Response

What Does Evolutionary Theory Tell Us about the Moral Status of Animals?

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Binary opposition as an ordering principle of thought has, indeed, been a paradigm for modes of thinking in Western civilization. Doubtless, evolutionary biology has been pivotal in the deconstructing of radical binary oppositions.

The history of non-evolutionary biology goes beyond the circle of fundamentalist Christian opponents of evolution. Long before Christianity, Greek philosophical anthropology assumed an atomistic worldview, paradigmatically expressed in Aristotle, sometimes in Plato, and given its modern character by Descartes. The primary binary opposition manifest in these thinkers, and more importantly, in the general ethos of their historical epoch, is the mind-body dualism.

The body is like any other natural entity, to be understood in atomistic-mechanistic language. The human soul, as a ghost in the machine, is incorporeal and spiritual in nature.

Professor Sheets-Johnstone recognizes that this example of binary opposition gave rise to the situation wherein human beings are both essentially and morally segregated from God, animals, nature, and even each other. This foundational ordering principle established a justification for human tyranny over other creatures and the entire natural world. Much of the reign of tyranny over nature stems from outdated religious, biological, and metaphysical systems of thought. These

systems of thought maintain a radically hierarchical ontological and axiological structure erected to support humanity at its apex. In short, Western people have come to think in terms of isolated individuals and insulated minds, rather than in terms of One Reality ontologically interconnecting all things and events.

In recent philosophy, anti-evolutionism is hard to find. It would seem that Sheets-Johnstone's thesis, that binary opposition as an ordering principle is refuted by evolutionary theory, is a moot point. In scientific and philosophically literate circles, the argument concerning non-evolutionary biology vs. evolutionary biology seems about over. With this in mind, what her paper does not fully provide are some precise ethical implications for human/nonhuman relations that would follow from dissolving binary opposition as an ordering principle of thought. For example, what is the moral status of nonhumans relative to humans and to the whole biotic community, given the fact that continuity is a basic tenet of evolutionary theory? In dissolving binary opposition, does it follow that we should dissolve any hierarchy of value among living entities?

In addition to evolutionary theory, process philosophy has done an exemplary job in dissolving a number of binary oppositions by maintaining the view that reality is a socially structured process which manifests intimate continuities between nonhumans and humans. Yet, process philosophy maintains a modified hierarchy of value-experience, arguing that humans, by virtue of their superior ability to reason, do have a higher degree of value than nonhumans. It follows that humans enjoy a higher level of moral status over nonhumans. But the difference in value between humans and nonhumans is one of degree, not kind. However, there may be no value distinction between higher animals and marginal cases of humanity.

What, exactly, does Sheets-Johnstone espouse as an alternative metaphysical and moral worldview based on her rejection of binary opposition as an ordering principle? If continuity between humans and nonhumans is to be identified with absolute equality in moral status, I would have to disagree.

Contrasts that stem from a hierarchical structure of value need not be invidious *per se*. The rejection of binary opposition is an attempt to raise the status of nonhumans, not lower the status of humans. In other words, there is nothing inherently mistaken, nor morally problematic, for humans to exalt and cherish their species. This becomes morally

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problematic if this exaltation is celebrated at the expense of, or in violation of, nonhumans' basic needs and interests.

Continuity does not imply strict equality. The value of any creature depends partly upon the effects it can have upon other creatures. In instrumental value, for better or worse, nonhumans are significantly less effective than humans. The key point here from the moral perspective is that acknowledgment of human superiority does not imply domination—quite the contrary. The human ability to apprehend the interconnections of the ecosystem and the intrinsic value of all things requires care, responsibility, and respect for nonhumans. A heightened level of compassion and respect for nonhumans comes from the very continuities and commonalities that are articulated in Sheets-Johnstone's paper.

Process metaphysics, in concert with evolutionary theory, recognizes that sympathy and compassion are not merely psychological achievements; they are part of all lived experience. In addition, there is organic connectedness between desire and reason, feeling and self-consciousness, etc. In other words, thinking stems from sentience but blooms into the awareness of alternatives. Sentience is the tie that binds human and nonhuman life. It is the only defensible boundary for having needs and interests at all.

The continuity and commonality between humans and nonhumans established by organic connectedness should prompt us to see the necessity for ethical ideals to be undergirded by instinctive and emotional depth. Before justice and fair treatment is considered, human beings must feel their commonality with animals.

Animals and humans are coevolved social beings participating in a single society, wherein all share feelings such as sympathy, compassion, trust, love, and so on. Springing from mind-body dualism, another classic Western binary opposition has been the radical separation of feeling and reason in moral philosophy, which, in turn, widens the gulf between humans and nonhumans. Feeling, compassion, sympathy, and the like are not *bona fide* moral categories, according to rationalist orientations to ethics. Kantian ethics, for example, is derived from a mind-body dualism which leads to an invidious contrast between feeling and thinking. This dualism has led to truncated visions of human nature and, ultimately, to truncated moral philosophies. In short, it is a faulty attempt at human transcendence of animality.

