

## Radical responsibility for nonhuman others

### *Abstract*

The human–animal relation is a complex one; it involves a collective and individual object and subject as well as synchronic and diachronic responsibility. Due to the range of dimensions that are included into this relation, there is a need for a form of responsibility that covers all forms of it: this is radical responsibility. This form of responsibility claims that we are responsible for what we do and the beneficial actions that others do for us. Moreover we are responsible for the unintended and unconsidered consequences of our actions and for not taking action when we could prevent something wrong from happening. This radical form of responsibility fully covers the entire range of complex human–animal relations and allows a moral agent to see the wide-ranging moral consequences of his/her actions.

As La Follette notices, “we are (...) part of a culture which rather cavalierly uses animals for food, clothes, for research in the development of new drugs, and to determine the safety of household products. And many of these uses require inflicting a great deal of pain on animals” (1989: 80). In my opinion, these cruel practices could be stopped if we employed the virtue of radical responsibility. In this mini review, I claim that the concept of radical responsibility that is presented by Nigel Dower is the kind of responsibility that should be employed in our relations with nonhuman animals. Radical responsibility applies to the entire range of animal uses and enables us to employ a wide range of responses to complex human–animal relations.

In this paper, I outline the general view on moral responsibility in ethics (1), focusing on the aspects of responsibility that apply to human–animal relations (3). I also present the concept of moral responsibility from the perspective of environmental ethics, the ethical subdiscipline that focuses on the natural world as the object of moral consideration (2). After introducing crucial information about moral responsibility, I outline the concept of radical responsibility as a proper approach to dealing with human–animal relations.

### *1. Moral responsibility in ethics*

Responsibility for one’s actions is one of the most important concepts in ethics; it is strictly associated with the issue of blameworthiness and praiseworthiness. Moral responsibility

has the following formula: “subject S is morally responsible (i.e. blameworthy or praiseworthy) to degree  $d$  for object O” (Khoury, 2017: 2). Historically, many philosophers focused on individual responsibility, but after World War II some philosophers raised the issue of responsibility as a constructive answer or explanation to what had happened (Levinas, 1978; Jonas 1978). Others focused on the collective context of responsibility (Feinberg 1970; Arendt 1987, Lewis 1948). The idea of some sort of a group moral agent in terms of responsibility might be a controversial concept. Most critics doubt the fairness of ascribing collective responsibility to individuals who do not cause harm directly. As Sverdlik noticed, “it would be unfair, whether we are considering a result produced by more than one person’s action or by a single person, to blame a person for a result that he or she did not intend to produce” (1987, p. 68). However, this concept is highly applicable to analysing a wide range of animal exploitation because most cases are examples of actions performed in an organized system that allows these uses.

As stated above, responsibility may be collective as well as individual. According to Peter French (1976: 443–444), the object of responsibility can be individual or collective actions, i.e. an action can be brought about individually or collectively. In terms of animals, this distinction also applies. Many examples of animal exploitation come in the form of very well-organized enterprises and many actions within this area need the cooperation of many moral agents.

Apart from the two aforementioned distinctions, Khoury (2017:3) also introduces a temporal distinction in the concept of responsibility: synchronic responsibility and diachronic responsibility. “More precisely, synchronic responsibility concerns the extent to which an agent at time  $t_1$  is responsible for an action that occurs at  $t_1$ . Diachronic responsibility concerns the extent to which an agent at some later time  $t_2$  is responsible for an action that occurred at  $t_1$ . Synchronic responsibility involves the responsibility of an agent at the time of action, while diachronic responsibility involves the responsibility of an agent at some time after the action occurs” (ibid.). Both of these temporal forms of responsibility also apply to animals, especially in the context of climate change and meat production as a factor that contributes to it significantly, as is explained in more detail below (see IPCC, 2019).

## ***2. Moral responsibility in environmental ethics***

In most of the history of western ethics, moral responsibility applied to interpersonal relations. However, as we enlarge the *moral consideranda* (Birch, 1983), namely the group of those with moral standing, we notice that human's moral obligations are not only limited to human beings. Since the beginning of environmental ethics in the 1960s, philosophers have been discussing the arguments for including ecosystems (Leopold 1949) and all living beings in our moral consideration (Taylor 1986). Due to the intrinsic value of the natural environment, our moral obligations should not be limited to human beings only, and this also applies to the virtue of responsibility. The concept of responsibility for any living organisms and the natural world appeared in Georg Picht's publication (1969) and was popularized by Hans Jonas (1979, 1982, 1984).

The concept that is the most well known in environmental ethics as an expression of responsibility for nature is Hans Jonas' principle of responsibility. "Strictly speaking, what we habitually call environmental ethics, Hans Jonas transforms into human responsibility ethics" (Mantatov, Mantatova, 2015: 1056). Since his works were published, it is quite common among environmental philosophers to acknowledge that a moral agent is responsible for his/her actions. This would be a formal responsibility, but Jonas added another kind of responsibility, namely a substantive one. The latter is the responsibility for something (Jonas, 1984: 92). It is analogous to the archetypical form of responsibility, namely the one that a parent has for his child: no matter what happens, the parent bears responsibility for his offspring; a parent is responsible for his/her child all the time. According to Jonas, our responsibility for nature should be of this kind: it should be accompany us all the time; whatever action we are taking, we should think about environment. Moreover "Hans Jonas considers all nature as an object of human responsibility. It is a colossal object in whose shadow all other objects of human responsibility are very small values" (Mantatov, Mantatova, 2015: 1057). His concept of responsibility applies also to animals, but it does not cover all forms of complex human–animal relations. In this paper I push the concept of responsibility and add its radical form, which I present below.

