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UNDERSTANDING MORAL STATUS OF ANIMALS THROUGH ETHICS OF CARE

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to elaborate one of the relatively novel theories of applied ethics which is Care Ethics (alternatively called Ethics of Care) and explore its standpoint with respect to moral status of non-human animals. The inception of Care Ethics as a moral theory could be traced in feminist roots as evident from the 1982 breakthrough work entitled *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* of feminist ethicist Carol Gilligan and another 1984 work entitled *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* by feminist philosopher Nel Noddings. Ethics of care is a feminist approach to ethics. Originating as an alternative way of speaking about moral problems, it offers the women's way of resolving ethical dilemmas. It highlights a different moral orientation based on "voices of care" which represents the unheard voices of the marginalized group of women. Grounded in the very idea that men and women differ in their moral decision-making, Care Ethics posits that ethical perspec-

tives such as Kantian deontology, utilitarian consequentialism and virtue ethics are male centric. Dominant in the history of western philosophy, these theories are based on male values of rationality, justice and universality; and thus underestimate the feminine values of empathy, care, compassion, relatedness and responsiveness. These male centric theories assert that moral decision making should be made by rational, unemotional and logical moral agents and should be such that they could be objectively / universally applied in any situation. This one-size-fits-all approach by the male-centric ethical theories aiming for abstract and universalizing norms neglects the particularities of an ethical dilemma. These are de-humanistic as they neglect the emotional responses to the ethical/philosophical debate. It presumes that society is composed of rational equals thereby neglecting the heterogeneity of various life-forms. Recognizing this utopian nature of moral theories, Care Ethicists realize the crucial role played by emotions such as care or compassion in real life decision making. It is not to say that Care Ethics present a dichotomy between reason and the emotions, as some emotions could be reasonable and morally appropriate in guiding good decisions. By placing emphasis on emotions, not only it puts women values in the mainstream of philosophical debate but also provides an alternative way of looking at the moral status of non-human animals. Unlike utilitarian or rights theory that ground our obligations to animals in rights or utilitarian consideration, Care Ethics grounds moral treatment of animals in our sympathy for them. It asserts that humans have a duty to provide at least a minimum of decent care to all animals that they have made dependent on them. Care ethics does not insist for caring for animals as mothers (human and non-human) care for their infants rather, it emphasizes on listening to animals, paying emotional attention and heeding to what they are telling. This application of care ethics to the animal question not only humanize us but also positively impact the human-animal relationship in the long run.

Keywords: feminism, feminist ethics, non-human animals, moral status, utilitarianism, deontology, care ethics.

Introduction

The Feminist wave of the late 1960s challenged the patriarchal notions of society of the then prevailing times and tried to re-define every sphere of life be it social, political, cultural, economic, environmental and so on from the women' view point. Feminist theory of ethics that arose as a result of Feminist movement likewise challenged the traditional philosophy on the basis of its being andro-centric or male biased. As per it, it is the moral perspectives of men that have articulated the methods and concepts of traditional ethics. Utilizing these male-centered values, traditional ethical theories justify the subordination of women in society. Under the garb of claiming their gender-neutral nature, traditional ethical theories tend to exclude women by focusing on isolated unrelated individuals deliberating rationally about ethical norms in the public sphere. Thus, to rectify this invisibility of women thoughts in moral thinking, feminists propose an ethics grounded in women's philosophical perspectives and experiences. Care ethics is one of the dominant approaches in feminist ethics, given that much of the feminine ethics was influenced by propounder of Care Ethics, Carol Gilligan who highlighted the difference between male and female ethical patterns (voices).

The Ethical Theory of Care

Ethics of care is a feminist approach to ethics. Originating as an alternative way of speaking about moral problems, it offers the women's way of resolving ethical dilemmas. It highlights a different moral orientation based on "voices of care" which represents the unheard voices of the marginalized group of women. Grounded in the very idea that men and women differ in their moral decision-making, Care Ethics posits that ethical perspectives such as Kantian deontology, Utilitarianism consequentialism and Virtue ethics are male centric. Dominant in the history of western philosophy, these theories are based on male values of rationality, justice and univer-

sality; and thus underestimate the feminine values of empathy, care, compassion, relatedness and responsiveness. These male centric theories assert that moral decision making should be made by rational, unemotional and logical moral agents and should be such that they could be objectively/universally applied in any situation. This one-size-fits-all approach by the male-centric ethical theories aiming for abstract and universalizing norms neglects the particularities of an ethical dilemma. These are de-humanistic as they neglect the emotional responses to the ethical/philosophical debate. It presumes that society is composed of rational equals thereby neglecting the heterogeneity of various life-forms. Recognizing this utopian nature of moral theories, Care ethicists realize the crucial role played by emotions such as care or compassion in real life decision making.

