



2016

## Folk Ontology and the Moral Standing of Animals

Justin E. H. Smith

*Université Paris Diderot—Paris VII*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/tcj>



Part of the [Animal Studies Commons](#), and the [Philosophy Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Smith, Justin E. H. (2016) "Folk Ontology and the Moral Standing of Animals," *The Chautauqua Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/tcj/vol1/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Chautauqua Journal by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact [Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu](mailto:Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu).

JUSTIN E. H. SMITH

FOLK ONTOLOGY AND THE MORAL STANDING OF ANIMALS

G. E. Lessing, the great critic and philosopher of the German Enlightenment, noted in his 1759 essay, “On the Use of Animals in Fables,” that “the great majority of fables feature animals, and still lesser creatures, as acting persons.”<sup>1</sup> Lessing wanted to know what we could learn from this. My own view is that his conclusions are dead wrong, but that the question itself is one that it took a certain kind of genius to ask in the first place, and one that remains as urgent as ever to answer, not just for the sake of literary theory, but above all for the sake of our understanding of what animals are, and of the way our moral commitments to them flow from this understanding.

Lessing gives two primary reasons for the replacement of human beings by animals in fables. The first is that we all tend to recognize more readily the sort of character represented by an animal species than by a particular human being. If one were to relate the historical tale of Nero and Britannicus, for example, it was already quite likely in the 18<sup>th</sup> century—and is all the more so today—that most listeners will have no idea what these characters are meant to represent. But if a fable has as its primary function the imparting of some moral principle or other, as Lessing supposes, it is far better to replace Nero with a wolf, and Britannicus with a lamb. Everyone, we might suppose, down to the most ignorant yokel, knows what these creatures represent, and how they stand in relation to one another. If the purpose is to communicate a moral principle rather than a history lesson, why let background knowledge of individual human actors stand as a prerequisite? The wolf and the lamb require the least in the way of shared background knowledge, and they thus serve most directly the fable’s function of universal moral edification.

Lessing adds another reason for the casting of animals in fables. He maintains that nothing gets in the way of the teaching of a moral lesson more so than the passions. He brings up the example from 2 Samuel 12 of the avaricious priest who wishes to take away

---

<sup>1</sup> G. E. Lessing, “Von dem Gebrauche der Thiere in der Fabel,” in *Literaturtheoretische und ästhetische Schriften*, Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1996, 43.

a poor man's only lamb. Lessing maintains that in this tale our passion of sympathy for the poor man is great, as is our passion of hatred for the priest. But if we substitute animals for the relevant actors, then, in so far as these creatures are 'lesser' than we are, the arousal of the passions in reading about them is thereby reduced, and we are better able to focus on the moral lesson at hand. "We sympathize with the lamb," Lessing writes, "but this sympathy is so weak that it has no noticeable impact upon our intuitive knowledge of the moral principle."<sup>2</sup>

I find the first argument interesting, and the second one deplorable. I also find that Lessing's engagement with the topic leaves a great many considerations completely unexplored.

The second argument seems to me patently false: even though we have strong species-based loyalties in our reasoned moral commitments, these loyalties are most likely to be suspended when, as in a fable, an anthropomorphized animal occupies a role that in another genre of story-telling would be held by a human being. The substitutability of an animal for a human in a fable brings with it, I think, the transferability of sympathy, as well as the other passions that some people, including Lessing, might ordinarily reserve, at least in their strongest form, for members of their own species.

Moreover, it is not clear to me that any anthropomorphization, or any prior commitment to what these days are called 'animal rights,' is necessary in order to feel intense sympathy across species boundaries. One could provide arguments as to why this is so: a utilitarian might say that with respect to suffering, animals have it just as bad as humans do; it is thus rational to wish to put a stop to their suffering, even if we do not ascribe a whole set of other human capacities to animals. But we do not need to resort to the traditional arsenal of philosophical arguments in order to note that it is simply not true that we sympathize less with animals than with humans. I recall here the Norwegian director Hans Petter Moland's 1995 film, *Zero Kelvin*, in which one explorer in Greenland shoots his rival in order to prevent the latter from torturing a sled dog. The audience cannot but feel that, under the circumstances, this was the right thing to do.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 47.

Does this feeling involve a weighing of the relative value of the life of a brutal man against that of a common husky? Does it involve the invocation of a calculus of worth at all? Of course not. It involves an abhorrence at the sight of suffering (of a dog, but species matters little here) and relief to see it come to an end.

