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The moral status of the non-human animals in the Western European philosophical tradition

SUMMARY

The moral status of the non-human animals is one of the most current areas of interest of ethics research. This is because the question of the status of non-human animals should be reconsidered, as traditional attempts to justify granting them rights have focused on identifying similarities between animals and humans. However, from an ontological and epistemological perspective, this question is poorly formulated and problematic; it should instead be framed as: “What are the conditions under which an entity becomes a moral subject?” In seeking an answer, this article revisits the history of Western philosophy to examine how this question has been understood, with the aim of clarifying contemporary positions and proposing a solution: to treat animals in ways comparable to how we treat one another and to refrain from using them instrumentally, instead respecting them as partners.

Keywords: moral status, non-human animals, moral subject, species, way of being.

“The root of the evil lies, as I have throughout asserted, in that detestable assumption (detestable equally whether it be based on pseudo-religious or pseudo-scientific grounds) that there is a gulf, an impassable barrier, between man and the animals, and that the moral instincts of compassion, justice, and love, are to be as sedulously repressed and thwarted in the one direction as they are to be fostered and extended in the other”.

- Henry S. Salt,
 (Salt, 1892, p. 102)

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INTRODUCTION

Non-human animals¹, their (moral) rights and duties, as well as our (moral) rights and duties toward them, have become a crucial and very important part of almost all major and essential ethical debates in the last half century. *First* and more importantly, it is about whether we should include non-human animals in morality, within the moral community², i.e., incorporating non-human animals as participants in our moral community, and how – the question of human moral responsibility towards non-human animals. *Second*, it concerns the fact that non-human animals can behave morally, and that is why we should see them as participants within the field of ethics, i.e., the question of non-human animals having their own ethics (Grušovnik, 2023, pp. 25-28).

After all, it is also about one of the most current areas of interest of ethics research because

the human beings relation on the planet to living non-human beings, animals, is characterized by their apparent superiority. Thanks to their overall abilities and potentials, human beings have become masters of the planet. Their *dominant* planetary position raised the question of the value regulation of their behavior towards non-human beings, animals as *lower and subordinate species*. [...] Throughout the history of civilization, people have often treated their superiority as an implicit or explicit authority for complete submission to non-human beings, animals in relation to human demands, interests and needs, with the behavior towards them being determined as *morally indifferent*. (Jakovljević, 2003, pp. 167-168)

But, species membership does not seem morally relevant in and of itself since “species” is a biological category, not a moral one.³ What is more, this way of treating non-human animals, i.e., our attitude according to which every moral reference falls into the water when the victims are non-human animals, actually testifies that in reality, while a small part of us think about the consequences of our act, organizes, and protests against, the majority continue with their lives practicing further atavistic customs and not thinking about the suffering and pain they cause especially in relation to those non-human animals who are capable of real reflective awareness of their personality. This means that deep down they are aware that they are doing evil, but they reject such a feeling by creating a kind of argumentative barrier with which

¹ Linguistically and logically disputable the correct term is “non-human animals.” The same is used to shed light on the often-overlooked fact that humans are also animals. For the rest of this text, we will generally hold to such uses, except when the sources we use relate to the more traditional human and animal dichotomy.

² “Moral community” basically defined as the community of those that count in our moral reckoning (Taylor, 2003, p. 21).

³ As stated in Norcross (2004), and especially Singer (1990).

they would justify their actions, because they are guided by economic necessity or the possibility of progress.

The global animal rights movement was created in the 1960s precisely because of that⁴, and the role of philosophy in developing the theoretical framework and forcing intellectual debates about our treatment of non-human animals was crucial in addressing this issue in its full significance – moral justification of current practices and regulation of normative issues regarding the attitude towards non-human animals, in general.⁵ Peter Singer, one of the key representatives of this movement⁶, commented on the role of philosophy, which joined this movement as a science in the 1970s, saying that: “philosophers were not the mother of the movement, but they did ease its passage into the world and – who knows – may have prevented it being stillborn” (Singer, 2006, p. 2).

Then, together with Tom Regan (1982, 2004) and Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich (1984, 1997), they formulated the primary thoughts representative of the current discussion on the new thinking and regulation of the relationship between humans and non-human animals in the following paragraphs:

1. Non-human animals are beings that are capable of suffering, with their interests and needs that are similar to the basic needs of people;
2. If there is such similarity, the principle of equality requires that the interests of non-human animals are respected as well as the similar interests of humans;
3. Non-human animals have their value, which for some (Singer and Regan) stems from their consciousness, while others (Meyer-Abich) attribute additional importance to the affinity of non-human animals and humans.

