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Thoughts out of Season on the History of Animal Ethics

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Abstract

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the earlier Western tradition did not customarily deny souls *per se* to nonhuman animals; when it denied immortal souls to animals, it sometimes deemed that denial a reason for giving greater consideration to animals in their earthly existence. Nor has the Western tradition uniformly deemed animals intended for human use. Further, there was considerable opposition to the Cartesian view of animals as insentient machines, and—even among those who were convinced—it was not unknown for them to deem it inappropriate to rely on that conviction in the treatment of animals. Moreover, Darwin's (1874) theory of evolution had neither a novel nor a positive impact on the way in which animals were to be regarded and treated. The study of the history of animal ethics needs to be rethought in a far more nuanced manner.

Keywords

animal souls, animal immortality, animals for human use, sentience, Cartesianism, Charles Darwin, evolution, vivisection

Introduction

In the study of the history of nonhuman animal ethics, certain conclusions have been reached that have become axioms for succeeding studies and have become ingrained in general intellectual understanding. The reality is that these conventional wisdoms are either exaggerations, distortions, or simply false. A close examination of historical attitudes to nonhuman animals reveals a decidedly nuanced ethic, though one would scarcely imagine it from a reading of the majority of relevant literature pertaining to the status of animals in historical perspective. Among these conventional wisdoms are the customary claims:

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1. that the Western tradition has denied souls to animals, especially immortal souls, with the corresponding implication that they were denied ethical consideration;
2. that the belief that animals were intended for human use was almost universal in the West;
3. that the view of animals as insentient machines was pervasively subscribed to; and
4. that Darwin's (1874) theory of evolution had a profound and positive impact on the way in which animals were to be regarded and treated.

None of these propositions is in fact tenable¹

Animal Souls

For many today, the question of whether animals—or humans for that matter—possess souls is either meaningless or a matter of little intellectual or moral significance. Its importance, however, lies in that, from the time of the presocratic Greeks to the nineteenth century—thereafter abating but not disappearing—whether animals possessed souls and what kind of souls they possessed, were deemed to be of central significance in determining how they should be treated. In reality, almost all ascribed souls to animals—the exceptions being some of the Cartesians, and the thoroughgoing materialists such as de la Mettrie who denied souls to humans as well as animals. Whether the materialists were consistent in their denials is to be seriously doubted. A majority deemed animals to possess sentient rather than rational souls, rationality usually being considered the criterion of immortality. However, many Western thinkers did ascribe immortal souls to animals, while many who did not do so acknowledged some measure of obligation to animals because they possessed sentient souls. Some who did not ascribe immortal souls to animals were of the view that—because animals could not be recompensed in the afterlife for ills committed against them in this life—their lack of an immortal soul required a greater obligation on our part to give animals due moral consideration during their earthly existence.

Perhaps Aristotle is the most appropriate starting point, for it is he above all who has been unjustly maligned in the animal advocacy literature and he above all who was the primary influence on philosophical discourse until the eighteenth century. Descartes has been even more maligned, but in his case most of the calumny is justified. Aristotle makes it abundantly clear that the “essential character of an animal” is the soul—“when the soul departs what is

left is no longer a living animal” (Loomis, 1971, p. 47)—and that the animal approaches in some lesser degree what he sees as the rational and divine—hence immortal—element in the human being. To be sure, Aristotle placed the human on a plane above other animals and emphasized human distinctive rationality. Nonetheless, he observed in the *Historia Animalium*,

[J]ust as in man we find knowledge, wisdom and sagacity so in certain animals there exists some other natural properties akin to these... one is quite justified in saying that, as regards man and animals, certain psychical qualities are identical with one another, while others resemble, and others are analogous to, each other. (588:A8):

Unfortunately, the Peripatetics, as Aristotle’s philosophical followers were known, were less subtle than the master, and most treated animals as possessing sentient souls alone. This was especially so following Aquinas, thoroughgoing Aristotelian as he thought himself.

The values of the many who denied immortal souls to animals were complex—indeed, they were often the very antithesis of what one might have expected. This complexity is exemplified by Pierre Charon in the early seventeenth century (*De la Sagesse*, 1601) when he deemed animals inferior to humans in some respects, but almost equal to them in reason, and superior to them in general in virtue. While denying animals immortal souls he insisted they must be treated with respect, views held equally by the vegetarian advocates Pierre Gassendi and Emanuel Swedenborg, the court physician Marin Cureau de la Chambre, and the fabulist Jean de la Fontaine. In the second half of the eighteenth century, we encounter a fervent French moral outrage against the perpetration of animal cruelty in the writings of, for example, Fréville, Grimm, Lavallée, Mercier, and Maupertuis—without any of them concluding that animals had immortal souls. The Italian Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) was one of those who avowed that the lack of an immortal soul made kindness toward animals obligatory because they could not be recompensed in heaven for their suffering.