The inception of Care Ethics as a moral theory could be traced in feminist roots as evident from the 1982 breakthrough work entitled *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* of feminist ethicist Carol Gilligan and another 1984 work entitled *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* by feminist philosopher Nel Noddings. Carol Gilligan, a research assistant to Lawrence Kohlberg realized the need for another theory of moral development as the latter's theory being based on nearly all male samples failed to take into account moral perspectives of women. Kohlberg's theory of moral development comprises of three levels/stages which are follows:

- Pre-conventional level: At this level, moral decisions are egocentric and concrete as individuals are motivated by their own self-interest.
- Conventional Level: At this level, moral decisions are determined based on established societal norms as individuals are motivated by the desire to meet social units' expectations without bothering about their own self-interest.
- Post-conventional Level: At this level, moral decisions are determined by general, impartial and abstract principles of justice, duty and so on that are universally applicable.

As evident from above, Gilligan argues that Kohlberg's theory prioritizes 'Ethics of Justice' which is morality centered on abstract rules that can be applied universally in all situations. This ethical norm of Justice conceives

people as separate individuals who by virtue of being autonomous need abstract rules to safeguard their individual rights and govern their interactions with one another. This justice perspective is held steadfast by males more than females, which in turn places latter's moral reasoning that values compassion and interpersonal relationships at a lower pedestal. Morality which is centered on justice do not provide standard for measuring female moral development and thus fail to account for moral perspectives of women.

Given this inability of Kohlberg's theory to reflect the moral perspectives of women, Gilligan proposes a new moral theory that adequately reflects moral decision making of women. By advancing the same, Gilligan didn't aim to prove that female moral thinking was better than that of men, but rather that they were equally important.

Realizing that women are very compassion oriented who act based on feelings for particular individuals unlike men who are very justice oriented and tend to stick to abstract rules, Gilligan propose an 'Ethics of Care' as an alternative theory of moral development which is as follows:

- Pre-conventional Level: Much like Kohlberg's first level, moral decisions here also are determined based on self-centered reasoning.
- Conventional Level: In this level, the individual feels responsible and shows care towards other people. This sometimes leads to the ignorance of the self. This moral thinking can be identified in the role of a mother and a wife.
- Post-conventional Level: This is the stage where the individual based on context-oriented reasoning is able to reach a balance between her own need of care and other's need to be cared.

The care perspective, on the other hand, begins with a conception of person as embedded in social relationships, in which he/she bears responsibilities to one another. Creating and preserving close connections between people and avoiding their suffering are emphasized. One's duty is to care about and promote people's well-being, and one's responsibility is to respond to the needs of individuals located in concrete, particular situations are thus placed at the highest ethical standard given their role in strengthening interpersonal relationships. This care perspective is expressed most prominently and most frequently by women as they are less likely than

males to justify moral decisions by the application of abstract moral rules. Rather they are more likely to carry out act of caring for others by virtue of their feelings of love and compassion.

Though there is no undisputed definition among care advocates about what constitutes 'caring for', but most care theorists agree that caring implies helping others to meet their basic needs, develop their basic capabilities, and avoid unwanted suffering and pain. Thus, caring may be defined as everything we do directly to help others (1) to satisfy their basic needs of life such as food, water, clothing, shelter, a clean environment, medical care, protection from harm and so on; (2) to develop and maintain their basic capabilities for sensation, emotion, mobility, speech, reason, imagination etc. and (3) to alleviate unwanted suffering and pain. The most general aim of caring is to help others to survive and function so that they take care of themselves and others and pursue some conception of the good life. Instances of caring include feeding the hungry, providing medication to the diseased person, teaching an infant to walk, providing shelter and so on.

Inception of Thinking About Moral Consideration of Non-Human Animals

There was a time when it was thought that non-human animals were beings that remained outside the category of moral consideration. Only human beings were thought to have moral standing. Various philosophers also shared the notion that animals did not deserve any moral standing. This was because they were of the notion that the capacity to reason had moral value and consequently those who possessed this capacity, were only eligible for moral consideration. This notion is evident in the thinking of philosophers like Aristotle, Descartes and Immanuel Kant.

