

Review of *Das Tier in der Moral*

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Das Tier in der Moral by Ursula Wolf.
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Seen in the perspective of cultural history, the contemporary movement to grant animals a moral status equal to that of human beings represents the final and catastrophic stage of a progressive crisis of confidence within our Western civilisation. Having abandoned first our belief in the proven superiority of our culture over all others, then our belief in the natural superiority of men over women, we are now urged to abandon also our belief in the intrinsic superiority of humankind over the beasts. The causes contributing to this last loss of self-esteem are no doubt various and conflicting: vegetarianism, the ecological movement, horror at the medical and industrial exploitation of animals, the influence of Indian religions, and a realisation of the remoter consequences of the rationalistic conception of man; some might also see in it perhaps an intellectual expression of the lapse into bestiality against which Biblical writers often warned the impious. Hitherto the philosophical debate concerning the moral status of animals has been conducted almost entirely within the English-speaking world, largely on account of its traditional concern for animals and its affinity for utilitarianism, which can more readily accommodate animals than the Kantianism dominant in continental

Europe; recently, however, the debate has been taken up in Germany, and this book by Professor Ursula Wolf of Berlin is one of the first philosophical contributions to it from that country.

As we might expect of a work by a German philosopher, the discussion of theoretical issues occupies the most important place in it, although it is plain that the authoress is well acquainted also with practical matters; the most original parts of the book indeed are those devoted to general moral theory, and it is to these that I shall largely confine myself. Much of this discussion of the fundamental questions of ethics is presented by way of a criticism of other writers, both German (Kant, Schopenhauer, Tugendhat) and English (Singer, Clark, Rorty, and others), but in appraising Professor Wolf's arguments I shall as far as possible abstract these from their critical context.

The central argument of the book is contained in the third of its five chapters (especially pp. 69-81) and is, as I understand it, the following. There can be no ultimate grounding of ethics, but the most reasonable (*sinnvoll*) moral theory is a "liberal" ethics, distinguished by the absence of metaphysical pretensions and the equal status it accords all human beings. However, because no empirical property can be found equally distributed amongst men to justify its egalitarian conclusions, liberal ethics has to presuppose the equal possession by human beings of some non-empirical



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property such as reason or intrinsic worth. By eliminating this inconsistency and so “radicalising” liberal ethics, we find that the only empirical property shared equally by all human beings is the capacity to suffer (*Leidensfähigkeit*); but this property is shared by most, if not all animals, who must therefore also enjoy the status of objects of moral concern. This “ethics of generalised sympathy” (or “pity,” *Mitleid*) of itself provides only the core of an ethical theory, not any concrete norm such as that no suffering may be inflicted without good reason; but the adoption of this standpoint implies the attribution to the objects of such sympathy of certain rights, from which in turn follow certain obligations towards them. Those parts of ethics which are not essentially concerned with individuals lie outside the scope of this theory, however.

Despite its simplicity, Professor Wolf’s argument requires clarification at a number of points. It remained unclear to me whether she offers her ethics of generalised sympathy as the only moral theory she herself can accept, as the one she recommends to others, as the one actually held implicitly by most people, as the only one which withstands philosophical criticism, or as the only one able to justify the condemnation of the contemporary treatment of animals. This unclarity is in part a consequence of an unclarity in the method followed in establishing this moral theory: despite her criticisms of other theories, Professor Wolf states that none of them are simply false; they are rather one-sided (57), since each implies a certain approach (*Sichtweise*); but although she promises to explain how one can argue about the plausibility of approaches (55), it is not evident to me that she does so.

Professor Wolf, furthermore, does not distinguish explicitly between the three senses in which sympathy is generalised in her theory, namely (i) from human beings to animals (or some of them) (49, 76), (ii) from short-lived (*punktuell*) episodes of physical pain to the entire weal or woe, in Schopenhauer’s phrase, of all sentient beings (88, 100), and (iii) from an emotion (*Affekt*) or sympathetic feeling (*Mitgefühl*) to a consistent attitude (*Einstellung*) or stance (*Grundhaltung*) which can alone provide the basis of a morality (51-2, 85, 97, 143); these three generalisations are however independent one of another, and each gives rise to peculiar difficulties. First, although there are unquestionably many similarities between man and the higher animals, it is too much to speak here, as she suggests, of continuities (36, 95); Professor Wolf herself admits that