In England, the Catholic poet Alexander Pope and the Anglican cleric Humphry Primatt were among those who were emphatic in their denunciation of animal cruelty while denying immortal souls to animals. For both Pope and Primatt, however, the lack of an immortal soul required our greater, not lesser, consideration for the animal. In the words of Primatt (1776/1992) the animals

present life... is the whole of his existence; and if he is unhappy here, his lot is truly pitiable, and the more pitiable his lot, the more base, barbarous, and unjust in man, must be every instance of cruelty toward him. (p. 33).

Although James Rothwell wrote explicitly in condemnation of Richard Dean's espousal of animal immortal souls, nonetheless he concluded animals must be treated with kindness and generosity.

Along with Richard Dean who would appear, together with Moses Maimonides, Christopher Smart, George Cheyne, John Hawkesworth, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to have been among the first to postulate sentience as the appropriate criterion for just treatment of animals—"Brutes have sensibility; they are capable of pain feel every bang, cut or stab, and therefore they should not be treated as stocks or stones" (Nicholson, 1801, p. 73)—there were numerous others of prominence who believed in immortal animal souls. The moralist Abraham Tucker, the vegetarian physician George Cheyne, the poet Anna Seward, the parliamentarian Soame Jenyns, the revolutionary leveler Richard Overton, the academic Thomas Brown, the Anglican Bishop of Durham Joseph Butler, the Swiss naturalist Charles Bonnet, and the evangelist John Wesley were among those who proclaimed eternal life for the animals. It was Leibniz and Pierre Bayle who dealt with the issue most profoundly. In his famed historical dictionary (Bayle, 1697), the French Huguenot skeptic included a lengthy article on Hieronymus Rorarius who had written a two-volume book (1544-1547) to show "that brutes frequently make a better use of their reason than men." Emphasizing the similarity of his own ideas to those of Leibniz, with whom he conducts a dialogue, Bayle uses the article to demonstrate all the arguments available to prove the reason of animals and the animals' consequent immortality. Bayle does not discuss immortality itself; to Bayle (and Leibniz), a demonstration of similar kinds of rationality among humans and animals is *ipso facto* a demonstration of animal immortality.

Victorian and Edwardian proponents of animal immortality (Karkeek, 1839/1840; Hamilton, 1877; Buckner, 1903/2004) added to their arguments lengthy lists of those prominent thinkers who, the authors claim, share their view. In his Introduction to Buckner's volume, the Maryland anti-vivisectionist campaigner Haughton claimed that "More than one hundred and seventy English authors, lay and clerical, uphold [the immortality of animals] and have written in its support." (p. 9). The question of the immortality of animal souls and its implications for the treatment of animals was a contentious and divisive issue. Discussing the dispute in 1860, the biographer of the human soul, Alger (1860) observed: "[t]he conflict is still thick and hot." (p. 632). Although a majority maintained animal souls were sentient and mortal, there was always a lively debate with many of the educated propounding what was commonly called, "a future existence for the brute creation."

Animals for Human Use

Notoriously, Xenophon and Aristotle proclaimed animals to be intended for human use. Having described the “superior” characteristics of humans, Xenophon announces: “the beasts are born and bred for man’s sake.” (*Memorabilia* IV, ii, 9-12.). Having mentioned the relationship of plants to animals and some differences between wild and domesticated animals, Aristotle concludes “as nature makes nothing purposeless or in vain, all animals must have been made by nature for the sake of men.” (*Politics* I, viii, 11-12). Although Aristotle was far more respectful of animals when his attention was devoted to fauna in his zoological studies, the notion of animals as existing for the sake of humans prevailed among the Peripatetics, Stoics, Augustinians, and Thomists—Aristotle’s students Dicaerchus and Theophrastus were notable exceptions to the rule. As late as the mid-nineteenth century, we find A. Brontë (1847/1988) depicting one of her heroines as having to defend the contrary view against her employer’s insistence that “the creatures were all created for our convenience.” (pp. 105, 106). Nonetheless, animals for human use was a far from universal view. The naturalist and classifier Ray (1691/1979) summed up the changing intellectual consensus:

It is generally received Opinion that the visible world was created for Man... This opinion is as old as *Tully* [Marcus Tullius Cicero]... yet Wise men nowadays think otherwise. [Dr. Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist] affirms:... “This comes only out of Pride and Ignorance or a haughty Presumption, because we are encouraged to believe, that in some sence, all things are made for Man, therefore to think they are not all made for themselves. But he that pronounceth this, is ignorant of the Nature of Man and the Knowledge of Things.” (pp. 127-129).

