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Ethical Models for the Animal Question

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Better Descartes than Aristotle

Talking about Those Who Deny Moral Consideration to Animals

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In this short paper I want to advance a provocative thesis. The French philosopher René Descartes has always been considered by animal rights defenders as the greatest enemy of animals, because he even denies them the ability to feel (a conception that in recent years has been advocated by Peter Carruthers). In reality, if we compare his ethical views on animals with those of another important symbol of the denial of moral status to non-human sentient beings, namely Aristotle, the French philosopher comes out better. Because the latter seems to endorse – albeit dubiously – the moral principle according to which it is wrong to make sentient beings suffer and kill, rejected instead by Aristotle and with him by a good part of the Western philosophical tradition.

To grasp this point, I would say to start with what I have elsewhere (Allegri 2021, 104) called the “Minimal Pro-Animal Argument” (hereafter MPAA). In fact, what does it mean to deny non-human animals any moral consideration (an aspect that unites Aristotle and Descartes)? It means not giving any moral weight even to their suffering. That is, it means not accepting the following reasoning:

it is directly wrong to procure unnecessary suffering to sentient beings¹
non-human animals are sentient beings

it is directly wrong to procure unnecessary suffering to non-human animals

¹ “Directly” because even those who deny moral status to animals can, for indirect reasons, censure the act of causing them (gratuitous) suffering; “unnecessary” because even those who ascribe moral status to animals accept that a cat or dog can be made to suffer for justified reasons (for example, when they need to be injected by the veterinarian).

Both Aristotle and Descartes reject the conclusion of this argument. But they do so for different reasons. Let us see which ones, starting from Aristotle.

Aristotle certainly accepts the second premise of MPAA. In his opinion animals *feel*, because they have a *sensitive* soul: this is what distinguishes them from plants which instead, having only a vegetative or nutritive soul (the least noble form of soul), move, grow, reproduce, but have no sensations (*An.* B2, 413 b 2; Γ 11, 434 a - Γ 12, 434 b; *Pol.* I, 2, 1253a, 11; I, 5, 1254b, 24-25)². Despite this, he seems to deny non-human animals any direct moral relevance. In the pages of his texts we find no moral consideration for the other sentient beings. On the contrary. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he asserts that

there is neither friendship nor justice towards that which is inanimate. Nor is there any towards a horse or an ox, nor towards a slave, as a slave. For there is nothing in common between the master and the slave: in fact, the servant is an instrument endowed with a soul and the instrument is an inanimate slave. (*Eth. Nic.* VIII, 11, 1161 b, 1-5)

The fact that for Aristotle there cannot be friendship between men and animals (indeed, between free men on the one hand and slaves and the rest of things on the other), since there is nothing in common between them, is all the more significant if we take into account the importance in Aristotelian ethics of cultivating the value of friendship for the full realization of the human being.

Quite in line with this approach, in Aristotle we find a first theorization of the instrumental use of animals also in scientific research. Thus, if it is a question of understanding the origin and path of the vascular system, one must not make the mistake of those who have studied live and slimmed humans or animals that are already dead (*Hist. An.* III, 2, 511b), because in this way the veins cannot be seen. In such a case, “observation is difficult, and it is possible to collect adequate information, if one has a real interest in these problems, only on animals killed by suffocation after having made them lose weight” (*Hist. An.* III, 3, 513a). It is

² According to DeGrazia, however, Aristotle, while attributing sentience to animals, denies them the possession of beliefs (DeGrazia 1996, 153, n. 58). In truth, there are passages in Aristotle’s biological texts that seem to refute this interpretation. For example, in *Historia animalium* he states that “many animals participate in memory and the ability to learn” (*Hist. An.* I, 1, 488b, 20) and that “a certain capacity for intellectual understanding” presents “in many animals similarities with man” (*Hist. An.* VIII, 1, 588a, 18-22). The English translation of these and subsequent passages from Aristotle is mine.

