

## 26. The political turn of the animal ethical discourse – the need for a virtue ethical approach

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### Abstract

A growing body of work within the animal ethical discourse is taking a ‘Political Turn’. It is primarily characterised by efforts to propose transformation of our legal and political institutions to account for a just human-animal-relationship in society. In this article, I examine the underrated potential of a virtue ethical approach, as this perspective is currently lacking in the turn’s literature. For instance, we get a clearer idea of who ought to represent animals according to many of the turn’s institutional reform proposals in terms of relevant political character traits. Likewise, what virtuous role modelling for politicians entails in creating ‘animal friendly’ moral norms, and how citizens can navigate their own correct political decision-making. Furthermore, we can better discuss the role of individuals in societal justice issues if we reframe our personal virtues as public political virtues. I conclude that including virtue ethical accounts would result in a more comprehensive political turn, not in spite of lacking a ‘language of rights’, but precisely because of its rich and diverse ‘language of virtues’.

**Keywords:** animal ethics, political turn, interspecies justice, political virtue, collective responsibility

### The political turn in animal ethics

The animal ethics literature has long tried to include the interests of nonhuman animals (henceforth: animals) into our moral considerations. We can identify a shift from mere traditional moral philosophy – characterised by philosophers such as Regan (2004), and Singer (2016) – to political philosophy. This new body of literature is increasingly concerned with the political institutionalisation of their theories, as a response to the dissatisfaction with traditional approaches (Woodhall and Garmendia da Trindade, 2017). This is characterised in works put forward by theorists such as Nussbaum (2007), Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) Cochrane (2012), and Garner (2013a). A few elements can be identified: (1) a broadening of the appeal to liberal political values; (2) a strong emphasis on a rights theory; (3) an emphasis on positive rights; (4) a downgrading from marginal cases; and (5) a broadly pragmatic attitude towards political engagement and compromise (Milligan, 2015: 7). Perhaps most strikingly, the political turn is made distinct by its focus on ‘justice’, and ‘more specifically on how our political institutions, structures and process might be transformed so as to secure just human-animal-relationships’ (Cochrane *et al.*, 2018: 274).

Animal ethicists often argue that ‘rights are the best tools to come to justice because they are designed to protect the inviolable interests of individuals, and as such they are particularly important [for vulnerable minorities] within current formations of power’ (Meijer, 2016: 61). Given the set-up of our political systems, I agree this much is true, and admit that it is unsurprising and indeed appropriate that the political turn literature has focused on animal rights. Unfortunately, the introduction of actual animal rights into our legal and political institutions is still met with much resistance. Animal advocacy is largely overlooked as a social justice issue, and not yet recognised as having a legitimate political agenda (Stallwood, 2017). Even though the political turn literature itself may not be at fault for this, or bear

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responsibility for the animal rights movements' failure or success, it does play an important role in providing a comprehensive philosophical justification to support its endeavours.

In what follows, I will argue that a virtue ethical perspective is currently inexplicably missing in the turn's literature. I propose that virtue ethical insights should complement the turn's literature that currently strongly emphasises rights theories. The richness of a language of virtues, emphasis on one's moral character, as well as the long-term commitment to habituating the moral virtues, and its guidance to moral political decision-making, are crucially important. This motivates our correct treatment of animals, and our recognition that institutional reform is needed from this commitment to justice for animals. Virtue ethics should play an important role within a comprehensive political turn of animal ethics.

### Promising aspects of a virtue ethical perspective

Virtue ethics is concerned with the moral character of human beings, and instead of using the language of rights, it uses the language of virtues and vices in order to respond to moral questions (Van Wensveen, 1997). According to Aristotle, the highest human good is a state of 'eudaimonia' – often translated as flourishing – that is wanted for 'itself'. It is a goal that is shared by humans, as the type of beings they are. The moral agent should lead a life in line with the human function of rational activity in accordance with excellence or virtue, and be motivated to do so for the right reasons. Living virtuously contributes intrinsically to a person's flourishing, i.e. the best state of character a person can possess (Aristotle, 2009).

