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Resolute Anti-anthropocentrism

Jonas Ahlskog and Olli Lagerspetz

In his *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, Raimond Gaita aptly remarks that '[t]he lives of animals have no meaning'.¹⁴ He identifies this as 'a grammatical remark'. Gaita connects it with the fact that meaning can only be attributed to beings who may in the right kind of sense be said to have 'lives', or what we may call a soul. 'Only a being for whom life can be problematic can have a spiritual life, and therefore have a soul'.¹⁵

An animal can suffer, but it cannot curse the day it was born. An animal can be afraid, but it cannot be ashamed of its fear and despise itself. An animal can be happy, but it cannot be joyous. An animal cannot give of its substance to certain pursuits and be admonished for doing so. One could go on almost indefinitely.¹⁶

To our great regret, Gaita however does *not* go on (quite) indefinitely. We now wish to expand on his Wittgensteinian insight. We believe that Gaita is on the right track, but he fails to bring the philosophical point he has grasped into full fruition. This is clear from the fact that Gaita limits his claims to 'thick' concepts such as shame or love. He gives no further argument as to why the rest of our life with language should be exempt from the principles he applies to 'thick concepts'. We are convinced that philosophy cannot make do with such half-measures.

¹⁴ Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, Second Edition (London. Routledge, 2004), p. 116.

¹⁵ Gaita, *Good and Evil*, p. 117.

¹⁶ Gaita, *Good and Evil*, p. 117.

It is not mainly the obvious anthropomorphism of ‘animal rights-talk’ that concerns us in this paper. We will consider a much more subtle and devious form of anthropocentrism. This is the anthropocentrism hidden in the very grammar of our shared language. We will expose this anthropocentrism by laying bare the fact that we do not share any relevant features of our *human* life form with the animals. Once this fact is exposed, the anthropocentric use of language will crumble like a house of cards. But not only will we expose the anthropocentrism of much of our language use¹⁷, we will also show how deeply misleading such use of language is. In conclusion, we claim that the only philosophically salient position is not to speak of ‘animals’ at all.

Rights Talk and the Language of Love

Anthropomorphism runs rampant in Applied Ethics. Open any issue of the leading philosophical journals on the subject and one will read papers about the ‘rights’ of this or that animal. This blatant anthropocentrism is easily exposed: what meaningful talk of rights is possible without the corresponding concept of obligation? Certainly, many animals ‘*obey*’ their masters (in some attenuated sense), but in no age or country have there been reports of animals with a *sense of obligation* towards either humans or other animals. One may here simply cite the fact that not one single animal *volunteered* in the great wars of the twentieth century. If it had been up to the animals themselves, they would have been happy chewing fodder in the barn while humans were defending their countries!

The absence of love of country in animals ties up with the fact that, as Rush Rhees has remarked, there can be no love without the language of love.¹⁸ Explicating this point, Gaita emphasizes that no love exists apart from certain ways of *talking about* what we

¹⁷ According to estimates by the *Mauno Koivisto Center for Axiological Engineering*, about 97,23 % of the language we use in relation to animals is anthropocentric.

¹⁸ Rush Rhees, *Without Answers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 121 ff; Gaita, *Good and Evil*, p. 119.

love and apart from ways of reflecting on one's own commitments, for instance 'whether something is worthy of our love'. Unlike any responsible mother, *cats* are constitutionally unable to address the latter question. Hence, Gaita notes that '[c]ats do not love their kittens'.¹⁹ For love, a language of love is needed, and the grammar of that language goes together with an entire background of a 'living culture' with a wealth of literature, religion and art. Richard Beardsmore, expanding on Gaita's remark, has pointed out that 'cats do not share a cigarette after intercourse'.²⁰

The Human Form

The idea of an ethically significant life goes together with the idea of a human form, of which the human body is the best expression. In a crucial passage of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes:

Only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious.²¹

Wittgenstein wants here to stress the notion of physical resemblance. We must, therefore, ask: what actual resemblance is there between humans and animals? Surely, cats have heads, or what may look like a head, just like humans do, but this is certainly not a sufficient common denominator. Anyone with even the most superficial acquaintance with cats will notice the following differences to humans: they have fur all over their 'heads', their 'noses' are wet and flat, they have strange hair right next to their 'mouths', etc. No one who is not hopelessly sentimental can claim that cats, or any other animal for that matter, *resemble* human beings.

¹⁹ Gaita, *Good and Evil*, p. 123, see also p. 124.

²⁰ Richard Beardsmore, personal communication with author (OL), ca. 1996.

²¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §281.

The *urge* by so called philosophers at our departments to ascribe seeing, hearing and consciousness to animals is a sad mirror image of the loss of meaning of those concepts in *their* lives – where the sole use of thinking, seeing and hearing is to prepare for the next Research Assessment Exercise.

‘Singing’ Birds, ‘Swimming’ Fish, and Other Blatant Anthropomorphisms

Birds make chirping noises that writers of children’s stories like to call ‘singing’ – but would anyone of a sober and lucid mind claim that they *sing*? Attributing musical interests to nightingales is blatant anthropomorphism – as, indeed, is already the assumption that they have the slightest knowledge of the sonata form or Palestrina counterpoint. But it should also be obvious that *birds do not fly*. Do birds ever *talk* about flying – surely a crucial aspect of flying for those who use the concept? Birds do not talk about making reservations for flights; nor voice their worry for not being let through in time at the security check. We cannot imagine them feeling joy at free drinks on transatlantic flights.

Similarly, comparisons between the human and piscine form make it crystal clear that *the fish do not swim*. ‘Swimming’ means to avoid drowning by keeping one’s head above water. But the fish do not seem even to care whether they drown or not.

Applying the Wittgensteinian insight further, it is also clear that *dogs do not breathe*. They have no conception of what it means to breathe freely after meeting others in a stifling atmosphere or of how people as well as closed rooms may be ‘stuffy’. Dogs have no conception of unjust suffering under oppression, for instance in a Nazi concentration camp, or of being once again able to breathe freely after liberation. Incidentally, this shows the extremely *corrupt* character of those would-be philosophies that mindlessly assimilate human concepts into animal life, as that can only occur at the price of denigrating human preciousness and dignity.

But, it may be objected, ‘Dogs do breathe, at least in a physical sense! We can note the air going in and out of their bodies!’ – But speaking of ‘in’ and ‘out’ here is just to whistle in the dark. Apart from sentimental projections, a dog has no *inside* in the real sense of the word: the ‘inner/outer’ distinction has no foothold in the existence we call animal ‘life’. As Gaita points out, ‘Only human beings (of the beings we know) have an inner life. That is because only human beings can reflect on what happens to them, and take an attitude to what happens to them because of such reflection’.²² Indeed, *dogs do not shit*. The concept of shitting would presuppose an ‘inside’ from which something comes out.

Meaningful Behaviour and Standards of Correctness

The above insights apply at the most basic level of practical concepts applied to animals. We often hear people thoughtlessly say that cats ‘miaow’. This is presumably motivated by the surface resemblance between our *human* practice of miaowing and the noises that cats sometimes make when close to foodstuff, for instance:

miiiiiaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaooooow.²³

However, this is to ignore the normative background that needs to be in place in order for us properly to say that someone has performed a particular action. As Peter Winch has pointed out, if anything is to count as meaningful action, it must be subject to social standards of correctness.²⁴

Suppose that *N* teaches a dog to balance a lump of sugar on its nose and refrain from eating it until *N* utters a word of command. [...] [H]e says that the dog has learned a trick. [...] He can now say that the dog has

²² Gaita, *Good and Evil*, p. 117.

²³ Spotty, personal communication.

²⁴ Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1990), p. 60.

done the trick ‘correctly’ or ‘incorrectly’. But it is important to notice that this is an anthropomorphic way of speaking; it requires a reference to *human* activities, and norms which are here applied analogically to animals.

For example: to say I have made an apology presupposes that there are standards by which my action can be evaluated. It must be possible for me to fail to make an apology, for instance due to being unaware of the relevant cultural codes. In addition, it must also be possible to *evaluate how well* I made the apology: was it heartfelt or did I simply apologize because it makes the work place atmosphere better? Neither of these demands have any equivalent when it comes to the noises cats make. Has any cat ever *failed* in ‘miaowing’? Cats may choke on hair balls, but that is simply a contingent physical obstacle ‘inside’ their throats. Can a cat ‘miaow’ well? This equals to asking: can there be *false* ‘miaows’? Do cats sometimes ‘miaow’ in a heartfelt way instead of simply ‘miaowing’ to annoy their masters? Anyone who has lived with cats will know that no such distinction can be made – cat noise simply goes on and on independently of time and place. Thus, to say that cats ‘miaow’ is thoroughly anthropocentric: we erroneously project our capacity for meaningful action upon creatures which lack any awareness of the distinctions that make our human concept of action possible.

