecting each other's capacity to act and self-determine is crucial for non-domination and must therefore be an integral aspect of interspecies freedom, understood as a condition free from oppression.

Agency is commonly attributed to beings with desires, intentions, and wills (Cudworth 2011, 77). Of course, this is not without complications. As Erika Cudworth rightly notes: "Given the ridiculously homogenising quality of the concept 'animal', the kind of agency 'animals' might have is almost impossible to imagine" (2011, 54). She argues that many domesticated animals qualify as agents, possessing a sense of self, and that agency thus is socially structured (2011, 77). From this perspective, agency should thus not merely be understood as a property that someone possesses, but as something recognised in social contexts.

Bob Carter and Nickie Charles (2013) argue for such an understanding of animal agency, demonstrating that agency is relationally generated. Rather than viewing agency as exclusive to humans or as mere action, they propose that other animals can also possess agency in relation to their environments, in interactions with humans, and in other social contexts. This conceptualisation of agency rests on a distinction between agency and action: while action refers to observable behaviours or acts, agency refers to the capacity to enable such actions; the ability to engage, resist, or respond in meaningful ways. Social context is therefore paramount to understanding an individual's capacity for agency in any given situation. As Carter and Charles illustrate:

> The agential conditions entailed by 'being a woman' are different in Sweden and Iran. Or, to use an animal example, being a polar bear in a zoo involves a different set of agential conditions from being a polar bear in the Arctic; the social relations into which the polar bear is incorporated are different in the two situations and they condition the bear's possibilities for action. (2013, 330)

Agency is thus contextual, historically contingent, and variable across the collective situations in which beings find themselves. Wild boars are influenced by humans in ways that differ from those affecting industrially farmed pigs. Each is entangled with human-dominated society in distinct ways, and different collectivities of pigs possess varying degrees of agency depending on their unique social settings. This shows that agency is recognised and mediated in various social contexts, and, consequently, through relations of power. It is always contextual, historically contingent, and varies in relation to the collective situations in which agents reside.

To expand agency, we must leave hierarchical frameworks behind to approach relational and justice-oriented approaches. This involves far more than acknowledging that other animals can act or that they possess moral significance. Recognition is a crucial first step, but the expansion of agency demands that human behaviours change, environments are redesigned, and broader relations are transformed to avoid arbitrary hierarchy and domination. Expanding agency thus entails actively creating relational, material, and political conditions that are non-oppressive and conducive to flourishing. It demands that humans cultivate the circumstances under which other animals can meaningfully exercise their capacities to choose, initiate action, form relationships, avoid harm, and pursue their own flourishing.

This is where interdependence returns as a guiding principle. Agency is not expanded by simply stepping aside or by attempting to sever relations with other animals in the hope of abolishing oppression. On the contrary, embracing interconnection and placing relationships at the centre requires careful attention to their quality. It calls for dismantling domination, ceasing oppressive practices, and removing barriers to self-determination to cultivate the conditions for interspecies freedom to take root.

There are many concrete examples of how such an expansion of agency can be practised, even in modest, small-scale settings. For instance, when living with companion animals, humans can learn about the communication and shared modes of decision-making that work together with the animals they live with (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Cudworth 2011; Meijer 2019). Dogs can lead the way on walks, decide on the duration and route, and have their preferences for specific foods respected. We can also learn about their preferences for social interactions to understand with whom they like to interact or play, or not. Equally so, nothing speaks

against relating to other domesticated animals in similar ways. We can restructure our relations to cows, horses, pigs, and many other domesticated animals in ways that respect their autonomy and protect them from harm and exploitation. Expanding agency across species is, therefore, a central dimension of interspecies freedom as it operationalises recognition and interdependence by enabling other animals to influence, shape, and participate in the relations and environments they inhabit. The next step is to further explore how these commitments can unfold in the context of the lived realities of human–animal relations.

Together, the three dimensions of recognition, interdependence, and agency outline the relational foundations of interspecies freedom. They demonstrate that freedom is not an individual attribute but a shared condition that emerges from balanced and responsive relationships. These pillars establish the ontological, ethical, and political starting points from which interspecies freedom can emerge in practice.

8.2 Interspecies freedom in practice

Freedom cannot take root under conditions of oppression. Having just outlined the foundational relational pillars of interspecies freedom, this section turns to illustrations of how interspecies freedom is practiced, enacted, and contested in human-animal relations. The examples show how the relational features discussed above are not merely abstract ideals but important sets of engagements that take shape in relational, communicative, and material contexts.

When other animals are treated primarily as instruments or resources in ways the pigs, cows, or farmed pheasants examined in chapter three were not, their capacity for self-determination is extremely curtailed. Even those who experience more autonomy in their own ecological and social contexts, such as the rhesus macaque, fish, or duiker discussed earlier, find their freedom profoundly constrained the moment they encounter humans. To envision genuine interspecies ways of living, we must therefore transform the relations, structures, and everyday practices through which humans engage with other animals. This transformation is not only conceptual but practical. It must be enacted through action (Arendt 1958).

The following discussions address the above-defined pillars of interspecies freedom by examining animal voice and communication, animal resistance, and

sanctuaries. Attending to the ways other animals communicate and express themselves illustrates the richness and complexity of their social, emotional, and ecological worlds, and makes visible forms of agency that are often overlooked or denied within anthropocentric frameworks. Animal resistance and refusal further deepen this picture by revealing that other animals do not merely endure oppressive conditions imposed on them but continually respond, assert their own preferences, and attempt to reconfigure their circumstances. The final section then turns to discuss animal sanctuaries, which provide relational environments where humans and other animals learn to live together in ways that foreground relationality, mutual recognition, attentiveness, and responsiveness to animal agency.

Animal voice and communication

One way to recognise other animals is by paying attention to how they communicate. Human language has long served as the benchmark for communication, becoming a measure that excludes other animals both from being regarded as morally valuable beings and from the scope of freedom. Chapter seven highlighted this point through activist testimonies, where participants stressed that listening to animal voices is central to liberation. Similarly, as explored in chapter five, one of the most persistent markers of human privilege lies in the overemphasis on language use. This exclusion from political and moral communities not only legitimises the oppression of other animals but also defines speech and language in profoundly anthropocentric terms (Meijer 2013). If the goal is to include other animals and recognise them as political actors, we must understand how they express what matters to them.

