

Book Review

Simone Pollo Umani e animali: questioni di etica

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Raffaella Cersosimo

Master in Animal Law and Society (UAB)



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Abstract

Simone Pollo, philosopher at the Sapienza University of Rome, has made a new contribution to animal ethics with the publication of this book. The title can be translated as "Humans and Animals: Ethical Questions". The analysis focuses on how humans should treat the animals that surround them. After having examined the philosophical thinking that refers to animals, before and after the advent of Darwinian theories, the author offers a series of reflections on antispeciesism, nutrition, experimentation and wild animals. In the epilogue he suggests to change the way animals are treated by developing personal morality.

Keywords: Relationship Human-Animals. Bond Human-Animals. Empathy. Feelings. Reflection

Resumen

Simone Pollo, filósofo de la Universidad de La Sapienza de Roma, ha hecho un nuevo aporte a la ética animal con la publicación de este libro. El título se puede traducir como "Humanos y animales: cuestiones de ética". El análisis se centra en cómo los humanos deberían tratar a los animales que los rodean. Después de haber examinado el pensamiento filosófico que se refiere a los animales, antes y después del advenimiento de las teorías darwinianas, el autor ofrece una serie de reflexiones sobre antiespecismo, nutrición, experimentación y animales salvajes. En el epílogo sugiere cambiar la forma en que se trata a los animales mediante el desarrollo de la moral personal.

Palabras clave: Relación Humanos-Animales. Vínculo Humanos-Animales. Empatía. Sentimientos. Reflexión

Animals have been present in philosophy since ancient times. However, animal ethics, as a systematic study of the moral status of animals, started only in the second half of the twentieth century. The works of Peter Singer and Tom Regan were fundamental in the development of this area of research, because they gave a theoretical framework to the questions regarding the place that animals have in the moral life of human beings, stimulating a critical discussion. The topics addressed by this field of study concern, in particular, the moral rights of animals, the duties of humans towards them, the problem of their use for human purposes. The theories and opinions expressed on these issues are not consensual. Sometimes they even seem irreconcilable. It is therefore necessary to look for new paths of reflection to facilitate the dialogue on these issues, which now concern the society itself.

Simone Pollo, philosopher at the Sapienza University of Rome, has made a new contribution to this field with the publication of the book we are presenting. The title, which can be translated as "Humans and Animals: Ethical Questions", clearly announces the content of the text. In fact, the analysis focuses on how humans should treat the animals that surround them. After having examined the philosophical thinking that refers to animals, before and after the advent of Darwinian theories, the author offers a series of reflections on antispeciesism, nutrition, experimentation and wild animals. In the epilogue he suggests to change the way animals are treated by developing personal morality.

The author analyses the relationship between humans and animals using a method based on naturalism and moral sentimentalism. The first is based on the Darwinian theory of evolution, which has challenged anthropocentrism. The second attributes moral choices to emotions rather than to the intellect. The approach is pragmatic. The author starts from the observation that the presence of animals has characterized the biological and cultural history of men for millennia. Suffice it to think of domestication and its consequences for humans and animals. In fact, humans have used animals for the interaction that has been created between them, and they continue to do so because certain practices have been transmitted across the centuries. If this had not happened, the relationship between humans and animals would not have existed or would have presented itself in a different way. Men and animals have shared the same path to such an extent that it is difficult to imagine their separation. Therefore, the reflection on the moral consideration of animals cannot ignore this common destiny in which the notion of species is linked to the transformations occurred in the course of evolution.

These observations imply a reflection on speciesism and its antonym, antispeciesism. In this regard, the author offers a reading key that is different from the founding theories of animal ethics that are based on equality between species in moral consideration. Created in 1970 by psychologist Richard Ryder, the term "speciesism" refers to discrimination based on the belonging to a species. On the contrary, antispeciesism rejects this discrimination, considering it as arbitrary as racism and sexism that discriminate humans on the basis of skin colour and sex, respectively. All this is rational, but difficult to put into practice.