On seeing the countless stars through a telescope, the celebrated seventeenth-century natural philosopher Robert Boyle was compelled to reject the idea that everything had been made for human benefit. Even Descartes acknowledged, “It is not at all probable that all things have been made for us.” (Lovejoy, 1933/1960, p. 124). Indeed, it was a general provision of the great chain of being—the dominant value concept in the history of ideas from medieval times to the nineteenth century—that every link in the chain exists for its own sake and not primarily for the benefit of any other link. (Lovejoy, p. 186).

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, Kant (1785/1994) formulated the ground-breaking categorical imperative as, “Act in such a manner that you always treat humanity, both in your own person and that of any other, always as an end and never solely as a means.” (p. 52). Infamously, Kant excluded animals from the application of the imperative because of the animals’ lack of self-consciousness. However, very shortly after Kant’s formulation, a man

in even greater vogue, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, borrowed the very words employed by Kant to announce the contrary conclusion in his 1803 evolutionary poem *Metamorphose der Tiere* (metamorphoses of the animals) that each animal is an end in itself—“*Zweck sein selbst ist jegliches Tier.*” In rather different formulation but with similar intent, we find the Lake Poets elevating the status of animals. Wordsworth’s (1805/1850/1996) *Prelude* is a hymn to the universal spirit in which humans and animals are united: “I saw one life and felt that it was joy” (book 2, line 430). Likewise, Coleridge wrote of the “Fraternity of Universal Nature.” (Griggs, 1956, p. 459). This brotherhood he regarded as “one Life.” Again, the continuity of Western thought lies in a juxtaposition of competing ideas and values, not in the establishment of an inerrant orthodoxy.

Cartesianism and Animal Sentience

The overriding view in the history of animal ethics is that the Cartesian view of animals as insentient machines, expressed most explicitly in the writings of Nicolas Malebranche, had an inordinate influence on the Western mind. In fact, while Cartesian rationalist philosophy was in general greatly admired and highly influential, it is remarkable how many expressed their conviction in the validity of its arguments except with regard to what they saw as the preposterous notion of animals as *bêtes machines*. In immediate response to Descartes’ *Meditations* we find the court physician Marin Cureau de la Chambre and Catholic abbot and mathematician Pierre Gassendi venturing into print to denounce the very idea. In *Traité des Connoissance des Animaux* (1648), the physician declared to the contrary that animals could reason and were ingenious. The abbot was appalled at what he saw as Descartes’ blindness where animals were concerned, arguing that animal and human senses were of a similar order. The Cambridge Platonist Henry More complained bitterly to Descartes of the “internecine and cutthroat idea you advance which snatches life and sensibility away from the animals.” (Harwood, 1928/2002, p. 102). Even Kant found the mechanist idea of animals wholly unfounded. At least one of those who was persuaded by Descartes, John Norris of Pemberton, would not allow his intellectual conviction to influence his behavior:

... lest in Resolution of so abstract a Question our Reason should happen to deceive us, as 'tis easy to err in the Dark, I am so far from encouraging any practices of Cruelty, upon the Bodies of these Creatures, which the Lord of the Creation has (as to the moderate and necessary use of them) subjected our Power, that on the contrary I would have them used with as much tenderness and pitiful regard, as if they had all

that Sense and Perception which is commonly (tho' I think without sufficient Reason) attributed to them. (Harwood, 1928/2002, p. 104)

By his use of “commonly,” Norris indicates that—despite over half a century of Cartesianism—the doctrine of animal mechanism had on the whole failed to convince. Indeed, Lord Bolingbroke, Mme. de Sévigné, and Bernard Fontenelle tried to outdo each other in cracking ribald jokes about the silliness of the animal-watch analogy and the inability to be persuaded of so unacceptable a notion. Jean de la Fontaine, Étienne de Condillac, the Duchess of Newcastle, Samuel Johnson, Joseph Addison, Alexander Pope, John Locke, John Ray, Jonathan Swift, and Charles Bonnet were among the many who found the notion of insentient animals as quite untenable. It is difficult to find more than a handful in England who were fully convinced by the insensate machine and, if more in France, not inordinately more. And certainly not in the proportions that the supposition of a Cartesian dominance of the Western mind would have us believe.

