It is half past one at night. Just finished Jan Siebelink’s, My life with Tikker. About fourteen years of intense togetherness between the author and his soul mate Tikker. In the final chapter Tikker, the dog, dies. The story is over. I can’t sleep. I’m sad. Thinking about Romke, my own dog, sleeping downstairs. Is he? Sooner or later he will die too. But not yet? I get up, go down, and snuggle alongside him on the couch. He turns on his back, stretches, and breathes deeply. Intense mutual pleasure.

Lunacies like these are typical for what Korthals describes as the practice of companion animals. And no reasonable person would expect to impose such an exorbitant intimacy with animals on other practices of human-animal relations, like farming or experimental animal research. We don’t have at our disposal a strong animal ethics, applicable to all practices and generally accepted; and it would be rather unpragmatic to develop and enforce one. But strong feelings towards animals we have - positive or negative. Such feelings, I would argue, should not be passed over too quickly as mere sentiments or unarticulated intuitions. On the contrary, they are a cornerstone of (not only moral) deliberations and learning processes concerning human-animal relations. Weak ethics but strong feelings.

In his contribution A Multi-Practice Ethics of Domesticated and “Wild” Animals Korthals argues for a pragmatic, multi-practices-oriented, animal ethics. I fully endorse the first, pragmatic part of his program. It avoids any foundationalist or essentialist reference to a kind of natural situation. Korthals gives two related reasons for this pragmatism. First, there is no natural situation, and therefore, secondly, essentialism, in whatever fashion, cannot handle the four dilemmas he reconstructs in human-animal relationships. In one or another way each animal ethics Korthals distinguishes refers to something like a stable, universal, a priori given Nature, which leads to normative criteria such as animal rights, genetic integrity, ecosystem equilibrium or animal welfare. Rejecting these criteria, Korthals argues for nonfoundationalist pragmatism in animal ethics, i.e. for practice-related
ethical learning processes. One cannot too often plead for this kind of pragmatism, I believe; especially in times of crises due to BSE or foot-and-mouth disease, when foundationalism and misplaced sentimentalism run rampant - not only among ordinary citizens but also among professional ethicists. As if pigs, cows and sheep at a farm should always be treated the same way as cats and dogs at the service flat.

In discussions like these, Korthals’ Walzerian idea of “spheres of animal ethics” has a wholesome effect. His multi-practices approach acknowledges that ethical rules and considerations function only within the context of a specific practice; that is in close relation to other concerns, for example of a more social, esthetic, environmental, historical or cultural kind. Consequently, animal ethics is not a matter of top-down regulation and legislation, but of bottom-up learning processes. Both the triangulation of those, often conflicting, concerns within one practice and clashes between different practices, possibly leading to a translation of the vocabulary of one practice into that of another, feed this learning process. So, Korthals’ pragmatism does not need abstract principles or rules to proceed. Exit ethical visions from nowhere. At best, we human animals can help ourselves, muddling through practices.

Nevertheless, Korthals formulates a general, practice-independent animal ethics - however minimal. First, he says, animals deserve serious, though not equal, ethical consideration. And secondly, the more animals fall within our responsibility and are dependent on us, the more we must care for them. Apart from the question whether the formulation of these general principles is philosophically consistent with Korthals’ own pragmatism, i.e. with his multi-practices approach, the content of these principles is disputable. How far does the idea of ethical consideration of animals actually reach or, normatively speaking, do we want it to reach? All animals in all situations? Or only some in some situations? But then: which ones in which situations? That’s just a matter of those learning processes, Korthals will riposte. Granted, but is the answer to those questions an ethical one, or to be more specific: one of animal ethics? What, in fact, do we mean by “(animal) ethics”?

I would like to push Korthals’ argument one step further. These learning processes are not so much a matter of moral learning, resulting into an (animal) ethics. On the contrary, we are faced with rather uncontrolled, because heterogeneously driven and thus contingent developments within and between practices - developments in which all kinds of facts, artifacts, and ideas play a role: economic changes, technological novelties, rational calculations, cultural traditions, sentiments, and, maybe, sometimes, even moral considerations and ethical principles. To illustrate my point, I go back for a while to the farm I grew up in the fifties and sixties.

Our farm was a mixed firm – partly agriculture, partly cattle farming. Behind the farmhouse are two stables, one for store pigs and one for breeding pigs. Surely, in Korthals’ categorization these pigs belong to the practice of livestock farming. But did we entertain one and the same relation towards all pigs? Of course not. Our affection and level of care for breeding pigs - the sows, the boar, and the piggies - was much more intense than for store pigs. We were not allowed to enter the stable