

28. Relating morally to farmed salmon – fellow creatures and biomass

H.M. Sandvik* and B.K. Myskja

Norwegian University of Science and Technology – NTNU, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Dragvoll alle 40, 7491 Trondheim, Norway; hannah.m.sandvik@ntnu.no

Abstract

Cora Diamond has criticized capacity-based approaches to determining the moral status of animals, arguing instead that the morally significant fact is that we have relationships to animals as our fellow creatures. This paper explores implications of her approach to fish and the practice of fish farming. Fish differ from most other animals due to their appearances and under-water existence, and it is not obvious that fish belong to our fellow creatures, and – if so – what it means for our treatment of them. In particular: if fish are fellow creatures, can we treat them in the way done in contemporary salmon farming? Iris Murdoch points out that moral differences are conceptual differences, that is differences in how we see the world. Similarly, Diamond argues that we should not consider ‘animal’ or ‘human’ as biological classifications – they are conceptual configurations that shape the way we think and make sense of the world. In this article, we explore the implication of the fellow creature concept for the case of fish, which challenge our ordinary understandings of companionship with animals. We argue that farmed salmon should be considered as a special kind of fellow creatures living in water, and discuss how scientific research on biological features of fish may influence how we see them. We also sketch how Diamond’s approach implies a need for reform of current salmon farming practices.

Keywords: fish, Cora Diamond, animal ethics, moral concepts

Fish – an elusive being

Our attempts to understand our moral relations with animals are often blocked by a sense of unreality, Mary Midgley writes (1998: 9). These creatures are both similar and close to us, and yet utterly strange and distant. Humans interact with them, love them, kill and eat them. How do we reconcile the idea of animals as living, feeling creatures on the one side with the fact that they are also something that humans eat? All in all, they are difficult to fit into our moral picture, and when we try to make room for them, this attempt is often met with resistance.

Fish, however, make for an even more difficult case as far as our moral relations with animals go. Many have pointed out how their difference from us makes it difficult to identify with them. This includes their lack of facial and audible expressions, their physical coldness, that they have scales instead of skin or fur, their lack of distinguishing features and their habitat underneath a surface, making their lives less accessible (Børresen, 2007: 9; Hursthouse, 2000: 223). This is the often-unrecognized moral challenge of the otherness of fish. Perhaps the title of a short article by Peter Singer hits the crux of the issue: ‘If fish could scream’ (Singer, 2010). If they could express their pain, we would understand that our treatment of them is in fact causing them pain and that this is morally wrong.

This distance between us and the fish is reflected in the way we think about and treat them. Fish have been taken to belong to an altogether different category than other animals, and their ability to feel pain has been heavily disputed. Regan doubted that they were subjects-of-a-life (Regan, 2004: 417), indicating how they escape our regular animal categories. It is still not uncommon for people who

regularly eat fish to call themselves vegetarians. In Norwegian sea-farming, the word biomass is an accepted term for the living fish. Fish, all in all, have not been taken to merit the same consideration as other animals.

Animals as fellow creatures

Thinking about animals and what kind of creatures they are raises questions about how we relate to them, how we treat them, and about how we should proceed to answer questions about morally acceptable ways of having them in our lives. Another philosopher who has written about the sense of unreality Midgley refers to is Cora Diamond. Diamond writes about 'the difficulty of reality', which she describes as 'experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking about it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability.' (Diamond, 2008: 45-46). This applies to reality broadly and not just experiences with animals, but animals present a particularly clear case of this kind of struggle, and understanding what Diamond means by it is useful for understanding her own attempt to say something about what animals are to us.

Commonly, in our response to these difficulties, we tend to 'deflect' from them, Diamond writes. The term 'deflection' is one she borrows from Stanley Cavell, and she uses it to describe a manoeuvre where 'we are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty in reality to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity.' (Diamond, 2008: 57). In other words, instead of confronting the real difficulty of our relationship with animals, we ask instead a set of easier questions: How do we differ from animals, and in which ways are we similar? What rights should animals have based on these similarities or dissimilarities, and what are the morally relevant facts about them? What we have done, is avoiding the difficult problem by re-articulating it in terms that makes it more manageable (Morag, 2020: 195).

Many of the dominant theories in animal ethics start with such questions. Peter Singer and Tom Regan, for example, argue that there are morally salient capacities shared by humans and other creatures that are decisive for our obligations towards them. On this view, biological facts about the neurological basis for consciousness in a species are decisive for how we ought to treat its members. The matter of establishing the moral status of an animal, then, becomes a matter of figuring out which capacities and factors should count, and how we can establish and measure them with sufficient certitude.

For Diamond, this is pure deflection, posing the challenge in the wrong terms. To be more specific, there are three traits which make them problematic from her point of view (Monsó and Grimm, 2019). (1) They are 'rationalistic', meaning that they don't consider emotions to be relevant for discussions on animal rights; (2) they are 'naturalistic' because they argue that there are empirical facts about animals that form the basis for establishing how we should treat them; and (3) they are 'reductionist' in the sense that they place primacy on theory over the plurality of our moral lives.

