

Mark Coeckelbergh: Growing Moral Relations. Critique of Moral Status Ascription

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Why should we consider animals in our moral circle? This is an important question as we often strongly intervene in the lives of animals: We keep them as pets, breed them in factory farms, let them dance in circuses, hunt them, and destroy the vermin. However, many of these practices are strongly criticized because many people consider animals as members of our moral circle. This is often grounded by considerations based on consequentialist and deontological thinking that recognizes certain basic features of animals as morally relevant.

In his recent book “Growing Moral Relations. Critique of Moral Status Ascription,” Mark Coeckelbergh develops a very critical view on these main streams of animal ethics, especially on consequential and deontological thinking, and to a lesser extent also on virtue ethics. Instead of such lines of reasoning, he argues for a relational approach to the question why non-human animals have moral standing.

The book consists of two parts. The first part is more or less an introduction to the main arguments through a critical journey along main streams of ethical and political thinking. This part ends in what we may call an engaged, relational, and ecological view of moral standing of human and non-human entities, as he also considers artificial intelligence in his approach. The second part, taking nearly a double number of pages, explores meta-ethical questions with respect to language, bodies, technology, and religion.

Let me start with the first part. According to Coeckelbergh current main ethical thinking concerning the moral status of non-human beings can be outlined as follows: (1) Having property P is sufficient for moral status S; (2) All entities of

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class C have property P; (3) Entity E is of class C; and (4) as a conclusion: entity E has moral status S. As an example, we may read for property P: sentience, for class C: mammals, for entity E: my dog Bobby, and for moral status S: a right on care, turns this formal reasoning in: (1) Having sentience implies a right on care; (2) All mammals are sentient beings; (3) My dog Bobby is a mammal, and (4) as a conclusion, my dog Bobby has a right on care.

According to Coeckelbergh this kind of reasoning raises three questions:

- How can we know which property is sufficient for ascribing moral status?
- How can we establish that an entity has a particular property S?
- Can we to define sharp boundaries between kinds of entities?

According to the author current main streams of ethical thinking are more less trapped in a Platonic and Cartesian way of individual property thinking, which does not account for the experience that we often have not sufficient answers to these questions. His main critique is that we consider entities usually in isolation from other entities: “From a social-philosophical point of view, this approach is individualist, since moral status is ascribed to entities considered in isolation from other entities—including the observer. The modern scientist, who forces nature to reveal herself, is now accompanied by the moral scientist, who forces the entity to reveal its true moral status” (p. 17).

The moral scientist, the term refers to most deontological and consequentialist thinkers, is criticized by Coeckelbergh because he or she reduces ethics to a kind of mechanical thinking. What follows is a search towards a relational approach along the paths of contractarian thinking, virtue ethics, communitarian ethics, environmental ethics, the land ethics of Leopold, deep ecology, phenomenology, Marxism, constructivism, actor-network theory, and finally ecological anthropology.

Most of these perspectives or their main features are rejected during this dwelling trip because they appear to be property-based, too individualistic or, on the contrary, too collectivistic, too naturalistic, dualistic, or too anthropocentric. Finally, the authors finds his destination in the ecological anthropology of Tim Ingold. This author considers all entities as nodes in a field of relationships, which can only be understood in relational, ecological, and developmental or growth terms.

In accordance with Ingold, Coeckelbergh considers moral standing as the expression of active and developing relationships between entities. Instead of asking what property P counts for moral standing S, the new question is: “How should we relate to other beings as human beings who are *already part of the same world* as these non-human beings, who *experience* that world and those other beings and are *already engaged* in that world and stand already in relation to that world?” (p. 68). Coeckelbergh considers relations as basic conditions for moral standing but relations should not be seen as properties, but rather as a priori given in which we are already engaged, making possible the ascription of moral status to entities.

In the second part these ideas are deepened making use of contributions from several philosophical traditions as the philosophy of language, cognition philosophy, and phenomenology. Authors such as Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Dreyfus, and, again, Ingold play important roles in this part of the book. An important concept is “form of life,” that he takes over from Wittgenstein: “If he [Wittgenstein] says that

when we speak we must presuppose a shared background understanding, this ‘sharing’ should not be understood as a rational agreement among rational subjects. Rather we have grown into it by learning the use of words, by learning how to do things (with words and with things), by growing up in a world of things and people, by what Heidegger would call a being-in-the-world: before we speak, we are already engaged in the world and we already live in a language” (p. 117).

However Coeckelbergh aims to take a step further and states, “Having a form of life is not only having a culture but also about having a body” (p. 125). Accordingly, morality is not only a language game but also a body game. It “presupposes concrete flesh-and-blood interactions in which humans as mental-bodily-cultural beings respond and react to the entities they encounter. This insight also entails that our response, in so far as it is both ‘biological’ re-action *and* ‘cultural’ response, escapes our full intentional and individual control” (p. 126).