animals’ relationship to their own welfare is less self-aware or conceptualised (*reflektiert*) than man’s (76); but self-awareness essentially makes a difference of kind, not of degree, and it is difficult to see how in the absence of conceptualisation animals can pursue their own good consciously as their good. Second, the equivalence between the capacity to suffer, thriving or ailing (*gut oder schlecht gehen*), and willing or striving towards one’s own good has to be demonstrated and not simply asserted (76, 89, 94-5). Professor Wolf insists that sympathy is directed upon the sufferer, not upon the state of suffering as such (49, 52), and that elemental (*elementar*) or uninterpreted suffering must be given greater weight than interpreted suffering (78); but she overlooks the fact that the more elemental the suffering the less the identity of the sufferer is relevant to the response it evokes, and she herself questions whether there is any pain or suffering which is perceived without interpretation or as such, even by the sufferer (79). Third, Professor Wolf simply leaves unexplained the transition from the feeling of sympathy to the standpoint of concern for others’ suffering, which reintroduces into ethics Kantian notions of consistency and universality: when we act in accordance with some principle to relieve suffering which occasions us no vicarious pain, we act as rational beings in a way which sympathetic feelings of themselves cannot make intelligible.

Professor Wolf never, to my mind, makes it perfectly clear whether she attributes to animals exactly the same moral status as that of man or some other, partly because she characterises the opposed position variously as attributing a weaker, different, or unequal status to them, partly because she draws no explicit distinction between the possession of an equal status and the equal possession of a status; the latter expression is strictly a tautology, for a status is either possessed or not, there are no degrees of possession, whereas different statuses may be ranked by some principle. The claim that animals enjoy some status or other within morality is not implausible, although my own view is that they bear at most a quasi-status by analogy with human beings; the claim that animals share the very same moral status as human beings is absurd, and would be inconsistent with the concession that animals do not possess the same rights as man (104-5), for a status is constituted precisely by the rights and duties associated with it.

The nature of the transition from the standpoint of generalised sympathy to the attribution of rights to the objects of such sympathy is left obscure, because

the author says both that the two are simply different formulations of the same (81) and that the former “generates” or “constitutes” the latter (81, 83); she also dismisses difficulties with the idea of animal rights on the grounds that animals cannot lay claim to them as a mere dispute about words (40). The whole conception of rights seems foreign to an ethics of sympathy, however, for sympathy or pity is precisely the response evoked by suffering where all formal claims to consideration are absent; that is, I believe, the case with animals, and consequently moral regard for them springs rather from generosity, not from a recognition of their rights.

Professor Wolf regards rights as conceptually prior to obligations (81, 88), on these grounds criticising Kant for the contrary view (40), and allows that there can therefore be rights without corresponding obligations (82, 90, 148). In fact, her own view makes it easier to understand how there can be obligations without corresponding rights, for once the notion of obligation has been established via rights, it can then be extended independently of the latter, as with animals—if, that is, one can speak of an obligation to be generous at all.

In contrast to her central argument, much of Professor Wolf’s discussion elsewhere of particular moral issues, such as vivisection (21-8) and the sanctity of human life (129-33), is clear and, given her assumptions, decisive, and these parts of her book may well be found most useful by readers. Nevertheless there are errors: one cannot say both that the attitude of extended sympathy is compatible with the view that man is incomparably more important than animals (53) and that it has been shown to follow from the ethics of sympathy that animals have the same moral status as man (55); on the other hand, there is no incompatibility between the positions of Midgley or Diamond and that of Becker (54-5), because the second term of comparison is not the same; the claim that Kantian ethical positions cannot justify the condemnation of tax evasion (84) overlooks the first formulation of the categorical imperative; and the argument that inanimate nature is entitled to less respect than animate because a stone, say, can be broken up into smaller stones without losing its petrosity (*Steinsein*, 139) succumbs to the obvious counterexamples of pulverisation and smelting.