Jonna Bornemark's (2025) notion of *de levande,* Swedish for "the living," or "those who live," sharpens this point by challenging calculative habits that reduce life to what can be measured and controlled. Bornemark argues that focusing on "the living" (beings) exceeds such frameworks and calls for a receptive judgement that remains open to signals, gestures, and rhythms beyond human speech. This orientation reframes listening to animal voices as an ethical and political practice, rather than translating them into human linguistic norms, by creating conditions where their expressions can matter. In this sense, attending to 'the living' aligns with activist calls for liberation and supports an understanding of communication

as situated and multisensory, emerging through relations that dismantle domination and affirm responsiveness across species.

Understanding animal communication also helps reveal commonalities and mutual interests with humans, enabling recognition of other animals as morally significant beings whose agency should be expanded for shared interspecies freedom. Ethologist Frans de Waal argues that the refusal to acknowledge similarities between humans and other animals and recognise them as intelligent beings is a major obstacle to a proper understanding of animal cognition and communication (2007, 2016). He shows that many other animals exhibit political behaviour, empathy, and cooperation, and that they develop species-specific intelligence that is adaptable to their social and environmental settings (de Waal 2016). De Waal's research on primates illustrates how animal behaviour and communication are politically relevant acts that allow them to form alliances, organise strategies for mutual support, deceive others through tactical communication or hidden behaviour, or reconcile and restore social order after fallouts (2007). Similarly, ethologist Per Jensen (2018) demonstrates that other animals are emotionally and cognitively complex social beings with emotional lives that include joy, affection, grief, jealousy, and fear. He shows how this range of emotions is not just biological reflexes, but stresses that emotions play a central role in other animals' social lives. Focusing specifically on domesticated animals, Jensen shows how animal emotion is linked to intelligence and that their emotional capacities are interlinked with cognitive flexibility, demonstrating that other animals' feelings and thoughts are meaningful.

Extending this, Eva Meijer's research on political communication with other animals provides compelling arguments to debunk the view that other animals cannot qualify as political actors. In *When Animals Speak*, Meijer develops a theory of political animal voices by drawing on a multidisciplinary approach including philosophy, linguistics, political theory, and ethology to argue that we humans can and should attend to, and be responsive to, animal voices as part of a broader understanding of interspecies democracy (2019). She argues against the idea that only human language would be meaningful or rational and provides many different examples that show how other animals make use of complex forms of communication, which not only include vocalisation but also gestures, body language, and patterns of behaviour; all of which express intention, emotion, and social meaning (Meijer 2019). Meijer argues that we commonly diminish animal

agency by judging other animals' levels of autonomy and their abilities to communicate and participate in human-controlled settings. Such judging through an anthropocentric perception of what, or who, counts as a political agent not only results in their subordination but also precludes us from properly understanding animal agency (Meijer 2013). This hinders the establishment of new modes of human-animal relations in which other animals are protected from harm. In the context of recognising animal agency, it is important not to evaluate other animals solely by how intelligent or capable they are "like us" to justify their protection or value. Rather, we should learn to appreciate the many ways in which other animals differ from us and recognise that their abilities to shape their own lives are meaningful, precisely because they matter to the animals themselves.

In the context of direct human-animal interactions, Meijer moreover shows that humans and other animals can share language, or "language games" (Meijer 2019, 33). Leaning on Wittgenstein's proposition to view 'language' in a different way, namely to try find out how it works rather than seeking to define it, Meijer holds that such an approach is especially useful for trying to gain a better understanding of interspecies and non-human animal languages since we cannot simply define what language means for all the other animals, and since we neither can claim superiority in deciding what counts as language (Meijer 2019, 43). Interspecies language games, and thus communication, come about when different species interact, and that very interaction and mutual recognition provide the basis for agency. Having the intention to be open to learn about nonhuman communication without devaluing it as irrational or less sophisticated than human language can thus be a meaningful way to challenge anthropocentric ideas about other animals as passive or incompetent and thus exploitable.

For instance, Meijer highlights how Caribbean reef squid speak with their skin. The squid have pigment cells called chromatophores that are attached to muscles, which are activated to quickly change the colour on their skin, enabling the squid to create complex visual patterns that allow them to camouflage into their environment, send flirting signals to each other, or communicate messages to scare off opponents (Meijer 2019, 54). So far, biologists have not fully comprehended squid communication, which not only involves changing colour patterns but also rapidly changing body postures. Humboldt squid, for instance, can produce their own light with bioluminescent organs which are embedded in their muscle tissue, enabling their entire body to glow in the dark of the deep sea to backlight colour

pigmentation patterns on the skin to communicate with fellow squid (Burford and Robinson 2020). Specific sequences of colour and glow patterns were identified during foraging and in social situations, which suggest that the squid communicate with each other by producing patterns that can be described as syntax. For example, it was observed that group foraging activities were organised by the squid to avoid competition for individual prey (Burford and Robinson 2020). Through their visual communication, the squid signified the type and location of prey to communicate prey-capture strategies (Burford and Robinson 2020).

Learning about the communicative abilities of wild animals such as squid, species with whom we do not share close relationships, is nevertheless important because it enables us to recognise them as autonomous social beings. Practices such as catching squid to use them as "food" directly harm them and hinder their ability to live their own lives. Respecting squid agency, therefore, calls for strong limits on human interference, including exploitation, extraction, and habitat destruction, alongside an ecological understanding of squid communities as embedded within broader marine networks that require protection.

This does not imply an absolute absence of human engagement. Attentive forms of observation, research, or interaction, such as diver encounters aimed at understanding squid communication and behaviour, may constitute responsive engagement rather than domination, particularly when they contribute to protecting squid communities and their habitats. Trying to understand the active engagement and mutual communication of other animals within their own social contexts can thus illuminate the complexity of animal agency and ways of life without reducing them to objects of human use.

Further examples of animal communication include the complex syntax and regional dialects of certain songbirds, as well as the sophisticated vocal communication of Mexican free-tailed bats (Meijer 2019, 55). Much of the bats' vocalisations, for instance, are beyond the range of human hearing, yet modern technologies reveal their complex structure and content, as shown by the fact that they discuss matters ranging from territory to social status, love, childcare, and other social affairs (Meijer 2019, 55). Observing and attempting to understand such communication, independently of direct human instrumental interests, provides one way of recognising other animals' sentience, individuality, and distinctive capacities.

These examples show that other animals have rich social lives. The agency of liminal animals such as bats can, for instance, be expanded by recognising that their urban and rural living spaces overlap with ours, and while we ought to respect that bats are not interested in direct relations with humans, their presence, ecological role, and agency should be respected so as to maximise bat agency and reduce harm imposed by human systems. Practically, bat habitats can be preserved by leaving established roosting nests in old trees or buildings intact or by putting up bat boxes to encourage bats to make themselves at home (Bat Conservation Trust 2025). Structurally, we can shift narratives about bats as "pests" to acknowledge them as a valuable part of interconnected webs of beings inhabiting shared urban and rural spaces, where bats migrate and fulfil ecological roles such as pollination and insect control. Politically, policies can be put in place to protect bat interests.

