

Mark Rowlands

Can Animals be Moral?

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Mark Rowlands' *Can Animals be Moral?* is an important and largely persuasive argument for the claim that animals are moral subjects. A 'moral subject,' as Rowlands uses the term, is neither simply a moral patient (an object of moral concern) nor a full-blown moral agent (a subject capable of being held responsible for its actions). Moral subjects, rather, are those beings that act for moral reasons.

Can Animals be Moral? is a sustained argument aimed to establish, against philosophical orthodoxy, that animals meet this definition—that they do, in fact, act for moral reasons. There is much detailed argument in the book, and much of it is persuasive. The bare outlines of the argument, however, can be put as follows:

1. It makes sense to attribute emotions to animals. "Emotions, if they are legitimate, track true evaluative propositions, but they do not require that the subject of an emotion entertain, or even be capable of entertaining, such a proposition" (67).
2. Acting on moral emotions—emotions with evaluative moral content—is a sufficient condition for acting for moral reasons.
3. One can be a moral subject without also being a moral agent—that is, one can act for moral reasons even if one cannot be held responsible for one's actions.
4. Thus, even though animals cannot be held responsible for their actions, they still meet the definition of moral subjects: they have moral emotions, and act on the basis of these. This thesis does not require the attribution of any mental gymnastics to animals—it is sufficient that moral emotions track true evaluative propositions. Neither animals nor humans need to *entertain* such propositions for their corresponding moral emotions to be *moral reasons*.

This summary of the argument, in certain respects, leaves out some of the most interesting argumentation Rowlands provides. Indeed, much of the book is devoted to spelling out why we ought to accept (3) despite some powerful arguments against it. There is a common assumption that the ability to reflect on our motivations is a prerequisite for being able to *alter* them, and that, moreover, the capacity to alter our motivations is required before we say that we ought to have some motivations rather than others. Moreover, both Kant and Aristotle make the capacity to reflect on our moral emotions and motivations a necessary component for calling any reasons for action 'moral' (Rowlands calls this 'the reflection condition'). In order to make the case that animals can be moral subjects, Rowlands must thus argue either that animals can engage in such reflection (an implausible view), or that such reflection is not in fact required for moral subjecthood. To put the point another way: Rowlands must show that being a moral subject does not require being a moral agent.

On the traditional view, moral agency is constituted by the ability to reflect on, and subsequently evaluate and alter, our moral motivations. The ability to alter our motivations (via critical analysis of them) is meant to ground the normativity of these motivations (if I cannot

change my motivations, in virtue of what are they normative?). In this respect, one gets normativity out of moral agency itself—the capacity to reflect on and alter one’s motivations. Without this ability, the traditional view runs, moral subjecthood is itself impossible: one can only be a moral subject if one’s motivations have normative force. One’s motivations can have normative force only if it is possible to change them. To make his case, Rowlands must show that there are plausible rivals to the traditional view—and hence that being a moral subject does not require being a moral agent.

Rowlands skillfully uses thought-experiments involving an agent incapable of reflecting on his motivations to bring out the difference between moral agents and moral subjects. At the heart of this view, Rowlands contends, is the idea of control. The implicit assumption is that the ability to reflect on our motivations can thereby provide us with control over them. It is this move—what Rowlands calls the ‘miracle-of-the-meta’—that is unwarranted. Our ability to critically examine our moral reasons may well be motivated by further dispositions that also require critical scrutiny. ‘Going meta’ thus does not provide us with anything like a normative magic bullet. As Rowlands explains: “The appeal to metacognition attempts to explain the normativity of our emotions by way of our control over them. This overlooks the fact that the very issue of control that arises at the level of motivations is also going to be replicated at the...level of our evaluation of those motivations” (186).

If the appeal to reflection does not provide us with control, then such an appeal cannot be used to show that being a moral agent is a necessary condition for being a moral subject. This move, however, raises several issues in its wake. First, if we cannot explain normativity by an appeal to metacognition (and the freedom traditionally associated with it), we require an alternative account of normativity. Second, if metacognition does not provide us with control, we must determine what function (if any) metacognition has in the moral sphere. Third, if we reject the ‘reflection condition,’ what is the difference between human moral action and animal moral action?

These questions are in fact questions that Rowlands begins to answer at the end of *Can Animals be Moral?* Normativity, in brief, can be explained in terms of participation in practices, where ‘practices’ are understood in a way that can include the activities of social animals. In a roughly Wittgensteinian vein, we learn by example how to navigate a moral world—how to respond to the emotional distress around us, what emotions are appropriate or inappropriate, and so on. While metacognition does not provide us with control in one sense of the term, it nevertheless still *does* mark something distinct about human moral cognition: we possess an understanding of our motivations that many other animals seem to lack, and this understanding may well make something like moral progress possible.

Rowlands only begins to provide answers to such questions. There is certainly much more to be said. If there is a criticism to be made of the book, it seems to me, it is here: the account provided of normativity and agency could be much more developed. For the purposes of the argument of the book, however, Rowlands provides an account of why separating moral agency from moral subjecthood need not eliminate our ability to explain normativity (there are rival

accounts of normativity available). Likewise, we can still distinguish between human and animal moral action (one is characterized by understanding, the other is not). Finally, we can preserve the idea that moral reflection is significant (even if we must alter our account of *why* it is significant).

How clean is the line between moral subjects and moral agents—between humans and animals? Rowlands acknowledges, at the end of the book, that “we may think of the distinction between a (mere) moral subject and a moral agent as one of degree rather than kind” (241). As one’s ability to understand one’s own action increases, one moves toward moral agency—towards the ability to be held responsible for one’s actions. The primary reason given for the link between understanding and responsibility lies in a core feature of the folk notion of responsibility: “a person should not be blamed for an action if she did not know what she was doing” (240).

Of course, this is only *one* notion of responsibility in our folk thinking about moral matters. We *do* hold persons responsible for actions they do not understand, or which they did not understand, or which they did not intend. There is an obvious difference between ‘being responsible for x’ and ‘taking responsibility for x.’ Perhaps human animals are the only creatures capable of the latter, but it is hard to see why they would be the only animals capable of the former. If awareness can create responsibility, it is much easier to see how in the latter sense than in the former. If I am made aware of the consequences of my actions, I can acknowledge my responsibility. The function of understanding here is obvious. But by what means, for example, would simply understanding *that* my actions caused x thereby make me responsible for x if I am *not* responsible *without* this understanding? Is the folk intuition Rowlands cites one worth preserving? I have my doubts. One could simply stipulate that moral responsibility (as opposed to causal responsibility) is constituted by an understanding of the actions one engages in. That may be correct, but stipulating and justifying are rather different discursive undertakings. Despite the fact that an appeal to understanding does manage to distinguish humans from other animals, I’m not convinced that it explains the idea of moral responsibility. More argument is required. If we cannot supply said argument, we may well wind up saying that some animals—other than the garden variety human ones—are moral agents as well (a view I do not want to rule out).

I profited a good deal from Rowlands’ book. The writing is as clear and as good-humored as we’ve come to expect from this author. The argumentation is largely compelling, and always stimulating. I have mentioned a couple of places where I think there is more to be said, but this modest criticism should not detract from the significant philosophical advances Rowlands makes. Might someone still insist that animals are not moral subjects after reading Rowlands’ book? The answer to that seems obvious. For those of us convinced that Rowlands has got the right idea—animals are indeed moral subjects—it’s reassuring to know that such nay-sayers will have plenty to chew on.

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