*PENULTIMATE DRAFT*

# Moral Animals? A Review of Mark Rowlands' *Can Animals be Moral?*

by Dan Hooley

The topic of animals and morality is something of a burgeoning field, with many different disciplines contributing: from cognitive ethology, evolutionary biology, and social neuroscience, to moral psychology and philosophy. Ethologists studying animal behavior have investigated and explored the presence of seemingly moral or proto-moral emotions and behavior in other animals. Others have focused on the historical evolution of morality, giving plenty of attention to how other animals fit into this evolution. Amidst this work, some scientists and philosophers have begun to argue that animals can act morally, with differing understandings of this claim.

It is in this context that we find Mark Rowlands' excellent book, *Can Animals be Moral?* While other philosophers and scientists have addressed this question, few have tackled it with the same clarity, detail, and systematicity that Rowlands does. The focus of Rowland's book, it is worth stating at the outset, is not empirical: he does not investigate or analyze the behavior of actual animals to see if they act on the basis of moral emotions or concern for others. So, with the exception of some initial examples from this literature, you won't find many studies or stories about elephants, dolphins, apes, or other social mammals acting morally.

Instead, Rowlands' focus is on how we should interpret this, already extensive, empirical literature. His primary concern is to undermine the prevailing orthodoxy among philosophers that animals can never act in ways that are genuinely moral. Rowlands' central thesis is the claim that animals can be moral subjects. That is, animals "can act on the basis of moral reasons, where these reasons take the form of emotions with identifiable moral content" (35).

The current conceptual terrain dominant among moral philosophers allows an individual to relate to morality in two possible ways. A moral patient is a legitimate object of moral concern (someone to whom we can have direct obligations), while a moral agent is responsible for, and so can be morally evaluated (praised or blamed) for her motives and actions (72). Rowlands argues that we need a third category, since an individual can be a moral subject yet fail to be a moral agent. An individual is a moral subject if and only if he or she is sometimes motivated to act by moral reasons (89). Rowlands argues that this is a distinct concept: moral agency is concerned with moral responsibility while moral subjecthood is concerned with motivation.

Nevertheless, while examples of what seems to be moral behavior among other animals abound, many would deny that this behavior is *genuinely* moral. Consider the following example:

> Binti Jua, a gorilla residing at Brookfield Zoo in Illinois, had her fifteen minutes of fame in 1996 when she came to the aid of a three-year old boy who had climbed onto the wall of the gorilla enclosure and fallen twenty feet onto the concrete floor below. Binti Jua lifted the unconscious boy, gently cradled him in her arms, and growled warnings at other gorillas that tried to get close. Then, while her own infant, Koola, clung to her back, she carried the boy to the zoo staff waiting at an access gate. (4)

Binti Jua seems to have acted morally. Her behavior shows evidence of concern for the fallen infant, she appears motivated to act on the basis of this concern, and she also appears aware of morally salient features of the situation: she seemed to understand that the infant needed help, and that helping the infant required her to be cautious and gentle. Thus, Binti Jua seems to be a moral subject - an individual capable of acting for moral reasons. If Binti Jua were a human being, few would doubt that she acted morally.

There are two primary objections to the claim that Binti Jua acted morally. First, some are skeptical that we can confidently attribute certain emotional states to other animals, or that we can ever be justified in doing this. While the evidence above might *suggest* that Binti Jua experienced certain moral emotions and acted on them, it does not *establish* this conclusion, as there are other explanations of her behavior that do not make such an appeal. Perhaps she was just following the training she received in mothering skills from zoo staff that used stuffed toys as a pretend baby. Maybe Binti Jua believed the unconscious boy was simply another unconscious toy.

Some scientists give this objection, claiming that we should prefer more parsimonious explanations of animal behavior, and that these do not appeal to moral emotions. Rowlands offers a convincing response to this sort of objection, noting that often attempts to explain animal behavior without appealing to emotional states are not remotely plausible, and that sometime alternative explanations are consistent with animals acting, in part, on the basis of moral emotions (9-11). And in Chapter 2, Rowlands defends the attribution of emotions to animals against various philosophical objections and explains what it means for an emotion to be "morally laden." All emotions involve evaluation and morally laden emotions involve moral evaluation (66). When it comes to animals, the primary moral emotions in question are forms of concern (such as sympathy, compassion, tolerance, and patience).