For example, the European Bat Agreement (EUROBATS) combines scientific study of bat populations with efforts to protect bats, as well as non-invasive monitoring to improve understanding of their species status and to inform conservation plans (UNEP/EUROBATS 2025). Sweden's commitments under the EUROBATS agreement include habitat protection, non-disturbance, the integration of bats' interests in city planning and the maintenance of landscape structures (Naturvårdsverket 2006). This is an example of how other animals' agency can be protected by creating relational, material, and political conditions that ensure non-domination and enable species-specific capacities, enabling other animals to move freely and pursue their own flourishing. Although bat-human relations involve little direct interaction, they can be described as indirect ecological relations through shared environments, thereby highlighting our interconnectedness. Maximising bat agency is important to safeguard their individual and collective freedom, as well as to enable the roles bats play in wider interspecies relations and ecological systems. Human efforts to support the agency of bats and other liminal animals can be seen to recognise animal collectivities that we share common spaces with.

Attending to animal communication not only challenges deep-rooted anthropocentric assumptions but also reveals how other animals live rich social lives in which they articulate preferences and negotiate boundaries. Understanding the communicative capacities of other animals is a crucial step toward transforming human–animal relations, as it shows one way in which other

animals pursue their own freedom. As Arendt reminds us, freedom is not an inner state but something that appears in the world through action and interaction (1958). When other animals express themselves through vocalisations, gestures, or other forms of signalling, they enact freedom in relational spaces, making their agency visible and calling for human responsiveness. Recognising these acts as meaningful contributions to shared worlds reframes communication as a political and ethical practice rather than a merely biological function.

Another, more direct expression of this pursuit of freedom is found in acts of refusal and resistance. Recognising these forms of dissent and responding with care and attentiveness is another crucial step toward transforming human–animal relations and advancing interspecies freedom.

Animal resistance

When possibilities for mutual communication are denied, resistance can become a form of dialogue through which other animals assert themselves and their desire for freedom. Reflecting on testimonies of resistance to human control highlights that other animals do communicate their discontent about what is being done to them. Through escape, refusal to cooperate, or attack, other animals disrupt their categorisation as docile resources to be freed, for instance, thereby enacting their desire for freedom.

One of these testimonies is of Yvonne, a cow who fled from a dairy farm in a German village (Colling 2021, 71). After her escape, Yvonne managed to avoid capture for several months by living in the woods and outsmarting the police and animal rescue teams, but she was eventually caught when she joined a herd of cows (Colling 2021, 71). The story gained considerable media attention, and a tabloid offered 10,000 euros for her capture, which the farmer owning the cows Yvonne had joined received. Due to the public attention drawn to the case, the Bavarian animal sanctuary *Gut Aiderbichl* purchased Yvonne to provide sanctuary for her, her son Friesi, and her sister Waltraud (Colling 2021, 71).

Such stories show that if other animals can make their dissatisfaction visible through acts of resistance or escape, it becomes easier for humans to recognise that they are not compliant with being farmed, confined, and ultimately killed. In most cases, however, farmed animals do not have the opportunity to be seen as individuals who resist human control, either because farming practices are

culturally romanticised, as it is often the case with farmed bovines, or because other animals are confined and killed out of public view within industrial systems of production (Pachirat 2011; Joy 2010; Nibert 2013).

What is important to bear in mind is that animal rebellion should not be misunderstood as purely an instinctual reaction or aggression. When recognising other animals as beings whose lives matter to them, their actions can be contextualised as disruptions to dominant anthropocentric worldviews and human-animal relations when they pose a direct danger to humans due to attacks (Wilbert 2006). Large predators such as wolves, or big cats like tigers, lions, and leopards can pose real threats to humans, but rather than viewing such attacks through depictions of these animals as purely aggressive or deviant, Wilbert highlights key problems as lying in habitat loss, human intrusion, and enforced control (2006). Especially in contexts where other animals are confined and manipulated, acts of rebellion occur that can be understood as self-initiated and intentional.

Consider Jason Hribal's example of two chimpanzees, Coco and Cherry, incarcerated in a zoo. Above their cage, a warning sign informed the visitors: 'Beware: Coco spits and throws poo at people.' (2010, 123). Hribal argues that Coco's behaviour is a sign of political resistance (Hribal 2010), and Meijer adds to this that research has shown that the throwing of faeces is a sign of intelligence in chimpanzees and that those individuals showing said behaviour are also those who are the better communicators in their group (2019, 124). She furthermore adds that "If we were to encounter a group of humans who had been imprisoned for no reason and they threw faeces at humans or at members of other species to look at them for entertainment, we might view this as an expression of resistance and an act of political communication; in this case, we do not." (Meijer 2019, 124). Coco and Cherry both had a reputation of being difficult with keepers and visitors, and according to Hribal, keepers referred to Cherry as a 'thug' and shot him right away after both chimpanzees managed to escape from their enclosure one day. Coco, on the other hand, was surrounded and captured after reaching a nearby field (Hribal 2010, 123).

Hribal analyses human-animal encounters from a CAS perspective, focusing on animal resistance, and argues that other animals are not passive or voiceless victims but rather active beings able to fight back and resist oppression, documenting numerous cases of such resistance from zoos, farms, and circuses.

His discussions show that these acts of rebellion are not random or instinctive, but intentional and agentive.

One very clear example is the story of three macaques in Guangdong Province, China, who attacked their owners after being forced to 'work' as street performers to entertain passers-by with tricks and their skills in bicycle riding (Hribal 2010, 99). During a performance, one of the monkeys refused to carry out a command and was consequently beaten with a large stick. The two other macaques saw what happened and turned to attack their owner by pulling his hair, biting his neck, and twisting his ears. Meanwhile, the injured macaque that had been hit picked up the fallen stick and proceeded to hit the man with it. Afterwards, the owner said that "'they were once wild and these performances don't always come naturally to them. They may have built up some feelings of hatred towards me'" (Hribal 2010, 99-100). These examples highlight a tension between human domination, reflected in desires for control, entertainment, and education, and the realities of other animals who are able to resist and express discontent in these contexts (Wilbert 2006).