As per Aristotle, "Nature is essentially a hierarchy in which those with less reasoning ability exist for the sake of those with more: Plants exist for the sake of animals, and brute beasts for the sake of man-domestic animals for his use and food, wild ones (or at any rate most of them) for food and other accessories of life, such as clothing and various tools." [1, p. 126b].

Similarly for 17th Century French Philosopher Rene Descartes, animals are not eligible for moral consideration because they are mere automata or

mechanisms. “A crying dog, Descartes maintained, is no different from a whining gear that needs oil.” [5, p. 29]. Just like Aristotle and Descartes treated animals as morally worthless entities with the sole purpose to advance the interests of humans, German philosopher Immanuel Kant too perceived animals in a similar vein. According to him, there was nothing wrong in using animals as a means to human ends given that animals lack rationality and therefore should be treated as “things” having worth merely as a means to the ends of rational beings.

However, thinking about animals as being devoid of moral status did not survive for long. The numerous scientific experiments carried out on animals revealed their similarity to humans in terms of physiology. This similarity brought to light that animals also suffer and thus should be entitled to some consideration. David Hume, recognizing the suffering of animals urged for a gentle usage to these creatures.

Though there were gradual changes in perspectives regarding animals, it was Jeremy Bentham who embarked upon the case for including animals within the category of moral beings. The English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who worked out the principle of Utilitarianism, stated that to degrade animals into a class of things on the basis of lacking intelligence is unsatisfactory. This is because human infants being less rational than many animals are still ascribed moral worth. Thus, to leave animals outside the scope of moral consideration on the basis of alleged irrationality is unjustified. All that is required for deciding who/what to be counted as a moral being is only his/her capacity of sentience. Sentience refers to the capacity to suffer or experience enjoyment and happiness. In other words, “the question is not, Can they reason? Nor, Can they talk? But, Can they suffer?” [9, p.173] that should be asked while entitling an entity as being worthy of moral standing. This capacity of sentience initially recognized by Bentham has gained enough popularity among those advocating against animal cruelty by virtue of their having moral status owing to their capacity of sentience.

Utilitarian Approach to Moral Status of Animals

Australian moral philosopher Peter Singer in his ground-breaking work *Animal Liberation* (1975) argues for moral consideration of non-human animals based on the utilitarian principle of equal consideration of interests. It is the principle of moral equality which asserts that the interests of every being who is affected by a particular act must be given equal consideration while calculating the consequences of the very action. It is through this principle that we are able to say all humans are equal irrespective of their factual or actual inequality (i.e. being unequal in terms of race, sex, sexual orientation, intellectual or physical abilities, and so on). It obliges mankind to cease them from exploiting any human or discounting his/her interests just because the person belongs to a category that they hold as undesirable. In addition, this principle also obliges mankind to take into account the interests of non-human animals. This is because non-human animals being sentient have interests in avoiding pain and therefore be given equal consideration in decision-making. Just as it is wrong to disregard the interests of human infants, disabled and so on who lack characteristics of a personhood, similarly it is wrong to disregard the interests of sentient animals which probably lack in terms of higher cognitive capacities equivalent to human. Thus, according to Singer, in order to decide the rightness of an action that affects the interests of both humans and animals, one should give equal weightage to the interests of both the species because an interest is an interest. In order to demonstrate the above-point, he puts forward the following instances:

- To decide whether using animals for testing cosmetics is right or wrong, one should impartially weigh the animal's interest in not suffering with human's interest in bodily beautification. Since the animal's interest in not suffering is more serious in comparison to trivial human interest in bodily beautification, the practice cannot be termed as a right one.
- On the other hand, if animal experimentation would directly lead to a cure of disease that affects many humans, then the practice can be termed as the right one.

