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European Philosophy and Its Negative Impact on the Treatment of Animals

The purpose of my article is to show the negative impact of the selected philosophical concepts on the relationship between man and animal. I have concentrated on the views of Aristotle, René Descartes, and John Rawls. These are the originators of three concepts which in different eras (antiquity, modernity, the contemporary times) had a decisive influence on man's instrumental treatment of animals. I believe that what characterises these philosophical positions is a biased selection of the criteria indicating a qualitative difference in the moral status of man and animals, and that they analyse the issue in the light of a pre-conceived conclusion. The authors selectively choose such premises that are to confirm the validity of the conclusions, at the same time ignoring those that could lead to a different conclusion. The *ad hoc* conclusion can be only one: there are no common features of man and animals, which could require equal treatment of the latter in the moral sphere. In addition, animals do not have any special attributes that would earn them moral respect.

We shall begin our consideration with Aristotelianism, which – through Thomism and neo-Thomism – had an impact on contemporary mentality. Nowadays, animals are regarded as a piece of man's assets, as livestock, the value of which is determined by the degree of usefulness and servitude. The only characteristic that distinguishes animals from other assets is the fact that they are alive. In this pattern of thought, confronting the interests of the owners of the assets, i.e. mankind, with the interests of the assets themselves dooms animals to failure. After all, mankind's living assets have no morally relevant interests. It is Aristotelianism that created a theoretical basis for assigning animals to the category of man's property and justified the postulate that so-called necessary

suffering may be inflicted on animals. Where the interests of the assets are not identical with the interests of their owners, it is the primacy of human interests that allows suffering to be inflicted on animals in the name of particularistic human goals. In practice, however, any pain inflicted on an animal can be justified by the argument of so-called necessary suffering¹.

The Aristotelian theory demands unequal treatment of dissimilar living entities; after all, justice means rendering that which is due. Thus, the living entities whose ontic structure is more perfect than others deserve a better life and better treatment than other, less perfect ones. It is in the name of justice that we should not treat equally those beings that differ from us because they lack such a characteristic as rationality. Let us remember that Aristotle distinguished three kinds of souls: vegetative, sensitive, and rational², which differ in the ontological and axiological sense, and are responsible for different functions of the living organism. The vegetative soul decides about nutrition, growth, and reproduction. The sensitive soul is responsible for the presence of desires and the functioning of the senses. The characteristic of the most perfect soul – the rational soul – is thinking, which pertains only to man. It should be noted that there is no difference of degree between souls, but of quality. Thus, human beings and animals have different natures. Owing to his rational soul, man participates in the intellectual sphere, while the animal participates only in the sensual one, because it is devoid of reason by its very nature³. Hence, in comparison with man, all living beings are like dwarfs, because only man has the ability to think. His soul has all the lower abilities, but is enriched with that which is unique – reason⁴. Although there is indeed a biological continuity between man and other organisms, it does not cover rationality. This characteristic is unique and applies only to the representatives of mankind.

Though Aristotle clearly distinguished animals from things, he attributed to them a relatively low position in the hierarchy of beings. The instrumental way of treating animals that he postulated should be interpreted as a special variant of the master–slave relationship. After all, while a slave is a living tool endowed with speech, an animal is a living tool deprived of speech. Let us remember that Aristotle praised the so-called natural slavery, resulting from the hierarchy of beings. There are living entities that are predestined to a subservient role due to their lack, or loss, of the rational element. This group includes some men and all the animals. Thus, slavery as servitude to an ontically higher being is fully justified. Without a rational soul, a slave is not a man, and cannot be treated in the same manner and with the same respect as a rational man. He is closer to an animal, which can be owned by man due to the lack of rationality. Thus,

¹ G. FRANCIONE: *Introduction to Animal Rights*. Philadelphia 2000, p. 25.

² ARISTOTLE: *O duszy*. Trans. P. SIWEK. Warszawa 1988, p. 74.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

⁴ ARISTOTLE: *Etyka nikomachejska*. Trans. D. GROMSKA. Warszawa 1982, pp. 20–21.

there are people who naturally deserve more, and those who can be exploited to promote the survival and development of the former⁵. It should be added that the Aristotelian hierarchy of beings will result in the depreciation not only of animals, but also of women and blacks because of their alleged reduced ability to use reason. After all, one of the most frequently cited arguments in favour of the inferiority of the black race was the meagre intellectual ability of its representatives, allegedly caused by biologically conditioned cerebral hypoxia. On the other hand, in the case of women, the differences in anatomy were thought to be the foundation of their intellectual inferiority to men and their consequent exclusion from advanced education⁶.