Let us first consider four elements that are characteristic for a virtue ethical perspective within animal ethics. First, the intellectual virtue of 'phronesis', or practical wisdom, takes the importance of context-specific considerations into account, and therefore provides practical guidance (Abbate, 2014). Second, the notion of acquiring virtues for character building through habituation emphasises that the language of virtues focuses on lasting change. After all, one only becomes virtuous, or flourishes, after committing consistently to a life in accordance with the moral virtues. Third, the language of virtues has a certain richness and diversity which sets it apart from other approaches. It ensures flexibility, prevents harmful extremes, and carries with it the promise of moral creativity. Furthermore, it helps us to characterise the relationship of humans with nature, which is especially helpful to animal ethical issues (Van Wensveen, 1997). And fourth, it does not need concepts such as inherent worth from which to build further, and avoids metaphysical demands by its focus on what contribution correct treatment of animals has on human flourishing (Garner, 2013b; Hursthouse, 2007). Accordingly, the virtue ethical perspective grants an uncomplicated and pragmatic approach to improving the human-animal-relationship. Admittedly, it is one thing to say virtue ethics is beneficial for animal ethics. To say it would be beneficial for the political turn as well is something else. Still, we can think of important reasons why it is.

To start, the language of virtues has important political strength. Emphasising the character traits individuals ought to possess in political decision-making can provide a different angle from which to consider the political turn of animal ethics. According to Aristotle, humans are the only 'political animal'. He regards virtue ethics not only as a moral philosophy but also as a political theory (Aristotle, 2009). With this in mind, I wish to highlight two points. First, we can consider what virtuous role modelling would look like for those who hold positions in politics. Many political turn proposals require some sort of political representation on behalf of animals, to voice their interests in our political institutions; e.g. see Smith (2012). It seems rash to assume *any* politician would be good for the job. It is also unclear whether for instance, veterinarians or animal rights activists would necessarily be best equipped for this task. Expert knowledge into the physical wellbeing of animals, or fanaticism to shut down animal agriculture at all costs, do not necessarily ensure that one goes about institutional reform in the right manner. A politician that leads a life in accordance with virtue would embody the right character traits

that we praise in people with leadership roles, e.g. care, responsibility and trustworthiness (Newstead *et al.*, 2019). Second, for citizens who are politically engaged only indirectly, virtues can likewise guide them in their political decision-making. This ranges from simply perpetuating the right behavioural norms such as supporting animal advocacy through virtues of humility or empathy, to deciding what political parties and public policies one ought to endorse through virtues such as bravery or compassion. The relevant virtues thus help us determine ‘what’ we should do, and emphasise that we ought to have the right motivations while doing so.

Furthermore, the language of virtues creates a platform for discussing the role of individuals in social justice issues. The political turn so far largely disregards this and focuses foremost on political institutions at large and their institutional responsibilities. Even though virtue ethics reviews the moral character of the ‘individual’, it is nonetheless favourably applicable to matters of (interspecies) justice. Namely, virtue ethics can be useful for the political turn due to their appeal to other-regarding virtues such as e.g. compassion, empathy, and so on, since justice must not only be good for the agents themselves, but also for the other. Whilst individual action alone usually does not introduce social injustices, the roles of individuals within social justice issues are still crucial to consider.

To illustrate this further, let us reflect on how societal moral norms are shaped through virtuous role modelling by individuals. In regards to the human-animal-relationship, we can think of moral norms that range from animal friendly norms, to norms that accept and perpetuate animal cruelty. As for the former, correct treatment of animals would be highly valued. As for the latter, using animals for our own benefit across an array of handy applications (such as food, research, sport, companionship, entertainment and so forth) would be acceptable, and would not receive immediate – or perhaps any – political attention. If authors within the political turn are proposing institutional reform that will assert a more just human-animal-relationship, it is crucial we consider our current moral norms, and the virtues that enable them. Namely, our individual commitment to virtue and moral convictions ‘collectively’ create and maintain societal moral norms. Through virtuous role modelling, we influence each other’s behaviour and shape how we as a society are inclined to regard our position towards animals. Especially virtuous role modelling of politicians remains to be considered. Arguably, those with positions in politics have more power to influence how our behaviour in relation to animal issues is – and should be – perceived. The political turn literature wishes to change our institutions, which we have grown used to, and whose existence is engrained into our daily habits. Given this, it becomes clear how valuable it is that the correct moral norms – that are in accordance with virtue – are perpetuated by political role models.