true that sometimes in his biological writings Aristotle compares humans to animals, highlighting the affinities between them. And in *Parts of Animals*, he goes so far as to say: “If [...] someone finds the observation of other animals unworthy, he should judge the observation of himself in the same way” (*Part. An.* I, 5, 645a, 22). But in ethical and political texts his attitude takes on different connotations. As is well known, in the *Politics*, for example, we read that

plants are made for animals and animals for man, the domestic ones so that he can use and feed on them, the wild ones, if not all, at least the majority, so that he can feed on them and use it for other needs, take clothes and other tools from it. (*Pol.* I, 8, 1256b)

Here Aristotle theorizes that conception which from Kant onwards has usually been called *external finalism* (while the finalism of biological processes is called *internal*). This perspective, which will find its full realization with Stoicism and Christianity, outlines a hierarchical ladder in which each step – symbolizing a level of being – has its purpose outside itself, in the higher step-level for which it has been preordained, until it reaches the stage of man, which is the highest level of reality, the entities of all the underlying stages being instruments at his service.

Returning to our main theme, we can therefore say that Aristotle rejects the conclusion of MPAA because, while accepting the second premise of the argument, he refuses the first.

What is the situation in Descartes? The French philosopher has always been accused of denying the second premise of MPAA. Indeed, there are several elements in the Cartesian texts that support this accusation³. But Descartes does not always maintain that animals are devoid of sensitivity with the same conviction. Among other things, it is a thesis that the French philosopher mainly presents in unprinted writings (and especially in letters) rather than in published texts. It cannot be explicitly found even in the *Discours de la Méthode* (*Discourse on the Method*, 1637), where it is expressly stated (in the fifth part) that animals are devoid of *reason*, not so much that they are devoid of *awareness*⁴.

³ This is an option that before Descartes had already been advocated by the Spanish physician and theologian Gomez Pereira in the book *Antoniana Margarita* (1554) and of which in ancient times traces can be found in the *Corpus Hermeticum* (Landucci 2002, 45; Clark 2011, 46).

⁴ In this context his opponents are Montaigne and Charron, who had attributed rational capacities to non-human animals (Landucci 2002, 39-54; Mori 2010, 96-99).

It makes its appearance in explicit terms in the “Letter to Plempius” (13 September 1637) and comes to light publicly in the fourth responses to the *Meditations*, until it takes on more doubtful contours in the last letters (especially in the “Letter to More” of 5 February 1649)⁵.

For example, in the “Letter to the Marquis of Newcastle” (23 November 1646) Descartes asserts that non-human animals

agissent naturellement et par ressorts, ainsi qu’une horloge, laquelle montre bien mieux l’heure qu’il est, que notre jugement ne nous l’enseigne. Et sans doute que, lorsque les hirondelles viennent au printemps, elles agissent en cela comme des horloges. Tout ce que font les mouches à miel est de même nature, et l’ordre que tiennent les grues en volant, et celui qu’observent les singes en se battant. (Descartes 2009b, 2352)⁶

According to the French philosopher, non-human animals perform all their actions and live their lives in the same way in which we carry out certain gestures that do not pass through our consciousness, because we are distracted, overthinking (for example, when we drive the car along usual routes, our mind often wanders thinking about other things, but we still do many operations: we steer, change gears, put on the indicator, etc.):

satis expresse ostendam me non putare bruta videre sicut nos, dum sentimus nos videre; sed tantummodo sicut nos, dum mente alio avocata, licet objectorum externorum imagines in retinis oculorum nostrorum pingantur, et forte etiam illarum impressiones in nervis opticis factæ ad diversos motus membra nostra determinant. (Descartes 2009a, 424)⁷

The basic reason why, according to Descartes, animals are not sentient is linked to the ontological dualism developed by the father of analytical geometry, for whom reality is composed of two types of substances, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, which are entirely irreducible and definable one

⁵ On the doubts of the late Descartes, see Landucci 2002, 50-51.