So, the question following their *moral status*⁷ was introduced and raised.⁸ At the same time, today, when discussing the moral status of non-human animals, we should

⁴ If we look more closely, we find that such initiatives were already mentioned in Pietist works from the eighteenth century.

⁵ More detailed see: Sirilnik, de Fontene & Singer (2018, pp. 15-17).

⁶ Also the founder of the Animal Liberation Movement, along with Jacques Cosnier and Hubert Montagner as early as the 1970s, shortly after the formation of the Oxford Group of Richard Ryder, which defined the great principles of animalistic ethics in the collection entitled *Animals, Men and Morals* on Roslind and Stanley Godlovitch and John Harris (Godlovitch, Godlovitch & Harris, 1971). Actually, the introduction of the debate proposed by Singer in *Animal Liberation* makes the 1970s the cradle of contemporary animalist discussions.

⁷ The “moral status of non-human animals” is a complex and contested terrain. Unsurprisingly, there are more than two sides to this debate. For more see, e.g., Catharine MacKinnon, “Of Mice and Men: A Feminist Fragment on Animal Rights,” in Nussbaum and Sunstein (2005); and Adams (2010).

⁸ My initial thoughts on the moral status on the non-human animals are discussed in: Donev (2022a) and Donev (2022b). Some elements of this paper, including a significant part of the chapter “The Western European tradition of thought and the moral status of non-human animals” are derived from these works. However, most of these elements have been substantially revised, expanded, and updated.

consider that the question about the status of non-human animals needs to be not just considered but reconsidered because traditional attempts to justify the practice of ascribing rights to non-human animals have been based on the search for what is common to non-human animals and people. This popular conviction rests on the intuition according to which we tend to treat better those beings that are closer to us and resemble man in one way or another. The attempts to ascribe a special status to non-human animals are therefore based on the question “What properties does the animal have?” However, the question is not well formulated because it leads to a number of ontological and epistemological challenges. The question should rather be “What are the conditions under which an entity becomes a moral subject?” (Coeckelbergh & Gunkel, 2014).

GENERAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE MORAL STATUS OF NON-HUMAN ANIMALS

The question of the moral status of non-human animals remains one of the most enduring and philosophically challenging issues in moral theory. At its core lies a deeper inquiry into the nature of the relationship between human beings and other living creatures. Historically, this relationship has been interpreted through ontological frameworks that place humans and non-human animals in distinct and hierarchically ordered categories of being. Such frameworks have profoundly shaped the ethical conclusions drawn about our obligations toward animals. As emphasized by Hub Zwart, “all ethical theories or statements regarding the moral significance of animals are grounded in an ontological assessment of the animal’s way of being” (Zwart, 1997, p. 378).

The ethical debate about animals is therefore inseparable from a broader metaphysical question about the criteria by which moral considerability is attributed. In other words, can this ontological differentiation, which imposes certain insurmountable limits on argumentation in favor of morally guided behavior toward non-human animals and on the very thought of their rights in general, be considered sufficient or does the modern ethical discussion require an adaptive reorientation of the argument when it concerns the normative regulation of our behavior toward non-human animals? (Protopapadakis, 2012, pp. 279-291).

In contemporary debates about the moral status of animals, in the current ethical discourse, three broad orientations can be identified: exceptionalism, welfarism, and abolitionism. Each of these positions embodies distinct assumptions about the basis of moral considerability and the permissible scope of human use of animals.

At one extreme lies **moral exceptionalism**, which maintains that non-human animals lack moral status and that humans therefore have no direct moral duties toward them. Contemporary versions of exceptionalism often rely on contractarian reasoning derived from thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and later elaborated in modern political philosophy by John Rawls. Within such frameworks, moral obligations emerge from reciprocal agreements among rational agents who recognize one another as participants in a shared normative order. Because animals cannot participate in such agreements, they are excluded from the moral community.⁹

Yet, this exclusion raises serious philosophical concerns. First, the contractarian model risks conflating the ability to participate in moral deliberation with the capacity to be morally harmed. A being may be incapable of articulating moral claims yet still be vulnerable to suffering and exploitation. Second, the empirical assumptions underlying exceptionalism have been increasingly challenged by developments in cognitive ethology, which reveal complex emotional and social capacities in many animal species. These findings undermine the claim that animals lack morally relevant psychological properties.