Hence, virtue ethics provides an important additional perspective for the political turn of animal ethics. It opens up discussion of what characteristics we wish for animal representatives to possess and what role virtuous role models play, in a way that has not been offered yet.

### **Collective responsibility for political virtues**

So far, I have claimed that individual virtues are important for the political turn. As is individual ‘motivation.’ Particularly, a pivotal point for right behaviour, is that the agent does not only act according to what virtue requires within a given situation, but also that the agent feels motivated to do so for the right reasons (Sandler, 2013). If we frame animal advocacy and our motivation for this only as a ‘personal’ virtue, the issue of justice for animals will be dependent on those who feel inclined to support justice for animals. There is a problematic tendency to think of these ‘animal-friendly’ motivations to act right as optional and personal choices, rather than necessary and socially engaged choices. Therefore, I suggest to regard the relevant ‘animal friendly’ virtues for the political turn, as ‘public virtues’ like Brian Treanor suggests. Their primary aim is to benefit the wellbeing of the community, and may include some benefit for the individual taking into account they are part of said community. They are character traits that

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bring us into virtuous relationships with our communities and environments (Treanor, 2010). Thus, community in this sense is not restricted only to humans, but includes animals and the environment we share. Similar accounts have been proposed for shared and collective virtues (Clowney, 2014). These accounts extend the aim for individual 'eudaimonia', to the effect that virtues do not only have individual value, but also social value. They highlight our collective responsibility for tackling institutionalised injustices.

As I mentioned before, our current legal and political institutions are a result of our collective action. No individual action has introduced the largescale political under-representation of animals that the political turn is trying to combat, and no individual action alone will solve it. In order to enable the required collective action and to strengthen a virtuous perspective that is politically salient, we need moral agents to possess public virtues that will benefit the community. More specifically, it would be wise to consider public 'political virtues' that would facilitate democratic decision-making and effective collective action. Candidates for political virtues could for instance be political engagement, compassion, friendliness, truthfulness, open-mindedness, justice, benevolence, and hope (Treanor, 2010). Aside from specific public political virtues, virtues such as respect for nature and the emotion of wonder would encourage people to deepen their understanding of animals and how we ought to treat them. More generally, environmental virtues emphasise the intertwined flourishing of the environment, nonhuman animals and human beings.

Establishing justice for animals requires collective action. Basing it solely on individuals would be over demanding. Here, public virtues offer the moral agent some flexibility in their efforts to be politically virtuous. First, the nature of the virtuous agent to be committed to living a life in accordance with virtue can help frame the required changes as conducive with one's own flourishing. This, in turn, reduces the demandingness of such changes. And makes it easier to incorporate virtues into one's character and act in a way that a commitment to interspecies justice requires. Second, virtue ethics recognises the importance of the context in which one finds themselves. It accepts that not everyone is in a similar position to act according to what virtue requires for the animal movement. Thus, on the one hand, virtue ethics would make achieving interspecies justice less demanding by framing it as being in accordance with one's own flourishing. And on the other hand, it would be less demanding for people in different situations. It recognises that interspecies justice is a joint effort, asking cooperation of all, though conceding this might look different for every moral agent.

## Conclusion

I have shown that it would be unwise to focus solely on pursuing the political turn through moral rights debates and to let virtue ethics remain underrepresented. I have considered the additional benefits the virtue ethical approach has to offer, but I also concede that the success of the political turn ultimately will depend on a multitude of approaches and intertwined efforts that complement each other. If we reconsider our motivations to act in accordance with individual and public (political) virtues, and likewise reframe animal advocacy as having both personal and social value, we make for a more comprehensive view of our role in the improvement of the human-animal-relationship. Therefore, I suggest reconsidering an additional language of virtues within the political turn of animal ethics.

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