Let us now reflect on the theory of René Descartes, which radically separates the human world from the animal one, since man participates in the spiritual realm, and the plants and animals are machines without any mental life. The entire Cartesian philosophy regarding the nature of animals serves the purpose of justifying their objectified and cruel treatment. As a theory, it has no equal in European culture. Admittedly, the Aristotelian concept depreciated animals, reducing their status to the level of slaves, but at the same time it acknowledged the special value of all living beings. Moreover, in Aristotelian theory the thesis that animals do not have a rational soul was not followed by the conclusion that they have no soul at all. Aristotle saw animals as corporeal and spiritual beings, although their spirituality in the ontological sense was of a lower order. He allowed the killing and the use of animals, but his theory did not promote cruelty to non-human beings. In turn, according to Descartes, animals are ontologically reducible to objects. They are not aware of anything, and they do not experience hunger, desire, fear, pleasure, or pain. They are like well-functioning clocks that take the time better than men, but do not have that which is purely human – consciousness⁷. Admittedly, Descartes recognised the presence of certain sensations in animals, such as for instance the sense of sight, but it was associated solely with the efficient functioning of their biological organs⁸. In his opinion, even if these creatures have some sensory receptors that react to external stimuli, the activity takes place without the participation of consciousness. Although animals have certain feelings, which are only a reaction of bodily sense organs to external factors, it does not mean that they are beings conscious of these sensations. Thereby, a dog with a broken leg – even if it is crying – is not aware of its pain, and its cry is equivalent to the squeaking of a faulty mechanism or the noise that comes from e.g. a broken spring. Cartesian scientists contributed to the torture of animals and mocked those who sympathised with suffering

⁵ T. REGAN: *Defending Animal Rights*. Urbana, Chicago 2001, p. 7.

⁶ *Biological Women: The Convenient Myth*. Eds. R. HUBBARD, M.S. HENIFIN, B. FRIED. Cambridge 1982, p. 135.

⁷ R. DESCARTES: *Rozprawa o metodzie*. Trans. W. WOJCIECHOWSKA. Warszawa 1988, p. 68.

⁸ T. REGAN: *The Case for Animal Rights*. Los Angeles 1983, p. 3.

beings⁹. Doctors and physiologists nailed the paws of living dogs to operating tables to perform vivisection for purposes as trivial as e.g. the observation of blood circulation in the body. Was Descartes a madman? According to Tom Regan – a leading representative of the animal rights movement – the Cartesian concept is not the product of a disturbed mind¹⁰. We should not ignore and reject it for emotional reasons. Descartes knew the common sense position that recognises the existence of animal consciousness, and kept a dog himself, which he reportedly did not hurt. Despite this fact, he treated the belief that animals are conscious beings as a superstition, which we are used to from childhood¹¹. Let us consider the behaviour of a dog, jumping and wagging its tail at the sight of its caretaker, thus demonstrating its joy. Do Descartes and his followers deny what we see? No. Their denial is not about facts, but the methodological assumption that the dog should be attributed awareness that would explain its behaviour. Descartes does not question the behaviour of the dog, but denies that the animal is aware of anything. Thus, the essence of the Cartesian thinking is the peculiar interpretation of the facts relating to the behaviour of animals, which brings these behaviours down exclusively to the stimulus–response pattern.

Why did Descartes – an outstanding mathematician, philosopher, and naturalist – build a theory contrary to common sense, asks Regan. First of all, for Descartes the rationalist, appealing to common sense was not a guarantee of truthfulness. Secondly, Descartes recognised the omniscient and omnipotent will of God as the cause of all human actions and sensations. For example, the nail that stuck in one's foot is not the cause of one's sensation of pain, and neither is one's decision the reason why one gets up in the morning. If we experience any sensations, be it negative or positive, it is not we who are their originators, but God – the cosmic operator acting between bodies and minds. Thirdly, Descartes was a dualist, who separated the existence of bodies and souls (and respectively minds). He believed that the soul does not have any physical properties; it is immaterial and spaceless. Its attribute is thought, whereas bodies have physical characteristics only. Bodies are devoid of thought and consciousness. Human bodies are similar to those of animals, the only difference being that they are the only ones mysteriously combined with the soul. Therefore, only the human body feels pain, because the presence of the soul makes feeling it possible. Animals, in turn, cannot feel pain because their bodies are not combined with the spiritual element. Thus, their cries, seizures, convulsions are only mechanical reactions to external stimuli, responses devoid of feeling. Finally, according to Descartes, if indeed it turned out that animals are actually conscious beings – and not only animated machines – we should nevertheless demonstrate them as beings not

⁹ L. ROSENFELD: *From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine: Animal Soul in French Letters from Descartes to La Mettrie*. New York 1968, p. 54.

