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the changing face of animal ethics

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Animal Futures: The changing face of animal ethics¹

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to ask what moral views about the relationship between humans and animals will predominate in the future. The paper describes the emergence of new attitudes to animals in the western world over the past two centuries. This development is seen as a *widening* rather than a *wholesale change* of the moral agenda. The main headlines on that agenda are: that animals are there for us to use, anti-cruelty, animal welfare, animals as friends, respect for animals as part of nature, and animal rights. Debates or controversies concerning our interaction with and use of animals reflect the dilemmas and contradictions to which these points give rise. The future of animals will be shaped through these debates and controversies.

Key words: animal protection, animal ethics, cruelty, animal welfare

Introduction

Human-animal interaction in the western world has changed dramatically over the last 200 years or so, and remarkable changes have followed in the attitudes that humans have towards animals. Suggestions as to how the norms governing human relationships with animals will develop in the future need to take these developments into account.

The aim of this paper is therefore to examine the emergence of new attitudes to animals in the west over the past two centuries with an eye to identifying moral trends; and to ask what kinds of moral view of the human-animal relationship will predominate in the future.

One way to describe developments in animal ethics is as a gradual change of agenda: the idea would be that in the beginning animals were not at all recognized as worthy of moral concern, and now they are recognized as individuals worth protecting in their own right. This picture certainly possesses a kernel of truth. Thus, at least in the western world, many more people today than in the past consider animals as worthy of protection and this is increasingly reflected in legislation.

However, it may be more appropriate to describe the story as one involving *widening* rather than *wholesale change* of the agenda. New norms and ideals regarding animal treatment have entered the agenda in today's societies, but the old norms are still there. So in that respect the situation regarding animal futures is complicated, torn by dilemmas, inconsistencies and conflicts of interest.

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In the following we begin by describing developments in the early nineteenth century, when movements and legislation aimed at *preventing cruelty* to animals first appeared. Next, the emergence of the idea of *animal welfare* after the Second World War is presented. The focus here changes from protecting animals from meaningless cruelty to shielding them from the adverse effects associated with intensive animal production and animal experimentation. Then, new developments in attitudes to pets and wildlife are introduced. These have in various ways given rise to the idea that animals deserve not only protection but also *respect*. Finally, a potential and highly complex moral agenda for animal futures is outlined.

Traditional ways of using animals and the emergence of anti-cruelty legislation

Within the mainstream of Western culture animals have traditionally been viewed as means to fulfil human needs. Until the nineteenth century animals in the Western world were legally protected only in their capacity as items of private property. Bans on mistreatment served to protect the rightful owner of the animals from having his property vandalized. Legally speaking, the animals themselves had no protection.

Things began to change in the nineteenth century. This was a reflection of more general ethical and political changes that had taken place in the eighteenth century — a century in which grand ideas of human rights and liberal democracy gained momentum. It was no longer accepted that the ruling classes could treat the lower classes in the way they treated their property. Together with revolutions in France and USA, the idea developed that all humans are equal, and that the role of the state is to protect the rights of all its citizens.

Whereas in the case of humans the focus is on political rights that allow people to pursue their own happiness, with animals (as with some weak or marginalised groups of humans) it does not seem to make sense to allow them to sort out things by themselves. Rather, in the various movements ‘for’ animals that developed around the beginning of the nineteenth century the aim was to place limits on what humans were allowed to do with, or to, animals in their care. The aim was animal protection rather than animal rights.

Of course, these developments were not driven by ideas alone. It also mattered that with growing urbanisation large parts of the population no longer lived in the countryside and so no longer took part in traditional rural pursuits. And it mattered that there was a general increase in average levels of wealth in many countries. Clearly, people who have enough to eat and do not have to strive daily to subsist are in a better position to discuss how animals are being treated.

All these conditions were in place in early nineteenth-century England, where the world’s first law for the protection of animals was passed. Getting the law through both chambers of the parliament was a huge struggle for the two key figures in this reform, Richard Martin MP (Member of Parliament) (1754-1834) and his collaborator Lord Erskine (1750-1823). They were up against strong opposing interests, and a political climate in which many people found concern for animals effeminate and ludicrous (notice that at that time women had no role in political life). The formulation of the bill that finally passed through the British parliament in July 1822 was therefore, in many respects, a political compromise. The bill said:

that if any person or persons having the charge, care or custody of any horse, cow, ox, heifer, steer, sheep or other cattle, the property of any other person or persons, shall wantonly beat, abuse or ill-treat any such animal, such individuals shall be brought before a Justice of the Peace or other magistrate (Ryder 1989, p.86).

