

Morality and Animal Rights: What Is “Ethical Interanimality”?

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Theme: [History](#)

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“Cursed be that mortal inter-indebtedness which will not do away with ledgers. I would be free as air; and I’m down in the whole world’s books. I am so rich... and yet I owe for the flesh in the tongue I brag with” (Moby Dick, chapter cviii).

In standard rationalistic approaches to animal ethics (often employed by animal rights and welfare advocates), moral consideration is incrementally extended out from an established human ‘moral club’ to grant moral status to ‘others’. Typically, this strategy consists of basing our ethical obligation to animals on certain morally relevant similarities. In that case, the inclusion of non-human animals in the ethical sphere involves a twofold operation: first, we must identify the characteristics that make human animals worthy of moral consideration (e.g., rationality, language, desires, beliefs, etc.); second, they must then show that (at least some) nonhuman animals possess the requisite characteristics.

However, the very attempt to satisfy this demand already presupposes the implicit attitude of non-affiliation. It is precisely this assumption that seems open to dispute – for it fails to appreciate our actual experience since we do not, generally, consider ourselves discreet, solipsistic objects whose original problem is to figure out how to reconnect to the world. It ignores the fact that we begin always already caught up in the experience of being a lived body thoroughly involved in a complex web of ecological and social interrelationships with other living bodies and people. Further, it neglects that we are “entirely a part of the animate world whose life swells within and unfolds all around us,” as the philosopher David Abrams observes. It involves, in other words, a denial of human animality and our ecological embeddedness.

I suggest that we should question the presupposition that humans can and should attempt to define criteria for the moral consideration of the non-human (or more-than-human) world. In what follows, I argue that we would do better to adopt a position of genuine ethical openness; which means acknowledging that we can never settle our attitude to the other – that “my knowledge of others may be overthrown” as Stanley Cavell puts it, and “even that it ought to be.” I suggest that we should be skeptical of drawing up criteria for something’s being worthy of moral consideration. Instead of ensuring that nothing is capable of disturbing our ‘good conscience’, the interanimal ethics I propose recognizes our fallibility, as well as the limits of our knowledge and understanding. In short, it recommends that we remain wary of our natural complacency, as well as malleable and receptive to the other who might address us from anywhere, at any time.

A brief story from my childhood offers a good starting point: When I was about five years old, I and another boy decided one day that we were going to find and kill a bird. My family had a house in a St. Louis suburb; so, my friend and I gathered what arms we could find – a

wooden stick, a boomerang that belonged to my older brother – and went into the backyard to find our target. After a few unsuccessful attempts we managed to sufficiently wing a small one so that it lay helpless but still alive on the ground. We then set upon it. I remember only two things about what followed: first, the bird’s screeching out in pain and terror; and second, my sudden apprehension of horror and shame, which led to a good deal of sobbing.

In his *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas observes that,

“Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent... freedom discovers itself murderous in its very exercise.”

To be sure, in a Levinasian moment of shame I discovered my freedom (and my embodiment) as murderous and arbitrary – I was startled, quite literally, by the voice (and, indeed, the face) of the other, in this case a defenseless bird. The point is that there was also a moment of carnal empathy, unbidden and completely unforeseen, in which the bird’s cries were my cries, its terror was my terror. I knew instantly – though not cognitively or discursively, but rather in my body – that I had intruded upon and violated something which had interests of its own. What horrified me was not that I had broken a moral norm or principle: what horrified me was that I had broken a body, a lived body with its own integrity – an integrity that I had not been aware of until I crushed it.

In that light, I propose we rethink the ethical in terms of human-animal intertwining, in terms of how ‘we echo through one another, such that “the relation between the human and animality is not a hierarchical relation, but lateral.” This involves recognizing that there is no human order as such in isolation from the semiotic networks – networks of meaning – that connects us inextricably to other living things. Consider, for example, *Moby Dick*. A whale has eaten Captain Ahab’s leg; and Ahab has the ship carpenter fashion a prosthesis out of a whalebone. “Oh. Life! Here I am, proud as a Greek God, and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on! Cursed be that mortal inter-indebtedness which will not do away with ledgers.” For one thing, Ahab’s mutilated body reminds him that without others, he is just as helpless as an infant, unable to walk or talk (“I owe for the flesh in the tongue I brag with”). But more to the point, his flesh is part of the whale’s flesh, and the whale’s bone is a part of his body, attached to his body – so that he is indeed indebted to the whale and vice versa. “Ahab... becomes *Moby Dick*, he enters into a zone of proximity [zone de voisinage] where he can no longer be distinguished from *Moby Dick*, and strikes himself in striking the whale” (Deleuze). Similarly, I struck myself in striking that bird.

By suspending the standard rationalistic approaches to animal ethics, in which moral consideration is incrementally extended out from some pre-established human moral core, we are afforded the opportunity to ground ethics in a non-dual and forward-thinking ontological model. In contrast to the inherently hierarchical relation between the human and animal, I propose that a ‘laterality’ becomes recognizable in our carnal empathy and web-like intertwining with animals.

Returning inter-animal ethics to its ontological foundation, this concept was used to describe an existential condition that is shared between humans and other animals. Animals, like ourselves, have interests – and all semiotic agents, even the simplest, are able to

distinguish between what they need and what is harmful (or unimportant) to them. As Kalevi Kull observes: “Everything alive has needs per se, not so the lifeless nor the dead.” I claim moreover that we are not justified in regarding animals as merely striving to continue in their existence – but rather, the animal is intrinsically a striving towards ontological expansion and self-expression, or what Kurt Goldstein calls “self-actualization” and “creativity”.

Nature is the inexhaustible proliferation of creations: an infinitely creative force expressing itself with infinitely differentiated results. There is still a tendency to view genuine creativity as the special province of mankind; but there is an argument to be made that true creativity could not arise in the middle of a universe in which creativity did not already exist. So, unless we are prepared to accept that the creativity of human beings is itself an illusion, then arguably “the world, contrary to the classical physical image, was creative even before human creativity appeared...” This may mean, among other things, that there is no sharp division between nature and culture, ‘no kingdom within a kingdom,’ which is not to deny those aspects of human culture that make it unique – rather, it is to say that there is no aspect of human culture which is not at least pre-figured in the animal world.

Indeed, structures of performance and spectatorship, music and dance, painting, architecture, courtship, camaraderie, ritual and mourning – all find expression and meaning in non-human worlds. As our knowledge of living Nature deepens, we may find that those aspects of ourselves, which we take to be most distinctly human, may in fact be regarded as ‘an extension and refinement of animal abilities.’

In closing, it seems incumbent on us to view living entities ‘within the widest of intellectual and spiritual horizons.’ This means viewing and treating the animal as a living whole, an irreducible way of being-in-the-world that cannot be grasped through the physio-chemical description of life alone. It also means acknowledging that our humanity implies an already existing continuity with the non-human, that we inhabit a shared meaningful world with other living things, which itself is constitutive of our humanity.

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