Citing numerous attacks by lions and tigers in zoos, Hribal observed that the standard operating procedure of these facilities is to assure the public that a particular occurrence is an extremely rare accident, and that one should keep in mind that these are "wild" animals acting out of "instinct"; thus denying the agency of these animals (Hribal 2010, 24). Zoos then proceed to ensure the public that they will do everything in their power to prevent escapes or attacks, either through adding further locks or electrical fencing, putting up signs to stop visitors from harassing the animals, changing training methods or strategies, avoiding direct contact with the animals, or getting rid of them by selling them to third parties (Hribal 2010, 27, see also Malamud 1998; Acampora 2010). The very need for such extensive systems of control over other animals can be read as a testament to their agency, which must be constrained and managed for humans to achieve goals such as entertainment, education, or food production (Acampora 2010; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011).

The examples discussed here show that other animals are not passive entities but beings who actively communicate their preferences, frustrations, and desires. These vocalisations, acts, refusals, and escapes can be seen as disrupting speciesist ideas about other animals being purely driven by instinct and being unable to actively participate in social life. Attending to animal communication and resistance

can thus enrich our understanding of the complexity of nonhuman sociality. By learning more about other animals, we can destabilise the taken-for-granted silencing, degrading, and ignoring of more-than-human expressions. Part of recognising other animals as morally valuable beings is thus to recognise their resistance and communicative abilities as forms of action that demand a human response, both practically and institutionally, to ensure that their expressions are taken seriously. While resistance and refusal might be modes of dialogue particularly pertinent in oppressive contexts, they should be seen as aspirations to more fully express behaviours and life plans that would enable these animals to flourish.

The following section turns to discuss more positive modes of interspecies interaction that are intentionally designed to maximise agency and foster settings in which animal voices and relational contributions are welcomed and actively sought out, enabling the building of interspecies relations that foster shared modes of freedom.

Sanctuaries as sites of reconfigured relationships

Unlike the confinement depicted in chapter three, animal sanctuaries exemplify spaces where recognition and agency can flourish. As spaces intentionally designed to provide both safety from oppression and opportunities for animal autonomy and flourishing, sanctuaries thus demonstrate how interspecies freedom can be practised and institutionalised. Responding to the suffering and injustices produced by the animal industries, sanctuaries work to undo some of the damage caused by creating conditions in which trust and mutual recognition can gradually be rebuilt. This makes the example of animal sanctuaries especially powerful for considering interspecies freedom in practice, because sanctuaries create freedom from oppression and enable freedom to act, explore, and form relations to shape one's own world and flourish. Sanctuaries, moreover, support freedom with others and thus illustrate lived, more-than-human interdependent communities.

Sanctuary life can offer opportunities for interspecies freedom by enabling relational autonomy and expanded agency, although sanctuaries vary widely in how effectively they achieve this. Unlike industrial farms, some sanctuaries prioritise the safety and choice of resident animals, designing spaces that allow for social interaction, natural behaviours, and voluntary engagement with humans. Fences at such sanctuaries serve as boundaries of protection rather than

instruments of confinement or control. For example, *VINE Sanctuary* in Vermont offers refuge to other animals rescued from exploitative industries, and fosters a "multispecies community" in which human carers recognise the individuality of animal residents and allow them to interact freely with each other, across species lines, rather than confining them primarily for display or entertainment. At such sanctuaries, fences and boundaries serve as protection from harm rather than tools of control, allowing residents to roam, forage, and engage with the environment on their own terms (VINE Sanctuary 2026). These features help create conditions in which interspecies freedom and relational autonomy can emerge. The bounds and routines of animal sanctuaries thus carry remnants of the material legacies of domestication and the consequences of human domination, yet their clear goal is to reconfigure human-animal relations and to create conditions that make flourishing possible for all involved.

This can make animal sanctuaries powerful places of reconciliation and interspecies learning. Care is given without expectation of return, encounters are voluntary, and social life emerges through co-constitution (Corman 2017; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 2015). Drawing on feminist care ethics, Lauren Corman shows how sanctuary and rescue settings can expand animal agency and transform human-animal relations through concrete practices such as observing and responding to other animals' signals of comfort or distress, allowing other animals to choose whether to engage with humans, modifying routines to accommodate individual preferences, and creating environments that support natural social behaviours (2017). In these contexts, humans learn to adapt to other animals' needs, boundaries, and preferences rather than imposing control, fostering relationships in which agency is mutually recognised.

In this way, sanctuaries can be seen as more than merely spaces of rescue and advocacy. Donaldson and Kymlicka propose a shift in view, treating farmed animal sanctuaries as intentional communities with a clear incentive to promote interspecies justice (2015). Their argument is that this allows for a more radical vision of interspecies relations as the emphasis is not just on refuge and advocacy, which could potentially risk reinforcing hierarchical relations by viewing rescued animals as victims or symbolic ambassadors. Instead, viewing farmed animal sanctuaries as intentional communities shifts the inherent asymmetrical human-animal power relation toward greater equality, since it allows us to view and treat other animals as citizens and active co-creators of shared space (Donaldson and

Kymlicka 2015). In such an interspecies community, all animals can enact their freedom in multiple ways. For example, environments can be designed to provide the greatest possible freedom of movement, enabling other animals to roam, explore, and retreat as they choose. They can also choose who they would like to associate with, form bonds with, or share spaces with. With the opportunity to decide over one's movement and relations, animals have the option to make choices that are important to them, such as where to sleep, what to eat, or how to interact with others.

Being able to participate in interspecies community life in such a way allows for co-created relations in which all involved are respected as co-creators of the community, and no one is used instrumentally in the sense that their presence and life are exploited for human interests, not even in the name of raising awareness or educating about animal oppression. Donaldson and Kymlicka (2015) present this model as an aspirational standard, a vision of how farmed animal sanctuaries could operate if they fully supported interspecies justice and relational autonomy rather than a description of how all sanctuaries currently function.

Taken together, conceptualising animal sanctuaries as intentional communities grounded in non-exploitative human–animal relations positions them as vital sites for exploring how the insights and experiences generated there can inform other forms of human–animal coexistence. The interviews discussed in chapter seven provide examples of how such communal interspecies living can be practised. Participants spoke of goats choosing to share their sleeping arrangements with a pig (Interview 29), sheep opting to live their collective lives amongst each other in relative distance from humans (Interview 19), and chickens rescued from the egg industry discovering new habits and pleasures (Interview 28). These testimonies reveal that moments of partial freedom exist, even within a world still structured by exploitation and domination. One of the interviewed sanctuary practitioners described how their sanctuary receives continuous state support, illustrating that sanctuary practices can be institutionalised rather than remaining solely grassroots or marginal initiatives (Interview 28). This example shows that animal sanctuaries can be politically integrated as civic institutions, recognised as part of public care infrastructure and as units of environmental protection.