At the opposite end of the spectrum stands **abolitionism**, which holds that the moral status of animals is fundamentally incompatible with their treatment as human resources.¹⁰ This position is most prominently articulated by Gary L. Francione, whose critique focuses on the institutional framework that treats animals as property. According to this view, the central injustice lies not merely in the infliction of suffering but in the structural commodification of sentient beings. Abolitionists argue that animals who are subjects of a life possess inherent moral value and therefore have rights that preclude their instrumental use. This argument builds upon the rights-based theory developed by Tom Regan, who contends that beings with complex psychological lives possess inherent value independent of their usefulness to others.

The abolitionist position, however, is not without its philosophical difficulties. One challenge concerns the conceptual extension of rights beyond the domain of rational agents traditionally understood as bearers of duties and responsibilities. Critics question whether the language of rights can be coherently applied to beings who cannot themselves participate in normative practices. Moreover, abolitionism's categorical rejection of animal use has been criticized for insufficiently addressing the ecological and socio-economic complexities of human-animal relations.

Between these two poles lies **welfarism**, the most influential approach within contemporary public policy and ethical discourse. Welfarist theories accept that

⁹ For more see Carruthers (1992).

¹⁰ For additional information see Regan (2004), especially Francione (2000).

animals possess morally relevant interests yet maintain that their use by humans may be justified under certain conditions. The philosophical foundations of this position can be traced to the utilitarian ethics of Jeremy Bentham, who famously argued that the morally relevant question is not whether animals can reason or speak but whether they can suffer (Bentham, 1988, pp. 310-311). This emphasis on sentience was later expanded by Peter Singer, whose principle of equal consideration of interests challenges the assumption that species membership alone can justify differential moral treatment.

Despite its intuitive appeal, welfarism faces criticism from multiple directions. Abolitionists argue that welfare reforms often serve primarily to legitimize existing systems of animal exploitation by making them appear more humane while leaving their underlying structure intact (Francione & Garner, 2010). Conversely, defenders of exceptionalism claim that welfarism erodes the moral distinction between humans and animals by extending moral concern too broadly. Additionally, the welfarist concept of “unnecessary suffering” remains philosophically problematic, since determining what counts as necessary inevitably involves value judgments shaped by cultural practices and economic interests (Marks, 2012, pp. 42-46).

These tensions reveal that the debate about animal ethics cannot be reduced to a simple disagreement about empirical facts or policy preferences. Rather, it reflects deeper philosophical conflicts concerning the nature of moral community, the criteria for moral status, and the ethical significance of biological life itself. Exceptionalism emphasizes human uniqueness and moral exclusivity; abolitionism emphasizes moral equality and the rejection of instrumentalization; welfarism seeks a pragmatic balance between human interests and animal welfare.

Ultimately, the persistence of these competing frameworks suggests that the problem of animal ethics is inseparable from broader questions about the foundations of moral philosophy. The challenge is not merely to determine how animals should be treated but to reconsider the conceptual assumptions through which moral status is attributed in the first place. Only through a critical examination of these assumptions can philosophical reflection move toward a more coherent and ethically defensible account of the relationship between human beings and the wider community of sentient life.

So far, resolving or attempting to resolve this problem requires further in-depth and detailed discussion of the major philosophical standpoints throughout history on the moral status of non-human animals within the Western European tradition of thought, which are considered responsible for our present-day understanding and treatment of them.

THE WESTERN EUROPEAN TRADITION OF THOUGHT AND THE MORAL STATUS OF NON-HUMAN ANIMALS

First of all, for centuries, the position and status of non-human animals have been neglected or even considered to have no place on Earth. The anthropocentric nature of this view of the world was an important reason why our natural-technical civilization did not develop in harmony with nature, but much more often in opposition to it. Elements, minerals, plants and animals are treated not as “partners” but as resources that man uses indefinitely. This is so because philosophy has been responsible for many of our views regarding the natural world, i.e., philosophical thought has, from the very beginning, influenced our absolute inclination toward anthropocentric ethics, regardless of the consequences of such ideas.

In this context, the dominant anthropocentric philosophical theories represent the belief that only man, a self-conscious being with the ability to act morally, and thus the only autonomous being, can have moral status. Namely,

the dignity of a certain individual is considered from the perspective of the reason of one’s nature, and such nature is only attributed to man. Only he is free from the realm of goals, while non-human living beings are connected by the bonds and relationships that exist in nature. Only man is aware of himself and can distance himself from himself in favor of higher goals, relativize his interests, all the way to self-surrender. This, as a moral being, gives him an absolute status that establishes his unique dignity, which in turn gives him the right not to be “enslaved” by anyone and, as a moral being, not to be deprived of his own goals. From this unique human dignity arises his unique rights. (Kaluderović, 2009, p. 312)

Guaranteed by the UN Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 (Universal Declaration of human rights, 2013).

