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# Re-framing the debate over animal morality

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Is morality uniquely human or does morality exist in at least some non-human animals? Are animals full-fledged moral creatures or do they merely exhibit *proto*-morality—evolutionary building blocks or precursors to morality, but not quite the genuine article? Such questions, prompted by remarkable advances in empirical research into the social and emotional lives of non-human animals, have aroused much recent interest amongst scientists, philosophers, and in the popular media, not least for their apparent bearing on questions of human uniqueness, evolution, and the ethical status of animals. The debate over animal morality has produced many valuable contributions and stimulated new areas for empirical and theoretical research. However, focusing on these questions has led researchers to talk at cross-purposes and down some unproductive paths (Fitzpatrick, 2017). The problem concerns the terms “morality” and “moral”.

One initial source of confusion stems from the fact that many have interpreted the question of whether morality exists in animals to amount to asking whether animals act in ways that *we* might judge to be *good* according to our own normative standards—chimpanzees consoling friends who have lost a fight, rats helping a drowning companion. But, Joseph Stalin was surely a moral creature, even if we don’t judge his deeds kindly, and we typically regard resentment as a moral attitude, even if we don't think it good to resent others. So, it seems better to ask whether animals have a *moral psychology*: mental states and processes that are somehow *about,* or connected with, things that are of moral significance.

On that question, researchers have ostensibly divided themselves into three camps: the human exceptionalists, who hold that nothing like a genuine moral psychology can be found in other species, the anti-exceptionalists, who hold that core features of a moral psychology are definitely shared with many other species, and the building-block theorists, who hold that at least some species possess elements of human moral psychology, but not the full thing. However, the disagreement between these camps stems from their endorsing different definitions of what it is to have a moral psychology. Korsgaard (2006) is an exceptionalist because she ties our moral psychology to a kind of self-reflection referred to as “normative guidance”, widely

assumed absent in other animals: the ability to reflect upon the motivations for one's actions and think about whether or not one should have those motivations. Bekoff and Pierce (2009) are anti-exceptionalists because they adopt a much broader understanding of what it is to have a moral psychology, including capacities for empathy and sympathy towards others, attitudes of jealousy and resentment, maintaining co-operative arrangements, and having a sense of fairness—things for which they see evidence in many species. In contrast, de Waal (2013), while agreeing with Bekoff and Pierce that capacities for empathy and sympathy and a sense of fairness are crucial building blocks of a moral psychology, nonetheless argues that humans are unique in that we are able to explicitly formulate and share moral codes with each other. That is why we have moral systems, but other apes, for instance, do not.

This naturally suggests the question: who has the "right" definition? This is where much of the debate has been focused: why this or that definition of what it is to have a moral psychology is better. Exceptionalists are accused of anthropocentrism; anti-exceptionalists of widening the circle too far. But, we need to step back and think about *what it is* to define "morality" and get the definition *right* (Nado et al., 2009).[1] Here, we see crucial differences in approach.

Western philosophers typically approach such definitional questions through the method of *conceptual analysis*: begin with intuitions about canonical applications of the term, propose a definition of the term in the form of necessary and sufficient conditions, then compare that definition with intuitions about the application of the term in new cases. If it comports with what intuition suggests, great; if it doesn't, a revised definition is required. This is what drives many philosophers to react with incredulity at the thought of animals as moral creatures: they find it so counterintuitive that rats, say, could have a moral psychology and they evaluate rival accounts of what it is to have a moral psychology by how well they comport with their intuitions about which things are moral creatures.

However, researchers like Bekoff and Pierce and de Waal seem to take a different approach to defining terms like "moral". They are primarily interested in how moral psychology *evolved* and wish to set armchair intuitions about the nature of this psychology and who has it aside. They seem to regard it as a *natural kind*, analogous to "water" or "heat". Delimiting the kind *moral psychology* is an empirical, not conceptual matter: we start with clear instances of the kind, then perform scientific investigation to find out the key hallmarks that set it apart from other kinds. As has been the case with scientific articulation of other natural kinds, the results may be surprising and counterintuitive—rats and humans may indeed manifest instances of this kind.