There are three striking limitations here: (1) only some kinds of animals are covered; (2) only things done by people who do not own the animals are covered; and (3) only what is described as *wanton* cruelty is covered.

On the first point, it is remarkable that a number of species are not mentioned at all – for example dogs, cats, pigs and poultry. One reason for this is that, at the time, there was a custom of arranging fights between animals, e.g. cock fights and dog fights. These forms of ‘sport’ could be extremely cruel.

Another reason that not all animal species are covered is that there clearly is a hierarchy of animals — a moral ordering that has been called the sociozoological scale (Arluke & Sanders 1996). The point of the scale is, that people rate animals as morally more or less important, and therefore more or less worth protecting, according to a number of factors. These include how useful the animal is, how closely one collaborates with the individual animal, how cute and cuddly the animal is, how harmful the animal can be, and how ‘demonic’ it is perceived to be.

The sociozoological scale is in many ways based on traditions and prejudices and its use as a basis for animal protection can be criticized on both scientific and ethical grounds. The point being made here is just that the scale is part of social reality. This reality is, among other things, reflected in the legislation that has been introduced to protect animals.

The second striking point about the 1822 bill mentioned above was that it only protects animals against things done by people other than the owner. This, of course, partly reflects a political reality, since those in power were typically the owners of land and livestock; by making sure that these people were not affected by the law it was easier to get it through both chambers of the parliament. However, there is another, more respectable reason, and this is related to the third of the mentioned limits in the scope of the 1822 law, namely that it only protects animals against “wanton” cruelty.

The bill’s advocates assumed that the animal owner wants to protect and make good use of his property. To a great extent, the way to do this is by treating the animals well. Bad animal treatment is thus seen as something that is irrational, or pointless, which can only be done by someone who does not share the owner’s interest in protecting the value that the animal represents.

Negligence towards animals was, of course, not uncommon in the past, and there would have been cases of obvious conflict between the interests of the animals and the interests of the owners. The use of animals for blood sports is an obvious example of this.

However, in general people in the past had to treat their animals decently to get the most out of them; and in many ways it can be said that people and their animals lived under the same conditions in mutual dependence. This remains the case today in some third world countries.

So in the early nineteenth century the need to protect animals was equated with the need to protect animals against pointless cruelty. This equation underpinned most legislation aimed at protecting animals until at least the 1950s.

The concern to protect animals from cruelty seems to be derived from at least two moral sources. One is the utilitarian idea that suffering is bad in itself and that suffering does not become less bad just because it is experienced by a being of another species. This idea was most forcefully expressed by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century. The other source is the idea that our moral character matters, and that cruelty to animals is an expression of a bad moral character. This idea was clearly stated by Immanuel Kant and received strong popular expression in William Hogarth’s *The four stages of cruelty* (1751).

The sufferings of animals used in *purposeful* ways, particularly in farm animal production, did not become major issue until the 1950s. This may partly be explained, as suggested above, by the assumption that to get

the best out of the animals owners had to treat them well. But in part it may also be explained by focusing on moral character – for the use of animals to do useful things does not seem to be a sign of a bad character.

However, since the Second World War there has been a dramatic shift in the way animal use in food production is popularly perceived. With the emergence of intensive animal production the welfare of farm animals became an issue, and the moral character of those participating in the industrialisation of animal production was increasingly perceived as dubious.

New ways of using animals and the emergence of animal welfare initiatives

Since the 1950s new developments have taken place in the western world. On the one hand, human wealth has reached unprecedented heights; and on the other hand, the way animals are bred and raised has been the subject of considerable intensification. At the same time other ways of using animals for the sake of human well-being have developed on a large scale: for example, the use of animals as tools in biomedical research and the use of animals as pets.