Contrary to this, non-anthropocentric theories believe there is no strict hierarchy between beings in nature. All differences between humans and animals should be grounded not ontologically but in biological terms (Caspar, 1999, p. 154; Kaluderović, 2020, pp. 18-31). This means that the predominantly anthropocentric picture of the world and the derived relation of man toward nature and non-human animals in the last few decades has been called into question by the non-anthropocentric expansion of ethics and the publication of (bio)ethical search for a new foundation of the relationship between humans and non-human animals. In this context, alongside the theoretical contributions of Peter Singer (utilitarianism), who refers to non-human animals as “persons,” and Tom Regan (rights theory), who describes them as “subjects-of-a-life,” as well as Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich, who emphasizes their dignity as the basis for animal rights and appropriate treatment, including the protection of their lives and the prohibition of killing them for food

(des Jardin, 2006, pp. 193-200; McMahan, 2002, pp. 194-203), we can also point to additional contributions in recent decades from Karen J. Warren (care ethics), Martha Nussbaum (capabilities), and Maria Clara Dias (functionings), which rest on empirical assumptions about the mental capacities of non-human animals. These capacities cumulative can be variously interpreted as the ability to suffer or experience pleasure in the case of Bentham's and Singer's utilitarianism, to be "subjects-of-a-life" in the case of Regan's rights-based theory, and to possess rationality in the case of Kantianism.

However, in general, besides the existing spectrum of theories, the two previously mentioned opposing lines of thought about the differences or similarities between humans and non-human animals characterize the Western philosophical-religious tradition¹¹. This tradition, which is based on two sources, shows less respect for non-human animals and the rest of the natural world than the Eastern traditions due to the assumed absolute superiority of man over nature¹².

The *first source* primarily refers to the nature of the relationship between man and animals as described in the Old Testament Bible, the essential Christian religious-historical document. It provides us with an idea of the world in which man was created according to the image of God and is thus destined to rule over all other living things on Earth. Man is only blessed through the unity of body and immortal soul. The soul is considered a valuable component of humanity, all the more so because it enables moral thinking and action. In contrast, bodily beings, animals, are considered the most primitive level of existence. This view is maintained by the Old Testament stories of animal sacrifice. In other words, animals and the rest of the natural world, according to the Christian philosophical-religious doctrine, exist only for human benefit because human beings "are the only morally important members of this world. Nature itself has no intrinsic value, so the destruction of plants and animals cannot be wrong unless the destruction does not harm human beings" (Singer, 2003, p. 205).

The most influential medieval Christian thinkers, Aurelius Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, are on this first line of thinking. The first one emphasized that the lack of reason in animals justifies their subordinate role, while the latter represents the idea that animals are essentially similar to human artefacts. According to his principal scholastic work, *Summa Theologica, Pars 1a 2ae* of this summa, the second article of Quaestio XIII is devoted to the question of whether animals are endowed with the

¹¹ The Eastern philosophical-religious tradition is in many ways opposed to Western cultural, religious and philosophical views and nurtures the idea of holiness and enthusiasm for all forms of life, not just human.

¹² This led to a kind of crisis of man in the scientific and technical age, as the imperative to preserve nature and biodiversity is increasingly emphasized in relation to the devastating impact of man over the natural world.

faculty of free choice, that is, whether they display resoluteness and goal-oriented behavior. As Zwart analyzing Aquinas observed:

at first glance, they intend to realize certain goals in a conscious and active manner. Moreover, they do seem to have the ability to choose. At times, moreover, animals are said to display remarkable signs of sagacity. So, eventually we must recognize that animal behavior is completely determined. They are by nature equipped with a rather limited set of options, and in a given situation it is rather predictable what they will choose. The faculty of free choice is denied to them. Although being sensitive, the objects of their sensitivity are predetermined by nature, rather than purposively and self-consciously chosen in view of some good. Although they seem to prefer some things above others, these choices are predetermined by nature” (Zwart, 1997, p. 380).

In another words, the movements of animals can be compared to those of arrows. Although one might have the impression that it is the arrow itself that tries to strike the target, it is of course the archer who is responsible for it and who makes the arrow take its course.

