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Book Review

Animals and Social Work – A Moral Introduction, by Thomas Ryan, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011, ISBN: 978-0-230-57686-5, 224 pp.

At first I thought there was something slightly odd about this book's project, to question the rationale for the virtual exclusion of non-human animals from 'social work's moral universe' and to examine critically 'the discipline's current assumption that anthropocentrism is a valid and non-negotiable given' (p. 2). It's not that I sneer at concern for non-human creatures. I just wondered: 'why pick on social work?'

Anthropocentrism—the focus on human individuals, their interests and liberties, to the exclusion of the non-human world—is hardly a mentality confined to social work. As a society, our plan to feed ourselves for the indefinite future involves breeding for slaughter literally millions (and globally, billions) of non-human animals, destined to live the full extent of their utterly wretched lives in what are effectively high-tech death camps, before being butchered in ways that even a psychotic gangster from an old Graham Greene novel would have to admit were 'a bit violent'. Populist media commentators laugh heartily at the suggestion that it is unnecessary and rather cruel to condemn vast numbers of conscious creatures to suffer and die because of a mere dietary preference. Headline writers of the national press pour scorn on the idea that such a lifestyle may not be sustainable, and urge us to ignore the mounting evidence that with our current food policies we are preparing an environmental catastrophe of absolutely unprecedented proportions. Meanwhile celebrities line their coats with the skins of animals and are described as 'quirky' for turning up at awards ceremonies clad in dresses made of raw meat. We have a Prime Minister who thinks that the great civil liberties issue of the day is not the detention of pro-democracy campaigners and their children in 'secure pre-departure accommodation' on the south coast. It's the fact that, if a group of lawyers, farmers and millionaire bankers want to watch while an exhausted stag, after hours of being chased, collapses, quivering, and a pack of hounds begins biting his panting, bloody sides until their Master eventually finds his gun to (their words) 'put it out of its misery', in these days of political-correctness-gone-mad they could actually be charged with 'animal cruelty' under UK law and might even get a fine! Better repeal that law, then.

Against a background of social attitudes like that, why single out ‘contemporary social work’s moral framework’ (p. 4) for its failure to consider non-human lives? Is it fair to condemn ‘the failure of social workers to respond appropriately’ (p. 5) to animal abuse and neglect—effectively to call such workers to account for not being crusaders for a more enlightened attitude towards the sentient creatures we so routinely exploit? It seems a bit like complaining that the Hackney meals-on-wheels service in the 1940s did absolutely nothing to prevent the holocaust.

You don’t need to get far into chapter 1 of Ryan’s book to see that it’s my initial puzzlement, my sense of incongruity, that is misplaced, and not his project. This is one of the most coherent, well researched, detailed and rigorously argued books that I have read in some time. The author is an experienced social worker with a strong sense of social work’s tradition and history—stronger, he notes, than those contemporary commentators whose desire for social work ‘to be accorded professional status’ has helped not only to depoliticise the discipline but has also led to ‘the jettisoning of animals’ from its sphere of interest (p. 19). Ryan demonstrates an impressive knowledge of social work’s intellectual and moral heritage, of the radicalism and compassion that define its identity. To forget that heritage, to abandon the goal of challenging dogma, complacency and cruelty while championing the defenceless, the needy and the systemically marginalised, is not to give up some contingent feature of social work but to disavow its essence. There is an analogy here with what the book shows about the nature of human morality. Our moral faculties developed not only from those features of our rationality that we regard as distinctive, but from our evolutionary heritage *as mammals*, with the capacity to empathise with our fellow creatures, to treat their sufferings as a matter of inherent concern to us: a rational being is essentially a social creature seeing itself as ‘a unit amongst others’ not ‘the core of the universe’ (p. 27).

Our ability to extend our sympathies to others, whether they reciprocate or not, is definitively human, and philosophies that devalue that capacity attack the core of our humanity. By analogy, Ryan shows that social work *came into being* defending those thought too insignificant to merit the respect or compassion afforded to others. It was born of movements that challenged ‘the obvious’, the unargued consensus about the proper boundaries of our concerns, affiliations and obligations. The ‘dogmatic anthropocentrism’ dominating contemporary social work practice ‘serves to obscure our understanding of the human animal’ (p. 5) encouraging us to ignore the social, psychological and moral links between domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse and animal abuse. Social work’s implicit acceptance of the general social prejudice that conceptualises compassion as ‘a rare and irreplaceable commodity’ rather than ‘a power of the mind that increases with usage’ (from the same page, quoting Mary Midgley) actually disables practitioners by eroding an essential character trait of the *good* social worker.

Ryan divides the book into five chapters, but there are lots of overlaps between them. The introduction, as noted, informs those of us from outside the

discipline (and according to Ryan, many currently working within it) of its heritage and moral foundations, explaining why, in the twentieth century, some in the discipline sought to distance social work practice from that heritage, to appear more 'reasonable' from the perspective of the political mainstream, and the disappearance of animals from social work's 'moral map' (p. 18) was one consequence of this process. Chapter 2 looks at the theoretical basis for social work, going into great detail on not only ethical but epistemological foundational questions, covering the problems with approaches as diverse as scientism, postmodernism, meta-ethical subjectivism and relativism. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the nature of human and animal subjects and the strengths and weaknesses of the principle of 'respect for persons' as a basis for social work practice, before developing implications for practice in both chapter 5 and an appendix articulating a new social work code of ethics that is inclusive of animals.

This is an *exceptionally* scholarly work, and it's hard to do it justice in a review such as this, given the sheer scope of its concerns. Ryan gives full voice to the range of opponents of his arguments, bringing out criticisms from socio-biology, contract theory and evolutionary psychology, as well as providing an extensive review of objections from philosophical ethics to the inclusion of non-humans within the scope of serious moral concern. His patient responses draw a detailed picture of the intellectual territory, bringing out clear links between debates in biology, social science and epistemology and even touching on such metaphysical issues as the debate between existentialism and essentialism, and the relationship between determinism, morality and freedom.

This makes it a fine textbook for a range of philosophy courses as well as a very full 'moral introduction' for social workers. If you want a book that you can skip through quickly, pulling out a few knock-down, 'for and against' points, then this really is not for you. But if you do want to think and to be challenged then put some time aside, and make a serious study of what this author has to say.

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