

Respect for animals – meaningful concept or hollow phrase?¹

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Introduction

It is one of the central tenets of human-animal studies that the anthropocentric world view is no longer defensible: animals² are no longer to be seen as mere objects and means to further human needs but as sentient, intelligent individuals with agency and personalities of their own.³ This paradigm shift in the human-animal relation requires envisioning new forms of interaction in human-animal encounters – with serious implications in the ethical arena. One concept that features prominently in this context is respect. This reflects a more general tendency. Recent years have seen a constant increase in invoking the concept of respect across the board – with calls for respect evermore becoming part of public life: this holds true not only for the human sphere but also goes beyond it to include other objects such as nature and, of course, animals. Respect is a widely acknowledged concept and common in moral and political life. However, there seems to be quite a lot of controversy and confusion – in both academic discourse and everyday thinking – regarding the deeper understanding and application of this concept.⁴ This holds even more true when it comes to animals. As a consequence, it's not only animal advocates who talk about respect for animals but also farmers, hunters and others who engage in practices that cause animals to suffer and die. People seem to have very different and often completely incompatible ideas as to

¹ We are indebted to Bernd Ladwig, Kerstin Reibold and Daniel Lau for helpful comments on drafts of this paper.

² For reasons of linguistic simplicity, we will be using the terms animals and humans throughout this article instead of the technically more accurate terms nonhuman animals and human animals. In doing so, we do not wish to suggest any biological or evolutionary discontinuity, let alone any normatively relevant difference, between natural creatures.

³ Petrus 2015.

⁴ Dillon 2018.

what respect is and what it entails. Quite naturally, this makes it an interesting subject matter for philosophical analysis.

The central question guiding our investigation is: Can the concept of respect be applied to our interactions with animals in a meaningful way? Or does it run the risk of dwindling into a hollow phrase which serves to soothe our conscience while we continue to engage in practices that are actually harmful to animals? To answer this question, this paper has been organised in the following way: We will begin by defining the term respect and distinguishing its three different meanings (1). Next, we will outline the concept of respect for persons as a starting point for our discussion (2). After that, we will analyse the application of this concept to animals (3). Then, we will look into respect for animals and sketch four different forms of that notion (4). Next, we will take a step back and consider the conditions of ethical reflection and its pitfalls in general and why this matters in this context (5). We will conclude by presenting a somewhat nuanced view regarding the use of the concept of respect for animals.

1. Respect

The philosophical debate about respect is rather complex and sophisticated.⁵ We can't deal with all subtleties here but will limit our analysis to those aspects we deem relevant for our discussion. Let's start by looking at a standard dictionary definition of "respect". The term is derived from the Latin verb "respicere", which translates as "to look back at" or "to look again", and nowadays has at least three central meanings in everyday discourse.⁶

First, there is respect in the sense of admiration/esteem/regard/reverence (German: Achtung/Bewunderung/Wertschätzung; Latin: reverentia). You may admire someone for who they are or what they do, especially because of their personal qualities, knowledge, status, or skills. This sense of respect is expressed in propositions such as "He respects her as an actress" or "I respect his achievements as a president." Here, respect seems to be conditional on a favourable attitude towards, or form of admiration for, the person in question or sometimes people in general – because of what they are or do. This may involve a hierarchical relationship where the giver of respect is, or considers himself to be, somewhat inferior to the receiver of respect – owing to social status or the like. Or it may

⁵ For a comprehensive overview, see Dillon 2018.

⁶ Dictionary of Contemporary English: 1487b-1488a.

involve a non-hierarchical relationship between equals who appreciate one another for valued qualities they share. Call this RR (Reverence). Unless more specifically qualified, with regard to persons, RR often refers to personhood as such: persons are considered worthy of respect because of their sophisticated capabilities – which entitles them to having their full-blown moral status acknowledged.