The movements of animals are like those of *horologia* – clockworks – or other artefacts, with the difference that whereas *horologia* are human artefacts, manufactured by man, natural things are divine artefacts. Although animals seem to move on their own accord, and even seem to display a certain amount of intelligence, they are in fact pre-ordained to act the way they do. The wisdom and sagacity *apparently* displayed by animals themselves, is actually the wisdom and sagacity of Him who manufactured them and brought them into existence (Zwart, 1997, p. 381).

In this manner, it can be concluded that we are not obliged to show any kindness, mercy, or compassion to animals because they cannot experience any benefit due to their irrational nature; thus, their value is judged solely by their suitability for human use: “Dumb animals... are devoid of the life of reason [...] they are naturally enslaved and accommodated to the uses of others” (Aquinas, 1920).

The *second source* derives from ancient philosophy, posed on Aristotle’s paragraph from the *Politics* and emphasized as a paradigm of the leading Western tradition and its unquestionable anthropocentrism:

and that plants exist for the sake of animals and the other animals for the good of man, the domestic species both for his service and for his food, and if not all at all events most of the wild ones for the sake of his food and of his supplies of other kinds, in order that they may furnish him both with clothing and with other appliances. If therefore nature makes nothing without purpose or in vain, it follows that nature has made all the animals for the sake of men (Aristotel, 1992: 1256b 15-22).

This means that, as Aristotle states in his philosophical teaching (Sorabji, 1995, p. 8), animals, according to the natural hierarchy, are subordinate to humans because

they possess only senses, but not reason and beliefs, i.e., a rational soul; thus, man can use them as resources (Steiner, 2005, p. 5714). However, unlike the animal soul, the human soul is characterized by reason whose products can be communicated through language, thoughts, and reason. Animals have a sensitive soul but not rational mechanisms for communicating pain, suffering or pleasure, so we should not treat them like any other human.¹³ Hence, it can be concluded that, due to their lack of reason, animals cannot participate in the ethical and political sphere: “our action is outside the sphere of righteous action, so there is no friendship because we have nothing in common” (Aristotel, 1992: 1161 a 34 – 1161 b 6).

Earlier ideas about the position of non-human animals in the human world were further developed and reached their peak with the development of modern Western philosophical thought in the seventeenth century, reflecting the still dominant influence of Christianity/Scholasticism. Namely, first is the idea that a non-human animal is basically identical to a machine and the assumption that justifies cruelty to them (that they cannot feel pain) is most prominent in the most important representative of the philosophy of rationalism, Rene Descartes. According to Nietzsche, “Descartes was the first who, with a remarkable audacity, dared to think of animals this way. Ever since, physiologists have been trying to verify this proposition” (Nietzsche, 1980, p. 14).

The differentiation of the overall battle into thinking and stretching stems from Descartes’ mechanistic understanding of nature under the influence of the science of mechanics, in which non-human animals as stretching are deprived not only of the thinking and rational aspect of battle but also of feeling. The result of Descartes diligence¹⁴ was the elaboration of an ontology containing the basic contention that non-human animals are basically machines.

They are not *like* machines in the sense that the machine merely serves as a metaphor. To Descartes, the animal really *is* a machine, and the way of being of an animal is basically similar to that of a machine, an instrument manufactured by man (Zwart, 1997, p. 380).

¹³ But human primacy over animals can also have a benevolent character. Namely, as Martha Nussbaum states, “Aristotle’s great contribution is the idea that each species has its form of life and that it is equipped for life under certain circumstances. The same thing means that the good is different for every animal, and every animal has a purpose in itself and is a measure of its success. [...] Aristotle’s claim from *Politics* that animals exist because of humans is contradicted by hundreds of statements from biological writings which suggest that each animal has its purpose”. (Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 1518-1519)

¹⁴ While dwelling in the Netherlands, Descartes was very much engaged in the practice of dissecting and analyzing bodily parts of animals. He was accustomed to pay daily visits to the slaughterhouses in order to collect interesting material to be anatomized at home (Lindeboom, 1979).

This implies that the phenomena of animal (as well as bodily) life can be understood in strictly mechanistic terms, while only human beings, as thinkers, have consciousness in their body, the unique ability of language and innovative behavior.

Later, in modern philosophy, many philosophers, especially Kant, further advocated for equal respect for interests and autonomy as a fundamental moral principle (Baranzke, 2005, pp. 336-363). But still, the same principle did not extend beyond the limits of its kind. Why? Because

Kant's philosophical point of departure is the distinction between the phenomenal realm (the empirical, factual realm of causality, explored by the sciences) and the noumenal realm (the realm of freedom and reason). Whereas animals will never enter the noumenal realm (it is a possibility which is fundamentally denied to them), humans dwell in both. Man is both an empirical phenomenon (the object of psychology and biology) and a moral subject (Zwart, 1997, p. 381).