Charles Darwin, Evolutionary Theory and Animal Ethics

That the Darwinian revolution profoundly altered our conception of animals and produced a veritable metamorphosis in our attitudes to animals is postulated in book after book as an undeniable matter of incontrovertible fact. Darwin is supposed to have raised the status of animals and diminished the sense of human superiority over animals and of Europeans over other races. In fact, on practically every other page of the first seven chapters of *The Descent of Man* Darwin (1874) emphasizes human superiority over animals and Caucasian superiority over other races. Darwin's racism is evidenced in his suggestion that “the races themselves might be classified as distinct species,” though he demurs since “it is hardly possible to discover clear distinctive grounds between them” (p. 194). The racism is exemplified in the following:

The Esquimaux, like other Arctic animals, extend over the whole polar regions. (p. 194) ... Judging from the hideous ornaments and the equally hideous music admired by most savages it might be argued their aesthetic faculty was not so highly developed as in certain animals, for instance, the birds [in contrast to Europeans]. (p. 199).

“Some savages take a horrid pleasure in cruelty to animals, and humanity is an unknown virtue” (p. 193). Nor can we brush the racism aside as a mere unfortunate reflection of racist Victorian culture, for he confesses:

I have entered into the above details on the immorality of savages because some authors have recently taken a high view of their moral nature, or have attributed most of their crimes to mistaken benevolence. (p. 105)

Nor does Darwin (1874) refrain from stressing human superiority over the animals. On occasion, it is the moral sense:

I fully subscribe to the judgment of those writers who maintain that of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important. (p. 135)

On another occasion, it is “Imagination” and on yet another “Reason.” He tells us:

... there can be no doubt that the difference between the mind of the lowest man and the highest animal is immense. (p. 110).

In summation:

all others have yielded before him. He manifestly owes this immense superiority [over the animals] to his intellectual faculties, to his social habits, which lead him to aid and defend his fellows, and to his corporeal structure. The supreme importance of these characteristics has been proved by the final arbitrament of the battle for life. Through his powers of intellect, articulate language has been evolved; and on this his wonderful advancement has mainly depended. (p. 54).

It is frequently said there is no “higher” and “lower” in Darwinism. Thus, for example, Rachels (1991) tells us that “such notions as ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ are very un-Darwinian. . . . There is no ‘more evolved’ or ‘less evolved’ in Darwinian theory” (p. 64). To be sure, in an important sense, Darwinian evolution is a branching system rather than a ladder. Milner (1990) adds that after Darwin had drafted *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872)—the working title referred to the *Lower Animals*—he “resolved not to use the terms ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ in his description of animals” and thus “went through the manuscript striking out terms of animal rank.” (p. 201). However, not only did Darwin use “higher” and “lower” with great frequency in *The Descent of Man* (1871), he continued to do so in the second edition of 1874, which was substantially revised and published two years after *The Expression of Emotions*. His decision to strike out “terms of animal rank” seems to have been without more than momentary effect.

Throughout the second edition of *The Descent* (Darwin, 1874), we continue to read of “the lower animals,” “the higher mammals,” “animals *very* low in the scale,” and “the organic chain.” At one point, Darwin writes of “the ascending organic scale.” (p. 143). The idea of a *scala naturae* in a manner very similar to the proponents of the great-chain doctrine is central to the Darwinian mode of thought in *The Descent*. When he removed the distinctions of rank from *The Expression of Emotions*, he did so in the interests of a technical, scientific point—one that if he had repeated for *The Descent* would have rendered the whole book meaningless or at least incomprehensible.

Yet it can be argued that it is for the change in attitude to animals for which he is best known and appropriately revered. There are three ways in which Darwinism may be interpreted to have fundamentally changed our attitude to animals. It may be suggested (a) that Darwin’s own attitudes, and his discussion of our similarities to, and kinship with, other species differed fundamentally from those of previous commentators; (b) that the theory aroused public awareness for the first time of our similarities and relationships to other animals; and (c) that Darwin and his followers showed themselves more sympathetic than others to animal interests in the issues that arose in the years following the publication of *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*. On all three counts, Darwinism fails the test.

