

Searching for the Animal of Animal Ethics

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Culture, speech and theory of mind in animals and their ethical implications

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Abstract

Culture, Speech and Theory of Mind (the capacity to impute mental states to oneself as well as to other beings) have long served to constitute a cognitive gap between humans and animals. However, empirical studies in different scientific fields provide increasing evidence that at least some animals show at least some aspects of these. Thus, it has become harder telling human and nonhuman animals apart and their abilities should be considered seriously. Both – theory and practice concerning the human-animal-relationship – are affected if long-serving terms of dividing human and nonhuman animals are no longer standing on solid empirical ground.

Firstly, I want to review the most important new results concerning the three cognitive abilities in animals. Secondly, I want discuss why cognitive abilities in animals should be explored at all. Are there any ethical implications arising from the fact that there might be a cognitive continuity between “us” and “them”? I will outline some difficulties of integrating cognitive abilities in arguments within Animal Ethics. Despite these theoretical difficulties, cognitive abilities in animals turn out to be very important in practice. Therefore I will deal with two important ethical challenges: the protection of our next relatives, the Great Apes (as being claimed by the Great Ape Project) and animal husbandry in zoos appropriate to the species. Here I will focus on behavioural enrichment as an ethical demand.