

Searching for the Animal of Animal Ethics

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Searching for *this* animal: the contribution of the concept of identity in animal ethics

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Abstract

Animal ethics is generally discussed with reference to animals, either as specific groups (e.g. battery hens) or as generalisations about a certain type of animal. Such discussion is thereby almost entirely without reference to individual animals.

This is in clear contrast to much of the actual decision-making by those involved with animals. Farmers and laboratory workers both have reasons to differentiate between specific animals. Pet-owners have obvious partiality to their own pets. Veterinarians usually deal with animals on an individual basis. Even crematoriums will perform individual cremations.

Ideas of identity have been promulgated and debated about humans and the role in (human) bioethics. (De Grazia, Human Identity and Bioethics, 2005) To what extent are such theories applicable to non-human animals?

For farm animals, physical continuity seems most appropriate: often farmers will go so far as concern about how the animal “killed”. For companion animals, it is psychological continuity that tends to have precedence. Decisions often include consideration about whether the animal is mentally the same and “It’s not him any more” is one reason for euthanasia.

Is identity (or its lack) a valid reason for taking invasive decisions? Is the failure of identification of mass-production of meat animals a (moral) reason for wide scale killing? Including some consideration of identities in animal ethics allows for greater correspondence with actual on-the-floor decisions. It also can be vital for analysis of more general concerns. Analysis of one such concern, Replaceability, shows how useful this can be.