The Moral Lives of Animals

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Abstract

Discussions of the moral status of animals typically address the key questions from an anthropocentric point of view. That is, in deciding whether non-human animals qualify as moral agents the discussion tends to center around the question of the extent to which members if candidate species are like human moral agents. Similarly, in deciding whether non-human animals qualify as appropriate moral patients, the discussion tends to center around the question of the extent to which members of candidate species have capacities and capabilities that are like the capacities and capabilities that are deemed necessary for human beings to be considered as moral patients. Viewing these issues from the point of view of evolutionary biology, cognitive neuroscience and cognitive ethology suggest a different approach one which focuses on the lives of animals that takes their characteristic behaviors and capacities as the basis for determining the norms of moral status for them. One might call this approach a 'speciocentric' point of view. The motivation for taking this approach is the evolutionary consideration that the moral capacities and patterns of moral behavior of human beings are evolved capacities and patterns that are rooted in shared homologies that give rise to homologous capacities and patterns of behavior in other species. In this paper, I explore the theoretical and experimental results which make this approach plausible and address two key questions: [1] To what extent is it proper to speak of the *moral* behavior of non-human animals? [2] To the extent that it is proper, what are the implications for our understanding of the nature and function of human morality and of our treatment of non-human animals?

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