Certainly, Darwin’s theory of evolution is of the greatest scientific significance. He did not discover evolution—Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Maupertuis, Bonnet, Goethe, Herder, Erasmus Darwin, Lamarck, Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, among others, have a prior claim. However, he certainly developed far clearer conceptions of it. What was strikingly new about Darwinism was its brilliant account of the manner in which evolution takes place. However, all theories of evolution, including those prior to Charles Darwin, have the same moral implications with regard to our kinship with, and descent from, other species (as, at least with regard to kinship, do demonstrations of homology). Darwin offers no new ethic with respect to the influence of our evolutionary relationship to other species.

Now it would be churlish to deny that Darwin himself cared deeply for animals, at least when he was not engaged in his pastime of sport hunting—which he gradually abandoned as he matured—or killing animals for his research.

Darwin (1874) stressed his caring: “humanity to the lower animals” is “one of the noblest [virtues] with which man is endowed.” (p. 139). However, it is an easy task to recall many prior historical figures who demonstrated not one iota less of respect—for example, Porphry, Leonardo, Montaigne, Emily Brontë, and Schopenhauer.

Darwin goes to considerable length to describe the similarities between humans and other species and to propose this as a primary indicator of our responsibilities toward other species. Of the greatest significance, however, is the fact that all the categories Darwin employs and all the conclusions Darwin reaches were already used and expounded in numerous pre-Darwinian studies pertaining to animal ethics. In chapters 3 and 4 of *The Descent*, Darwin (1874) tells us,

all have the same senses, intuitions and sensations—similar passions, affections and emotions, even the more complex ones, such as jealousy, suspicion, emulation, gratitude and magnanimity; they practice deceit and are vengeful; they are sometimes susceptible to ridicule, and even have a sense of humour; they feel wonder and curiosity; they possess the same faculties of imitation, attention, deliberation, choice, memory, imagination, the association of ideas and reason, though in very different degrees. (p. 89)

The relevant question, of course, is whether this analysis differs in any significant manner from the pre-Darwinian accounts. The literature pertaining to animal ethics has claimed the answer to be in the affirmative.

Yet it is not. Immediately, one notices the similarity to the views of the devout anti-materialist Sir Benjamin C. Brodie, who was president of the Royal Society when *The Origin of Species* was published and had, a few years earlier, written in his *Psychological Enquiries* (1855):

The mental principle in animals is of the same essence as that of human beings, so that even in the humblest classes we may trace the rudiments of these faculties to which, in their state of more complete development, we are indebted for the grandest results of human genius. I am inclined to believe that the minds of the inferior animals are essentially of the same nature with that of the human race. (Buckner, 1903/2004, pp. 31, 32).

If we turn to the study by the veterinarian Youatt (1839/2003), published 20 years before *The Origin of the Species* and 32 years before Darwin (1874), we will be struck immediately by the degree of similarity between the concepts and categories employed by Youatt and those later employed by Darwin. Moreover, it should be clear that each uses the prevailing categories of ideas of human-animal continuity prevalent in the nineteenth century. There is nothing revolutionary, not even anything slightly novel, about Darwin's analysis and conclusions.

In very similar vein to Darwin's later approach, Youatt (1839/2003) writes, at greater length than Darwin, of the animals' senses, emotions, consciousness, attention, memory, sagacity, docility (the capacity for learning), association of ideas, imagination, reason, social affections, moral qualities, friendship, and

loyalty—each of which is said to differ from human attributes only by degree. (pp. 49-101). Nor was Youatt being, or claiming to be, especially original. The French army surgeon Paré was already writing in the mid-sixteenth century that “magnanimity, prudence, fortitude, clemency, docility, love, carefulness, providence, yea knowledge, memory & c. is common to all brutes” (Overton, 1543/1968, p. 26). We find extensive listing of similar attributes in the writing of, for example, Rorarius, Gilles, Bary, de la Chambre, Bayle, Voltaire, and George Nicholson, with Nicholson citing them from a broad variety of sources.

In the early eighteenth century, we encounter the influential Bishop of Durham, Butler (1736/1834) taking it as common knowledge that animals as well as people share “apprehension, memory, reason... affection... enjoyments and sufferings.” (p. 28). By the nineteenth century, such compilations were common currency among the educated. No previous evolutionary theory became the *cause célèbre* occasioned by the publication of *The Origin of the Species*. However, *The Origin* was entirely about our descent from the animals. Darwin said nothing perceived as controversial then or later about animal ethics—at least not until the Great Vivisection Debate of the mid 1870s when he was seen to be on the side of science against the animals.