With this, Kant clearly moved beyond Descartes and the scholastic-mechanistic tradition and ontological status of non-human animals by stating that the instrumentalization of animals implies a *moral* point of view, meaning that instead of being an end in and of itself, an animal, lacking self-consciousness, must be regarded as a means which allows *us* to realize our reasonable ends. Therefore, we do not have any immediate obligations toward them (Kant, 1990). Kant thereby puts us through a very complicated effort to understand animal life as an organic rather than as a mechanistic phenomenon. The machine itself does not have a goal but is put to use by man in order to realize a particular objective. In the case of non-human animals, however, we discern a purposiveness that is already there, intrinsic to the organism itself – animal life already seems to be directed at achieving certain goals. Because of this, as Zwart explains, “we are bound to think of natural entities *as if* they are manufactured by a Divine Creator, out of a certain intention – we perceive them *as if* they were works of art in the sense of *technè*” (Zwart, 1997, p. 383).

The previous conclusion has thus become problematic. The apparent purposiveness, he claims, is not *constitutive* for nature itself. Rather, it is the way nature is perceived by *us*. We are the ones who perceive animals *as if* they are inherently oriented at realizing certain goals, but we cannot conclude from this that the purpose or intention of the Divine Creator is behind it all. Even more, for although animals are conscious beings, only reasonable and *self*-conscious beings; that is, human beings – have the capacity to set and realize goals of their own – reasonable goals. Whereas the apparent goals of animals remain predetermined by the laws of nature, only humans allow their goals to be determined by the laws of freedom (that is, our sense of moral obligation).

Furthermore, for philosophers such as Hume and Schopenhauer, above all, the dominance of reason in the autonomy of a being has maintained the same direction in philosophical considerations on the question of the moral status of non-human animals. Hume said, “Animals have no rights, although the laws of humanity do oblige us to treat these creatures with care” (Hume, 1975, p. 186).

This careful treatment follows as an implication from the view that the compassion we can feel for non-human animals can be a source of moral thought, but that does not mean that cruel treatment of non-human animals can be considered as a matter of justice because justice is a moral attitude that refers to equals in force and rights. Thus, the righteous deed, i.e., equal respect for interests, applies only to human interests. In this context, under the influence of Indian philosophy, Schopenhauer integrated many ideas from Eastern philosophy into his philosophical teaching. While rejecting reason and self-awareness as necessary for the assumption of the moral status of a particular being, he builds the doctrine of the moral treatment of non-human animals around the ethics of compassion. Moreover, “the greater intelligence of human beings also increases their ability to suffer, thus justifying the increased moral concern for human suffering” (Schopenhauer, 1995, pp. 175, 177, 180).

Moving forward, understanding what animals are – and, consequently, their moral significance – means reflecting on their *way of being*. This establishes Jeremy Bentham as the founder of modern utilitarianism. In a well-known passage, which represents a departure from the mainstream of Western philosophy, Bentham says the following:

The day *may* come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum* are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week or even a month, old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*? (Bentham, 1988, p. 311)

Until the 20th century, it was common to think that animals were immature creatures and undeserved of our compassion. In summary, Paola Cavalieri¹⁵ speaks of a twenty-century philosophical tradition aimed at excluding members of species other than

¹⁵ Italian philosopher who, together with Peter Singer, founded the Great Apes Project, a movement created in 1996 that aims to extend to the great apes the three, not all, rights that until then were reserved only for man: the

ours, outside the ethical domain (Cavaleri, 2007). After Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, she cites Kant as a modern follower of the most persistent and widely accepted thesis of animal relations in all Western culture. By categorizing animals as “things” to which we cannot have direct duties: “animals, as pure means have a moral status of zero-order, i.e., they are excluded from the moral community” (Cavaleri, 2009, p. 98).

But these are attitudes that have been slowly losing importance in the last few decades with the transition into the new millennium, as too harsh and unfounded. In general, As Professor Čović states,

it is believed that most of the discussions about human responsibility for non-human living beings take place today within the so-called animal ethics, which task is to determine the ‘moral status of animals’, and within the advocacy of ‘rights of animals.’ (Čović, 2009, p. 36).

