

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Animal Morality: Control Without Reflective Self-Awareness

ABSTRACT

Non-human animals can act morally by acting on the basis of moral emotions such as concern without being morally responsible in the sense of deserving praise or blame. They can unconsciously select from different motivations and so have the requisite control over their behavior for moral normativity yet lack awareness of their reasons as reasons and so lack the self-reflection and understanding required for full moral responsibility. This is an alternative to Mark Rowlands' compatibilist construal of non-human animals as moral subjects.

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Can non-human animals be moral? Animals can behave in ways that seem moral. There is growing evidence that they act out of moral emotions such as compassion, empathy, grief, kindness, and tolerance (Bekoff and Pierce 2010). For one example, a dog pulled another who was injured from a busy highway, apparently displaying concern and courage.¹ For another example, one elephant chased an aggressive elephant away from another elephant with an injured leg and then touched the injured leg in an apparently empathetic or consoling gesture (Rowlands 2015, 4). However, it also seems that because they lack awareness and understanding of why they act as they do, animals cannot be morally responsible for their actions. Moreover, moral actions are actions that should or should not be done, and this normativity cannot apply to animals who lack control over their motivations for acting as they do, it seems. Accordingly, the common, as well as traditional, view is that only one who can evaluate their motives for acting has the requisite control over them necessary to make moral choices, and only humans have this self-reflective capacity. On this view, apparently moral animal behavior is not genuinely moral behavior. In this essay, I appeal to an agent causation theory of freedom to describe how animals can be moral, contra the traditional view, yet not be morally autonomous enough to warrant praise or blame. This follows a distinction between moral agents and moral subjects made by Mark Rowlands, and I construct my view as an alternative to Rowlands' compatibilist view that animals can act for moral reasons despite lacking control over their actions (Rowlands 2015).

¹ "Hero Dog Saves Another Dog after Getting Hit in the Highway." YouTube, 7 Apr. 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTg5VGbzTq8.

Rowlands' Compatibilist View of Animal Morality

Rowlands says non-human animals should not be considered moral agents because agency connotes responsibility. He notes the absurdity of punishing animals for their actions to satisfy justice (Rowlands 2015, 83). Animals are not sufficiently responsible for their actions to deserve punishment because they lack understanding of their own motives and of moral right and wrong. However, animals can be motivated to act by moral emotions such as concern, and so should be considered moral “subjects” according to Rowlands.

Against the objection that animals cannot act for moral reasons because they lack the ability to critically evaluate their motives required for the control over them necessary for moral normativity, Rowlands forcefully argues there is no viable account of how critical scrutiny of one’s motivations can provide control over them: one’s evaluations of motives do not provide control unless one has control over them. The notion of control is not rendered intelligible by adding a higher level of awareness, no matter how many levels are added. Just as someone ignorant of their motives may be thought caused to act by the reasons and emotions they have no control over due to this lack of awareness, one fully aware of their motives may be caused to critically evaluate their motives in ways they have no control over. The ideas of awareness and of the capacity for critical assessment of one’s own motives, commonly thought to provide the self-control required for moral behavior, do not at all include, even implicitly, an idea of control, and we have no other suitable notion of control, according to Rowlands (Rowlands 2015, chapters 6-7).

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Rowlands argues that we should therefore instead construe normativity in terms of external reasons that one's actions may accord with more or less well, and construe moral responsibility in terms of understanding. For example, if there is objective moral reason for an elephant to feel distressed at the pain of another elephant and to console her, one can say the elephant's emotions were what she should feel and her actions were what, morally, should have been done. The necessity of her emotions and actions does not remove this kind of normativity. Therefore, as long as her behavior is due to a reliable morally appropriate emotional responsiveness (rather than being accidentally morally appropriate), this counts as moral action. This is so even if the elephant lacks control over her actions, and even if the elephant cannot recognize, as humans can, that the action is what should be done. This externalist account of moral normativity also applies to humans, but it is still true that animals cannot be praised or blamed for their behavior as humans can. The crucial difference between animal moral subject freedom and the moral agent freedom warranting praise or blame that most humans have lies not in the idea of control, but solely in that the latter involves moral and self understanding and the former does not.

So Rowlands' compatibilist construal of animals as moral subjects is based on his claims that the ability to critically evaluate one's motives does not give one control over one's motives and that there is no other suitable notion of control. Rowlands' argument for the former, that the ability to critically evaluate one's motives does not by itself give one control over them, is correct. This ability is not sufficient for control. However, the latter claim, that there is no suitable notion of control requires further argument, and is incorrect in my view.

Agent Causation and Unconscious Control

There is a familiar puzzle about freedom that points to the requisite notion of control. If a free choice is necessitated by events prior to the choice, it seems the “choice” is not up to the agent and therefore cannot be free. However, if a free “choice” is not necessitated by events prior to the choice, then it seems there can be no adequate explanation for why it occurred: to the extent it is not necessitated, it seems instead due to chance, which is not freedom either. One response, which Rowlands adopts, is compatibilism: a choice may be free even if it is necessitated by events prior to it. Rowlands believes this can be made plausible by describing freedom in terms of mechanisms that have beliefs and desires as input and plans of action for satisfying desires as output. Another response, which Rowlands rejects, is that freedom just is the power to cause an event without being necessitated to do so. On this agent-causal view, an agent, which is a substance, originates free actions (without being fully caused to do so).

