Darwin and the Animals

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Rachels, James, Created From Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, 256 pp., $30.00

These two recent books from Oxford are both concerned with the relevance of Darwinism for the moral status of animals. Of the two, the work by Rachels is by far the more ambitious. He sees in Darwinism the basis for revolutionizing the foundations of moral reasoning. Rodd’s book is more narrowly drawn and only tangentially about Darwinism per se. Her focus is on how our biological understanding of the kinship between humans and animals should shape our moral stance towards animals. Of course, since Darwin, human beings are one among the animals. However, in the name of clarity I shall use the term “animal” to mean “non-human animal” unless the context makes it clear that humans are meant as well.

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I begin with a discussion of Rodd’s book. She seeks to incorporate a wider concern for the welfare of animals within a conventional moral framework. The book is at once a brief for animal rights and the proper treatment of animals as well as a critique of sociobiological theories that suggest that animals have no special moral standing. The argument in the book rests on some controversial assumptions about the moral status of animals. In order of least controversial to most, they include (1) that animals can suffer; (2) that animals have desires and interests; (3) that animals can make choices; (4) that animals have rights; and (5) that animals can be said to enter into (implicit) contracts with human beings. This is a tangled web of philosophical themes. Rodd’s arguments on these questions will not convince the unconverted.
Rather they explore the implications of adopting these assumptions. Those interested in pursuing the philosophical niceties underlying these issues are advised to consult R. G. Frey’s *Interest and Rights: The Case Against Animals* or Michael P. T. Leahy’s *Against Liberation: Putting Animals in Perspective* (against) or Tom Regan’s *The Case for Animal Rights* or S. Sapontzis’s *Morals, Reason and Animals* (for). The bottom line of Rodd’s analysis is the construction of a case for changing human attitudes towards animals and their suffering. Her concern is to show how a proper appreciation of our kinship with animals should lead us to include them along with our fellow human beings in an extended moral community. Along the way she makes a number of cogent points about animal welfare and human responsibility which deserve close attention. Rodd points out, for instance, that animal rights movements should not be construed as parts of a wider concern for the environment. Conferring rights on animals is one thing; conferring rights on plants and ecological situations in general is quite another. Also, environmental activists, while often concerned with the welfare of wild animals and their habitats or food animals, often overlook the question of the rights of domestic animals. Finally, environmentalists, as such, are concerned with questions of species preservation and not with the welfare of individual animals. These concerns are often in conflict. For example, surplus kills at zoos are often justified on the grounds that such weeding out, even of healthy animals, is necessary in order to promote preservation of species. But, the rights of individual animals are ignored in such cases (Rodd, pp. 105ff).

How have evolutionary theories of human and animal behavior reshaped the attitude of the arguments of biologists about the moral status of animals? Rodd sees some sociobiological arguments moving from the fact that we are predators and the claim that morality has evolved because it has survival value to the conclusion that animal rights movements are misguided. On the one hand, consideration of our evolutionary kinship with animals lends support to the view that animals possess the prerequisites for being treated as members of a moral community. On the other hand, sociobiological theories of the evolution of human nature lend support to the view that, as predators, it is part of our “good” to be consumers and exploiters of animals. Rodd rejects this line of reasoning.

Rodd holds that only current status, not evolutionary origin, is relevant in assessing moral status (Rodd, p. 20). The key property in determining moral status is sentience or the capacity to suffer. Evolutionary considerations, as such, play a secondary role in determining the range of organisms to be accorded moral status. The connected diversity of the family tree of animals is a source of clues about how widespread this capacity is.