The second argument is based on an unconvincing account of how the passions are roused in us. The first argument, for its part, holds that animals are substituted for humans in fables because their characters are easily remembered. This is true, but it raises more questions than it answers. On what basis do we attribute characters to animals in the first place? Are we simply reading off of them behavioral features that are phenomenally self-evident? Or are we projecting our own human values, or even narrow cultural values that other humans do not share, when we say, for example, that a fox is sly or an eagle is noble? (It has recently been discovered that lions are just as likely to scavenge as are hyenas. What is it that led us to suppose that the former creatures were brave hunters in the first place, and the latter undignified bottom feeders? Surely this has something to do with distinctly human standards of beauty.) Finally, at a more ontological level—where I would like to dwell for the bulk of this essay—how are we to account for the fact that an animal in a fable stands as a representative of an entire species, whereas a human being in a story is generally a unique individual? Fables tell of Mr. Fox or Brer Rabbit; but it would be a very peculiar sort of story that featured ‘Mr. Man’ as its protagonist.

This final question which I have raised points to what I would like to call the ‘folk ontology’ that underlies our moral commitments, or lack of them, to animals. I am using ‘folk’ here in the way that it has been used to describe, e.g., folk psychology, folk biology, or folk taxonomy: that is, the pre-scientific, generally unarticulated commitments people have passively, as members of a given culture, that correspond imperfectly to the ideas that science and philosophy mean to render explicit and to make precise.

Our folk ontology of animals remains rooted, I maintain, in the traditional culture of fables. It holds that an entire species of non-human animals has a status equivalent to that of an individual human being. Thus ‘Fox’ or ‘Bear’ can be the protagonist of an animal story, but only a particular Mr. or Mrs. So-and-So can play the lead role in a

human story. Human beings are unique, the folk theory goes, while members of any given animal species are interchangeable.

It should not be at all hard to see what moral consequences follow from this ontology. If an entire animal species is equivalent to a single human, then the murder of a human could not be equivalent to the slaughter of an animal; rather, the appropriate comparison in the animal realm to the murder of a human would be the utter driving to extinction of all members of a given animal kind. ‘Meat’ can’t be ‘murder,’ as the song has it, since for every slaughtered bovine there are billions more still on the hoof. The *kind* lives on.

But even if we want to reserve the term ‘murder’ for the human species alone, surely the killing of a human being has more in common with the killing of an individual steer than with, say, the extermination of the dodo bird or, God forbid, the Siberian tiger. It is not, perhaps, that we do not recognize the greater semantic proximity of ‘murder’ to ‘slaughter’ than to ‘extinction,’ but simply that slaughter’s semantic link to murder retains little of the latter’s ethical charge. What matters for the sort of being that can be slaughtered but not murdered—i.e., any non-human animal—is that some quantity or other of such beings remain in existence. Perhaps counterintuitively, this is more rather than less the case in the era of environmentalism and conservation: there was a time not so long ago when driving menacing or pestilent animals to extinction was seen as having no moral down-side at all. While there is some definite progress in having overcome that primitive outlook, nonetheless for the most part conservationism has failed, or perhaps simply declined, to reject the folk ontology that attributes moral status to non-human animal species as a whole, but not to individual members of these species.

But let us try to remain neutral inquirers for at least a moment, and ask whether conservationists are justified in preserving this bit of traditional thinking about animals. Do animals in fact have moral status only as a group, but not as individuals?

At this point it is urgent to remark that ‘animals’ form no natural class of entities such that a single answer can be given to questions such as: What are our moral obligations to animals? Do animals have moral status? And so on. ‘Animals’— as a class that includes all biological entities between human beings and plants on some imaginary

scale of being, all of which have some salient properties in common from which their moral status flows—simply do not exist. Elephants and fleas are both animals, but there is nothing that they have in common, but that elephants and humans, or for that matter fleas and fungi, do not have in common, that would warrant treating fleas and elephants alike in virtue of their shared status as ‘animals.’ Failure to make this point explicit has, I think, greatly hindered clarity of thinking in moral-philosophical reflection about animals: to speak about ‘animals’ might carve nature at its joints, to the extent that there are some real features that barnacles and deer have in common; but whatever these are, humans will have them too, and in any case these features (possession of a digestive tract, etc.), will be almost entirely irrelevant to any questions we might have about how we should behave toward this or that creature.

