

Searching for the Animal of Animal Ethics

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Species and roles as tools to understand animal ethics, legislation and welfare

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Abstract

To what animals do texts on animal ethics, legislation and welfare refer? An answer in terms of species is not enough. One also has to focus on animal roles. Animals have different roles in society, for example in human care as pets, in human care as production animals and as living wild.

The concepts of species and role are crucial for the analysis of animal ethics, legislation and welfare. With regard to ethics and welfare, for example, suffering is dependent on structures in the nervous system and these structures follow a species design. Contracts with humans, such as is the case with pets, depend on a role. In Swedish legislation the main approach is on the role, such as the role of being game animals (The Hunting Act) or of being animals in human care (The Animal Welfare Act).

Whether a theory is based on the concept of species or that of a role tells us if the theory is to be interpreted as a biological one (species) or a sociological one (role). The purpose of the theory will determine what concept is more important.