Rowlands' main focus, however, and really the central concern of the book, is on a second, more philosophical objection to the claim that animals can act morally. For even if the empirical evidence shows that Binti Jua acted on the basis of concern for the infant, and even if we are justified in the attribution of certain emotions to her, many would argue that she nevertheless does not act morally and is not a moral subject. This objection is most common among philosophers.

According to this objection, one can be a moral subject only if one is a moral agent.

This objection has historic roots in the work of Aristotle and Kant (the focus of Ch. 4) and holds that for an individual to have a genuinely *moral* motivation she must have *control* over her motivation. The core of Rowlands' book develops and responds to this objection and argues that an individual can be a moral subject while failing to be a moral agent (Ch 5-7).

To illustrate this objection, Rowlands presents the character Myshkin. Myshkin has a kind soul and during the course of his life performs acts that are compassionate. He is motivated to perform these acts because he is concerned for the welfare of others and is the subject of emotions that are compassionate. Nevertheless, Myshkin does not and cannot subject his motivations and actions to any sort of reflective, critical scrutiny. He cannot ask himself questions like, "Is what I am feeling or doing the right thing to do or feel?" Nevertheless, because Myshkin is compassionate, concerned with the fate of others, and reliably acts on the basis of these seemingly moral emotions, he appears to be a moral subject. Myshkin, then, serves as a proxy for considering whether other animals - who like him cannot critically scrutinize their motivations - can be moral subjects.

The primary objection against the claim that Myshkin is a moral subject is that his emotions and actions aren't really moral because he is unable to subject them to critical scrutiny. This scrutiny gives an individual control over his emotions, which makes these emotions distinctively normative. Without this control over his motivations, Myshkin is at their mercy. His emotions push him this way or that; they are *causes* of his behavior, not *reasons* for his behavior. Because he cannot evaluate and scrutinize his motivations, they are not the sort of things he can choose to embrace or resist. As a result, Myshkin's motivations appear to be lacking a normative dimension, as they are unable to make a normative *claim* on him. But, the objector claims, moral motivations are precisely those things that make normative claims on their subjects (morally good motivations should be embraced, morally evil motivations should be resisted). Thus, Myshkin's motivations aren't *genuinely* moral. According to this objection, there is a deep connection between normativity and control (96). If an individual is not a moral agent (capable of moral scrutiny), then she cannot be a moral subject either. The category of moral subjects appears to collapse into that of moral agents.

Rowlands' response to this objection has two parts: a negative argument and a positive argument. The negative argument attempts to show that there is no viable way to understand a subject's ability to engage in critical moral scrutiny of his motivations that would entail control over them (154). For the objection to work, we need an account of why this ability yields control over one's motivations (162). Rowlands rejects the claim that the connection between scrutiny and control is basic (or has no explanation). And in Ch. 6, he argues against the claim that the phenomenological experience of an individual who engages in critical scrutiny of her motivations gives that subject control over her motivations.

The most plausible explanation claims that metacognition, or the ability of an

individual to scrutinize her motivations - to ask if they are the right motivations, to consider what principles might support this conclusion, and to question those principles - gives this individual control over her motivations.

Rowlands argues that this explanation commits a fallacy he calls the 'myth-of-the-meta' and attributes miraculous powers to metacognition. A reflective moral agent can ask questions like "Should I act on this motivation?" but the answers she comes to for these and other questions involved in scrutinizing her motivations are ones over which she has little or no control. An agent's evaluations of her motivations are likely to vary with variations in her circumstances that she cannot control. Here, Rowlands draws upon situationist accounts of moral agents put forward recently in the field of moral psychology. If an agent's evaluation of a given motivation or moral principle depends on the circumstances she is in (whether the agent is a guard at Abu Ghraib, or in a pleasant, clean smelling environment), and varies depending on these circumstances, then it appears as if the agent is "a hostage to empirical fortune" (185).