Cats make inarticulate gurgling sounds²⁵, as they physically ‘move’ about, but they surely *do not* ‘miaow’ in the *human sense* of ‘miaowing’; they do not do what humans would do if *they* miaowed. The point above is, of course, not restricted to cats but applies to any noise made by animals (all animals being exactly the same anyway, from ape to amoeba). Dogs do not bark, cows do not moo, sheep do not baah, etc.

²⁵ Cf. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (1998), p. 3e: ‘If we hear a Chinese we tend to take his speech for inarticulate gurgling. Someone who understands Chinese will recognize language in what he hears. Similarly I often cannot recognize the human being in someone’. – This of course shows that Wittgenstein agrees with us, since he makes *humanity* coterminous with the possibility of meaningful sound production.

Doing Away with Animal ‘Life’

Our exposure of anthropocentrism is still incomplete. We have so far only been concerned with concepts concerning what animals *do*. That is unsatisfactory because any resolute anti-anthropocentrism must naturally include *every* region of human language. We must, therefore, look closer at the most basic relation of our language to animals. This means that we must scrutinize our use of ‘animal’ as a noun. What does it really mean to call something an ‘animal’? Certainly, it implies that the thing spoken of has life. We now face the question: what does it mean to have a life? That can only be described in terms relevant for what it means to have a *human* life. This involves an existence in which there are plans for the future, disappointments about career development, reminiscences of love that was lost, and so forth. Would any person of unquestioned good sense really claim that such things are found among the animals? Has a dog ever thrown itself off a skyscraper because it failed to achieve the company’s goals? Do cats ever save money because they want to prolong their vacation next summer? Do cows lie sleepless at night because they haven’t gotten over some bull in their youth? Nay, the animals are painfully unaware of any connection between their existence and commitments they may have made both to themselves and others. Animals do not even have the notion of commitment – when was the last time an animal *promised* you anything? Without the notion of commitment, they will also lack every notion of self or individuality. Animal ‘life’ thus has no equivalent to our understanding of a human life as *irreplaceable*. If my grandmother dies, I do not simply go out and buy a new one, but if my dog dies then you might find me in the pet store the very next morning.²⁶ Gaita is one of the few philosophers who fully appreciate the implications of the lack of individuality of animal life:

²⁶ Animals are, in this sense, like kitchen appliances: we like them when they work, but when they break down we simply go and get new ones.

It would be absurd to write the biography of an animal, except anthropomorphically as is done in children's stories. This is because an animal does not have the kind of individuality which is the object of a biography to reveal, and its life has no meaning which it is the object of a biography to disclose.²⁷

Properly speaking, then, an animal *does not have a life*. We must reap the full philosophical consequences of this inference: if animals do not have lives, then we cannot properly go on calling them 'animals', since that very concept implies the notion of life. Saying that animals exist even if they have no life would be like announcing that one has found a cup of water which contains no H₂O.

Conclusion: A Resolute Rejection of Anthropocentrism

How then should we address the entities we sloppily call 'animals'? Naturally, given that we want to keep philosophy honest, the noun 'animal' or any noun that implies life, such as deer, cat, dog and so forth, is out of the question. To minimize the risk of anthropomorphism we, therefore, suggest the use of 'middle sized object' for everything previously categorized as an 'animal'. In this category, convenient colour and size distinctions can be made in order for us to identify the right object in our everyday use – we do, of course, want to avoid eating the 'dog' and going for a walk with the 'pig' which properly belongs on our plates.

In this paper we have strictly been concerned with the application of our human concepts on the middle sized objects colloquially called 'animals'. The central argument was that these middle sized objects simply lack the background of a 'living culture' with a wealth of literature, religion, art and so forth, which makes the application of human concepts intelligible. The average person may readily accept this fact in the case of 'animals'.

²⁷ Gaita, *Good and Evil*, p. 118.

However, any serious thinker will immediately recognize that these Wittgensteinian insights cannot be restricted merely to such middle sized objects. Surely, anyone who has travelled by public transport or visited the local pub will have noticed that there is an abundance of people who do not seem to possess the wealth of a 'living culture' displayed in religion, literature and art. This will naturally lead us into the following question: are our human concepts applicable to humans without discretion? In the next issue of *Übersichtliche Darstellung*, we will argue that human concepts are only applicable to nuns, as well as to individuals well versed in Romantic bourgeois literature, preferably Jane Austen, and who possess the moral vocabulary of Aristotelian virtue ethics.²⁸

²⁸ Hugo Strandberg is acknowledged for fruitful remarks on the present theme.