



Simone Pollo: *Umani e animali: questioni di etica*

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The Darwinian idea – revolutionary at the time – that humans and animals “may be netted together” never seems to lose its innovative force. The last two hundred years have simply contributed, from that point of view, to transform the hypothesis into a fact. Yet we often risk forgetting it in the practice of our daily life. In his work *Umani e animali: questioni di etica* [*Humans and Animals: Ethical Issues*] Simone Pollo refers to several significant theoretical positions, but it is particularly the Darwinian lesson to be taken as the premise and foundation for any ethical-philosophical discussion on non-human animals. Only from Darwin, namely from the assertion of the *continuum* between animals and humans – from the attribution of cognitions and emotions to animals and from the consequent anti-anthropocentrism and anti-finalism – can we start, according to the author, a moral reflection on the relationship between humans and animals.

The book is divided into three large sections. The first section, which works as an introduction, is the reconsideration of the structural presence of animals in human life. Animals are everywhere, involved in most actions of our daily lives and agents in that “coevolution” process that has led to the constitution of *Homo sapiens*.

The second section is, first of all, a historical overview of the philosophical interest towards animals, starting from Aquinas, Descartes, and Kant to Bentham and Salt, up to the last decades when Singer and Regan have been developing animal ethics. This part of the book is the most interesting and significant especially for the critical discussion on “standard” animal ethics – that refers to Singer’s and Regan’s theories – and is aimed at detecting its limits and proposing an alternative point of view, on the basis of a sentimentalist perspective and a naturalistic method. Such an approach is designed to elaborate philosophical analyses starting from the facts experienced by common sense. By analysing separately the positions held by Singer, Regan and Francione – and clearly illustrating their differences – Pollo detects a shared theoretical lack lying in the “rationalist” and “monist” approach, that conceives moral

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judgments as “the outcome of argumentative procedures that isolate relevant features (the sentient’s interests) and abstract from any element considered unrelated, such as emotions and relationships” (62).

As those normative theories claim to enclose the complex aspects of moral experience in a univocal and unifying perspective, they fall prey to an excess of simplification of the experience itself. Opposing such theoretical approach that moves “from above”, Pollo claims that there is a need for an empiricist approach that originates “from below and from inside”, according to which moral reflection should proceed in constant accordance with experience. In order to carry out such reversal, reason must be replaced by feelings, sympathy and imagination since they are designated to guide “the development and maintenance of morality” (78). Accepting Hume’s idea that the central core of morality lies in the feelings of approval and disapproval of what is pleasant or unpleasant and Darwin’s acknowledgment of the animals’ capacity to experience emotions similar to humans’, Pollo suggests that sympathetic and imaginative relationships, as they activate those feelings, will lead to a broader and deeper inclusion of animals within human morality. Moreover, according to such sentimentalist and empiricist approaches, the “partialities” implied in human psychology – for instance, species preference – can be conceived not as an obstacle simply to be removed, as normative theories claim, but as the breeding ground from which morality can proceed.

In the last step of the book the sentimentalist point of view is, so to speak, tested through the comparison with three categories of the interaction between men and animals: eating animals, animal testing and wild animals’ conservation. As for the first one, Pollo stresses the fact that we are dealing with a strongly rooted habit, so the normative theories’ pretension of the total abolition of eating meat clashes with the “resistance” of common sense and with a certain “opacity” and “distance” – related for instance to animal breeding conditions – which hinder a clear understanding of the effects of our diet. Focusing on private ethics, Pollo combines the sentimentalist perspective with Mill’s conception of “self-perfection”. Starting from the human sympathetic connection with animals – that arises a feeling of repugnance for their sufferings – and from the role of imagination, that would allow the overcoming of distances and opacities, the moral acknowledgement of animals and the subsequent reconsideration over one’s behavior and diet will become possible.

Also with respect to animal testing, the author’s targets are the abolitionist theories held by Regan and Francione, whose claims for abolition *tout court* collide again with a series of psychological and structural restrictions. Following the Humean-conventional genealogy of society and justice conditions, Pollo believes that moral reflection must be inserted in the context of revision and transformation of animal testing, in order to stimulate a stratification of moral practices and conventions which may provide alternatives to experimentation. In this sense the author suggests the use of the notion of “animal welfare” as a fruitful tool for moral discussion.

Finally, in the analysis of wild animals’ conservation Pollo proposes as central the concept of “respect” as “the expression of a specific feeling of approval for the free expression and the autonomous unfolding of individual lives of sentient beings” (122). On the theoretical level, the author deals with Singer’s utilitarianism and Nussbaum’s theory of justice. Although starting from different premises, these theories assume an anthropocentric vision and argue, at least as a matter of principle, the legitimacy of invasive human interventions to protect wild animals. A correct reading of the Darwinian lesson should lead instead to an anti-anthropocentric point of view based on respect and whose practical implications lie in “non-interference” on wild animals’ “freedom”. The author as a consequence states that it is

necessary to reconsider the concept of conservation, by relocating and reformulating the human position and demands towards both animals and the environment.

To conclude, we can say that Pollo's book balances well the critiques of dominant theories within animal ethics and its own proposal, through an analysis of the implied ethical-practical outcomes and coherently with its aim of putting forward a moral and philosophical reflection that goes hand in hand with ordinary intuition on the interaction with animals. The direct comparison with the reality of our daily interaction with animals, and the consequent main role of feelings that replace rationality as the nucleus of moral reflection, turns out to be the most credible and at the same time original move made by the author, who offers a convincing alternative to the currently prevailing animal ethics. By accepting his position and auspices, we are allowed to state that this book is a remarkable contribution to that education of human capacities of reflection that passes through changing of our ways of seeing and feeling reality and that, according to the author, is the foundation of "moral progress".