However, beyond these empirical concerns, there is a deeper problem. Metacognition is supposed to explain the normative status of motivation by explaining how an individual can have control over her motivations. But the very issue of control that arises at the level of motivation confronts later levels of our evaluations and scrutiny of these motivations (186). There is no reason to suppose that metacognition is *ever* above the motivational fray. As Rowlands writes, "second order evaluations of our first-order motivations cannot lift us above the motivational fray that we think endemic to the first-order motivations, for the simple reason that we can be motivated to evaluate our motivations in one way rather than another" (186-87).

A moral agent, capable of reflective scrutiny, appears to always be at the mercy of his metacognitive assessments of his motivations (whatever the situation's circumstances), in the same sort of way that Myshkin was at the mercy of his motivations. As a result, Rowlands argues we have no account of how reflective scrutiny gives a moral agent control over her motivations, and no justification for the claim that this control is needed to act morally. Thus, we do not have a good reason to deny that an individual like Myshkin, or other animals, can be moral subjects.

The goal of Rowlands' negative argument is to undercut the most common and significant philosophical objection to the claim that animals can be moral subjects. However, it is possible to accept Rowlands previous argument, yet conclude that this only shows that human beings are not moral subjects or moral agents. To preclude this conclusion, the positive part of Rowlands' argument (in Ch 9) offers a sketch for how we might understand the normativity of a moral subject's motivations and the idea of moral agency, without an appeal to control.

Here I want to consider Rowlands' account of moral agency. Rowlands reconstruction of moral agency centers on an individual's moral understanding. On this reconstruction, one is a moral agent to the extent that she understands what she is doing,

the likely consequences, and how to evaluate those consequences (240). Moral agency, on this view, is not something one either has or doesn't have, but like understanding, comes in degrees. A typical child is less of a moral agent than a typical adult. And responsibility can be diminished, or absent, when understanding is hampered or impaired. On this understanding of moral agency, Myshkin and other animals would not be moral agents because they do not have a sufficient level of understanding to be held responsible for their behavior. Thus, to count as a proper moral agent, one must reach a certain threshold level of understanding to be held responsible for one's behavior.

*Can Animals be Moral?* is an impressive and important work. Rowlands writing is clear and largely accessible to those without much background in philosophy. The only exception is Chapter 2, which at times is rather technical and most likely difficult to follow for those without much background in philosophy. Those who are not skeptical that we can attribute emotions with moral content to other animals can skip this chapter.

Rowlands also does a good job situating his work among other philosophers and scientists who have considered whether animals can act morally and his book provides a nice overview of recent work on the topic. This context also illuminates the novelty of Rowlands' central thesis. Others who have argued that animals can act morally have tended to water-down this claim. Both Clark and Sapontzis, for example, have argued that other animals can be moral or morally virtuous, but only by putting forward a very minimal requirement of virtue possession that is widely rejected. And while Bekoff and Pierce claim that animals can act morally, they restrict this claim, in a problematic way, arguing that moral agency is *species-relative*, so what it means for a wolf to act morally is different for a human, or gorilla, or wolf.

Rowlands' thesis is bolder. Unlike others, Rowlands does not hold that the behavior of some animals is *proto*-moral, or *quasi*-moral, or that what it is to act morally varies from species to species. He argues that animals can be moral subjects, and act from moral reasons, *in the same sense* that humans can act for moral reasons. While moral reasons for animals (likely) consist solely in morally laden emotions, when animals act on the basis of these emotions, they can act morally in the same way that humans do. Humans can act morally in different ways, of course, as they are sensitive to moral reasons that animals cannot entertain (34). Nevertheless, animals and humans share *a* way of acting morally.

Rowlands' thesis is, however, tentative in some respects: he does not claim that many animals are, in fact, moral subjects. Rather, if the empirical evidence shows that an animal acts on the basis of moral emotions (which he suggests it does, for many animals), then we should recognize the animal as a moral subject. In any case, since the empirical evidence is becoming increasingly strong on this point, the fact that Rowlands does not summarize the empirical literature (but leaves this to others, with more expertise) is of little importance.

I find Rowlands' argument that animals can be moral subjects persuasive, but a few important questions remain. First, I wonder if we can completely remove control from an

adequate conception of moral agency. And if we cannot, this might pose problems for Rowlands' main thesis.