As he adds,

the absurdist method of the specistics leveling has been established within the mentioned framework, which occurs in two forms, as an Aesopian approach of *leveling upwards*, which consists in anthropomorphic attribution to non-human living beings of specifically human properties and categories such as dignity, moral status, rights, etc., and as a Singer’s approach of *leveling down*, consisting of zoomorphic reduction of specifically human traits and categories. Both procedures have the same goal - to level the gap between man and other living beings with the ability to feel, starting from the mistaken assumption that this is a good way to develop moral considerations and legal obligations toward non-human members of the sensitive community. (Čović, 2009, p. 37).

To sum up, it can be freely stated that these views are quite suitable for promoting those attitudes that have led to the monstrous destruction of nature by the modern technological society that continues today with increasingly pronounced savagery. But, the battle continues!

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion¹⁶, it can be concluded that the trajectory of much traditional philosophical reasoning tends to identify rational action with moral

right to life, the right to individual protection and the right for respecting the physical integrity (prohibition of torture). See in more detail: Sirilnik, de Fontene & Singer (2018).

¹⁶ It can be said with certainty that the history of ideas about the moral status of animals does not stop here. On the contrary! Here we can also include the ideas, thoughts, and efforts of Fritz Jahr, Ignaz Bregenzer, Mark H. Bernstein, and even Corey Lee Wrenn. In this sense, this chapter would be richer but also much longer. Therefore, we have decided to leave some of them for in-depth analysis on future occasions, such as articles or chapters.

action. Within this framework, to act morally is to recognize the moral significance of those beings who possess rights or intrinsic value in themselves, rather than to treat them merely as instruments for the realization of the interests of others. Moral obligations are therefore commonly understood to arise primarily among moral subjects, that is, beings capable of rational deliberation, autonomy, and participation in the normative practices that constitute the moral community. Such a view forms the basis of the doctrine that humans possess direct moral duties only toward other rational agents, while obligations toward non-human animals remain indirect.

This position is most systematically articulated in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Within Kant's ethical framework, the possession of rational autonomy constitutes the decisive criterion for moral status. Only rational beings are capable of legislating moral law and thus of existing as ends in themselves within the "kingdom of ends." Non-human animals, lacking this capacity for rational self-legislation, are therefore excluded from the sphere of direct moral obligation. Nevertheless, Kant does not advocate cruelty toward animals. Rather, he maintains that humans possess indirect duties with respect to animals: acts such as kindness, compassion, and humane treatment are morally required because they cultivate virtuous dispositions within human beings and help preserve the moral character necessary for proper relations among persons. In this sense, moral concern for animals ultimately derives from concern for humanity itself. Animals are not the direct objects of moral obligation but rather serve as occasions for the exercise of human virtue.¹⁷

Yet, this position has been increasingly challenged within contemporary moral philosophy. One of the most influential critics is Peter Singer, whose utilitarian approach rejects the assumption that rationality constitutes the primary criterion for moral considerability. Singer argues that the morally relevant characteristic is not rationality but sentience – the capacity to experience suffering and enjoyment. From this perspective, the exclusion of non-human animals from the sphere of direct moral concern reflects an arbitrary privileging of one's own species. Singer famously characterizes this bias as **speciesism**, a form of discrimination analogous in structure to racism or sexism. As he observes, although kindness toward humans and animals may often coincide in practice, philosophers such as Aquinas and Kant nonetheless justified kindness to animals solely because of its beneficial effects on human moral

¹⁷ Historically, this indirect-duty framework echoes earlier theological and philosophical traditions. For example, Thomas Aquinas similarly argued that cruelty to animals should be avoided not because animals possess moral standing, but because such behavior might encourage cruelty toward human beings. In both Aquinas and Kant, the moral significance of animals remains fundamentally derivative: their ethical relevance is mediated through the effects that human behavior toward them has on the moral condition of human agents.

character. According to Singer¹⁸, such reasoning remains fundamentally speciesist because it treats the suffering of animals as morally insignificant in itself:

it may be true that kindness to humans and other animals goes hand in hand; but, nevertheless, Aquinas and Kant argued that this was the real reason one should be kind to animals, which is a totally speciesist position (Singer, 2009, pp. 285, 351).

These philosophical critiques played a crucial role in shaping the intellectual foundations of the modern animal rights movement. Beginning in the 1960s, a new wave of ethical reflection emerged that sought to challenge the long-standing assumption that animals could legitimately be treated as mere resources for human use. In this context, philosophical inquiry did not simply accompany social activism but actively contributed to the development of its normative framework. Scholars such as J. Baird Callicott and Robert Frodeman, as well as Dale Jamieson, have emphasized that philosophy played a decisive role in articulating the conceptual foundations of this movement and in stimulating broader intellectual debates about the ethical legitimacy of prevailing human practices involving animals (Callicott & Frodeman, 2009, pp. 42–53; Jamieson, 2008, pp. 112–120).