The intensification of animal production in western countries was initiated by public policies in place before, during and after the Second World War. These promoted more abundant, cheaper food. As a result, animal production became much more efficient, as measured by the cost of producing each egg, or kilogram of meat, or litre of milk. The pressure for efficiency subsequently became market-driven, with competition between producers and between retailers to sell food as cheaply as possible, and thereby acquired its own momentum. In many ways this can be viewed as a success story. Thus, consumers in these countries are able to buy animal products at prices that are low relative to those charged in the past. In Northern Europe it was typical, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, for people to spend between 25% and 33% of their income on food. Now roughly 10-15% is usual. Again, by reducing the need for labour and by increasing farm sizes, farmers and farm workers have been able to maintain an income that matches what is common in the rest of society.

A number of conflicts have arisen between productivity and the interests of the animals, and the animals have paid the price. They now typically get less space per individual than they did previously, and many live in barren environments unable to exercise their normal range of behaviour, while genetic selection has been accompanied by increased problems with production-related diseases.

Particularly in Europe this development has given rise to a new kind of legislation aimed at protecting animals against the most extreme consequences of intensive animal production. The point of this legislation is to prevent farmers from doing what is, economically speaking, the most rational thing to do. For example, in intensive egg production it is economically sound to keep hens in small cages with very high stocking densities. In places without animal welfare regulation it is not uncommon to keep hens with as little space as 300 cm² per animal. The point is that if there is no regulation or other mechanism in place, egg producers will be obliged by market forces to keep their hens this way. The alternative is to produce at a higher cost than their competitors, and this is not feasible in the long run.

In Europe, the main response to such problems was initially through legislation. However, with the growth of international markets it has turned out that national legislation is vulnerable because of competition from producers from countries with less stringent laws.

An alternative approach is to find ways to allow the consumer's preferences regarding animal welfare to make themselves felt on the market. This can be done in two ways. The first, more direct, way is to label

animal products so consumers can pay a premium for higher standards of animal welfare. This approach is in place in various production schemes. However, these schemes represent only a very small part of the market. The second, indirect approach is to work with fast food chains and retailers. To increase consumer confidence in their products, such outlets can (as some already have) define certain minimum standards of animal welfare that must be fulfilled by the producers from which they buy their meat, eggs, milk, and so on.

The main point to be made here is that the rationale behind animal protection has changed dramatically. In industrialised countries it is no longer the case that humans and animals live in a kind of symbiosis where animal welfare can be protected by a combination of self-interest and legislation aimed at preventing “wanton cruelty”. People in these parts of the world are becoming more and more wealthy. And this wealth is partly achieved at a cost to the welfare of the animals which deliver products which (in both relative and absolute terms) become cheaper and cheaper. Therefore there has emerged a perceived need for legislation and other initiatives which place limits on the use of animals for purposes to which most people agree. Such initiatives fall under the heading of ‘animal welfare’ and may be distinguished from initiatives that are ‘anti-cruelty’.

Companion animals, fascination with wild animals and the animal rights movement

Throughout human history the main role of animals in human life has been as utility animals. Animals have been needed as tools to provide transportation, clothing, food and — more recently — biological knowledge. Throughout history, however, humans have also kept animals as companions; and this kind of animal use has exploded in recent times. In many Western countries it is very common for families to have cats, dogs and other ‘family animals’, which do not appear to serve any other purpose than being good company. These animals are generally seen, not as tools, but as family members.

This represents a different kind of animal use, where an integral part of the role played by the animal is to serve as a companion. The main purpose of this variety of animal ownership is to have a life with the animal in which the animal is happy and thrives. This means, among other things, that the animals in question are typically no longer killed unless they are suffering.

Severe animal welfare problems may, however, still arise. Although, it may be assumed that being on top of the sociozoological scale and having a close relation with humans is a guarantee that the animal’s welfare is assured, this is not necessarily the case. Despite the fact that the animal’s owner wants the best for the animal, he or she may, out of ignorance and unintentionally, treat the animal in ways that jeopardize its health or welfare – for example by treating it as a human being rather than an animal of the species in question with its particular needs.

