

Searching for the Animal of Animal Ethics

IX Annual Swedish Symposium on Biomedicine, Ethics and Society,
11-12 June 2007



Wild justice, cooperation, and fair play: Can animals be moral beings?

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Abstract

Can nonhuman animals (hereafter animals) be moral beings? Yes they can. Research in cognitive ethology, evolutionary biology, and social neuroscience, along with common sense, clearly shows that animals are emotional and empathic beings (including mice who have been shown to display empathy) and that they display moral sensibility. What we observe when animals interact with one another tells us a lot about what's happening inside their heads and hearts. Animals' lives are very public, not hidden, private, or secret, and the privacy of mind argument that we can never know what animals are thinking or feeling is over-used and goes against solid arguments based on evolutionary continuity and ethological and neurobiological data.

In my presentation I will stress the importance of interdisciplinary research and collaboration for coming to terms with various aspects of animal emotions and morality. I will also discuss anthropomorphism and why it is a very useful and inevitable way to describe and explain animal behavior. To make my case about animal morality I will focus on the details of social play behavior - the many ways in which animals play fairly and honestly signal their intentions - and also discuss research on inequity aversion in animals. When animals play they carefully signal their intentions to cooperate and to play, they trust that playmates will obey the rules of fair play, and they forgive and apologize to one another so that play can continue as play and not escalate to aggression. Individuals fine-tune their interactions "on the run" by paying attention to what is happening from moment to moment.

I will also argue that cognitive ethology is the unifying science for understanding the subjective, emotional, empathic, and moral lives of animals because it's essential to know what animals do, think, and feel as they go about their daily routines in the company of their friends and when they are alone. Research on mirror neurons is also important to factor into discussions of fair play and moral behavior. It is essential to learn why both the similarities and differences between humans and other animals have evolved. The

Searching for the Animal of Animal Ethics: www.bioethics.se/symposium/2007
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more we come to understand other animals the more we will appreciate them as the amazing beings they are and the more we will come to understand ourselves. If humans are moral beings then so are other animals. We are not alone in the moral arena.

Finally, I will argue not only that individual animals matter, but so does what they feel, and what they feel is very much related to how they behave. Surely, a whimpering dog, a playing wolf having fun on the run and doing "what's right", and a grieving chimpanzee or elephant feel something. They are not unfeeling objects. And what animals feel matters very much as they try to negotiate their lives in a human-dominated and often abusive world in which we attempt to manage their lives for our and not their benefit. I am incredulous that some skeptics actually question whether animals feel anything (and even if they think).

We owe it to all individual animals to make every attempt to come to a greater understanding and appreciation for who they are - emotional, empathic, and often moral beings - in their own worlds. And, when we're not sure about what they're feeling, we should leave them alone. Quite often good welfare isn't good enough - offering animals food, a bed, and health insurance just isn't enough. They deserve more and we can always do better. This sort of respect will go a long way toward ending, once and for all, the unnecessarily cruel treatment to which far too many non-consenting individuals are subjected each and every second of each and every day.

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