Second, there is respect in the sense of consideration/due regard/thoughtfulness (German: Beachtung/Berücksichtigung/Rücksichtnahme; Latin: observantia). You may have due regard for, or recognition of, the feelings, wishes or rights of others who are considered important and should not be harmed or treated badly. This sense of respect finds expression in propositions such as “This dictator doesn’t respect human rights” or “I respect your feelings in this matter.” Here, respect seems to be conditional on a positive attitude towards, or admiration for, certain concepts or principles (such as human rights or the right to expressing one’s own feelings) or general traits of persons (such as rationality or agency) rather than towards specific persons. In this context, persons seem to be sufficiently important to warrant this respect but are not necessarily objects of express admiration or reverence.⁷ In fact, it would seem possible to respect such concepts, or the objects that benefit from this form of respect, even if one doesn’t personally like the objects. Call this RC (Consideration). Regarding persons in general, RC is, to some extent, the complement to RR: because personhood is considered a valuable quality in persons, their interest, needs etc. ought to be taken into consideration. As we will see, this is not the case when it comes to animals. Because, unlike with personhood, there is no default and clear point of reference when it comes to respect for them. Instead, this void is filled with various interpretations, resulting in incompatible and contradictory consequences and an overall problematic use of the concept. This problematic use harms animals (as it ignores their genuine interests) and us as moral agents (as it increases the risk of falling prey to self-delusion).

Third, there is respect in the sense of caution due to fear of danger (German: Furcht/Vorsicht). You may have a careful attitude towards someone or something that is potentially or actually dangerous and harmful to you. This sense of respect is expressed in propositions such as “People should have a healthy respect for weapons” or “As a sailor, I respect the sea”. Here, respect is based on pruden-

⁷ In most cases, they probably are, but it’s not a necessary condition.

tial considerations regarding one's own safety rather than ethical or moral deliberations.⁸ Call this RF (Fear).⁹

As we will see, these different senses of respect are often overlapping or conflated in discussions of respect for animals. So far, we have only looked at one aspect of respect, namely attitudes – that is mental states such as beliefs, judgments etc. as well as emotions and feelings. However, these attitudes also require a certain behaviour in order to qualify as true instances of respect. So with regard to the three senses of respect outlined above, the following behaviours seem to be necessary complements. If you admire someone for their qualities or actions (RR), you also need to behave in a reverential way to show this respect when you interact with them.¹⁰ If you acknowledge the fact that others have rights or are entitled to express their feelings, thoughts etc. (RC), you also need to act in a way so as not to interfere with these rights or entitlements. And if you acknowledge danger (RF), you don't act in a way that puts yourself at risk, but you obey certain rules or principles of prudence.

So, the following, admittedly very rough, characterisation seems uncontroversial: respect involves both an attitudinal and a behavioural component.¹¹ That is to say, respect is expressed through certain mental states or beliefs and emotions or feelings on the one hand and certain corresponding actions or behaviours on the other. Both attitude and behaviour need to be consistent or else we wouldn't con-

⁸ Some form of admiration or awe (RR) may also play into this sense of respect, especially with regard to natural forces, but it's not its defining element.

⁹ Feinberg (1975) makes a similar distinction between *Reverentia*, *Observantia* and the German term *Respekt* – the latter in the sense of an “uneasy and watchful attitude that has ‘the element of fear’ in it”. Hudson (1980) suggests a four-fold classification distinguishing Evaluative Respect (esteem, admiration); Directive Respect (intentional compliance with rules, rights claims etc.); Obstacle Respect (objects that are potential obstacles to achieving one's ends); and Institutional Respect (where institutions or their representatives are the objects of respect). And Darwall (1977) differentiates between Recognition Respect (directed at a wide variety of objects) and Appraisal Respect (a positive attitude towards persons or their merits). For an overview, see Dillon (2018). We have chosen a slightly different approach as we deem it the best fit for applying respect to the animal issue.

¹⁰ Talking about an object of respect in a conversation with others can be seen as an indirect way of showing respect to that object, whereas talking to the object or interacting with it can be seen as a direct way.

¹¹ More accurately, one can classify the actions prescribed by respect as part of the attitude and analyse them accordingly. Then, the attitudes of respect comprise “cognitive dimensions (beliefs, acknowledgments, judgments, deliberations, commitments), affective dimensions (emotions, feelings, ways of experiencing things), and conative dimensions (motivations, dispositions to act and forbear from acting)” (Dillon 2018).

sider either as an expression of true respect. It's not exactly convincing to claim to have respect for X and at the same time act in a way that is incompatible with respect for X – or vice versa.¹²

2. Respect for persons

As hinted at above, recent years have seen an increase in invoking the concept of “respect” in ever more contexts. However, moral philosophy has traditionally focused on “respect for persons” – a concept that goes back to Kant¹³ and has since taken centre stage in many ethical theories. Since this is probably the least controversial usage of the concept, it provides a good starting point for our discussion.