Within this emerging ethical discourse, the central normative claim gradually became that animals should be treated in ways that acknowledge their morally relevant interests rather than merely their utility for human purposes. In its strongest formulations, this claim implies that animals should be regarded as entities whose interests deserve consideration comparable –though not necessarily identical – to those accorded to human beings.¹⁹ From this perspective, the widespread instrumentalization of animals in agriculture, experimentation, entertainment, and other domains appears increasingly difficult to justify.

Nevertheless, a striking tension persists between the philosophical recognition of animal suffering and the practical realities of contemporary human–animal relations. As Hub Zwart observes,

¹⁸ Singer's critique, however, does not emerge in isolation but rather builds upon earlier philosophical challenges to anthropocentrism. Already in the eighteenth century, Jeremy Bentham had famously argued that the morally relevant question is not whether animals can reason or speak, but whether they can suffer. Bentham's utilitarian perspective thus undermines the Kantian emphasis on rationality by shifting the focus from cognitive capacities to the experiential reality of suffering. In a different philosophical register, Arthur Schopenhauer likewise rejected the dominant Western view that animals exist merely as instruments for human purposes. Grounding morality in compassion (Mitleid), Schopenhauer argued that the capacity to suffer creates a moral bond among all sentient beings. For him, the moral indifference toward animal suffering characteristic of many Western ethical traditions revealed a deep conceptual limitation rooted in anthropocentric metaphysics.

¹⁹ In June 1995, for example, a bill on research with animals was put forward in the Dutch Parliament. One of the amendments passed on that occasion demanded that the intrinsic value of animals be respected, even such an utterance is regarded as highly problematic.

Even in its weaker sense it presupposes the idea that the world is composed of facts to which human beings can add something called “values”. The animal world is interpreted as basically similar to our own, and due to the conceptual confusions which arise from this, we fail to conceptualize the extent to which, during recent decades, and in spite of the apparent increase of our sensibility when it comes to animals, our actual exploitation of them has intensified considerably. (Zwart, 1997, p. 387)

Indeed, throughout much of human history animals have rarely been treated as ends in themselves or as entities possessing intrinsic value. Instead, they have predominantly been regarded in instrumental terms – as resources to be used, consumed, or manipulated for the satisfaction of human needs and desires. Yet this instrumental treatment exposes a profound ethical asymmetry. Unlike human participants in moral communities, animals cannot consent to the conditions imposed upon them nor articulate objections to their treatment. We cannot ask them to consent to what is being done to them! (Zwart, 1997, p. 387).

The contemporary debate about animal ethics therefore confronts a deeper philosophical challenge: whether the traditional criteria by which moral status has been assigned – particularly rationality and moral agency – can continue to justify the systematic exclusion of non-human animals from direct moral consideration. Addressing this question requires not merely the refinement of existing ethical theories but a more fundamental reassessment of the anthropocentric assumptions that have historically shaped Western moral thought. Only through such critical reflection can philosophical inquiry move toward a more coherent and ethically defensible understanding of the moral relationship between human beings and the wider community of sentient life.

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Moralni status neljudskih životinja u zapadnoeuropskoj filozofskoj tradiciji

SAŽETAK

Moralni status neljudskih životinja jedno je od najaktualnijih područja interesa etičkih istraživanja. To je tako jer bismo danas trebali uzeti u obzir da pitanje o statusu neljudskih životinja ne treba samo razmotriti, već i preispitati, budući da su se tradicionalni pokušaji opravdavanja prakse pripisivanja prava neljudskim životinjama temeljili na potrazi za onim što je zajedničko neljudskim životinjama i ljudima. Međutim, ontološki i epistemološki, ovo pitanje nije dobro formulirano i vrlo je problematično te bi trebalo glasiti: „Koji su uvjeti pod kojima entitet postaje moralni subjekt?” U pokušaju da se dođe do odgovora, ovaj se članak nastoji vratiti u povijest zapadne filozofije kako bi pokazao kako se ovo pitanje/problem razmatra i tretira u pokušaju da se razumiju današnji stavovi i da se ponudi moguće dobro utemeljeno rješenje: tretirati životinje na način usporediv s načinom na koji se odnosimo jedni prema drugima te se suzdržati od njihova korištenja ili trošenja na instrumentalan način – što znači poštivati ih kao partnere!

Cljučne riječi: moralni status, neljudske životinje, moralni subjekt, vrsta, način postojanja.