### ***3. The radical responsibility for animals***

Human–animal relations are marked with a special kind of ambiguity, or as Francione calls it, "moral schizophrenia" (2000). This attitude denotes double standards that some of us employ when it comes to animals. Namely, some people declare that they are pro-animal; they might even take great care of a pet if they have a one, but at the same time they use products

that involve a great amount of animal suffering. One example of these cruel practices is meat production, which is growing globally due to countries with intensive economic development, such as China (Kanerva, 2013). Generally, urbanization increases meat consumption (York, Gossard, 2004). “Such a trend (increased meat consumption) is not true for most countries in Europe in the recent past” (ibid.). This branch of the economy is characterized by huge environmental pressure; it also creates a threat to animal welfare, including animal suffering, and is even a threat to human health (Westhoek et al., 2011, 2012).

Animal exploitation involves two kinds of subject: collective and individual. There are also cases of individual and collective actions. Processes like meat production or animal testing involve cooperation between many individuals. A certain number of people must be involved in order for the meat industry to function. Moreover, some of these practices are examples of synchronic and diachronic responsibility; for the latter, it is enough just to mention the range of consequences on global warming of meat production and consumption. There is enough scientific evidence to recognize that meat production and animal farming contributes significantly to global climate change (IPCC, 2019). Thus the content of our plate is not only a matter of satisfying our palate, but it is a matter of responsibility for Earth.

To address the complex nature of human–animal relations, we need a concept of responsibility that is capable of covering all of the aforementioned dimensions: this is the concept of radical responsibility. According to this approach, we are responsible “for the unintended (and often unnoticed) consequences of our actions and our failures to act” (Dower, 1989: 18). Radical responsibility is not only related to our actions, but Dower also introduces the concept of an indirect footprint that includes responsibility for what others have done for us. This concept is very relevant for the animal ethics discussion since most of our animal “usages” are cases of an indirect footprint. One might never have killed an animal or conducted an experiment on a non-human being, but one may have benefitted indirectly by choosing a product that was produced in a way which involves the exploitation of animals.

Thus, there is a question of responsibility when we do not perform a deed ourselves but let things be done for us or do not act to prevent some actions even if they are morally wrong or dubious. Nigel Dower explored this issue and asked about the so-called logic of omission, for which he provided a utilitarian explanation. According to him, “there is a difference between typical cases of killing and typical cases of letting something die. Whereas with killing the death of someone is what is intended – either as an end result or as a necessary means to an end – with ‘letting die’ the death of someone is neither what one aims to achieve – one does not want

them to die – nor is it a means to some other end. It is simply an unwanted and often unthought consequence of pursuing one’s other objectives” (Dower: 1983: 22). However, in terms of the indirect footprint concept, we are still responsible for what has been done for us; if the unwanted or unconsidered consequences of our actions are still in the range of our moral responsibility, we should act to prevent them. Dower claims that “if it is in our power to prevent something very bad happening without thereby sacrificing anything of moral importance, we ought to do it” (Dower, 2018). Peter Singer also makes a very clear point about not acting when one can do something to prevent wrong things from happening. When he claims that members of wealthy societies are morally obliged to help those less privileged in other parts of the world, he writes that “passivity, when people are able to act to prevent evil, is morally wrong” (Singer, 1985: 834).

Thus, as stated above, morality is not only about deeds we perform ourselves; it is also about what others do for us and about the unwanted and unconsidered consequences of our actions. We are morally obliged to minimize any potential harm done to people, animals, or the environment. The idea of total responsibility sets a very high moral standard. And so another question arises: are we able to follow this standard? In my opinion, if we approach it from a virtue perspective, we can successfully apply total responsibility. Moreover, I think that cases of animal exploitation are either obvious (e.g., animal products usually involve the use of animals), or in most cases the information is given on product packaging (e.g. animal testing on cosmetics and drugs). We are easily able to identify which products or services include some form of animal usage, and we can make informed choices.

In cases in which we cannot know whether a product or service involves animal exploitation, the virtue approach might be conducive to and supportive of making moral judgments. First of all, the idea of such a wide-ranging responsibility is an overwhelming one as a moral agent can doubt their ability to analyse a situation properly and to find all cases that should be morally responded to. The concept of radical responsibility can be perceived as a supererogation, which would denote that it is probably too demanding for the average person to apply. However, ancient wisdom comes with a solution: if we perceived radical responsibility as a virtue, then we could apply to it the Aristotelian rule of the golden mean. The Stagirite reminds us that “a master of any art avoids excess and defect, but seeks intermediate and chooses this” (Aristotle: book 2, chapter 6). Thus if we define radical responsibility as a virtue, we could then take on a wider spectrum of responsibility (also in cases in which we are not doers ourselves), but with the reasonable limits of our moral obligations. Radical responsibility

allows passivity in cases that one cannot influence, but on the other hand it helps one to approach the problem of animal exploitation in the most comprehensive way.

### *Summary*

The human–animal relation is marked with a special kind of ambiguity that allows us to love some animals but use others. The situation is more complex than it looks at first because most of our uses of animals are in some sense hidden before us. In most of these cases, we are not the doers: we might never perform a medical experiment on an animal and yet we might use cosmetics, medical equipment or drugs that have been tested on a sentient being. We might never kill an animal, but if we eat meat we support an industry that derives benefits from killing animals. So, we are partly responsible for things that we have never done or even never intended to do. This is a special kind of a moral responsibility that recognizes our responsibility for deeds we never performed ourselves but allowed to happen or derived benefits from. Radical responsibility addresses our complex relations with animals and allows a moral agent to see the far-reaching moral consequences of his/her actions.

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