The Moral Status of Animals

LECTURE 2 – HUMAN-ANIMAL STUDIES

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Contents

1. Background on animal ethics - leading thinkers/movements

2. Various philosophical formulations of arguments pertaining to the moral status of animals (plus counter-claims)
   a. UTILITARIAN
   b. RIGHTS
   c. ANTI-RATIONALIST

3. Ways in which these formulations have implications for action with regard to safeguarding the welfare of animals
‘I don’t care that it’s wrong’
1. Animal Ethics in the History of Western Philosophy

• Pythagoras (c. 570 BC – c. 495 BCE) - Vegetarian (?); ‘Metempsychosis’

• Aristotle (384–322 BCE) - History of Animals; Taxonomy of souls

• The Church Fathers (Tertullian (AD 155-160)) - Asceticism/‘moral purity’

• René Descartes (1596 – 1650) - ‘mechanistic’

• Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) - ‘Indirect moral duties’: ‘He who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men. We can judge the heart of a man by his treatment of animals’ (Lectures on Ethics).

• Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) – ‘**What else is it that should trace the insuperable line?** Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day or a week or even a month old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? **The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?**” (The Principles of Morals and Legislation, 1789)
2. Animal Ethics – 20th Century to Present
2. a. Utilitarianism

- Maximising utility
- ‘the greatest happiness for the greatest number’
- Types of Utilitarianism (act, rule, preference, total, average, negative, etc.)

Peter Singer (preference utilitarian)

- ‘The capacity for suffering and enjoyment is a prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in a meaningful way’. (Singer, 1975: 9).
- ‘Equal consideration of interests’
2. a. Utilitarianism - Objections

- ‘Aggregation’ – ‘summing together all pleasures and pains’ (Nussbaum, 2006)

- ‘Utility monsters’ - who get enormously greater gains in utility from any sacrifice of others than these others lose. For, unacceptably, the theory seems to require that we all be sacrificed in the monster's maw, in order to increase total utility. (Nozick, 1999)

- Slavery objection - ‘If slavery is wrong, it is only because the practice fails to maximize the good, not because of the inviolability or dignity of persons.’ (DeGrazia, 1991)

- VALUE OF LIFE - FORECLOSURE OF POSSIBILITY? - Rachels (1983: 254) similarly argues that "when a mentally sophisticated being dies, there are more reasons why the death is a bad thing."
2. b. Rights

- Ethical, legal, social principles of *entitlement* or *freedom*
- *Collaborative* - ‘some sort of agreement’ / ‘mutual advantage’ / ‘contractual’
- *Deontological* – rule-based ethics
- *Inviolable* (‘negative rights’ – free from interference)
- Who qualifies? (species membership, certain cognitive capacity, etc.)
- *Speciesism* - ‘How can one defend the idea that human beings are ends, while nonhuman beings are means? ... Human rights are not *human*’ (Cavalieri, 2005)
2. b. Rights

Tom Regan

- ‘Moral agents’ vs. ‘moral patients’

- ‘Treatment’ - Moral patients cannot do what is right or wrong, we have said, and in this respect they differ fundamentally from moral agents. But moral patients can be on the receiving end of the right or wrong acts of moral agents, and so in this respect resemble moral agents.

- ‘Subjects of a life’

- individuals are subjects-of-a-life if they have beliefs and desires; perception, memory, and a sense of the future

- ‘They have ‘inherent value’ and this value is ‘irreducible’’

- ‘It is not an act of kindness to treat animals respectfully. It is an act of justice’.
2. b. Rights - Objections

- Reductios (extreme rights extensions, disruptive reform)

- Rights as ‘reciprocal’

  ‘they are . . . claims, or potential claims, within a community of moral agents. Rights arise, and can be intelligibly defended, only among beings who actually do, or can, make moral claims against one another’. (Cohen, 1986: 865)

- Does the awarding of rights logically follow from subjective experience?

  ‘Repeately we encounter the same fallacious passage from the premise that animals have interests to the conclusion that animals have rights’ (Cohen, 2001)
2. c. ‘Anti-rationalist’

- Rationality not the absolute horizon of cognition
- Eschewing ‘attempts to ground ethics in ahistorical, transcendental norms’ (Sapontzis, 1987)
- ‘things are embodiments of relational networks’ (Taussig, 2010: 136)

Margaret Midgely (also, Richard Nozick, Steve Sapontzis, Nussbaum, etc.)

- ‘Social-bondedness’

- The special interest which parents feel in their own children is not a prejudice, nor is the tendency which most of us would show to rescue, in a fire or other emergency, those closest to us. We are bond-forming creatures, not abstract intellects. (Midgely, 1984)
2. c. ‘Anti-rationalist’ - Objections

- long-term utility?
- it is never successfully explained why racism could not be justified along the lines of a defense which of gives priority to those "closer" to us
- the relation between reason and emotion is never clearly explicated (Russow, 1985: 174)
- the normative suggestions are very vague
- Anthropocentrism – Evaluation of what ‘a life with dignity’ means ... ‘we need to remember that we are relatively ignorant of what a good life for each sort of animal is and strongly biased in favor of our own power interests’ (Nussbaum, 2006)
3. Activism

- Utilitarianism - Awareness raising (‘scornful dismissal’ vs. careful renunciation ‘designed to convince the detached critic’)
  ...Consumer boycotts

- Rights - Legislative measures (‘it would imply for these animals a shift from the condition of objects to that of subjects of legal rights’ (Cavalieri, 2005) ‘a constitution or other founding statement of principle a commitment to regarding nonhuman animals as subjects of political justice and to treating them in accordance with their dignity’ (Nussbaum, 2006))

- Anti-Rationalist - Environmental arguments
4. Bibliography