

Dissertation abstract
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A Contextual Theory of the Moral Status of Animals

My dissertation offers a contextual theory of the moral status of animals that combines the moral demands of impartiality and the moral significance of relationships of vulnerability and reasonable partiality. It engages with historical and contemporary literature in animal ethics, moral theory, animal cognition, social sciences, and moral psychology, and it provides: (1) a “meta-ethical” framework for animal ethics (including conceptual analysis, axiology, and experimental philosophy); (2) a discussion of recent relational views (e.g. Donaldson and Kymlicka, Palmer, care ethics, contractarianism) leading to a robust defense of the relevance of special relationships to moral status.

From an analysis of the concept of moral status as a set of specific direct obligations to finally valuable entities, including nonhuman animals, I spell out a two-fold theory: a descriptive model and a normative model of moral status attribution. Both are dual models in that moral status depends on both intrinsic and extrinsic properties of entities--typically, (a) (relevant) mental capacities and (b) (relevant) relationships. The descriptive model takes into account the partial determination of ordinary perceptions of mental capacities, which are key to attributions of moral status, by contextual factors. The normative model, based on selected relevant factors among those, is constructed from two core principles: a Principle of Protection of the Vulnerable and a Principle of Reasonable Partiality, which are both impartially justified and account for some variations of moral status independently of variations in capacities.

The two models are partially aligned insofar as the descriptive model sets cognitive and agential constraints for a fully developed normative theory. The contextual theory thus combines the relational and particularistic demands of care ethics and the impartial demands of justice. Special relationships endow some animals with a special status, in particular in terms of positive obligations, stemming from reasonable partiality or created vulnerability. Among these animals, many are irreplaceable in virtue of such relationships. But a great deal of animals who are conscious yet not robustly self-conscious (including most animals currently raised for food), and who do not take part in special relationships to moral agents, are nonetheless irreplaceable insofar as they have lives of their own, the premature loss of which existence by itself cannot compensate for.