According to the agent-causal view, an agent’s free choice consists in their directly causing (the initiation of) an action without being necessitated to do so (Rowe 1991). On my understanding of this view, one’s reasons or motives for various actions give one inclinations, of varying strengths, to act in various ways. Importantly, an agent may feel an inclination to act without being aware of their underlying motives or reasons to act in that way or some other. Nevertheless, in making a choice, the agent is choosing to act on some reasons and motives and not others. This possibly unconscious selection from among reasons and motives is essential to the ability to cause an action without being necessitated or fully caused to do so, and is therefore common to all free actions.

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It may be difficult to imagine selecting one reason over others unconsciously or assigning weights or values to reasons one is unaware of, but it also seems quite common. Many actions we regard as free choices, such as choosing how to react to someone, are made without conscious awareness or any reflection on what can be complicated underlying motives. Also, many behaviors that are done without thinking seem to have some degree of freedom, such as choosing the precise path one walks home, or how to swing a bat at a pitch, for example. It certainly seems that we could have done such things slightly differently, perhaps by choosing to direct our attention differently or to make a different effort. These behaviors do not seem purely automatic in all their specificity, and yet they are done without conscious awareness of selecting their specificity. Moreover, there is good reason to think that consciousness of making a choice itself is not essential to free choice: a free choice must be explanatorily prior to consciousness of it and so its existence cannot require one's consciousness of it.

Rowlands assumes free choice cannot involve such unconscious selection among reasons and motives. He says his rejection of the idea that control over motivations is grounded in the ability to critically assess those motivations is equivalent to the rejection of agent causation (Rowlands 2015, 236). But to assume that the ability to critically scrutinize one's motives is the only idea of control the agent-causal theorist can plausibly have in mind as a requirement for moral freedom is to assume that an agent must be conscious not only of their inclinations to act, but also of their reasons for those inclinations. But, again, much of our mental lives is unconscious and it is plausible, at least on an agent-causal view of freedom, that often when we choose, we are unconsciously selecting from many motives and reasons we are unaware of. Furthermore, in a discussion

of animal freedom it is important to consider the possibility of unconscious selection among reasons for action, even if there is reason to question it. To understand animal freedom we cannot only consider paradigmatically human fully self-reflective decision making.

Animal Morality: Control without Metacognition

Rowlands describes the intuitions behind the key idea he rejects, namely, that it is the ability to critically evaluate one's motives that gives one the control over one's motives required for moral normativity, by contrasting Myshkin, representing animals, who is motivated by moral emotions but cannot reflect on them, with Marlow, who can assess his own motives in the light of moral principles:

It is easy to feel the intuitive pull of the idea that Marlow's ability to metacognize could imbue him with control over his motivations. Myshkin is the subject of motivations of various sorts. However, because he cannot reflect on those motivations, but simply act on them, he is, in one fairly clear sense, at their "mercy." These motivations push him this way and that - causing him to act one way or another. But Myshkin has no control over where - and how far - these motivations push him. These motivations are, one might suspect, always merely causes ... they exert no normative grip on Myshkin. ... [Myshkin] is tossed this way and that - a bobbing cork on a sea of motivations. Marlow's metacognitive abilities, on the other hand, allow him to float above this sea. He is able to observe his motivations and, by following certain evaluative procedures, adjudicate between them. Because of this, Marlow has control over his motivations in a way that Myshkin

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does not. In virtue of his metacognitive abilities, Marlow can decide which motivation he is to act on and which he is to reject. And, in virtue of this, Marlow's motivations have a normative dimension that Myshkin's lack. Marlow's motivations belong to the space of moral reasons, not the space of causes (Rowlands 2015, 169-170).

Rowlands rejects this picture for reasons already mentioned, though he says he finds it intuitively compelling. What Rowlands attributes to this picture, and what he rejects, is the idea that Marlow's metacognitive abilities confer a control that Myshkin lacks. However, the thought conveyed in this description is not just that Marlow's self-awareness gives him control, but also that Myshkin's lack of self-awareness means he does not have control. What Rowlands does not dispute is the assumption guiding this thinking that is most relevant to a consideration of animal freedom, namely, that because Myshkin is unaware of his motives, his actions are necessitated by them; that because he is unaware of his reasons for acting he is (deterministically) caused to act by them; that he cannot unconsciously select from among his reasons or motives in choosing.