A form of life should be seen, according to the author, as an a priori condition of human existence. The cultural and biological aspects of a form of life enable us to recognize moral standing of other entities as part of ever developing or growing relationships. The idea of a “form of life” also includes technology, which is “not so much about (transforming) what is ‘naturally’ given, but about intervening in human and non-human processes of life and growth that are already going on and that are strongly related” (p. 149). This results in a comprehensive and a seamless web of relational growth: “the cultural, the technological, and the natural are all part of, and depend on, living, relational growth” (p. 151).

What does this mean, for example, for ethics? According to Coeckelbergh “We should replace an ethics of distance, of disengagement, with an ethics of immanence and engagement” (p. 155). Moreover: “True moral knowledge is *in* the skill and *in* the activity, in which good is experienced and done. In this sense there is no truth or good (nouns); there is only *true-ing* and *good-ing* (verbs)” (p. 163).

Coeckelbergh not only focuses on ethical theories. In Chapter 10 he applies his approach to religious and spiritual thinking and argues that the relational thinking has a lot of affinity with natural religions of pre-historic societies, that do not consider the world in hierarchic and historic perspective but rather as “cyclical and rhizomatic” “making conditions *now*, about continuous spiritual non-linear growth” (p. 171).

I think Coeckelbergh has given us an important contribution, not only on the moral standing of non-human entities, but also on moral practices by his emphasis on engagement in our relationships to other entities. But let me put some critical comments. Firstly, I think, especially the second part could have been shorter because the main insights are repeated several times, although from different angles. In addition, his arguments are often rather abstractive, although here and there, especially if he characterizes historic developments, it is comfortably concrete.

But, let me focus on the content. I must say I’m not completely convinced by the arguments. Let us look to his critique of the property-based approach of moral standing as expresses by the three questions outlined above. The first critique deals with the question whether current animal ethics theory can sufficiently explain why non-human animals have moral standing. In my view, both consequential and deontological theories aim to give an answer on this question. Although the answers

do not solve all issues and one may disagree with the assumptions of these theories, they do provide an answer to this question. However, Coeckelbergh does not pay any attention to the given answers but considers them simply as inadequate. Both the second and third questions concern the practical applicability of theories: how do we know an entity has a property S; and, can we really distinguish entities with such a property? In my view, that problem, i.e., how to turn a theory into practical terms, is the challenge of any theoretical approach in a practical context. Also the relational approach may suffer from this problem: how do we establish that there is a significant relationship towards an entity?

The author disqualifies any property-based ethical account in his book simply by saying that it is property-based. This is, in my view, not convincing. On the contrary, I think we should not throw away the well-known child with the bathing water. In my view a relation-based ethical approach should not replace property-based thinking as Coeckelbergh argues but rather compliment them. As an example, how should we otherwise be able to make a moral distinction between keeping tamed (as far as possible) lions and (domesticated) dogs in a circus without making use of properties that are based on their biological constitution? In the past, property based reasoning has contributed to the moral standing and moral liberation of suppressed entities as animals and slaves and can do that to other entities in the future. For example, the rights approach, which is so manifest in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and which is put forward by the author as an outstanding example of the property based approach, must be considered, in my view, as one of the most important political and ethical attainment of the last century.

So let us be careful dropping property-based approaches. I must say that the author himself cannot escape himself from property-based statements when he distinguishes humans from animals by referring to cognitive or emotional features. For example, animals have, in contrast to humans, no capacity for experiencing feelings as hope (p. 131). The author makes a good point in criticizing radically objectivizing attitudes of moral and natural scientists but that does not rule out the relevance of properties. In my view, properties should not be considered as ontological and invariable characterizations but rather as temporary stabilizations of nodes in an ever-changing moral and epistemological web.

Another critique I have is his plea for a radical replacement of an ethics of distance and disengagement with an ethics of immanence and engagement. According to the author: “The traditional distinction between know-how (practice) and know wherefore (values) collapses: value grows in practice. ... If we want to know the good life, we have to experiment, try out different possibilities. Our lack of ethical knowledge is not a lack of theory (insight) but a lack of experience. We need know-how. The problem is not what nature is, but how to handle it” (pp. 163–164). However, an approach that strongly stresses such an active experimentation and handling as a form of ethics may discover later on that it has failed to protect what then appears to be valuable but has gone for ever. Pre-caution, reflection, and taking distance may be very sensible. And, although the precautionary principle can be criticized from many perspectives, it may also prevent us of doing things that we will regret later on.

Nevertheless, in spite of these remarks I consider the book of Mark Coeckelbergh as an important contribution to animal ethics as it tries to develop alternative ways of thinking. I really hope that it may attract attention not only from academics but also from people that have to deal with issues of moral standing of non-human animals in their daily practice.