Diamond suggests an altogether different approach to thinking about animals. The point is that we are never confronted with beings with empirically discoverable similarities and dissimilarities to us, based on which we apply some general principle on how we must act (Diamond, 1991: 351). Rather, they are our 'fellow creatures'.

Diamond doesn't provide a definition of fellow creatures, at least not by any regular standards of how definitions should look, and understanding what she means by it can be challenging. A standard definition would be reductionist like the approaches she criticizes. However, her elucidation of the concept provides direction. 'Fellow creatures' serves as an alternative concept to the emphasis on interests

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or capacities, and this tells us something about what she does not mean. She writes that it is an idea of 'a being in a certain boat, as it were, of whom it makes sense to say, among other things, that it goes off into Time's enormous Nought, and which may be sought as company' (*ibid.*). What is meant by company here should also be specified. There is an obvious sense in which animals are sought as companions, as demonstrated by the amount of people who own, for example, dogs or cats. But Diamond has a broader understanding of companionship in mind here. She means that we share a form of life in that we are living, mortal beings (Diamond, 1978: 474). In other words, she wants to show how we share with animals a form of life in that we will all die. However, this concept of 'animals as our fellows in mortality [...] depends upon a conception of 'human' life' (*ibid.*).

To explain this further, Diamond invites us to think about how we do not find it acceptable to eat other humans, even after they have died. The reason why we don't eat humans has nothing to do with the avoidance of suffering, recognition of interests or any other thinkable morally relevant characteristics – the person in question may have died of natural and painless causes – but even so, we wouldn't prepare any of that person's limbs for dinner. Similarly, even the most enthusiastic of carnivores find the idea of eating their pets unthinkable. Humans and pets are simply not something we eat.

Thus, our moral obligations towards animals are not based on a definition of species characteristics but on a fundamental human understanding of what we are. What kind of values we have and how we value is something that is constituted through the forms of life we participate in. Just like being human is significant in moral thought, so our idea of what animals are is not given to us independently of our ways of thinking about and responding to them (Diamond, 1978: 476). This is the given framework for moral reflection on our interactions with other animals. A critique of Diamond's approach from a capacity-based perspective can be found in McMahan (2005), but due to space limitations, we will not attempt to respond to this criticism here. Our modest aim is to sketch some of the moral implications of Diamond's position for salmon farming.

'Fish' as a moral concept

If we return to the issue of fish, the question that arises is whether it makes sense to think of them too as our fellow creatures. There is something telling about the metaphor of the boat Diamond uses to describe our relationship with animals. Thoughts go to the story of Noah's ark, where Noah saved a pair of each animal species from the great flood. It goes without saying that he did not make fish companions on the Ark; a boat is exactly where a fish does not want to be.

It can seem, then, that if it is reasonable to consider animals as our fellow creatures, then this is something the fish is excluded from, partly due to its alien nature. Diamond says that when we talk about how we ought to treat certain animals, this is an 'extension to animals of modes of thinking characteristic of our responses to human beings' (Diamond, 1978: 474). Words like biomass prevent this kind of extension, turning fish into what Diamond calls a stage 'in the production of a meat product' (Diamond, 1978: 475) placing them outside the range of fellow creatures in a shared moral world. She points out that sometimes animals are vermin, conceptually placed as unwanted elements in our lifeworld, and hence not fellow creatures. To the extent that the concept 'fish' encompasses the alien features described above, it extends the distance between them and other animals, making it difficult regarding them as fellow creatures. Arguably, it is doing a similar conceptual job to vermin and biomass in excluding a creature from our moral world.

Which concepts we use to denote something has implications for how that thing is taken into consideration. Diamond argues that concepts such as 'animal' and 'human' are not biological concepts at all – they are 'conceptual configurations' that explain how we make sense of the world. In her development

of this idea, Diamond leans on Iris Murdoch, and they are both influenced by Wittgenstein. What they all oppose is the idea that concepts correspond to a world that is given prior to moral thought and life. Diamond writes: ‘What life is, what death is, what a human being is, what an animal – these things are not given to ethics by biology or metaphysics understood as external and prior to ethics but are rather ‘understood through moral thought.’ (Diamond, 2010: 59). In other words, the concepts of human being and animal are not simply handed down to us by biology and tradition, they are works of moral thought and imagination and derived from human practices.

Criticizing concepts and worldviews

At this point we encounter the main challenge of Diamond’s approach: how do we overcome deeply ingrained aspects of our worldview that we suspect to be morally untenable? This is also a question about how moral philosophy can be something different than a moral anthropology or psychology, empirically describing conceptual practices as historical practices. In other words, how do we go from a description of how fish are perceived and treated to any kind of assessment of how they should be treated?