The agent-causal view does not grant this assumption. On my understanding of this view, the reason one freely acts on does not cause the free action, nor one's causing of it. The various reasons and motives one has, along with their respective strengths, contribute to the explanation of why one freely acted as one did in that they are available for selection and perhaps in ordering selection probabilities, but a complete explanation must include that one chose to act on one reason rather than another (or decided to value some motives or reasons over others). Therefore, on the agent-causal view, Myshkin, who represents

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animals, can exercise some degree of control over his behavior. On this view, control is a metaphysically primitive power, the power to choose, not equivalent to conscious control. Again, it cannot be essentially conscious because it is explanatorily prior to consciousness of it. So the agent causation view provides animals with a kind of control, as *prima facie* required for moral normativity.

Additionally, the thinking behind the common attribution of moral behavior solely to humans, though centrally involving the notion of self-control, may not be accurately represented by Rowlands' description. Animals do seem to have some degree of control over their behavior and therefore some measure of freedom, even if within the constraints of instinctual responses. Accordingly, it may be commonly thought not that animals lack any kind of control, but that animals' (Myshkin's) lack of self-awareness means they do not have the right kind of control for moral freedom. If this is so, the case for animal moral behavior is best made not with a reconstruction of the notion of normativity without the notion of control, but with an analysis of the kind of control animals may possess, as afforded by the agent causation view, which provides for normativity, combined with Rowlands' own philosophical defense of the possibility that animals act on the basis of specifically moral emotions, and appeal to the growing scientific evidence that they do (Bekoff and Pierce 2010).

To illustrate, the dog who pulled the injured dog from the highway had a fear that was a reason to abandon the injured dog and may also have had an emotion of empathic concern which was a reason to help. These were the prominent emotions, which, along with instincts and other factors, narrowed her action choices. Within these broad alternatives there were

many other open possibilities, such as whether or not to dash into traffic and when, how long to persist, whether to continue despite the new threat of an oncoming truck, etc. Self-preservation, empathic concern, avoidance of pain, and other motives, had relative strengths, or were perhaps incomparable. In behaving as she did, the dog selected between them. Of course, the dog was not conscious of all these reasons and certainly not conscious of any of them as reasons. Nonetheless in deciding what to do, when, precisely how, and for how long, etc. she unconsciously acted on some reasons or motives (or perhaps unconsciously assigned weights or values to them). Because the dog could have chosen differently, if not whether to attempt rescue, in the extent of her rescue effort, the decision was normative, and if a motivating emotion was concern, the dog acted morally. So agent causation provides the normativity required for animal moral behavior. Moreover, the agent-causal view, with a plausible commitment to unconscious selection among reasons, does so in a way that readily explains why animal moral behavior does not imply animal moral responsibility, appropriately distinguishing animal from human morality. To see this, note another respect in which Rowlands' description of the intuitions behind the common attribution of moral behavior solely to humans may not be accurate. Though it is clear that human self-awareness is thought to enable humans to exercise control over their motivations, it is not obvious that according to common reasoning self-awareness by itself confers control, as Rowlands says in contrasting Marlow and Myshkin. Self-awareness may be thought to supply what is required for morally responsible freedom without being thought sufficient for it. The agent-causal view makes sense of this idea.

Rowlands' argument that critical scrutiny does not confer control appeals to the intuition that just as Myshkin, who lacks

such scrutiny, is “pushed this way and that” by his moral emotions, Marlow may have full critical scrutiny of his motives and yet be “pushed this way and that” by his own assessments. Marlow’s judgments, just as Myshkin’s motives, may be affected by factors he is unaware of, such as his surrounding environment, and therefore has no control over, Rowlands argues. Even if the idea that moral behavior requires self-control is rejected by Rowlands for lack of intelligibility, and Marlow has nothing Myshkin lacks other than metacognition itself, the intuitive force of Rowlands’ own metaphors remain: if Marlow, with his moral understanding, is indeed necessitated to make assessments of his own motivations in ways he has no control over, how can he be responsible for them? Rowlands’ illustrations intended to show that the ability to critically scrutinize one’s motives does not give one control over one’s motivations undermine his view that self and moral understanding, combined with externalist compatibilist normativity, is sufficient for moral responsibility.

The agent causation construal of animal moral freedom avoids this objection. Both humans and animals may share the same basic agent causation freedom, and hence, control, but differ in moral responsibility because understanding enlarges the scope of what that power can choose between, from purely unconscious reasons and motives to consciously entertained reasons and moral principles, for example. On the agent causation view, autonomous or more fully responsible moral freedom may require the ability to consciously select a desire to fulfill or goal to achieve and the capacity to form a conscious intention to act for the sake of fulfilling that desire or achieving that goal. In this case, one has consciously selected from among one’s potential goals and motivations and formed a conscious intention that has one’s prioritized motivation as

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its content. This capacity requires recognition of at least some of one's own motivations, reasons, and goals, as well as interrogation and assessment of them, in order to consciously select among them. Because of this self-understanding and conscious self-control, one is morally responsible for these choices and so can be praised or blamed for them. Plausibly, only humans have such autonomous moral freedom. For these reasons, the agent-causal view explains how animals can be moral yet not morally responsible better than Rowlands' compatibilist view.

References:

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