It is not, I think, unfair to say that Professor Wolf’s conception of morality, with its stress upon concern for individuals as a response to need rather than as a response to worthiness for protection (76), is an

essentially feminine one; by that I intend no disparagement, for the value of such feminine concern is beyond question; but rather than constituting a morality, or even the core of one, such concern rather supplements or corrects morality, rather as equity supplements common law in the English legal system, or mercy tempers justice in Christian theology. And indeed there are signs in her book that the authoress is not entirely happy with her own argument: the confidence she expresses in it varies markedly, and at times disconcertingly (87), and the tone becomes noticeably tentative at crucial points (74, 80, 120, 123); she frequently breaks off the argument or postpones further discussion of difficulties; and although she roundly declares that she can make nothing of absolute values (69) and even more radically that “nothing has a value, not even man” (142), she seems fascinated throughout her book by the very idea of some higher or intrinsic worth in man, recurs repeatedly to Christian morality, and gives a sympathetic account of Jewish teaching on animals (133-5). She herself would not seem entirely free, then, of the longing (*Sehnsucht*) for a foundation of morality to which she alludes (62); and at times (95, 110-1, 114-6, 144) her policy of raising the moral status of animals appears to spring less from concern for their sufferings than from a fear of the consequences of granting man no higher status; but, as the example of Hindu culture may warn us, the consequences of such a policy could be worse for all, animals included. To defend unwelcome conclusions because they follow from some metaphysical or anti-metaphysical doctrine to which one is committed is in the end not a proof of rationality or constancy of purpose, but rather of inflexibility and desperation: it would be more rational to regard the argument as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the initial assumption and to look elsewhere for one’s starting-point. Altogether, I felt, Professor Wolf’s book had something about it of the spiritlessness and uncertainty of direction characteristic not only of a culture which has lost faith in itself, but also of a philosophical school which has largely abandoned its own tradition for the half-hearted espousal of another.

Professor Wolf’s pessimism concerning the possibility of a rational grounding of ethics, and her desire to propose an ethical theory free of metaphysical assumptions, may arise in part from a misapprehension concerning the nature of metaphysics. However dogmatically metaphysical doctrines may be presented

by their advocates, they actually arise and gain their plausibility from a reflexion upon experience and an abstraction from it of its most significant features; a perfect harmony between experience and its simplified, philosophical representation is not therefore to be expected, and the task of further philosophical reasoning is precisely to reconcile recalcitrant data with the metaphysical principle. If one is seeking an empirical basis for a metaphysical distinction between man and other animals, one may well find it in the fact mentioned by Professor Wolf in passing (118) that man is the universal enemy of animals in the wild. This instinctive fear can hardly be explained in evolutionary terms, for most species have not known man long enough for natural selection to operate; rather it would seem that there is in animals an obscure awareness, perhaps akin to awe, that in man they are confronted with a being superior in kind to themselves whom they cannot comprehend. This suggestion complements the ideas of R. Leicht reported by Professor Wolf with apparent approval (138) that in dealing with liminal forms of human existence (such as embryos) we are made aware of the indefeasible limits to our own self-understanding, and ought therefore to show respect for something necessarily lying beyond our ken; such ideas offer in my view the most promising approach to these issues, although Professor Wolf's own attempts to develop them by means of an analogy with artistic understanding (138-40) I consider frankly misguided.

The book leaves a certain amount to be desired in purely technical respects. It is sometimes unclear whether the writer is expounding others' ideas or her own (72-3, 75, 77-8), a fault less readily excused in German which has the subjunctive at its disposal for reported speech; and she makes a practice of giving indefinite references, especially forwards, many of which I found difficult or impossible to identify (34, 37, 48, 55, 72, 75, 105). Professor Wolf's German is uncomplicated, but entirely devoid of elegance: the absolute use of *Erstens* is unnecessarily clumsy (49, 60, 69, 87), *bzw., beziehungsweise* is not only ugly but ambiguous between a real and a verbal alternative (76, 89, 94), and lovers of the German language will regret the introduction into it of such words as *interagieren* and *moralischer Akteur*. The convention followed in the bibliography of abbreviating as St. names beginning with these letters has no phonetic justification in the case of English names and has a comical effect to English eyes. The absence of an index

is to be regretted. I noted three misprints (34¹⁰, 68⁵, 133⁸) and a repeated distortion of entire lines (12₁₀, 27₉, 106_{11,4}, 118^{10,6}). The physical appearance of the book is elegant but serious, lacking the meretricious trappings of a cover illustration, with which most English publishers of philosophy now lure purchasers.

Publisher's Note: Superscript and subscript numerals indicate lines counted from the top and bottom of the page respectively.

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