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Basel

Research Project

Challenging our intuitions about the moral status of non-human animals with experimental philosophy

Project funded by own resources

Project title Challenging our intuitions about the moral status of non-human animals with experimental philosophy

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Organisation / Research unit

Ethik / Bio- und Medizinethik (Elger)

Project Website <http://ibmb.unibas.ch/research/animal-ethics-experimental-philosophy/>

Project start 01.08.2013

Probable end 30.07.2017

Status Completed

This project aims at bridging the gap between the intuitions of people without a special education in philosophy (lay people) and theoretical philosophical approaches concerning the moral status of nonhuman animals. Dealing with nonhuman animals, mainly so-called “livestock”, but also “lab animals”, “wild” animals and “pets”, is increasingly questioned and discussed in public, e.g. by the media. Thus, it is necessary to review national and international laws and guidelines regarding animals in the sciences, in the economic sector and in the private field. On the one hand, due to different perspectives of scientists, associations and nongovernmental organisations, politics, lobbies and private persons, the debate has several aspects on the other hand, there is a long tradition of theoretical animal ethics in philosophy whose arguments are developed to a large extent independently of practice and every day life. There is a broad spectrum of different ethical approaches:

Since Bentham, utilitarians have tended to include the well-being or the preferences of non-human animals into their considerations and to make them count in their moral calculus (Singer). For example, the concept of animal rights is promoted by Regan, who applies Kantian ethics to non-human animals. Furthermore, there are approaches based on capabilities, contract, compassion, integrity, dignity or individual relationships (e.g. Midgley, Nussbaum, Wolf, Palmer). Not least, environmental ethics present reasons to think about our attitude towards non-human animals and modify them, if necessary (e.g. Leopold, Schweitzer).

In philosophical texts, knowledge about the views of a large reference group is sometimes just assumed (“People tend to believe, that. . .”, “Common sense tells us, that. . .” or similar phrases). In many cases, these claims are not based on empirical data but on armchair philosophy. In the case of ethics, however, a discipline that systematically deals with rules for actions, lay people’s actual moral judgements should not be completely neglected.

To further investigate the relationship between lay people’s opinions and the theoretical positions in animal ethics about the moral status of non-human animals, the methods of the social sciences (qualitative interviews) and experimental philosophy (thought experiments) will be applied in this project.

As a result, the study will reveal argumentative patterns and basic moral beliefs of several societal groups concerning the status of non-human animals and facilitate a comparison with theoretical animal ethics’ positions. Based on these findings, animal ethics and animal rights could be discussed in a new way.

Keywords animal ethics

Financed by

Add publication

Published results

3291690, Persson, Kirsten; Shaw, David, Empirical Methods in Animal Ethics, 1187-7863, Journal of agricultural and environmental ethics, Publication: JournalArticle (Originalarbeit in einer wissenschaftlichen Zeitschrift)

Add documents

Specify cooperation partners

ID	Kreditinhaber	Kooperationspartner	Institution	Laufzeit - von	Laufzeit - bis
2288754	Elger, Bernice Simone	Engels, Eve-Marie, Prof. Dr.	Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Lehrstuhl für Ethik in den Biowissenschaften	01.08.2013	31.07.2017