The Moral Community of Animals

There is a common conviction that espouses the adoption and recognition of moral equality among living beings not according to species boundaries but according to the similarity of cognitive abilities. While the former would be prone to speciesist prejudices, the latter has been considered by some, if not many, as a means to ascertain moral discrepancies “objectively” across species lines. In Animals and the Moral Community, Gary Steiner looks to rethink and overcome the narrow moral standpoint that comes from the “similar minds theory.” The result is nothing less than a continually surprising book that weaves its way through philosophy of mind, animal and environmental ethics, liberal political thought, and Continental philosophy. Steiner ends up with a revised moral framework, under the name of “cosmic holism,” that situates human and nonhuman animals within a broad moral community affiliated by kinship and mutual belonging on the earth.

Steiner’s primary aim in this book is to dispel two prevalent prejudices that have been held against animals: “that animals are essentially ‘dumb’ creatures and that their putatively inferior cognitive abilities confer on them an inferior moral status vis-à-vis human beings” (p. 61). But rather than replacing these prejudices in favor of their opposites—i.e., to posit that animals are rational and have an equal moral status—Steiner proposes another alternative. His argument is that the tradition has been wrong to disavow animal cognition and a corresponding subjective life, but that it would be just as wrong to attribute “complex thought, self-reflective awareness, and moral agency” (p. 61) to nonhuman animals. It is a middle position that he wishes to sketch out, one that balances both animal thought and a credible moral position, while not claiming an absolute similarity among all human and nonhuman animals.

The first part of the book, therefore, is a review of, and commentary on, the arguments both for and against rationality in animals. The second part is a discussion surrounding sentience as a more legitimate criterion for moral kinship. Steiner does not, however, simply repeat the dismissal of rationality in favor of sentience as the moral criteria in the equal consideration of nonhuman animals. Rather, Steiner argues both sides of the issue: that nonhuman animals have limited cognitive abilities (he claims that most lack the capacity for abstract thought), but instead of excusing a moral hierarchy on this basis, he projects a vision of a living community wherein membership is founded upon a natural affinity and sense of justice among sentient beings.

Steiner deals with the first issue—animal cognition—by surveying a wide variety of notable thinkers on animal cognition, and by employing a number of examples to illustrate the arguments at stake both for and against animal rationality. By the end, Steiner constructs
a plausible and well-intentioned narrative that defends nonhuman animals as “intelligent creatures with subjective states of awareness” (p. 88), albeit without the capacity for abstract reasoning (pp. 67, 89). We are a long way from the traditional positions that would have us believe that nonhuman animals are no more than sophisticated machines (e.g., Descartes), or even from more recent discussions that describe animal behavior as simple, mindless actions (e.g., behaviorism). For most theorists today, including the most skeptical among them, a great number of animal species experience subjective life of one kind or another, but it is precisely the kind and degree of such experiences that are in question here. One problem in the attribution of subjective experience, Steiner warns, is that many succumb to the excesses of anthropocentrism in the attempt to attribute or deny rational thought.

It would be difficult to summarize all the theories that Steiner surveys, since they cut across a number of philosophical histories, both analytic and Continental, and Steiner himself treats them quite quickly and matter-of-factly. The majority of the views hinge, however, on the presence or absence of language and whether mental representations (ideas, beliefs, desires, etc.) are dependent upon linguistic abilities. The reason that linguistic ability so often proves to be a definitive trait is that, as Steiner asserts, it suggests an ability to hold conceptual content independent from perceptual experiences. In other words, the experiences that nonhuman animals have may be entirely linked to complex perceptual associations (e.g., a dog believes it will pass the house down the lane because of the associations the dog has had with this house in the past) and not the result of conceptual abstractions suggesting a sense of objectivity (e.g., the dog is unable to contemplate the house as that house independent of context). The mental representations of nonhuman animals, according to this line of thought, are all perceptually based and cannot be divorced from experience in the way that mathematical or abstract reasoning might be said to be.

Yet, even if nonhuman animals are incapable of reasoning abstractly, Steiner claims that “[m]y view is that perceptual experience… is sufficient, although perhaps not necessary, for moral status” (p. 91). The second half of his book, then, is an elaboration and defense of the inclusion of nonhuman animals within a moral community that has, within the history of ethical and political philosophy, tended to include only human lives. Steiner bases his claim to moral obligation on a reinterpretation of the Stoic notion of “oikeiosis (kinship or belonging)”: the idea that kinship within a moral community is not limited to rational beings alone but involves a more inclusive sense of membership within a “holistic cosmology” (p. 92). To this end, he offers a review of the liberal political tradition, both classical (Locke, Kant, Mill) and contemporary (Regan, Rawls), that addresses questions of equality, justice, rights, and obligations.

Throughout this clear and informative review, Steiner attempts to draw the issue away from the humanist bias that favors “social justice” toward one that he calls “cosmic justice” (p. 105). Why? Because despite the great advances of the liberalist tradition, its one great flaw has been its anthropocentric perspective and consequent neglect of nonrational agents. Steiner claims that the “affective roots of a robust animal ethic are to be established through the development of a cosmic holism that sees human beings as part of a larger natural environment in which we have fundamental obligations toward other sentient beings” (p. 114). The affective roots of which he speaks are those of a “felt” kinship with other living beings, not the rational contemplation and explanation of them. The remaining parts of the book are an elaboration of the moral parity among sentient beings within the framework of cosmic holism. Steiner presents a lucid revision of what it means to be cosmopolitan in a...