Moreover, France was already further advanced in the dissemination of the evolutionary idea. Earlier in the century, Saint-Hilaire had propounded an evolutionary theory in which he had proclaimed, “there is, philosophically speaking, only a single animal.” The prolific French novelist Honoré de Balzac promoted Saint-Hilaire and advertised the evolutionary message to the whole literary world in his popular series of books *La Comédie humaine*. In the preface that he wrote in 1845 as a generic preamble to the whole series, Balzac (1880) announced approvingly, and indeed as the underlying theme of his own novels, that all animals, human animals included, were all created on “one and the same principle” and that “all animals behaved according to similar natural laws.” (p. vi). The preamble was included in each post-1845 new printing of those works published prior to 1845 as well as in all subsequent novels and their translations. The series comprised 70 volumes! Balzac, one would imagine, reached a far wider audience than did Charles Darwin and T. H. Huxley.

Only a few prior to World War I associated Darwinian evolution with animal ethics: notably Thomas Hardy, J. Howard Moore, and Henry Salt—with some others such as George Bernard Shaw and Stephen Coleridge in adamant opposition to the association. At the turn of the twentieth century, acceptance of Darwinian evolution went into a decline. The Darwinian Clodd’s *Pioneers of Evolution from Thales to Huxley* (1896/1907) was subtitled: *With a Chapter on the Causes of the Arrest of the Movement*. It was only after the revival of the

fortunes of the theory in the twentieth century that Darwinian evolution and animal ethics came to be generally associated—and then almost exclusively in the second half of the century—earlier evolutionary theories and compilations of animal attributes being long forgotten. It was only then that evolution was taken as a package with animal ethics. Only then were animal ethics associated with evolutionary theory in the minds of animal advocates, and very largely in theirs alone.

Within a few short years after the publication of *The Descent of Man*, the Great Vivisection Debate consumed the interest of animal advocates. Darwin and most evolutionists were adamant in favor of the fewest possible restrictions on vivisection—for the sake of knowledge, not medicine. Alfred Russel Wallace was a notable exception, on the grounds of degradation of the vivisectors, not for the interests of animals. Arrayed against them were the scholar, preacher, and activist Frances Power Cobbe, Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), the novelist Wilkie Collins, Archbishop Thomson of York, Cardinal Henry Ernest Manning, John Ruskin, Robert Browning, Christina Rossetti, John Coleridge (about to become Lord Chief Justice Coleridge), Lords Shaftesbury and Carnarvon, Queen Victoria, and a host of others. It was a close-fought battle with a “compromise” favorable to the vivisectors finally being reached in the British Parliament. As Frances Power Cobbe said,

Mr. Darwin eventually became the centre of an adoring *clique* of vivisectors who (as his biography shows) plied him incessantly with encouragement to uphold their practice, till the deplorable spectacle was exhibited of a man who would not allow a fly to bite a pony's neck standing before all Europe as the advocate of vivisection. (Rachels, 1991, p. 214)

In his private life, he was affectionate to animals; in his professional and public life, destructive of them. It is difficult to posit Darwin and his theory of evolution as a revolution favorable to animal ethics. If anything, it is the contrary. To be sure, the theory of evolution has been used at will in the interests of animal advocacy, but there was no such intent in the minds of Darwin, Wallace, or Huxley. There was no more of value to animal advocacy in Darwinian theory than in the numerous, previous, non-evolutionary expressions of sensibility to animals or in the acquired characteristic theories of other evolutionists.

Conclusion

Over time, perceptions of reality have changed. The comparability of human and animal souls was once bitterly contested. Now we believe animals were

denied souls completely. One of the most influential figures in the history of philosophy deemed animals intended for human use. The incorrect assumption has been that almost all followed in his wake. Descartes was highly influential in his time on philosophy in general. Now that influence is assumed to have extended into areas in which, on the whole, the Cartesian view failed to convince. Charles Darwin's influence on the acceptance of the theory of evolution is thought to have extended to animal ethics. In fact, later commentators assumed that must have been the case because, in their view, it ought to have been. It was not.

We are left with the conclusion that the study of the history of animal ethics needs drastic revision. Dionysius claimed that history is philosophy leading by examples. But if we have our history wrong, we will learn from the wrong examples. If we have our history wrong—and we do—our collective social conscience will err about who we are to the extent that who we are depends on knowing aright who we were.

Note

1. For a comprehensive account, see Preece, (2005), chapter 3, *Brute Souls, Happy Beasts and Evolution: The Historical Status of Animals* (Vancouver, CA: UBC Press).

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