⁶ Non-human animals “act naturally or mechanically, like a clock, which tells the time much better than our judgement teaches us. And perhaps when the swallows arrive in spring they act like a clock. Everything that bees do is of the same nature, so is the order that cranes keep in flight, and what monkeys observe when they fight”. The English translation of these Cartesian passages is mine.

⁷ “I believe that brutes see like us not when we feel we see, but only when, our mind being turned elsewhere, we feel nothing at all about external objects, even if their images are depicted in the retinas of our eyes, and perhaps even though their impressions, made in the optic nerves, cause our limbs to move in different ways”.

by negation of the other (so that what is extended does not think and what thinks is not extended). While, not only inorganic nature, but also the phenomena of life can be explained entirely in terms of *res extensa* (this is the great difference from Aristotle, for whom life requires a soul; whereas for Descartes even biological phenomena require only matter and local movement), all manifestations of thought presuppose the *res cogitans*, i.e. the presence of something totally different from matter: an immaterial mind (which, being entirely distinct from physical things, does not follow the same fate and is immortal). Among the forms of thought Descartes also includes awareness itself, that is, the capacity to feel. This extremely broad meaning of thought finds its justification in Descartes' preliminary metaphysical approach, the *cogito ergo sum*, foundation of all other knowledge. Because it is thought as "awareness of", i.e. in its formal and non-content-related value, which makes the meditating subject certain of existing. This is the truth (the only truth) that cannot be doubted (even if the sensations, and all the other thoughts, had no correspondence in reality, it remains an indubitable certainty that I feel them). Now, while both *res cogitans* and *res extensa* are present in human beings, all the other inhabitants of the Earth – and not only the inorganic reality and the vegetal world, but also the animal world – consist exclusively of *res extensa*. Non-human animals, therefore, not having a *res cogitans* (not being immaterial minds), do not possess any manifestation of thought. In addition to being unable to reason, they are also unable to feel (i.e. to have states of consciousness: to experience pleasure, pain, etc.)⁸.

But what is Descartes' attitude towards the first premise of MPAA? Here comes the surprise, because the French philosopher, unlike Aristotle, seems to believe that if non-human animals were sentient, it would be morally problematic to mistreat them. That is, he seems to subscribe to this premise of the "Minimal Pro-Animal Argument", and even to go further. In fact, in a passage in the "Letter to More" he asserts that his denial of animal sentience

non tam crudelis est erga belluas quam pia erga homines [...] quos nempe a criminis suspitione absolvit, quoties animalia comedunt vel occidunt. (Descartes 2009c, 2624)⁹

⁸ For the metaphysical conception that forms the theoretical background to these theses, see Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (1641).

⁹ "is not so much cruel towards beasts, as benevolent towards men [...], who are absolved from suspicion of crime every time they eat or kill animals".

Namely, Descartes is telling us that if animals felt then, not only might it be wrong to make them suffer, but it might even be wrong to kill them! This is not a negligible achievement. Descartes appears on the way to subscribe to the moral principle that it is unjust to suppress the life of sentient beings. By contrast, this thesis is far from being asserted by Aristotle, who, although fully convinced of the sentience of non-human animals, does not seem to ascribe moral significance to this fact, not even in the minimal terms of attributing a weight to their suffering, so as to censor the human actions that cause it. As is known, quite a different attitude was to be taken by his main disciple, Theophrastus, who can be considered one of the first and most important animal rights defenders of antiquity.

Since Descartes subscribes to this principle, not accepted by Aristotle and by a large part of the Western tradition (which, although aware of the sensitivity of non-human animals, showed disregard for their suffering and death), it seems to me that such a negative attitude towards the French philosopher by the defenders of the animal cause is excessive and that between Descartes and the prevailing approach following Aristotle (full awareness of animals' ability to perceive pain, but moral indifference with respect to this) Descartes is to be preferred.

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