In everyday discourse, person is often used synonymously with human being. In philosophical discussions, however, this term has a meaning which is narrower and wider at the same time. In ethics, person is usually employed as a technical term for autonomous, rational, moral agents. Persons typically display a whole bundle of sophisticated cognitive capabilities such as reason, self-awareness, awareness of time and death, language (or another means of complex communication to convey abstract concepts), moral agency, etc. This definition is narrower since not all humans are persons in this sense: the so-called marginal cases¹⁴ such as infants, the senile, the mentally handicapped, the brain damaged, etc. are not. And it is wider since some non-human beings may also qualify for this category: this may include some animals such as primates, cetaceans and elephants, or, possibly, extra-terrestrials.

Because of their sophisticated cognitive and communicative capabilities, persons typically have an understanding of the concept of respect. They can express respect. And they can appreciate being respected – not only in the sense of benefitting from the actions and behaviours that flow from it, but also in the sense of appreciating the cause of these actions, namely the attitude as such. Or to put it differently: persons are vulnerable not only to the consequences of behavioural

¹² There are also expressions of respect that only involve a behavioural element, such as in “Climate change doesn't respect national borders.” This signifies behaviour that avoids violation of certain rules, boundaries, etc. without recourse to attitudes, intentions or – as in the proposition cited – even agency (Bird 2004; Dillon 2018). In this article, we will not be concerned with this kind of respect but focus chiefly on instances that feature both attitudinal and behavioural elements.

¹³ For Kant, persons partake in reason. This makes them free, autonomous agents and ends in themselves and as such valuable. Kant calls this intrinsic worth dignity, and dignity exacts respect (Kant 1907).

¹⁴ Pluhar 1995.

disrespect – such as bodily harm and suffering as well as the physical consequences of social isolation. In fact, they are additionally vulnerable to attitudinal disrespect as they can know and understand the reasons for and intentions behind these physical and mental harms. If persons are denied their autonomy or their status as persons and equals, if they are excluded from their community, if they are humiliated or otherwise disrespected, being aware of the fact that they are experiencing acts of disrespect adds to their harm. Calls for respect for persons aim to protect them from exactly those kinds of harm. So here, two of the senses of respect established above come into play: reverence or admiration for what persons are as well as for their cognitive abilities (RR); and consideration for their wide array of possible interests (RC). And it is quite clear, what it normatively implies.

Non-persons, on the other hand, don't seem capable of appreciating the mental states and motives of those expressing respect. That is to say, they can't appreciate the attitudinal element of respect and are consequently not vulnerable to a lack thereof. All they can experience are the behavioural effects of respect and other mental states and attitudes. You can disrespect your dog maybe because she embarrassed you publicly. Naturally, your dog will suffer from the behaviours that flow from your disrespect – such as scolding or ignoring her etc. However, she will hardly experience this conduct as any different from behaviour that stems from abuse, neglect or indifference on your part. She will not experience it as a genuine act of disrespect and thus not suffer from being aware of it. This is a crucial point to remember. Because even well-intended expressions of respect can't be appreciated by animals, such expressions can't qualify as a sufficient condition for the concept to work with regard to non-persons.

3. Applying respect to animals

One might object to applying the concept of respect to animals because of its close association with the term person. From a human-animal studies perspective, it might be argued that the term person per se is overly anthropocentric and indicative of human hubris and thus ought generally to be avoided. Then again, all concepts and terms humans could possibly come up with always tend to be somewhat anthropocentric. In fact, epistemological anthropocentrism is unavoidable given our rather limited ways of perceiving and structuring the world.¹⁵ So, provided

¹⁵ Krebs 1997.

it's not used synonymously for *Homo sapiens* but as a shorthand for beings with certain capabilities, not a lot seems to speak against its use.