The adoption of equality between species as a rule can be discussed. In fact, according to Darwin's theories, species only serve to explain the transformations that have taken place in the evolution of all living organisms, where man does not occupy an exclusive position. Moreover, even if reason justifies equality between species, in reality, differences exist because we must also take into account feelings. These differences based on feelings are not an absolute negative value. Indeed this can be explained through biology. In fact, the preference for their offspring is completely natural and also favours the survival of the species. Furthermore, the author points out that psychology can reject equality between species. The author focuses on sympathy, which can be the heart of moral life. In fact, this emotion develops with the knowledge of the other through daily experience, which must be the starting point for reaching philosophical reflection. Following this line of thought, humans can discuss the treatment of animals, particularly in feeding and experimentation. In this way, they can care for animals, without being conditioned on antispeciesism.

As far as food is concerned, it is necessary to start from the empirical data according to which men have been fed animals since the most remote times. Hunting and domestication have allowed humans and animals to interact. Omnivorous feeding, which also includes meat and other animal products, has been transmitted from one generation to another for millennia, with some exceptions. This way of eating is part of the biological, cultural and social heritage of humans. In this sense, it is difficult to state that vegetarian and vegan diets are natural. To justify these eating habits, it is more convincing to state that they are choices dictated by moral reasons that belong to the individual person and that can change their existence. For example, one can become a vegetarian or a vegan because she/he refuses the way in which farming animals are treated.

The empirical approach is also useful in the field of experimentation. According to the author, it must be considered that this is a scientific practice that has given important results to improve the health of humans and animals. Many progresses have been made in the field of experimentation compared to other areas of animal use. Indeed, European legislation requires researchers to apply the three-R method (replacement, reducing, refinement) that consists in the introduction of non-animal models, in lowering the number of animals used to obtain a certain result and in ensuring welfare throughout their entire life. Discussing the ethical lawfulness of the experimentation may have no practical effect. Instead, it may be more useful to find solutions that reduce the use of animals and improve their wellbeing until their complete replacement by other scientific practices. In this regard, the dialogue between scientific community and society is welcome.

Although his analysis mainly concerns domestic animals, the author does not forget wild animals, also worthy of moral consideration. Today, these animals are at the centre of the hunting debate and their use in circuses and other shows. The author invites to respect their freedom and excludes any practice that uses them and makes them suffer for the sole purpose of entertaining humans.

This book is interesting not only for the moral analysis, but also for the impulse it offers to move forward in the development of morality. The author draws attention to the diversity of the relationship between humans and animals and invites us to reflect on the need for their deep change in the present society. He does not say what is right or wrong in the way of treating animals. He only suggests thinking and acting freely, increasing and refining the level of reflection. This choice is consistent with his call not to fall into moralism, which reduces the discussion to the value judgments of opposite groups, with little practical results. We have to consider that various uses of animals exist because it has always been this way. This does not mean that certain treatments inflicted on animals are justified. Instead, it is the observation of reality that allows us to discuss their welfare to improve their living conditions. The development of sympathy towards animals can change the vision of the relationship that humans have with them. This presupposes a change of conduct that is better achieved if it derives from personal moral growth.

In everyday life, the relationship between humans and animals is articulated in various ways. Some animals are loved as children, while others are bred for the sole purpose of producing food or testing drugs on them. The sacrifice of the latter is generally considered necessary. Then there is the problem of poor protection of wild animals, which is not limited to hunting, but also includes the eradication of animals considered harmful. The author argues that it is necessary to take note of this reality and increase the critical reflection on animals in daily life, so that ethics and law take them more into account.

It would be useful to develop the notions of "sympathy", "feeling" and "imagination" (p.85). They could help to change not only the feeding habits, but also the entire consideration of animals in private and public morality. Sympathy allows us to understand other living and sentient beings, inducing us to respect them in everyday life. Feeling unites humans and animals beyond the bond of the species. Imagination can conceive solutions that avoid, to an extent, the sacrifice of animals.

All those who care about the fate of animals should critically read this short and intense book. Each sentence induces to pause, reflect, reread and deepen. A major merit of this publication is that its ideas are applicable in everyone's daily life and can be developed with the resources of human experience.