

Book Reviews

Ethical and Political Approaches to Nonhuman Animal Issues

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This book is a collection of papers, many of which seem to have come out of a conference organised by the two UK-based editors, one of whom works in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Birmingham, and the other as an independent researcher. As the title of the book indicates, it explores two kinds of approach to so-called nonhuman animal issues, ethical and political.

The description of the issues covered as “nonhuman animal issues” already indicates the shared orientation of the authors of the book: in principle there is for most, if not all, contributors to this book no good reason to draw an ethical distinction between humans and other animals. This view gained momentum through Peter Singer’s book, *Animal Liberation* in 1975, while Peter Singer was still based in the UK. In North America, a parallel development was spurred by Tom Regan’s 1983 book, *The Case for Animal Rights*. However, as is stressed by the British author of the book’s foreword, Richard Ryder, and by the American author of the book’s afterword, Carol Adams, there were people, many of them women, on both sides of the Atlantic who came before Singer and Regan and paved the way for their ideas.

However, the main focus of the book is the more recent development of a so-called “political turn” that has happened in what the editors in their introduction call “the movement”, adding in a footnote that a more accurate description would be “movements”. The fact that the editors feel the need to talk about *the* movement is symptomatic of a them-and-us mentality which permeates many of the 17 contributions to the book: *We* have seen the light and have decided both in theory and in practice to live according to a view whereby it is unacceptable to use animals for farming, experimentation and recreation, in contrast to *them*, the many, who go on to eat animal products and in other ways condone violations of animal rights. In this way, the orientation of this book is very different from the orientation of most contributions to the journal for which I am writing this review, *Animal Welfare*, where, as indicated by the title, the moral distinction between humans and other animals is accepted, and where the main focus is on finding ways to improve the welfare of animals used by humans rather than bringing the use of animals to a halt.

An important context for the book is that the movement as a whole, according to the editors, has not been very successful in achieving its goals “as more nonhuman animals suffer and are exploited than ever before” (p 2). Frustration with this development has contributed to what the philosopher Tony Milligan has termed “the political turn” in the animal rights movement, where the focus is on

politics rather than on ethics, marked by recent books by authors such as Robert Garner, Alistair Cochrane, Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka. As the editors express it: “... many within the movement have begun to consider whether the traditional ethical approach to nonhuman issues is inadequate. As a result, some have begun to turn to political theory in order to provide traction for the movement and better aid for nonhumans” (pp 2-3). This claim, that addressing animal issues by means of political rather than ethical theory will make not only a theoretical but also a genuine practical difference for the affected animals, underlies many of the contributions to the book. However, it is directly confronted in the first paper following the introduction.

This paper is written by the British philosopher, Mark Rowlands. He quite convincingly, in my view, attacks the claim that a shift from speaking of animal rights in ethical terms to speaking of them in political terms will make a practical difference by achieving a wider recognition of and respect for animal rights. He does so by addressing the version of this claim made by Donaldson and Kymlicka in their highly influential book, *Zoopolis, A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (2012). He notes that the main reasons Donaldson and Kymlicka give for why, on a global level, no real progress has been seen in terms of respect for animal rights, are population growth and related increasing demands for meat. However, Donaldson and Kymlicka still argue that a *new framework* is the solution to the problem of failing recognition of animal rights. However, that a change in theory, going from an ethical to political framework, should be the solution to the noted massive global problem as Rowland dryly notices “strains credibility” (p 24). In the rest of his very interesting paper he goes on to argue that another alleged deficiency of the previous animal rights framework, that it emphasises negative rights at the cost of positive ones, “is more a question of strategic emphasis than theoretical commitment” (p 36). Rowlands clearly sees the value of framing animal rights in political terms, but his paper warns against thinking that this change will serve as a magic bullet solving all the problems faced by the animal rights movement so far.

One of the claims made by Donaldson and Kymlicka is that domesticated animals should be seen as members of our society. One contribution to this collection, by the Icelandic philosopher, Gardar Arnason, aims to think through the consequences for animals of making them members of our society when it comes to research. In contrast to traditional moral rights thinkers who favour an abolitionist stance towards animal experimentation, Arnason argues that thinking of animal rights within a political framework would not only entitle animals to societal goods, such as healthcare, but would also imply duties for the group as a whole to participate in research — in roughly the same way as is the case for humans today, including human infants who cannot consent on their own but still can participate in

research based on the consent from a guardian. This imagined form of animal use for research is, of course, far removed from current uses of animals in biomedical research. However, it may not be that far removed from how companion animals are today used in research, including translational research.