Imagine an individual who meets Rowlands' requirements for being a moral agent - she understands what she is doing, the likely consequences, and how to evaluate these consequences - yet she is deeply in the grip of an addiction and, we'll say, has little control over acting to fulfill her desires. It seems possible for an individual to understand everything she's doing, but without some level of self-control over her motivations, we might doubt she is responsible for her behavior. This suggests that some notion of control is necessary to an adequate account of moral agency.

Interestingly, Rowlands does recognize the moral importance of self-control for other animals. In a discussion of animals and moral practice (in Ch 8), he notes that one important element of his dog Hugo's moral profile is his ability to inhibit some of his desires when they conflict with concern for others. Given that Rowlands recognizes that this ability has some moral importance, more needs to be said about how controlling our motivations (in terms of inhibiting and managing desires) relates both to moral agency, but also to moral subjecthood.

Second, if some notion of control is essential to an account of moral agency, this might pose a problem for Rowlands' arguments. Rowlands argued that we lack a non-mysterious explanation of how critical scrutiny could provide control over our motivations. Given this, he argued we should reject the claim that critical scrutiny is necessary for an individual to act morally.

However, if we aren't convinced by Rowlands' reconstruction of moral agency without control, and if we think human beings are moral agents, perhaps the most acceptable position is to accept some mystery, and maintain that *somehow* critical scrutiny provides control over our motivations, although we do not know why or how. Perhaps accepting some mystery is inevitable on any view we take. This position might be preferable to an inadequate account of moral agency, or denying that human beings are moral agents.

Ultimately I do not think this is a compelling position to take. If some control over our motivations is crucial to moral agency, this suggests that what we really need is a better account of what this control amounts to. And it seems likely that this control is a something that both humans and many other animals share (as Rowlands' discussion of his dog Hugo suggests).

One final question concerns the significance of the claim that other animals are moral subjects. Rowlands turns his attention to this question in the last chapter of the book. In this fun and intriguing chapter, Rowlands adopts the perspective of a Martian ethologist, investigating whether or not the hair-less apes living on earth (and by extension, other animals) are capable of acting morally.

Like the Martian ethologist, we might wonder why the question of whether other animals can act morally is important or significant. Rowlands suggests it matters both

because of a basic concern for truth, but also for how we relate to other animals. If animals can act for moral reasons, we might think that providing opportunities for them to exercise this capacity is important for these animals having a good and flourishing life (beyond their own happiness or satisfaction).

Further, Rowlands suggests the question is important because it determines whether other animals are worthy of a certain kind of respect (252). *Praise*, Rowlands argues, is appropriate for beings that are responsible for what they do. *Admiration* is appropriately directed at things that do not act at all (such as a work of art). But *respec*t, Rowlands suggests, is directed at beings that can act. The significance of the question - can animals be moral? - concerns *a* way we might respect other animals. If animals can act morally, then they are the appropriate objects of distinctively moral respect. If animals can act for moral reasons, and can do good, then it is a good thing the world contains beings who acts in this way.

While I'm inclined to agree with Rowlands regarding the significance of this question, we might wonder whether this sort of respect depends on animals having the ability to act in ways that are *genuinely* moral, compared to ways that are proto-moral or quasi-moral. We have good reason to believe that many social animals act out of concern and compassion for other animals. On this point, the empirical evidence seems strong. The question of whether or not other animals can act morally, then, is a question of whether or not we should interpret or label this ability of animals as "moral" or not. How we answer this question, however, seems to speak as much about our investigation into 'the true nature of things', as it does about how we'd like to see our place, as human beings, in the world and our relation to other animals. Ultimately, I think Rowlands makes a compelling case that animals can be moral subjects. But even if one rejects this claim, the fact that other animals act on the basis of concern for others is a good thing - our world is better off because of it - and, one might think, something that is worthy of our respect.

Despite these questions and concerns, Rowlands' book is a crucial read for anyone considering whether animals might be able to act morally and how we can best understand this sort of claim. I highly recommend this work not only for those interested in animals and animal ethics, but also for those with an interest in normative ethics more broadly, and for those working in the field of animal behavioral science.

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