Deontological Approach to Moral Status of Animals

The American philosopher Tom Regan in his monumental work entitled *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983) adopted the deontological stand to argue for moral consideration of animals. He endorses deontological stand by stating that animals are subjects-of-a-life which possess inherent value. Adopting Kantian approach, Regan asserts that all those who possess inherent value demands respect and therefore cannot be treated as things or means. Those individuals who have inherent value must be treated in ways that respect their inherent value. Respecting inherent value of a subject-of-a-life requires, for Regan, bestowing them with a basic right to respectful treatment. The right to respectful treatment is a natural right in the sense that it is neither an outcome of social contract nor something that is voluntarily given by humans to other humans and animals. This natural right is rather an outcome of subjects-of-a-life criterion. In other words, the rights exist because of the very nature of being subject-of-a-life. All subjects-of-a-life are equal holder of this right to basic treatment.

By including animals within the subjects-of-a-life category, he does away with the hierarchy that is widely assumed while distinguishing between a moral agent and moral patient. Moral agents refer to normal adult humans who are able to act morally and take moral decisions. Whereas human babies, mentally retarded, comatose patients, nonhuman animals, and so on that are not able to act morally fall under the category of moral patients. Unlike moral agents who are able to decide what is morally right or wrong, moral patients owing to their inability to act morally cannot be said to do any wrong. This limited moral capacity of moral patients places them at a level lower than what is occupied by moral agents. To be precise, a moral patient is seen as someone with a moral status below than that of moral agent. It is Regan, who by recognizing animals as being subjects-of-a-life, not only does away with their status of being only moral patients but also locates them on a moral status with a basic right of respectful treatment.

Care Ethics and Moral Status of Non-Human Animals

Utilitarian and deontological approaches to non-human animals as evident from Singer's and Regan's ethical theories respectively have remained dominant standards to determine their moral status and consequently their ethical treatment by society. However, afflicted by the male centered values of universality, these theories fail to take into account the nuances of relationship one shares with animals. It is difficult to take into account a wild animal's interest in not dying from hunger than that of a pet's interest in not being hungry. Likewise, it is more feasible to owe a right to basic treatment to an animal which shares an individual's life (such as pet dog, pet cat etc.) than to one which is being utilized as a research model in scientific laboratory remotely situated. In the absence of emotions such as love, care, sympathy etc. for some animals due to negligible interaction with them, it is rather very difficult to ascribe moral status to all animals based on either utilitarianism or deontological approach. This one-size-fits-all approach by the male-centric ethical theories aiming for abstract and universalizing norms neglects both the emotional attachment (care, compassion) and particularities involved while dealing with an ethical dilemma.

Rather it is feminist ethics of care that recognizes society as consisting of heterogeneity of human life-forms wherein each individual is embedded in social relationships with a moral duty to care about and responsibility to respond to needs of others. By placing emphasis on emotions, it provides an alternative way of looking at the moral status of non-human animals. Unlike utilitarian or rights theory that ground our obligations to animals in rights or utilitarian consideration, Care ethics grounds moral treatment towards animals in our sympathy for them.

It is not to say that care ethics explicitly prescribes extending caring treatment to other non-human animals as evident from Gilligan who has remained silent on the same. As per Care ethics, humans have a moral duty to care for one another by virtue of being dependent for survival and development on each other. As moral obligation to care is rooted in dependency, humans do not have moral obligation to care for animals that are not dependent upon humans. However, an obligation to care for animals is established when humans make them dependent by providing food

or shelter. Humans have a duty to provide at least a minimum of decent care to all animals that they have made dependent on them. It does not intend that one should care for animals as mothers (human and nonhuman) care for their infants but rather, it emphasizes on listening to animals, paying emotional attention and heeding to what they are telling. This act of caring humanizes mankind and makes them sensitive enough to acknowledge that animals also possess moral standing without taking recourse to abstract principles of Utilitarianism or Rights theory.

Conclusion

Feminist care tradition offers a superior foundation for animal ethics. Its emphasis on contextual sensitivity makes it a better parameter to ascribe moral worth to animals given the complexity of ethical situations involving animals. In other words, it is the flexibility that makes it a better approach for assessing animals' moral status as it does not limit itself to evaluating morality of act involving animals based merely on either moral rules (Deontology) or the consequences (Utilitarianism). By prioritizing relationships between humans and animals, it duly acknowledges the deep emotional bonds and mutual dependencies that exist. This perspective fosters a more compassionate and respectful treatment of animals. This emphasis laid on care and compassion in ethical deliberations involving animals is not only beneficial for fostering positive human-animal interaction but also is crucial to strengthen the fabric of society in the long run. In a nutshell, Care Ethics by promoting a just and compassionate world for all Beings emerges as a humane and holistic approach to animal ethics.

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