These examples of sanctuary life highlight that freedom does not require the absence of all constraints or the impossibility of interspecies relations. In fact, interspecies communities depend on forms of care, trust, and negotiated routines

that involve mutual dependency. Rather than viewing dependency as a limitation, sanctuaries illustrate how it can become a condition for flourishing, which enables safety, responsiveness, and shared practices that make freedom possible in situated ways.

Bornemark's reflections on her relationship with the horse Kaja deepen this discussion on dependency by challenging the assumption that dependency is inherently negative. In her account, dependency becomes a condition for creativity and ethical responsiveness rather than a marker of domination. Relating to Kaja by first asking "what does Kaja want" required Bornemark to suspend control and cultivate attentiveness to the horse's signals, such as pausing, adjusting, and learning in ways that allowed both to shape the interaction. This relational dynamic illustrates that freedom does not demand independence but can emerge through interdependence when humans respond to other animals as co-creators of shared practices. Such responsiveness resonates with sanctuary life, where care and dependency are not erased but reconfigured as mutual and generative. Rather than striving for autonomy understood as separation, sanctuaries and Bornemark's example invite us to imagine new ways of being with other animals as ways that affirm their agency and life worlds while acknowledging the relational conditions that make flourishing possible. In this sense, dependency becomes a resource for ethical and political transformation, enabling humans to respond to other animals without instrumentalising them and to cultivate practices of care that dismantle domination rather than reproduce it (Bornemark 2025).

With these reflections on dependency in mind, it is crucial to emphasise that reconfiguring dependency in line with interspecies freedom invites the cultivation of relational practices in which dependency is not exploited asymmetrically, but rather interdependence and recognition enable the mutual constitution of each other's agency. In this way, even asymmetrical relations can be guided by a commitment to respect and responsiveness, dismantling unequal power structures and allowing mutual flourishing to emerge.

8.3 Synthesising interspecies freedom

The preceding sections have established the conceptual foundations and practical contours of interspecies freedom. Drawing together the diagnostic critique of

anthropocentric liberty developed throughout this dissertation and the constructive account articulated in this chapter, this section synthesises the core argument: that freedom, when disentangled from naturalised hierarchical and exclusionary assumptions, can be rethought as a relational condition that includes humans and other animals. As shown throughout chapters three to seven, dominant anthropocentric accounts of freedom as a human-only concept shape liberty as a human entitlement and a zero-sum privilege, treating it as something that needs to be guarded or defended. Chapter four showed how these constructions are rooted in anthropocentric epistemologies that position rational human capacities as the threshold for moral and political standing, and are anchored in Ancient, Christian, and canonical texts of Western humanism, which constructed the *Anthropos*, thereby normalising systems of oppression. For other animals, this heightening of the human category meant that their disadvantaged positioning became hidden, making their lack of freedom conceptually invisible as their subordination and oppression became a taken-for-granted "truth". The structural logics outlined in chapter five highlight that this pattern reflects broader systems of oppression long analysed in ecofeminist and intersectional scholarship (e.g. Adams 1990; Gaard 1997; Cudworth 2011), underlining that the exclusion of other animals from the domain of freedom is historically produced, politically contingent, and therefore subject to critique and reimagining.

The conceptualisation of interspecies freedom developed in this chapter begins from a recognition of shared vulnerability and interdependence across species (Cudworth 2011; Haraway 2003). Rather than grounding freedom in separation, hierarchy, or capacity-based thresholds, I propose that freedom emerges within social and ecological relations and is co-constituted through them. Applied to the more-than-human domain, these insights situate freedom not as an attribute that individuals possess independently but as a condition shaped by relations that support or constrain possibilities for action. In this context, recognising other animals as subjects who actively negotiate, communicate, and express preferences becomes essential for conceptualising freedom relationally (Meijer 2019). Such a shift challenges longstanding dualisms between human agency and animal passivity and destabilises the conceptual foundations used to justify domination (Plumwood 1993, 2002; Warren 2000; Griffin 1978). Interspecies freedom thus requires a fundamental rethinking of how humans understand their place within our multispecies world.

It is important to note that interspecies freedom is relational and context-specific, rather than uniform across all animals. Different species and even individuals within species experience and exercise freedom in ways shaped by their ecological, social, and communicative capacities. For example, freedom for a cow in a sanctuary may involve movement across pasture, choice of social partners, and control over feeding. Freedom for a rat may depend on access to tunnels, opportunities for exploration, and engagement in social play, while freedom for a cat may be expressed through roaming, hunting, and selective interaction with humans or other animals. Relational freedom is also influenced by the specific human and environmental contexts in which other animals live. Farmed animals, companion animals, and wild animals inhabit distinct social and ecological worlds, and the conditions enabling agency and relational negotiation vary accordingly. Recognising these boundaries and differences is essential to avoid homogenising "other animals" and ensures that relational freedom remains attentive to species-specific needs, capacities, and forms of sociality. By situating freedom within these differentiated contexts, the account developed here highlights the need for tailored relational arrangements, environments, and practices that support co-constituted flourishing across diverse multispecies settings.

Based on the pillars of recognition, interdependence, and expanded agency developed earlier, this account rejects any conception of freedom that presupposes or legitimises the domination of Others. Recognition is indispensable because freedom cannot emerge when the experiences and claims of some beings are systematically denied (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Meijer 2019, Nedelsky 1989). However, what counts as recognition may vary across species and contexts. For a pig, recognition may involve respecting social hierarchies within the herd, providing opportunities for rooting and exploration, and allowing choice over feeding and resting areas, whereas for a dog it might mean respecting social bonds, providing opportunities for play and mental stimulation, and allowing voluntary interaction with humans and other animals. Expanded agency builds on Meijer's (2019) work to affirm the communicative, expressive, and resistant capacities through which other animals exert themselves, articulate preferences, and pursue their own life projects. The ways agency is expressed are shaped by species-specific behaviours, social structures, and environmental conditions, as a pig's capacity for social and exploratory engagement differs from a dog's. Interdependence similarly varies across ecological and social contexts, and

multispecies communities require humans to attune to these differences, responding to needs, limits, and preferences in ways appropriate to each species. Together, these pillars form an ethical and political orientation that understands freedom as a condition of flourishing in which beings can live according to their own ways of being, express their capacities, and participate in relational spaces without coercion or domination.