[1] Due to an oversight by the author, this reference was omitted from the published version of this article. Sincere apologies to Nado et al. for that omission.

But, there is another important difference between these approaches that compounds the problem of miscommunication. The kind of conceptual analysis that philosophers typically perform with terms like “moral” is also driven by, and inseparable from, background concerns in metaphysics and epistemology. Every student of ethics should know that the different traditions in ethical theory have quite different conceptions of the subject matter of ethics—what morality is all about. For Kant, morality is about obligation and duty, for the utilitarians it is about happiness and suffering, etc. This disagreement is crucially intertwined with disagreement about how ethical knowledge could be possible. Kant’s conception of ethics is driven by his concern that ethics be given a foundation in reason; while, as empiricists, the utilitarians prefer to see ethical knowledge as ultimately empirical and the subject matter of ethics as something that can be studied scientifically, like psychological states of happiness.

It is vital to keep this in mind when understanding a position like Korsgaard’s on morality in animals: for Korsgaard, this issue is crucially bound up with questions about the metaphysics and epistemology of ethics. Normative guidance is the “essence” of morality because Korsgaard adopts a largely Kantian view of the metaphysics and epistemology of ethics grounded in self-reflection. That is why she can’t recognise de Waal’s building blocks of morality as building blocks of morality at all—empathy and sympathy have nothing to do with the ability to obligate oneself. Proponents of the natural kind approach, however, tend not to have such background concerns driving their agenda. That would be to put the cart before the horse: better to begin with an empirically informed account of how our social psychology works and then reflect on what metaphysics and epistemology makes the most sense of our practices, rather than have such concerns drive our account of what it is to have a moral psychology. But, this is, nonetheless, how many philosophers approach the question of morality in animals, and it means that researchers have not only adopted different methodologies, but have also often been interested in different things: metaethics v.s. evolutionary psychology.

What about those who ostensibly agree on thinking of morality as a natural psychological kind? Scientists like Bekoff and de Waal can make common cause with naturalistic philosophers and researchers in the cognitive science of morality in thinking of moral psychology as something to be revealed by empirical investigation. Here, however, another problem arises: how do we decide between different ways of drawing the boundaries of this kind? How do we decide, for instance, between Bekoff and Pierce’s expansive account of what it is to be a moral creature and de Waal’s more restrictive account, and various others on the market? Is empathy enough for being a moral creature, or is something else required, like an understanding of explicit codes of conduct, or some sense of *ought*? The situation is similar to the debate over what it is to have a “language”. Is the essence of language syntactic structure, or is it intentional communication, or just exchange of information? Much ink has been spilled here, but it

is an entirely terminological dispute. We have a variety of potential natural kinds (some more inclusive than others) and there is no debate of value to be had over which has more or less ownership of the pre-theoretical concept “language”. Similarly, the pre-theoretical concept “moral” is vague enough that there is no substantive debate to be had over which of a number of possible natural kinds constitutes its “real” extension.

So, if we wish to avoid talking at cross-purposes or wasting our time with merely terminological disputes, we should stop asking whether animals are “moral” or “proto-moral”. Better, I suggest, to focus on more fine-grained questions about what different species can do, what psychological mechanisms underlie their behaviour, and what philosophical implications may follow from this. For instance, are rats motivated to help others because of others’ distress, what role does that distress play in their psychology, and what might this tell us about the potential harmful effects on the welfare of laboratory rats, say, of keeping them in conditions where they are routinely exposed, but prevented from responding to, the distress of conspecifics (Monsó et al. 2018)? These are much more precise, more tractable, and substantive questions than whether or not we should call rats “moral” or “proto-moral”.

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