However, the term person might also face criticism for a somewhat related issue, namely for placing too much emphasis on cognitive sophistication – or rather human cognitive sophistication. Along these lines, it might be argued that maybe animals do have much more sophisticated mental states and complex capabilities than we give them credit for. Maybe these mental states and capabilities are similar to ours but find very different expressions which we simply fail to notice or interpret correctly. Or maybe their mental states and capabilities are in fact quite different, but nevertheless comparatively complex. Caught in epistemological anthropocentrism, humans may simply fail to recognise them or are, to some extent, even reluctant to do so. Be that as it may, none of this goes to prove the lower complexity or total lack of these capabilities in animals. So, provided it is used in a wide enough sense so as to include hitherto unknown forms or modes of intelligence, most worries regarding the term person may be laid to rest in the context of human-animal studies.¹⁶

But even if it were the case that some relevant cognitive differences didn't actually exist and pose a problem, there is still another issue troubling the concept of respect – namely the bilateral character of communication. Respecting creates a specific relation between the giver and receiver of respect. This specific relation is not realised until the giver communicates his mental state to the receiver in some way – be it verbally or non-verbally by way of certain behaviours – and the receiver understands this communication accordingly at least to a certain extent. Communication theory informs us that even between human persons there are potentially several obstacles to overcome. Those involved in a communicative exchange need to speak the same language or share a common background regarding behavioural conventions such as certain gestures and postures. As regards respect in the sense of reverence (RR), such conventions may include avoiding

¹⁶ This, however, does not answer the deeper, practical question whether invoking cognitive capabilities is helpful at all when it comes to human-animal relationships and the ethical aspects involved. Animal advocates often pursue the strategy of upgrading animals to the same moral level as humans by readily ascribing to them very specific sophisticated mental abilities that are also found in humans. This is problematic for two reasons: first, this often implies quite a stretch of the concepts in question; second, this is counter-intuitive even within the intra-human ethical realm. Intra-human morality is rather complex, containing various elements: respect for persons, consideration of the wellbeing of sentient non-persons, care for dependent others, special obligations towards certain others owing to relationships, assistance in emergency cases etc. (Tuider 2015a; Wolf 2012). Cognitive sophistication is no necessary condition for moral consideration, but it may be a sufficient one.

direct eye contact, keeping a distance (in hierarchical constellations), specific forms of approaching or verbally addressing someone, etc. If I perform a certain action as a sign of respect towards another person, this person needs to understand and correctly interpret what I am doing. In a word: expressions of respect only work when they are not just intended and articulated as such by the sender but also perceived and understood accordingly by the receiver. So, owing to communicative misunderstandings or lack of shared conventions and moral principles, expressions of respect may go wrong even between persons from, say, different cultural backgrounds. Needless to say that, with regard to interspecies communication, these dangers are potentially even more virulent as communication barriers are far higher and shared conventions almost non-existent. Of course, domesticated animals living in close relationships with humans may develop some rudimentary understanding of the rules that govern interspecies social interaction which may be reminiscent of something like respect. And of course, there are intra- and interspecies animal behaviours that lend themselves to being interpreted as instances of respect – such as avoiding direct eye contact, certain submissive behaviours (RR) or behavioural self-restraint to avoid harm (RC). However, given interspecies communication barriers, those instances are constantly at risk of being misinterpreted one way or another.

Finally, there is another, rather intrinsic problem burdening the concept of respect: its bilateral character in terms of acceptance. Giving and understanding respect is insufficient – it also needs to be accepted. If the receiver – for some valid reason – feels uncomfortable with an expression of respect on the giver's part, we can hardly speak of a genuine instance of respect. Consider the following scenario: two gladiators in ancient Rome are to fight each other to death. Both share the same fighting ethic and values and respect each other for what they are and what they do. Although they are willing and ready to kill each other, this doesn't affect their mutual respect because they have freely agreed to their shared code and the actions that entails. Now consider a hunter about to kill a gorilla. The hunter claims (and genuinely believes) he respects the gorilla for who he is etc. (RR). For the sake of the argument, let's also assume that the gorilla somehow grasps the concept and understands its current expression but – for obvious reasons – refuses to accept it. Instead, he tries to attack or flee. The hunter shoots him. In this case, the unilateral use of the concept of respect enables the hunter to feel good and noble about what he's doing – at the expense of the gorilla and by ignoring his interests, wishes and perspective. This unilateral application of the concept seems to have a conscience-soothing effect for the sender at the receiver's expense. That is

probably the most common and most problematic instance of applying this concept to animals: invoking respect (mostly RR) in an inadequate sense which tends to cloak behaviours that are actually harmful to animals. Again, the problem resides in the fact that the point of reference of RR remains unclear when it comes to animals and that this void can be filled with all sorts of interpretations of what it is moral agents respect about them.