A parallel development has taken place in connection with wild animals. Whereas in the past wild animals were used as hunting animals, or as game, or were killed as pests or vermin, they are now increasingly objects of fascination and grave concern. The media and various forms of entertainment have, to a large degree, driven this new perspective. Today entire television channels are devoted to wildlife programmes. Zoos and various kinds of wildlife parks are flourishing.

Huge efforts are made all over the world to protect wild animals and their habitats. This is, of course, closely related to a general concern about man’s destruction of nature and the environment. As a result a number of species, such as great apes, big cats, wolves, bears and birds of prey, which used to be hunted for e.g. meat, trophies or as pest, are now increasingly protected.

What these new trends have in common is opposition to the view that animals are here for us to use. Rather, companion animals are viewed as friends and wild animals as beings with a right of their own to exist. It is therefore no surprise that, since the 1970s, a number of new ideas and movements have developed which focus on the abolition of various forms of animal use.

The most radical of these movements, the animal rights movement, opposes most common forms of animal use. Supporters of the animal rights movement make up a relatively small group. However, the ideas of the movement, in a more or less pure form, have a much wider uptake. For example, many people are sceptical about fur production. They seem to be sceptical not just because they have concerns about animal welfare; rather, they seem to object to the idea that animals may be killed for the production of a luxury such as fur.

Other movements focus on wild animals as parts of nature and urge us to protect these animals together with other elements of wild nature. Here the concern is not for the individual animal and its rights. Rather it is for species or populations of animals. Radical holders of this view want human beings to stop from interfering with wild nature completely.

It would be quite wrong to suggest that these new ideas dominate the scene. Rather they exist side by side with the previous ideas, animals as property, anti-cruelty and animal welfare. So there is wide moral agenda set for the futures of animals.

Animal futures: Where are we heading?

In some parts of the world basic anti-cruelty legislation is still missing. And on a global scale discussions about whether animals are for us to use without any restrictions will continue. In most western countries, however, the banning of cruelty to animals is no longer an issue, and minimum requirements regarding animal welfare are slowly being put in place.

The main debate in the western world seems to be between those who think it is acceptable to use animals as long as their welfare is looked after properly and those who are *in principle* against specific forms of animal use. This debate could significantly influence the keeping of various domestic animals and the management of wildlife.

An important factor affecting animal futures is the globalisation of the market for animal products and services of all sorts. Particularly for farm animal products, the global market is becoming more and more open. Therefore, increasingly, competition on the world market limits the effectiveness of local initiatives to improve farm animal welfare through legislation.

On the other hand, the global market may also serve, as already mentioned, as a vehicle for spreading and enforcing animal welfare initiatives. Thus in the food market large multinational companies involved in food processing, retail and catering are becoming more powerful. These companies have brands to protect and may be vulnerable to campaigns by NGOs aiming for better animal protection. Therefore international food companies may in the future become more engaged in animal protection.

Another important trend is the globalisation of the media and the entertainment industry. Stories about animals and their maltreatment seem to have a very wide appeal across cultures; and through these channels new ideas about how to treat animals may be very rapidly disseminated around the globe. Therefore distinctly western ideas of animal ethics may soon become global ideas.

Turning to the use of animals in research, this takes place in a scientific setting, or arena, which is becoming more and more international. The vehicle for this process is the international infrastructure of sciences, the backbone of which is made up of international scientific societies, international journals and international organisations. Here one may expect current developments to continue – namely, an increased focus on shared minimum standards for good scientific conduct, including standards on the housing of research animals and the implementation of the so-called three Rs (i.e. to reduce, replace and refine animal use). There is no reason here, in a foreseeable future, to anticipate a significant movement to stop animal use.

When it comes to wild animals, already there are, as mentioned above, strong international initiatives in place to protect biodiversity. In combination with tourism and other ways in which the protection of wild nature can become economically beneficial for local communities, strong international trends favour the protection of wild animals. However, there is a clear tension between two approaches to this: one emphasizing wise use of wild animals, the other leaning towards no use.

All the perspectives on animals presented in this paper — that animals are there for us to use, anti-cruelty, animal welfare, animals as friends, respect for animals as part of nature and animal rights — exist side by side in various combinations in today's world. Debates or controversies concerning our interaction with, or use of, animals reflect the dilemmas and contradictions to which these ideas give rise. The future of animals will be shaped through these debates and controversies.

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