Some contributions to the book go beyond developing and discussing the theory of animal rights and instead aim to apply this theory to real life issues. Thus, a paper by the Dutch philosopher, Eva Meijer discusses how, in practice, to allow animals a voice in political deliberation thereby affecting their lives. She underpins and illustrates her theoretical account of the subject by looking at conflicts between greylag geese and humans in The Netherlands. Populations of greylag geese have been growing in recent decades, giving rise to problems in residential areas, in farm areas and around Schiphol airport, where the geese pose a risk to flight safety. As a sympathiser with the animal activist side of public controversies concerning how to handle geese-human conflicts, Meijer speaks in favour of new ways of interacting with the geese: “Speaking with them and listening to what they have to say is the first step in this process” (p 224). Of course, it is not perfectly clear what this means, but Meijer, at least in my view, manages to open the eyes of the reader to the possibility of allowing wild animals a more active role in human-animal interactions via their behavioural responses to human interventions.

Another interesting contribution comes from the British/American animal rights advocate, Kim Stallwood, who has spent many years of his professional life working for animal advocacy organisations both in the UK and in the US. He criticises the current widespread view of “animal rights as a narrowly defined moral crusade and not as a wider social movement with a political mission and strategic objectives” and he argues that “the fault line between success and failure for the animal rights movement lies in understanding the difference between personal change and institutional change; or, in other words, the difference between a moral crusade (inspired by self-interest) and a social movement (inspired by benefits for many)” (p 288). Following this, he argues against the view that there should be an exclusive choice between abolition and regulation of animal use. According to him, both aims are needed to achieve change; and following this he presents very practical guidance on how to achieve political change that will lead towards animal rights being recognised at societal level. The upshot of his argument seems to be that only pragmatic and incremental approaches stand any chance of dealing with what in the book, as a whole, is seen as the major problem for the animal rights movement, ie the mismatch between the goal of the movement and the realities for the animals having their rights violated due to human use.

The aim of the book is quite widely defined by the editors not only to cover the development from an ethical to a

political stance towards animal use, but also to include contributions from each of these areas. Therefore, there are a number of contributions in the book that focus on specific issues in animal ethics, some of which are really interesting.

One such contribution is a paper by the Dutch philosopher, Tatjana Visak, which discusses cross-species comparisons of welfare, and shows their implications for the question of how to rank the value of a human life against the life of an animal, and how to rank the value of one animal life against the value of another animal life, for example, the life of a dog against the life of a squirrel against the life of a snail. Using an ingenious line of argument, she concludes that there is no basis for saying that the value of the human (to the human) is higher than the value of the life of squirrel (to the squirrel) or the snail (to the snail — provided that things matter to a snail). This is a counter-intuitive conclusion that flows from a plausible argument, and for this reason gives food for thought for those who, like the present reviewer, like to have their assumptions challenged.

Another interesting contribution, by the Spanish philosopher, Oscar Horta, deals with the issue of wild animal suffering. In this very rich and well-argued paper he concludes that “the claim that suffering and early death is widespread in the wild, and that it vastly prevails over happiness, stands as correct. This means that if there is any way we can help them and reduce the harms they suffer we have strong reasons to do so” (p 374). This is, of course, a great challenge to those who care about animal welfare, many of whom seem to think that living in nature outside human control is good for wild animals. Also, it poses a challenge for those who not only care about animal welfare but also care about not interfering with wild nature. Again, this is a paper that is of value not so much because of its practical implications (which, anyway, are not the strongest part of the paper) but because it forces the reader to challenge and reflect on her or his underlying assumptions. It is also written in a very accessible way, making it potentially very useful for teaching purposes.

Unfortunately, the liberal policy of the editors regarding what to include in the volume does not only have the good consequences exemplified by the two previously mentioned papers. The volume contains a significant number of papers that do not, in the view of the current reviewer, make a positive contribution. These fall in two groups: (a) philosophical papers which, if they should be published at all, would be better placed in a relevant journal; (b) well-meaning contributions which despite using a lot of words do not really get beyond providing gestures and flowery political rhetoric. This is a pity, since there is a genuine risk that, as a consequence, the good contributions found in this huge volume will not get the readership they deserve.

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