

Searching for the Animal of Animal Ethics

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Rational decision-making for animals and their humans

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Abstract (Poster presentation)

While many ethical paradigms equate moral action with rational behaviour, the precise nature of rational behaviour has never been elucidated beyond controversy.

Nevertheless, it has been generally assumed that, whatever rationality is, animals do not have it. As such they do not have the moral statuses afforded to rational beings (predominantly under contractarian or constructivist theories). It is an issue of debate whether the possible rationality or intentionality of animal behaviour is a reason for increased protection and proponents of moral status for animals have tried to argue for ethical duties outside of such rationalist concerns, with limited success.

However, there are other ways of challenging such theories' respect for animals within the theories themselves. Epistemologically, developments in behavioural studies and philosophy of mind have allowed us to read rationality in the behaviour of non-human animals. There is a tradition in phenomenology on the intentionality and rationality of the body (Merleau-Ponty), which some philosophers applied to the behaviour of animals. For example in the 1930s, the Dutch physiologist and ethologist Buytendijk published a book about the wisdom and rationality of the behaviour of ants (*Die Weisheit der Ameisen*). Ontologically, the definitions of rationality could be expanded to accommodate a less anthropocentric range of purposive behaviour and/or practical reasoning.

Day-to-day, such advances might provide a useful model for combining animals' ostensible preferences with their carers' greater logic and foresight, broadening human conception of animals' best interests as for designing husbandry systems and for veterinary interventions.