

Searching for the Animal of Animal Ethics

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



What is natural behaviour and can it be cultivated?

Pär Segerdahl

PhD, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Centre for Bioethics at Karolinska Institutet and Uppsala University, Sweden

E-mail: par.segerdahl@bioethics.uu.se

Abstract

The notion of natural behaviour is present in many legal and policy-making documents on animal welfare. One example is the *Swedish Animal Welfare Act* which states that “Animals shall be accommodated and handled ... in such a way as to ... permit natural behaviour.” The presence of this notion in official documents of this kind gives rise to concern since it is not self-evident what natural behaviour is, especially not in domestic animals. Although definitions and clarifications have been suggested there is still a feeling of vertigo, because we think of natural behaviour as something inherently important that still eludes us: in other words, that it is “very-very-important-but-we-don't-know-what-it-is.”

I begin by proposing an answer as to why “natural behaviour” resists unanimously accepted definition: the idea is not a biological concept, although it aspires to be one. Rather, it is a philosophical tendency to perceive animal behaviour in accordance with certain dichotomies or contrasts; between nature and culture, animal and human, original orders and invented artefacts. I go on to scrutinize this “static” philosophy of nature and propose a more dynamic way of thinking about what can be considered natural for animals in general and for domestic animals in particular. At the end of my talk I will suggest that we understand farms as local human/animal cultures where domestic animals, in interplay with human caretakers and the local environment, develop agricultural forms of natural behaviour. If the proposal seems contra intuitive, I believe it shows how profoundly we associate “the natural” with a static philosophy of nature, and how important it is that we reconsider our notion of an animal.