¹⁰ T. REGAN: *The Case for Animal Rights*, p. 5.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

conscious of anything. It is because their souls would then have to be immortal, like the souls of men. In his *Letter to the Marquis of Newcastle*, Descartes says that if we consider one particular animal as a conscious being, and therefore an immortal one, then there are no sufficient grounds to limit ourselves to this single case. Thus, one would have to accept the existence of an immortal soul in each animal. This would lead to an unacceptable conclusion that, for instance, the soul of an oyster has the same ontological status as the human soul¹².

It would seem that nowadays such considerations are of interest only to historians of philosophy. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Modern neo-Cartesianism is becoming more and more prominent, and it is used as a theoretical basis for the admissibility of painful experiments involving animals. Its current representatives are philosophers such as Peter Carruthers, Robert G. Frey, Donald Davidson, and Peter Harrison. Like Descartes, they argue that animals have no consciousness. These philosophers ignore the results of recent neurological research, according to which even people with damaged brains have the so-called cortical consciousness associated with a sense of oneself in the present. *A fortiori*, neurologically healthy animals (mammals and birds) must at least possess such kind of awareness.

The crowning argument of all neo-Cartesians is the thesis introduced by Descartes that only beings that have mastered a verbal language are entitled to the ascription of consciousness. Let us recall that Descartes advocated carrying out the so-called test of language to answer the question whether a living being is aware of its own experience. In his view, living beings that cannot speak a verbal language do not think, because you cannot think beyond language; if they do not think, these beings cannot be aware of anything, even their own pain. Thus, with the lack of awareness, pain is imperceptible. Modern neo-Cartesian philosophers base their reasoning on the Cartesian assumption of a necessary connection between consciousness and a verbal language. Moreover, in their opinion, if for instance a dog cannot use a verbal language, much less can it have convictions regarding the truth or falsity of its statements. That is because the condition for having such beliefs is the additional ability to understand the relationship between the language and the actual states of affairs. A dog does not have this ability, and therefore, even if it is beaten, it does not demonstrate the desire not to be beaten¹³. This supposedly proves not only that the dog is unaware of its own desires and interests, but also that it does not have any desires and interests, since the presence of these internal states is subject to having convictions about the truth or falsity of sentences describing these states. Let us take a specific example: if someone touches your skin with a lighted candle

¹² R. DESCARTES: *Letter to the Marquess of Newcastle*. In: *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*. Eds. T. REGAN, P. SINGER. New Jersey 1989, p. 16.

¹³ R.G. FREY: *Interests and Rights. The Case Against Animals*. Oxford 1980, p. 170.

while you are asleep, i.e. in an unconscious state, it will cause pain and you will wake up. No doubt anyone will wish to avoid the physical suffering and will want the offender to stop inflicting the pain. Will the desire which we feel at that moment have any relation to the conviction that the sentence “I’m suffering” is true or false¹⁴? In addition, many people (infants, the mentally ill, people with brain damage) have no convictions whatsoever about the truth or falsity of their statements, though in their case no one challenges the existence of at least the so-called experiential awareness. Thus, if the existence of consciousness depends on verbal language skills, we should hold that children are not aware of anything before they learn to speak. If a child who does not speak is unaware of any state of affairs, it is also unaware of the sounds, lights, or tactile sensations. How, then, can they learn the basics of the language, or anything else? Hence, consciousness in its rudimentary form must be prior to the language. Equating verbal language with consciousness makes it impossible to explain the process of learning the language.

Let us move on to the third concept, developed by John Rawls; nowadays, it is one of the most influential political and ethical theories. Why does so-called contractualism result in the admissibility of exploiting animals and treating them instrumentally? First of all, man has no direct moral obligations towards non-human beings. Direct responsibilities concern only men, and the treatment of animals should be determined by concern for human interests. Supporters of contractualism represent morality as a contract concluded by men on a voluntary basis. Morality is a universal agreement to limit one’s own freedom, arising from the conviction that this restriction serves the interests of all participants in the agreement, including one’s own. According to this theory, men are motivated to act by the natural impulses of sympathy and compassion. Everyone is selfish and pursues their own benefit, although this selfishness has a rationalised character.

