Animal ethics: the capabilities approach

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Abstract

This paper argues that beliefs about human nature are central for animal ethics as beliefs about animal nature ground human treatment of animals. It shows that what constitutes animal nature is a contested question, and that animals have long been considered inferior to humans in Western thought. In Judaeo-Christian ethics, God gave humans dominion over animals. This exacerbated the long-established prejudice in Western culture in favour of rationality as the defining characteristic of human beings. Rene Descartes was influential in arguing that animals were but machines that moved and made sounds but had no feelings. In such a context it was easy to portray animals as quasi-clockwork animated robots — ‘furry clocks’. Jeremy Bentham first advocated the direct inclusion of animals in our ethical thinking, introducing the concept of sentience, or the capacity to feel pleasure and pain, as the central criterion. Peter Singer’s work is in this tradition. He also popularised the notion of speciesism — a bias in favour of one’s own species. Now, Martha Nussbaum has introduced a new approach, the capabilities approach, a Quality of Life approach which lists ten capabilities, nine of which apply to animals as part of their nature. It applies to the whole range of animals (and throughout this paper the term ‘animals’ refers to sentient animals unless otherwise specified) — companion animals, farm production animals, animals in zoos, rodeos, museums and laboratories. Her work is the main focus of this paper. It is argued, therefore, that the capabilities approach contributes to understanding the relation of notions of animal nature to animal welfare, and what a good life for animals entails.

Keywords: animal ethics, animal welfare, capabilities, John Stuart Mill, Martha Nussbaum, nature

Introduction

This paper argues that beliefs about animal nature are central to, and in fact drive, issues of animal ethics. It problematises the concepts of nature and ‘the natural’, and their ready use as a shortcut to the good, by discussing John Stuart Mill’s essay, *Nature* (1969). It then traces some key conceptual developments in animal ethics, and argues that Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities approach is the most promising and practical of current alternatives. Because of its breadth of concern and specificity of recommendations, it can make a vital contribution to animal welfare.

Prior to demonstrating this conclusion, and outlining the capabilities approach, there is a question that has to be addressed and one which is all too often tacitly presumed in such discussions: what is nature and the natural, and can it be used as a shortcut to the good?

No one raises these key questions more clearly than John Stuart Mill’s essay, *Nature* (1969). It then traces some key conceptual developments in animal ethics, and argues that Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities approach is the most promising and practical of current alternatives. Because of its breadth of concern and specificity of recommendations, it can make a vital contribution to animal welfare.

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Mill’s essay, *Nature*

In *Nature*, Mill takes issue with the many people who argue that women have a fixed nature, and who make assumptions about what they are and what they ought to do. He is attempting to purge nature and the natural from “the penumbra of meanings they have acquired”.

He starts by posing the question: what is meant by the ‘nature’ of particular objects, and answers:

Evidently the ensemble or aggregate of its powers or properties; the modes in which it acts upon other things… and the modes in which other things act upon it; to which, in the case of a sentient being, must be added its own capacities of feeling or being conscious. The Nature of the thing means all this: means its entire capacity of exhibiting phenomena… As the nature of a given thing is the aggregate of the powers and properties of all things… Nature, then, in this its simplest acceptation, is a collective name for all facts, actual and possible (p 374).

Yet, as Mill points out, this conflicts with the sense in which Nature is opposed to Art, and natural to artificial: in the first sense of the word, Art is as much nature as anything else. This leads him to postulate two senses:

It thus appears that we must recognise at least two principal meanings of the word nature. In one sense, it means all the powers existing in either the inner or the outer world, and everything which takes place by means of those powers. In another sense, it means not everything which happens, but only what takes place without the agency, or without the voluntary and intentional agency of man (p 375).