

Mark Coeckelbergh

Growing Moral Relations: Critique of Moral Status Ascription

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Whereas the main traditions of (modern Western) moral thought and practice have tended to recognise human individuals as both paradigm subjects and objects of moral standing, the emergence of 'intelligent' robots and new insights into the subjective life of non-human animals have called into question that assumption.

The starting point of this book lies within the up-and-running debate about the moral status of non-human animals, and a related discussion in the philosophy of technology. Coeckelbergh's aim is to show that the philosophical framing of these debates is misconceived. It presupposes a 'modern', scientific ontology of things, properties and 'contracts' that reflects a form of alienation from the inescapably social and relational grounding of our form of life. This pre-given relational grounding is a transcendental condition of our being able to make moral status ascriptions at all, and it sets limits to the sorts of things that can be said, thought, and, more importantly, done.

Coeckelbergh makes rather short work of the literature of animal rights, whether utilitarian or deontological. For him, both approaches make the assumption that we know what properties of beings confer moral status, and also can know in the case of non-humans whether those (especially mental) properties are instantiated. These knowledge-claims assume a god-like authority on the part of the moral philosopher, and imply an ontology of independent particulars that can be subjected to authoritative classification with moral status assigned accordingly. The scientific basis of this is such that Coeckelbergh speaks of 'scientific morality'. The alternative tradition of virtue ethics fares no better. Coeckelbergh (rightly, I think) suggests that a problem with virtue ethics is its difficulty in accounting for the moral intuition that the moral rightness of our treatment of another being must be 'at least partly related to something *about that entity*' (p. 32). I include this quotation, since it seems to me that Coeckelbergh's own approach is difficult to reconcile with this requirement.

Even communitarianism remains residually attached to the criticised 'modern' ontology of particulars and their properties, whereas Coeckelbergh advocates a thoroughgoing relational view of the conditions of possibility for moral status ascription. Approaches to this he finds in some philosophers of deep ecology, in Latour, in 'Benton's Marxism' and in the work of Tim Ingold. However, this takes him only so far. We must not think of 'relations' as themselves belonging to an ontology, but rather, following Heidegger, as transcendental preconditions of our thought, language and moral life. The transcendental argument reveals our ability to make moral status ascriptions as premised on our sharing a 'form of life' (Coeckelbergh adopts a phenomenological reading of Wittgenstein's use of this term) including both humans and non-humans. Natural, social, linguistic and spiritual dimensions of the form of life are, he says, conditions of possibility for moral status ascription, not (as in a scientific view) causal determinants.

It seems that the 'form of life', as a transcendental condition of possibility, cannot, in principle, be an object of positive knowledge or enquiry. The complex,

multidimensional ensemble of relations that preconditions and constrains what we can think or do has its own dynamic, moving and developing according to its own rhythms, and as our relations shift, so, already, do the moral aspects of these relations: we can only think new moral thoughts insofar as new moral relations have already emerged. Moral relations must be allowed to 'grow' slowly, we must learn to 'evolve' and 'adapt'. Philosophical attempts to address the problems of moral status ascription still have their place – but only as a 'ladder' to a life-philosophy according to which we live well and wisely without need of (modernist) philosophical discourse.

Coeckelbergh's philosophical view is a long way removed from my own, so I do hope I have represented it fairly. As he gives considerable – and generous – space to my own work, I might be forgiven for posing some problems that I see in his argument from my own perspective. First, I follow Russell's treatment of Bradley, in considering the relational view of the world to be incoherent. The concept of 'relation' is, it seems to me, entirely dependent for its sense on there being particulars of some sort that stand in relationship to one another. The properties of things do, indeed, change as they enter into and pass out of different sets of relationships with other things, but this can only be coherently stated on the assumption that those things/ beings retain their identity throughout. Grateful as I am for Coeckelbergh's sympathetic treatment of my argument in *Natural Relations*, I have to admit that it is less relational than he takes it to be. In my view grasshoppers and dogs and chimps are all morally considerable, but in different ways according to the different relations we can have with them. However, the sorts of relations it is possible to have with a grasshopper are rather different from those one can have with a dog – and that is not unconnected with the intrinsic properties and powers of the beings themselves.

As to science, which Coeckelbergh takes to be characteristic of a 'modern' mode of thought, I see no good reason for *a priori* rejection of the insights that research has given us. There is also a continuity between 'science' and common-sense thinking. It seems to me not only justifiable, but even morally required, that in trying to find a proper way of treating another being we should do our best to find out about it: how it sees the world, how it sees ourselves, what, for it, count as harms and what as sources of comfort or pleasure. We can do this by patiently observing, and even intervening experimentally. Coeckelbergh represents this as implying 'externality', but it seems to me that it is regularly the kind of thing that we do, and are right to do, within a shared form of life.

Finally, a word about 'Benton's Marxism'. Coeckelbergh goes a long way in agreement with the view he attributes to me, but on p. 148 takes his distance from Marxism. However, Coeckelbergh has already excused my own work from the decisive failings he attributes to Marxist modernism. It seems that the dividing line has to do with the idea of 'transformation' rather than relational metaphors such as 'growth', 'adaptation' and 'evolution'. Benton certainly takes great inspiration from Marx and other thinkers in the tradition, but would prefer to be discussed in terms of what he writes or says rather than packaged up as an exemplar of a particular way of thinking. On the human/ animal dichotomy and on aspects of Marx's political economy, Benton has written critically, just as Coeckelbergh takes his distance on important questions from Heidegger.

Through the book the concept of form of life seems to shift between a transcendental condition in the Kantian sense, through to an historically variable set of socio-natural conditions, with 'non-modern' forms of life as depicted by anthropologists given a rather central place. This may be what underlies Coeckelbergh's tendency to speak of 'our' form of life and the constraints it imposes on our thought and action as though 'we' all shared a common set of conditions of existence. If forms of life are, indeed, historically variable socio-natural systems, then why should we not attempt to depict them? In the case of the currently dominant 'form of life', experiences of socio-natural relations and opportunities for agency are highly differentiated, often contradictory, and open to diverse moral and practical responses. My own sociological account of human/ animal relations explored such contradictions and power relations. Pet dogs and cats, cattle and sheep in grazing regimes, chickens in intensive regimes, foxes hunted for pleasure, butterflies loved for their beauty, and birds fed through the winter out of compassion are all elements in 'our' form of life, but they establish contradictory sorts of moral experience, and attempts to change thought and practice face very different kinds of challenge in each case. Coeckelbergh's generalities of 'growth', 'evolution' and 'adaptation' simply do not address the urgency of addressing our deeply problematic relations to one another and to the rest of nature.

So, I disagree, but am grateful for the fascinating journey through some unfamiliar philosophical territory!

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