Such an orientation stands in sharp contrast to the anthropocentric model of zero-sum freedom that has dominated Western political thought. It reveals that the exploitation and oppression of Others cannot be justified as a function of the privilege of those in more powerful positions, since doing so itself participates in the very logic of domination that enabled it. Reimagining freedom as liberation from oppression thus asks us to confront and dismantle the domination of Others, offering alternatives grounded in diversity, coexistence, and mutual flourishing rather than hierarchy. This reconceptualisation resonates with feminist critiques of traditionally male-centred ideas of liberty as belonging to property-owning men (Halldenius 2001). It resonates with critiques of freedom being defined as something exercised at the expense of Others, which implies that true freedom is understood as radical autonomy, in which one is in no way dependent on others (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). Instead, the notion of interspecies freedom I propose is generative, in that the dismantling of domination opens the way for relational spaces to emerge that are conducive to mutual flourishing.

It is crucial to emphasise that interspecies freedom does not imply an idealised absence of conflict or utopian harmony. Relationships require ongoing negotiations, responsiveness, and attentiveness to differences. These relational dynamics are already visible in sanctuary practices and other forms of multispecies care and cohabitation (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015; Meijer 2019). Such examples demonstrate that other animals exercise diverse forms of agency when they are making choices, resisting control, forming relationships, and shaping shared environments. These practices reveal that freedom is relationally sustained and enacted through everyday interactions in which communication, care, and mutual adjustment create conditions enabling beings to pursue their own life trajectories.

Conceptually, the account of interspecies freedom developed here contributes to political theory and animal politics by expanding the scope of freedom beyond its anthropocentric boundaries. It challenges the assumption prevalent in liberal, republican, and capability-based approaches that freedom is necessarily exclusive

to humans (Cochrane 2009; 2012; Pettit 1999; Nussbaum 2022). By situating freedom within multispecies relationality, this account extends debates in political animal philosophy (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011), ecofeminism (Adams 1990; Gaard 1997; Gruen 2009), and more-than-human political thought (Cudworth and Hobden 2018; Haraway 2008). It offers a framework for analysing the structural conditions shaping multispecies communities and for imagining political institutions oriented not toward control or management but toward relational flourishing and the dismantling of domination.

To translate this relational account of freedom into practice, institutional and spatial arrangements must be reoriented toward non-domination and multispecies flourishing. This includes embedding evaluations of interspecies relationality into planning and animal protection policies (Schmidt 2015), establishing multispecies councils and guardianship models to represent nonhuman interests (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011), and integrating sanctuary practices as civic institutions that model interspecies care (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015; Meijer 2019). Legal reforms should move beyond welfare models toward recognising other animals as subjects with moral standing, while public procurement and food systems must phase out animal agriculture and support plant-based and coexistence-oriented alternatives (Joy 2010; Nussbaum 2022).

Coexistence-oriented alternatives to animal agriculture could involve sanctuary settings where other animals live for their own sake, while also contributing to broader production goals in ways structured around non-domination and flourishing. For instance, manure could be collected and used as fertiliser for vegetable farming. Pigs would be protected from bodily harm, but providing them with new spaces to dig and forage could meet their needs for exploration and self-sustainment while simultaneously preparing soil for later planting. Such methods are already common in permaculture farming, but the key difference would be that pigs are not slaughtered; instead, they are valued as co-members contributing to the shared goal of producing food for both humans and other animals without killing. Sheep and bovines could roam freely on pastures, and their grazing would help keep landscapes open, an argument frequently invoked by the "dairy" industry to justify its practices. A shift in perspective could thus help move away from viewing other animals as mere resources, not only by recognising them as valuable subjects but also by acknowledging the important roles they play within complex social and ecological contexts.

These measures create structural conditions that enable agency and relational negotiation rather than control, aligning with ecofeminist calls to dismantle hierarchical logics of domination (Plumwood 2002; Warren 2000). At the level of everyday life, interspecies freedom requires infrastructures and practices that sustain recognition, interdependence, and agency. Coexistence standards in urban and rural design, protocols for consent in animal labour and care, and non-lethal conflict mediation can foster environments where other animals exercise agency without coercion (Meijer 2019). Education and research reforms should prioritise non-animal methods and embed interspecies literacy across curricula, while emergency planning must include other animals as vulnerable subjects (Haraway 2003; Cudworth 2011). Together, these interventions operationalise interspecies freedom as a shared social good, making relational flourishing a tangible horizon rather than a conceptual ideal and advancing the transformative ethos of multispecies politics (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Haraway 2008).

Finally, synthesising interspecies freedom in this way foregrounds its transformative potential. It reframes freedom as a shared social good (Schmidt 2015), rather than a scarce resource reserved for those who meet human-defined criteria. It challenges the view that freedom is secured through mastery, sovereignty, or exemption from interdependence and instead positions it as a relational condition made possible through care, responsibility, and the refusal of domination. This reconceptualisation opens new spaces for political imagination, suggesting that human flourishing is inseparable from the flourishing of other animals. In this sense, interspecies freedom is not merely an extension of moral consideration but a reorientation of political thought itself. It positions freedom as a multispecies practice of creating and sustaining conditions in which all beings can live, move, and relate free from oppression.

This synthesis concludes the dissertation's constructive argument. By reframing freedom as a relational and interspecies condition of liberation from oppression, this chapter positions freedom as a central concept for future work at the intersection of political theory, critical animal studies (CAS), and more-than-human futures. The concluding chapter will briefly reflect on the implications of this account for political thought and outline directions for further research and political transformation.

9 Conclusion

This dissertation set out to challenge anthropocentric conceptions of freedom and to develop an account of interspecies freedom as a relational condition in which humans and other animals can flourish without domination. At its core, the study asked what freedom means when extended beyond the human and how rethinking liberty can help dismantle systems of oppression that shape human–animal relations. Through a critical analysis of dominant ideas of liberty, grounded normative theory, and empirical illustrations of animal unfreedom, the argument has shown that freedom cannot remain tied to hierarchical notions of the rational political subject. To imagine a more just and inclusive social order, freedom must be reconceptualised as a shared, co-created good, one that resists domination and affirms interdependence across species boundaries.

Synthesis of the main argument and contributions

This dissertation began by bearing witness to the realities of animal oppression through visual testimonies of domination and control (McArthur 2014). These examples illustrated how other animals are rendered unfree by being deprived of autonomy, movement, and social bonds, revealing the systemic nature of oppression that underpins human-animal relations. From this empirical grounding, the analysis turned to the conceptual foundations of freedom, discussing how dominant Western traditions constructed liberty as an exclusively human attribute. Philosophical accounts from Plato and Aristotle to Locke and Mill positioned freedom within a hierarchy that celebrated rationality and abstracted the human subject from nature and animality, thereby legitimising the subordination of other animals (Plato [375 BCE] 2002; Locke [1690] 2007; Mill [1859] 2002).