Let us remember that there are two versions of contractual thinking. The first includes the theories of Thomas Hobbes and Jan Narveson¹⁵, while John Rawls is representative of the other one. There is a significant difference between these two versions. In the first case, morality is interpreted as the consequence of a debate in which each participant is aware of their own interests, needs, and desires. The purpose of the social agreement and moral rules is to protect men against other men, who in their limitless freedom pose a threat to others. Such an understanding of the contract excludes animals from the realm of moral life. These beings, due to the lack of the ability to verbally express their needs and thus to negotiate, cannot participate in a collective debate. Thus, their protection is admissible only if it is in the interest of men – the participants in the contract.

¹⁴ G. FRANCIONE: *Introduction to Animal Rights*, p. 106.

¹⁵ J. NARVESON: *Animal Rights. The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1977, p. 177.

In the second version, the one by John Rawls, morality is a set of rules of conduct, to which all participants of the debate would agree, having imagined that they had forgotten about their interests, social status, economic level, occupation, etc. Let us remember that Rawls proposes the adoption of a hypothetical situation in which all participants in the social contract are subject to the so-called veil of ignorance, and lose the knowledge of both their own and other people's preferences, goals, dispositions, or interests¹⁶. Thus, all are characterised by complete ignorance about their own, and others', social status. No one knows either their own or others' abilities, intelligence, sexual orientation, level of affluence. Thus, no one can be biased in promoting and supporting their own interests, or the interests of others. Because of this ignorance, everybody meets the requirement of impartiality. Let us emphasise that the participants in the contract forget their sex, race, nationality, profession, and how big their bank account is, but they remember that they are human beings. In this case, membership in mankind is beyond doubt. No one needs ask the question: "What if I were born an animal? How would I like to be treated then?" Since the participants in the contract are confident that they would come into the world as human beings, and there is no possibility of them being born as animals, they will consent to different ways of treating other people and animals. Does contractualism deny animals the status of beings capable of suffering and aware of their feelings? No. Animals are seen as living beings capable of feeling pain, but this results in no conclusion that would entail a moral duty towards them. Supporters of contractualism recognise the existence of the suffering of non-human beings, but also degrade the importance of this fact in the case of forming man's moral attitudes.

Let us summarise our reflections: Aristotelianism, Cartesianism, and contractualism are three philosophical currents typical of European culture, which preserved the conservative postulate of human domination over animals. Traditional European thinking was and still is anthropocentric, according to which only humans have the right to pursue their own ends, while animals should be treated as means to achieve these goals. The idea of domination implies violence, arrogance, aggression, and the suffering of the innocent.

Abstrakt

Negatywny wpływ europejskiej filozofii na sposób traktowania zwierząt

W artykule analizuję poglądy Arystotelesa, Kartezjusza oraz Johna Rawlsa dotyczące moralnego statusu istot pozaludzkich i ukazuję ich negatywny wpływ na kształtowanie relacji człowiek – zwierzę w kulturze europejskiej. Celem mojego rozumowania jest wykazanie, że każde z tych stanowisk obciążone jest doбором subiektywnych kryteriów w jakościowym odróżnieniu moralnego statusu ludzi od innych zwierząt oraz wykorzystaniem takich przesłanek, które udowodnią uprzednio za-

¹⁶ J. RAWLS: Justice as Fairness. *Philosophical Review*, vol. 67, no. 2, 1958, p. 164–194.

łożony wniosek. Stanowisko tych trzech filozofów łączy wspólna konkluzja. Jest nią przekonanie o braku wystarczających podstaw do równego traktowania ludzi i istot pozaludzkich w sferze życia moralnego.

Słowa kluczowe:

etyka, prawa zwierząt, moralność, Arystoteles, Kartezjusz, Rawls

Абстракт

Негативное влияние европейской философии
на способ трактовки животных

В статье анализируются взгляды Аристотеля, Рене Декарта и Джона Ролза, касающиеся нравственного статуса животных, а также показывается негативное влияние их идей в этой области на формирование отношений человек – животное в европейской культуре. Цель статьи заключается в том, чтобы обратить внимание на то, что каждая из этих позиций характеризуется подборкой субъективных критериев для качественного разграничения нравственного статуса людей от иных живых существ, а также использует такие предпосылки, которые докажут предрешенный вывод. Концепции всех трех философов объединяет общее умозаключение. Оно выражает убеждение об отсутствии необходимых оснований для равной трактовки людей и животных в области нравственной жизни.

Ключевые слова:

этика, права животных, нравственность, Аристотель, Декарт, Ролз