However, for all the commonalities and kinship humans share with nonhumans, there still remains a hierarchy of value. Over and above plant life, at the level of animals and humans, there is a higher level known as consciousness and ultimately, in humans, the capacity to reason.

Sheets-Johnstone rightly acknowledges that consciousness and thinking are common to humans and nonhumans, and are derivative from primitive feelings. Alfred North Whitehead adds to this by saying:

It must be remembered, however, that emotion in human experience is not bare emotion. It is emotion interpreted, integrated, and transformed into higher categories of feeling. But even so, the emotional appetitive elements in our conscious experience are those which most closely resemble the basic elements of all physical experience.¹

By acknowledging that reason stems from sentience, we delimit human transcendence of animality. However, it is not clear to me whether Sheets-Johnstone shares Tom Regan's view that any doctrine of degrees of value would lead to unjust subjugation of those possessing less value. Regan's claim is not convincing. It is not necessarily the case that a doctrine of degrees of value will lead to exploitation, although this often occurs. And there must be some grounds for adjudicating conflicts between humans and nonhumans. If consciousness and sentience establish value and moral status for nonhumans, then it would seem to follow that a higher degree of sentience and consciousness (reason) would establish a higher moral status for humans.

Human beings have achieved a level of consciousness on the evolutionary scale which determines that reflective experience is more interesting, influential, and value-laden than the experience of nonhumans. Humans are able to grasp the universal nature of ideals and symbols, whereas animal consciousness is more closely tied to the primitive and physical mode of experience. Yet, as Susan Armstrong-Buck points out, "...this same capacity of abstraction from the actual world allows human beings to forget their rootedness in their bodies and the world, as well as their kinship with nonhuman life. This disconnection results in the cruel and destructive behavior which human beings sometimes exhibit."² According to Sheets-Johnstone, it is precisely this disconnection

resulting from radical binary opposition that human beings must overcome.

We should be more hesitant to celebrate our unqualified "superiority" over animals, given the moral atrocities that have resulted from our capacity to "reason." Recall Mark Twain's remark that the beast is always clean-minded and innocent, whereas the human is always foul-minded and guilty. And in a remarkable passage, Whitehead states:

Without doubt the higher animals entertain notions, hopes, and fears. And yet they lack civilization by reason of the deficient generality of their mental functioning. Their love, their devotion, their beauty of performance, rightly claim our love and tenderness in return. Civilization is more than all these; and in moral worth it *can be less* than all these.³

Nevertheless, by maintaining the view that humans have more inherent value than nonhumans, we can adjudicate conflicts between humans and animals. But it does not justify forcing sentient nonhumans to suffer unnecessarily. The consensus that human beings need to reach is when interference with the lives of nonhumans is necessary, hence, morally justifiable, and when it is not necessary, hence, morally impermissible.

At one point in her paper, Sheets-Johnstone claims that an absolute divide between humans and nonhumans ignores evidence of culture, mind, thinking, and reasoning in nonhumans. I suggest that culture and reasoning are not achievements found in the world of higher animals. Culture is a human achievement which springs from surveying the world with a large generality of understanding. It is the complex of aims and interests which define and organize human social activity and its products. Cultural interests involve activities that are distinct from any activities found in the lives of

animals. Art, morality, religion, science, and philosophy are examples of exclusively human social activities. Doubtless, nonhumans are remarkably social. But it would be more accurate to say that nonhumans enjoy social living rather than cultural living.

The discussion on language perception and production illuminates striking commonalities between humans and nonhumans, but there is a difference, albeit one of degree, and this point is not fully explicated in Sheets-Johnstone's paper. All higher animals communicate, but the ability in nonhumans is significantly limited compared to that effected by human speech and writing. Most birds sing, but their music, while beautiful in its relative simplicity, is hardly comparable to human music in complexity, harmony, and intensity.

In conclusion, Sheets-Johnstone offers sufficient evidence for rejecting any lingering appeals to binary opposition as an ordering principle and to the axiological schemes that follow. As I mentioned earlier, what her paper fails to do is to show what specific moral points follow from evolutionary continuity between humans and nonhumans. Nevertheless, it would appear that the careful refutation of any appeal to binary opposition as an ordering principle in human thought is an appropriate starting point for extending moral consideration to nonhuman animals. Human beings deserve moral consideration and humans, after all, can never fully transcend their animality.

Notes

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p. 162.

² Susan Armstrong-Buck, "Whitehead's Metaphysical System as a Foundation for Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* (Fall 1986), p. 248.

³ Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 4 (emphasis added).