Our understanding of concepts is not a stable thing, as Murdoch points out. She invites us to think about the world in which our moral concepts move about as ‘cloudy and shifting’; brought about by the use of our moral capacities. We can consider, for example, how our conception of fish has gradually changed, challenging the understanding of it we presented in the introduction. There is more and more conclusive evidence that fish both feel pain and fear and that they are intelligent beings with memory, ability to learn and rich social lives, including creativity and cooperative behaviour (Børresen, 2007). If we return to Singer’s statement that fish do not scream, this is not quite true. Fish communicate by sound, although we usually cannot hear it (McCauley and Cato, 2000). It has become more common to talk about fish welfare and what can be done to improve it. Additionally, if we pay attention to the practices of people who interact with fish, the conception of it as outside of the scope of any conception of meaningful relations is challenged. Hobby fishers, researchers and fish farm workers alike express concern for the well-being and even admiration for the fish they work with (Lien, 2015).

Now that science has made it likely that fish experience both fear and pain, this knowledge reinforces what are assumptions shared by many of those who regularly interact with fish. In other words, even though Diamond is critical of the moral individualism Singer defends, this doesn’t mean that capacities and characteristics of individuals are unimportant. By observing and learning more about that which is unknown to us, we can come to see it in a different light. For instance, Diamond writes about how she used to think that friendship with animals was limited to a few species only, but after seeing movies about the relation between whales and their Greenpeace rescuers, she realized that she had held a narrow view of which friendships are possible (Monsó and Grimm, 2019: 12). Learning more about the whales made her see them in a new light. Likewise, few books have contributed more to promoting compassion for animals than Singer’s ‘Animal Liberation’ and many readers report giving up meat entirely after reading it. However, as Hursthouse points out, this is not necessarily because they have been convinced by Singer’s utilitarian doctrine, but because of its vivid depiction of animal suffering (Hursthouse, 2019: 119).

Paying attention and virtues

The phenomenon of seeing things in a new light is a familiar one to most of us. But what happens is more than acquiring new facts on the basis of which we form a judgment about how something should be treated or valued. Diamond is influenced by Murdoch, who writes that morality is a matter of attention, not will. She describes this as ‘a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality’ (Murdoch, 2001: 33), putting the idea of moral vision up against the idea of morality as a choice. For the purposes here, we can take fishing as an example. Learning how to fish is more than putting bait on a hook and seeing

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what happens; it is a practice where the person fishing over time learns a set of skills about how to read the weather, read the ocean, and read the fish. To outsiders, it might seem as though they perceive the world a little differently (Moi, 2017: 226). It may be objected that fishing is a skill rather than an expression of moral perception. However, for Diamond, even when perform such tasks, we give expression to a moral demeanour, as Cordner and Gleeson have argued (Cordner and Gleeson, 2016: 59).

This opens up a space for exploring the role of the virtues. Diamond has little to say about any kind of positive program she may have with regards to how we may or may not treat animals, but she does give content to the idea of an answer by suggesting appropriate virtues for our interaction with animals, analogous to human-related virtues. She mentions several, including charity, fairness, respect for independence and pity (Diamond, 1978: 474-475).

These virtues do not turn animals and fish into beings with moral status, as morality on this account is not defined by certain principles telling us how to act. It is the other way around; morality is part of our moral vision of the world. Our distinctions are conceptual rather than biological, even if they have a biological basis, and saying that moral judgements can be based in the biological similarities between different creatures fails to take into account the way in which morality is immersed in these conceptual distinctions. We do not change our moral perception of fish merely by stating these scientific facts, since fish are on the border of our moral world. However, by recognizing fish as fellow creatures, we learn to see them differently and include them in a certain moral vision. This includes a realization that they are our fellows in mortality, and have lives of their own, both recognizable and alien to the lives of humans. Bringing this to our attention, includes seeing that a virtuous interaction with fish means treating them with charity and fairness, as individual beings with independent lives.

This changed moral gaze includes a realization that certain concepts are integrated aspects of untenable practices, such as calling live fish 'biomass'. This word only makes sense in a form of aquaculture that is cruel, and is an instrument enabling this particular kind of cruelty. There are, however, resources in our existing practices and stories for recognizing fish as fellow creatures, just as there are resources for seeing them as nothing more than a stage in food production. Drawing attention to our knowledge about the life of salmon, wild and farmed, enables a novel moral vision with implications for how we ought to live with them.

Conclusion

Cora Diamond criticizes approaches to animal ethics that argue that moral status should be determined on the basis of capacities and suggests that a more adequate idea for understanding our relationships to animals is our experience of them as fellow creatures. Fish are not readily seen as fellow creatures, but we argue that there are resources in human relations and scientific knowledge for such an inclusion. Among other things, this involves discarding morally untenable words as 'biomass', which prevents us from seeing them as beings with whom we share a form of life. If we recognize fish as our fellow creatures, we have to reconsider our treatment of them in light of this and reform or end practices that are not consistent with this conception.

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