Building on this critique, I argued that anthropocentric conceptions of freedom are inseparable from broader structures of domination. Freedom has often been imagined as a privilege exercised at the expense of Others, reinforcing zero-sum logics and hierarchical social orders (Graeber and Wengrow 2021; Howes 2016; Wadiwel 2015). Intersectional and ecofeminist perspectives deepen this analysis

by exposing how speciesist oppression is entangled with gendered, racialised, colonial, and class-based hierarchies, all sustained by dualistic logics of domination that separate culture from nature and rationality from emotion (Plumwood 1993; 2002; Warren 2000; Cudworth 2005; Young 1988; Cudd 2006). These frameworks show that dismantling anthropocentrism requires challenging the wider politics of domination that normalise violence across multiple axes of difference.

Chapter six extended this critique by engaging with debates on animal freedom, mapping approaches from utilitarian and rights-based theories to abolitionist and political models of inclusion (Singer [1975] 2002; Regan [1983] 2004; Francione and Garner 2010; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Nussbaum 2022). While these contributions provide important protections against harm, they often remain tied to anthropocentric criteria such as rationality or capacity, which limit their transformative potential. Drawing on these discussions, I proposed interspecies freedom as an alternative conception of liberty that extends beyond the human boundary. This account reframes freedom as a relational good, co-created through practices of recognition, interdependence, and the expansion of agency (Meijer 2019; Blattner et al. 2020). Rather than treating freedom as an individual possession or a human-only ideal, interspecies freedom is envisioned as a shared condition that resists domination and enables flourishing across species boundaries. In doing so, the thesis revises and extends political theoretical debates about liberty by foregrounding animal agency and by recasting freedom as relational rather than as an exclusively individual possession.

Empirical insights from interviews with animal advocates further grounded this normative argument. Participants emphasised that freedom is not merely the absence of harm but a condition of relationality, mutual care, and opportunities for other animals to live according to their own interests. They highlighted that liberation is always partial, context-specific, and ongoing. Assuming a total perspective risks closing down opportunities to learn about unanticipated forms of oppression and marginalisation. From an intersectional perspective, freedom is a continual negotiation shaped by social, cultural, ecological, and species-specific contexts, which aligns with the relational account developed here. Just as freedom for a pig or a dog must be understood in relation to their capacities, social structures, and environments, human understandings of liberation must remain flexible, responsive, and open to revision. These reflections underscore the need

to dismantle structural hierarchies and cultivate practices that amplify animal agency, from sanctuary models to political advocacy.

Methodologically, the dissertation employs a grounded normative approach that integrates conceptual analysis with empirical materials to build arguments that are both critical and situated. Visual testimonies of animal oppression from *We Animals* and 31 semi-structured interviews with animal advocates, scholars, and sanctuary workers function as anchors that inform and test the normative claims advanced here. This design demonstrates how empirical insight can sharpen conceptual work, bridge theory and activism, and shows how normative theory can remain accountable to lived experiences of oppression and to practices of resistance and care (Ackerly 2018; Kvale and Brinkmann 2015; We Animals 2025). The approach also models an explicitly reflexive stance that acknowledges positionality and uses non-speciesist language to destabilise taken-for-granted hierarchies that are perpetuated linguistically and institutionally. In combining diagnostic critique with constructive theorising, the thesis contributes a practical template for doing political theory that is relational, empirically informed, and oriented to emancipation.

The dissertation offers a framework for reimagining institutions and everyday practices in ways that align with interspecies freedom. It identifies limitations of animal welfare models that manage animal oppression and shows why meaningful liberty requires structural transformation rather than incremental adjustments to the conditions of exploitation. Building on debates in animal politics and justice, the account developed here supports political inclusion through relations that recognise other animals as morally valuable beings. Concretely, the analysis points to practices that can amplify animal agency and redesign relations, including sanctuary-based models of care, urban and rural planning that safeguards movement and habitat, participatory attention to animal communication in decision making, and legal reforms that move beyond property status toward protections against domination and toward enabling conditions for flourishing (Meijer 2019; Wadiwel 2015; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011). By linking structural critique to everyday relations, the thesis contributes to political theory and to advocacy by offering actionable principles for cultivating social worlds in which humans and other animals can live more freely together.

To close this synthesis, let us consider the cover image of this thesis. Depicting Gulliver, a horse rescued from the Premarin industry[1], the photograph offers a visual counterpoint to the testimonies of animal oppression discussed earlier. Gulliver's calm presence in an open sanctuary landscape symbolises the possibility of transforming domination into care and of reimagining human–animal relations as spaces of safety, dignity, and flourishing (McArthur 2014). This image encapsulates the normative aspiration of this thesis to move from structures of oppression toward practices that enable freedom as a shared interspecies condition.

Implications

The findings of this dissertation carry implications for political theory, CAS, ecofeminism, and activist practice. For political theory, the analysis challenges the anthropocentric foundations of liberty and demonstrates that freedom cannot remain confined to the human political subject. By reconceptualising freedom as a relational good, the study invites a broader rethinking of core concepts such as agency, justice, and citizenship, extending their scope beyond the human (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Nussbaum 2022). This shift opens new avenues for theorising political inclusion and for interrogating the hierarchical logics that underpin dominant models of social organisation.

For critical animal studies (CAS), the account of interspecies freedom strengthens the field's normative commitments by providing a conceptual framework that moves beyond negative liberty and welfare-based approaches. It aligns with CAS's emphasis on total liberation while offering a constructive vision of what freedom might entail once oppression is dismantled (Nocella et al. 2014; Wadiwel 2015). Similarly, ecofeminist scholarship gains from this analysis by

1Premarin, derived from pregnant mare urine (PMU), is used in hormone replacement therapy for menopausal symptoms. Mares in the PMU industry are confined in stalls to collect urine, repeatedly bred, and separated from foals, many of whom, especially males, are slaughtered (Gentle Giants 2025). Gulliver, rescued at eleven months, now lives at Equine Voices Sanctuary, where horses receive medical care, social companionship, and open space to roam (Equine Voices 2025).

reinforcing its critique of dualistic thinking and by advancing an ethic of interdependence that foregrounds the relational constitution of freedom (Cudworth 2005; Plumwood 1993, 2002; Warren 2000).

