

Featured article

God's Chosen Species?

What Aristotle and Darwin can teach us about nonhuman animals.

by Dr Colette Sciberras

Everyday morality with regards to animals is flawed, and the problem may lie with unexamined assumptions that underlie our beliefs about ourselves and about nature. If, as a society, we are to claim any degree of moral integrity, we urgently need to re-think our treatment of nonhuman others. In other words, we need to expand our moral circle, in the same way that humans have previously widened their moral consideration to include others, for instance, with the abolition of slavery and the declaration of human rights.

I base my claims on the findings and theories of evolutionary science, and on an ancient view of nature which perhaps still pervades human consciousness - that of the Scala Naturae - as it appears in Aristotle. I argue that the contrast between Aristotle and Darwin is not as great as might be imagined. Aristotle's views lend support to the idea that nonhuman beings have a good of their own written into their very natures (entelécheia). Yet his depiction of living creatures as organic - i.e. as tools for the soul - might have paved the way for the pervasive belief that nonhuman living creatures are there to serve human needs.

Since we have established, scientifically, many relevant similarities between humans and other animals - since we can agree with Aristotle that we share most functions of soul, mind, and life (psūchē) with them - especially, the capacity to feel pain, for self-directed movement, to form social bonds and groups, and for at least some precursors of thought and language - we can conclude that they have a good of their own, independent of any use humans might make of them. Our failure to take their interests into account, therefore, and our allowing them to be treated in ways we would never allow our pets to be treated, and our endorsement of the miserable lives that some animals lead based on nothing more than the fact that they are cows, pigs, or chickens is analogous to racism and sexism.

*This short article was submitted by **Dr Colette Sciberras** following her talk at Philosophy Sharing's monthly public meeting held on 4 June 2014*