Both biology and common-sense observation reveal to us a vast diversity of capacities in the animal kingdom, such that any given discovery of, say, a chimpanzee’s ability to exercise foresight in storing food, tells us absolutely nothing about whether ‘animals’ are capable of having a concept of the future. Yet sloppy science-journalists, and regrettably even some scientists, go on speaking about chimpanzee or elephant behavior as if it were the measure of animal potentiality in general. Individual animals are taken as representatives of their species; and species in turn are made to represent the entire kingdom! Good, sound science would have us going in just the opposite direction: not investigating the capacities of ‘animals,’ but rather investigating the range of capacities of different kinds of animal, and the range of capacities of individual members of these different kinds.

Here, then, ethics and science are very much out of step with one another. In no case is this clearer, perhaps, than in policies concerning the culling of elephant herds. Tim Flannery notes in a recent review that “elephants have been known to raid a shed filled with the body parts of slaughtered elephants, removing the feet and ears (which were destined to be turned into umbrella stands) and burying them.”<sup>3</sup> This follows the various reports over the past decade of complicated premeditated raids by elephants on

---

<sup>3</sup> Tim Flannery, “Getting to Know Them,” *The New York Review of Books*, April 29, 2010: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/apr/29/getting-to-know-them/> .

villages inhabited by humans who, often years before, had killed members of their elephant families.

In the *Politics* Aristotle says that hunting is a form of war, and the common wisdom has it that this is a war that has been decisively won by humans in the past few millennia. We have killed off the great majority of other megafauna species, and now the only creatures that pose any real threat to us are mosquito-sized and smaller. But elephants remind us that the war is still on in some spots. The particular expression of their violence can only lead one to conclude that ‘war’ is not an analogy here. In fact, what their behavior most resembles is that of besieged guerillas, who are ultimately doomed and have no real hope of winning against their enemy, and are fighting, whether they know it or not, precisely *because* they are doomed.

Some might of course feel emboldened in their dismissal of the moral status of elephants by the fact that they act with such violence. But the interesting thing about this violence is that it is a feature of their behavioral repertoire that can either be manifested, or not. The refusal to attribute a moral character to animal behavior in the history of philosophy has often been grounded in the belief that animal behavior simply flows from animal nature, that there is nothing an animal does that it could just as well not have done. But elephants, like people, appear much more likely to flip out when they or their loved ones have been messed with. Elephant attacks have nothing of the character of, say, shark attacks, which really do flow directly from the shark’s nature. It is simply an ethological mistake to suppose that the elephant attack ought to be studied in more or less the same way as the shark attack, rather than, say, a guerilla attack in rural India.

Guerilla insurrection has as its root cause the inability of human beings to share land and resources; it is a problem of demography and geography. One way of solving this problem would be to cull human populations to the point where everyone could share resources to the satisfaction of all. But of course no one seriously considers this an option, since each individual human is supposed to have an irreducible moral status that precludes the possibility of treating them as anything other than, to speak with Kant, ends in themselves. Yet it remains a fringe view to suggest that elephant populations should not be culled for their own good.

Why is this? Again, it is not enough to say that if we *don't* cull them, then they are doomed, since evidently the same reasoning could not possibly be invoked with respect to any human population. Human beings as a species could very well be doomed, in fact, for reasons having much to do with overpopulation and competition for resources, but what righteous and decent people do nonetheless is to look for ways to save every last one of them, rather than just some of them. I want to know what it is that permits us to reason differently in the different cases, other than the fact that they are elephants, and we are human. This is true, but it's not an argument. Elephants, I believe, have done everything a creature could do short of transforming itself into a human being to demonstrate that they are worthy of treatment as *individually* morally relevant beings, with the same rights that flow from this individual moral status that human beings are held to deserve.

The one circumstance in which culling of human populations becomes possible (even if we still would not call it that), arises when a foreign ethnic group has been conceptualized in the way that animals are conceptualized in fables, not as irreducible individuals, but as, e.g., the Jap or the Hun. Some recent scholars have argued that human beings are innately disposed to cognize other racial groups by means of the same module responsible for folk-biological taxonomizing of animal species.<sup>4</sup> On this line of thinking, the default mode of cognition of Japanese people (for anyone who is not Japanese, that is), is as 'the Jap,' just as the default mode of cognition of foxes is through their imagined representative, 'Mr. Fox.' Now what moral universalism is supposed to do is to ensure that we not think in this way about the members of other human groups, while in contrast Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr. Fox* is still a harmless entertainment. But it is no secret that moral universalism can easily be suspended under circumstances of demographic and ecological competition (a competition conceptualized in recent centuries as 'political').