For activism and advocacy, the implications are both practical and conceptual. The thesis underscores the need to move beyond incremental welfare reforms and toward structural transformations that dismantle property status and institutionalised domination. It highlights strategies such as sanctuary-based models of care, participatory attention to animal communication, and legal frameworks that protect against domination while enabling conditions for flourishing (Meijer 2019; Blattner et al. 2020). These principles can inform policy design, educational initiatives, and grassroots activism, fostering practices that cultivate interspecies freedom as a lived reality rather than an abstract ideal.

Limitations and future research directions

While this dissertation advances a conceptual and normative account of interspecies freedom, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the analysis primarily focuses on theory, supported by visual testimonies and interviews, but does not include direct engagement with other animals. Fieldwork methods that incorporate multispecies ethnography or participatory observation could have enriched the study by providing deeper insight into animal agency and lived experiences (Meijer 2019). Second, the empirical component was limited to 31 interviews with advocates and scholars, most of whom were based in Europe and North America. Future research could be enriched by including more geographically diverse perspectives and voices from Indigenous communities whose relational worldviews challenge anthropocentric assumptions in profound ways (Kimmerer 2024; LaDuke 1999).

A further limitation lies in the conceptual boundaries of freedom itself. While this thesis argues for a relational and inclusive account, the complexity of species-specific needs and interests means that any attempt to define interspecies freedom remains partial and provisional. Future work could explore how freedom is experienced and negotiated in specific contexts, such as sanctuaries, urban environments, or conservation projects, and examine how these practices can inform institutional design and policy. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaboration

with ethology, environmental studies, and legal scholarship could strengthen the practical applicability of interspecies freedom by linking normative principles to concrete governance frameworks.

Concluding reflections

The argument advanced in this dissertation calls for a fundamental shift in how freedom is imagined and practised. Moving beyond anthropocentric hierarchies and zero-sum logics, interspecies freedom offers a vision of liberty as a shared, relational condition grounded in recognition, interdependence, and expanded agency. This vision does not deny difference but embraces it as a source of diversity and mutual flourishing. In a world marked by ecological crises and systemic violence, rethinking freedom beyond the human is not a peripheral concern but a pressing ethical and political imperative. The image of Gulliver standing in the open sanctuary landscape reminds us that transformation is possible. Spaces of domination can become spaces of dignity, and relations of exploitation can be reconfigured into relations of trust and reciprocity. This is an unfinished project, but one that holds the promise of a more just and life-affirming future for all beings.

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Appendix A: interview questions

Relational freedom: Freedom from violence and exploitation in human-animal relations

Background:

Could you tell me more about your background and about what kind of animal advocacy work you do?

Part 1: on freedom in human-animal relations

What do you think freedom means for human beings?

How do you understand or define the meaning of freedom for other animals?

What positive obligations should exist in society so that everyone has the chance to live not only a life free from harm but also a satisfying life?

What characterises free human-animal relations?

Part 2: on the discourse and goals of animal liberation and free human-animal relations

How do you understand the goal of 'animal liberation'?

Intersectional analyses of domination and oppression as reinforcing one another sometimes

make the argument that "None are free until all are free". What do you think about this claim? Do you agree with it, or do you have reservations?

Follow-up: Have you ever encountered a situation or context in which "all are free"?

Part 3: Looking forward

Let us imagine a world that comes as close as possible to the goal of liberation from violence and oppression for humans and other animals.

What do you think such a world would look like? What solutions would you like to see? How do we get there?

Appendix B: informed consent form

Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form

Project title
Relational freedom—Freedom from violence and exploitation in human-animal relations

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Invitation
You are being invited to take part in this research project. Before you decide to do so, it is important you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the project?
The purpose of this research project is to develop how a restructuring of human-animal relations along principles of nonviolence and relational freedom would challenge animal exploitation and transform the wider socio-political problems connected to it. The goal is thus to contribute to animal liberation theory in trying to understand what freedom could look like and how it could be achieved when it does not only involve humans but all animals, across species boundaries and social differences.

Methodological information

The theoretical aim of the PhD project is supported through an empirical part for which semi-structured interviews are conducted to learn more about how the goal of animal freedom is understood by animal advocates. Through bridging academic and activist work, this research seeks to draw from, and contribute to, intersectional liberation movements.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been asked to participate in this study due to your experience of being engaged with some form of animal advocacy work (broadly defined; including activism, scholarly work, or direct engagement with other animals in NGOs or sanctuaries, for example).

Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be able to keep a copy of this information sheet and you will be asked to sign below to indicate your agreement to participate and that you have been sufficiently informed about the study. You can still withdraw at any time if you change your mind, and you do not have to give a reason.

Interview procedure and duration

If you agree to take part in this study, a semi-structured interview will be conducted. This means that you are asked a set of questions that have been designed to guide the conversation. However, over the course of the interview, additional clarifying questions may be asked. The interview questions take up topics that consider freedom for humans and other animals, how freedom relates to oppression, and reflect on different approaches to think about freedom and animal liberation. You are free to skip any questions that you would prefer not to answer. If you agree, the interview will be audio-recorded. The audio recording will be used to transcribe the interview. Recordings will be made on a digital voice recorder and stored in a locked location. The interview will approximately take between 30 to 60 minutes.

Confidentiality

All the information that that is collected about you during the course of the interview will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified or identifiable in any reports or publications. Your institution will also not be identified or identifiable. Any data collected about you in the interview will be stored in a locked safe and/or on a password-protected computer. In case we wish to cite something you said anonymously, we will contact you to ask for your permission.

What are the risks of this study? Due to the confidentiality measures in place, there are no foreseeable physical, legal, or financial risks when participating in this study. However, due

to discussing the topic of oppression, it cannot be ruled out that the interview situation could be causing some form of stress, discomfort, or other negative emotions such as feelings of upset.

What are the benefits of this study? There are no foreseeable direct benefits from participating in this study.

Are there any costs or compensation? You will not have any costs for participating in this research study. There will not be any economical compensation for being interviewed for this study.

Who is funding this study? The research project is funded the Political Science Department at Lund University. The PhD researcher and research supervisor are not receiving any payments from other agencies, organisations, or companies to conduct this research study.

Processing of personal data

If you have any questions or complaints about how Lund University processes your personal data, please contact the University's data protection officer at dataskyddsombud@lu.se. Such complaints can also be made directly to the Swedish Data Protection Authority: Complaints and tips – datainspektionen.se (in Swedish).

Further questions?

If you have any questions about the study please contact Jana Canavan at jana.canavan@svet.lu.se

Informed consent

This Informed Consent Form is not a contract. It is a written explanation of what will happen during the study if you decide to participate. You are not waiving any legal rights by signing this Informed Consent Form. Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

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Participant Signature	Date	PhD Researcher	Date

Thank you very much for taking part in this research.

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