---

<sup>4</sup> See in particular Francisco Gil-White, "Are Ethnic Groups Biological 'Species' to the Human Brain?: Essentialism in our Cognition of Some Social Categories," *Current Anthropology* 42.4 (2001): 515-554; Gil-White, "The Cognition of Ethnicity: Native Category Systems under the Field Experimental Microscope," *Field Methods* 14, 2 (2002): 170-198; Edouard Machery and Luc Faucher, "Why Do We Think Racially? Culture, Evolution and Cognition," *Categorization in Cognitive Science*, eds. Henri Cohen & Claire Lefebvre, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005; Machery and Faucher, "Social Construction and the Concept of Race," *Philosophy of Science* 72 (2005): 1208-1219.

When this happens, does it not seem to be a *reversion* to a more basic way of cognizing, rather than a perversion of our natural or regular way?

More than one prominent theory of the origins of the religious life sees it as rooted in an attempt to absolve the guilt that arises from aggression and violence. We are religious because we are violent, and we are violent simply because it is in our natures. According to Walter Burkert in his influential work, *Homo Necans*, for most of human history social solidarity was achieved “through a sacred crime [hunting and war] with due reparation [the rituals associated with these].”<sup>5</sup> He argues that “[s]acrificial killing is the basic experience of the ‘sacred.’ *Homo religiosus* acts and attains self-awareness as *homo necans*. Indeed, this is what it means ‘to act,’ *rezein, operari* (whence ‘sacrifice’ is *Opfer* in German)—the name merely covers up the heart of the action with a euphemism.”<sup>6</sup> In this respect, for Burkert those progressive social scientists are mistaken who “attempt to locate the roots of the evil” of violence while setting out from “short-sighted assumptions, as though the failure of our upbringing or the faulty development of a particular national tradition or economic system were to blame.”<sup>7</sup>

I do not wish either to defend or to refute Burkert's specific thesis here. It is enough to draw inspiration from his suggestion that both war and hunting are part of the same complex of human behaviors, a complex that required the creation of a counter-complex, that of ritual, religion, and, eventually, morality, in order to repair for the transgression of the originating complex. If this is the case, then one thing that becomes clear is that there is a knowable mechanism at work in the periodic dehumanization of human groups, a dehumanization that functions almost as a precondition of being able to go to war against them. It is a dehumanization in the sense just considered, that from being a group of sundry irreducible individuals they are now conceived, in the way in which we regularly conceive animals, as interchangeable instances of the same kind. We might in this sense modify Aristotle's claim above by saying that war is a form of hunting, and that it is made possible by the rescinding of the irreducible moral status of

---

<sup>5</sup> Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983, xiv.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

individual human beings, and its replacement with the default perspective humans take on animals: as Mr. Fox, or as Brer Rabbit, or ‘that filthy varmint.’ The rescinding of moral status is possible, indeed easy, along Burkert’s lines, because the war/hunting complex comes first in the order of things, and the morality/religion complex was only erected subsequently in order to modulate or regulate an existence that is fundamentally defined by the first of these.

The idea of human rights that has emerged gradually over the past few centuries has been based on the very new idea that no one is just a ‘Jap’ or a ‘Hun’ or a ‘Barbarian,’ but rather every human being is an individual with an inherent irreducible value equal to that of every other human being. It is no longer possible to tell folk tales about ‘the Jew,’ though as recently as the Grimm Brothers’ collection of German folk tales in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century we can still see a trace of this fable-ready generic character that Lessing, several decades earlier, thought best instantiated by animals.

The old folk-ontological conception of unfamiliar ethnic groups as consisting in interchangeable members lacking any individual character or moral status has today been largely overcome. With the exception of our comportment towards domestic animals, however, we have never so much as considered the need to rethink our folk-ontology of non-human animals, and to reevaluate the moral commitments that flow from it. Ethically speaking, the modern world has not moved beyond Aesop in the way it thinks about animals, even as science has revealed—and above all in the last decades—so very much about what we share emotionally and cognitively with a wide variety of non-human animals.