Lacking reciprocity, this scenario differs radically from the hierarchical or non-hierarchical relationships of RR as outlined above. In fact, here the sender of respect, in a sense, actively determines the situation, putting the receiver in a more passive and inferior position.¹⁷ It's an inversed hierarchical constellation – an instance of the power difference which almost always characterises human-animal encounters, thanks to our cognitive and especially technical superiority.¹⁸ Expressing respect through superiority leaves those at the receiving end in a position that is impossible to reconcile with the very concept at stake.

Needless to say that, in addition to aforementioned aspects, genuine instances of respect also require further conditions to be fulfilled: irrespective of simply offering, accepting and denying respect, a situation needs to be adequate to warrant expressions of respect in the first place: a criminal might be respected by his misguided peers although he does not deserve respect for his actions; or conversely, a traumatised victim of oppression may be unable to appreciate or accept their entitlement to respectful treatment. So respect may not depend on acceptance or the ability to reciprocate on the receiver's part.

As our discussion goes to show, for expressions of respect to work properly, at least three conditions need to be fulfilled: (1) sufficiently sophisticated cognitive capacities that make complex abstract communication possible; (2) successful communication, that is to say understanding the conditions governing the concept; and (3) bilateral agreement, that is to say any expression of respect on the sender's part must meet with the adequate acceptance on the receiver's part – ruling out a superior power position forcing respect upon one's counterpart. With regard to most animals, our current state of knowledge seems to suggest the following: they don't have the necessary cognitive capabilities – or at least we are currently unable to identify or interpret them correctly; communication barriers are too high to

¹⁷ In a hierarchical relationship (as is often the case in the context of RR), the reverse holds true: the giver of respect is in an inferior position of reverence or admiration.

¹⁸ Interspecies encounters on eye level, such as a human being living with a wolf pack in the wild and abiding by their rules, are possible but rather rare (Ellis 2007).

negotiate abstract concepts, and shared conventions are too weak; and there is obviously no acceptance of expressions of respect on their part, especially with regard to harmful behaviours which imply suffering or taking their lives. Of course animals could still benefit from well-intentioned and adequate respect – at least because of the behaviour that flows from it. However, given this plethora of subtle challenges and the fact that there is no clear point of reference for a valuable quality in animals in the sense of RR with clear normative consequences in terms of RC, and the fact that animals can't appreciate the mental states motivating expressions of respect, a lot seems to speak against applying this concept to animals – at least from their perspective. Still, its use is legion.

4. Respect for animals

Let's now take a closer look at how this concept is being applied in various contexts. We have identified at least four different usages of the term.

4.1 Respecting animals regardless of direct harm

Some people think that certain practices are simply incompatible with respect for animals, regardless of whether those practices actually harm animals directly. Consider the following scenarios: (1) A dog food company pays dog owners to paint the company's logo or slogan on their dogs. The paint isn't toxic or otherwise harmful to the dogs, and the dogs themselves don't mind at all having the logo painted on themselves. (2) Hunters pose with wild boar they have only just killed, pretending to be in a romantic situation with the carcasses in order to have supposedly funny pictures taken. The boar are already dead and so can't be harmed anymore.

In both scenarios, the respective actions clearly don't harm the animals who are directly affected by it. They don't have to endure any physical, emotional or psychological suffering. Still, many people would consider both behaviours disrespectful of animals. How is that? Maybe they feel there is some form of animal nature or dignity¹⁹ that should be respected. They might object to the fact that animals are being instrumentalised in an inappropriate way and are seen as mere objects for human manipulation or entertainment – rather than having intrinsic

¹⁹ Dignity is usually understood to denote some sort of absolute value and often works as a complement to respect. However, owing to its metaphysical nature, it's a largely unclear and thus highly problematic concept (Tuider 2017).

value or some form of essence or natural purpose of their own. This would amount to RR: reverence or admiration for what animals are or what their function is. Or they take a more pedagogical stance and are concerned about possible consequences for other animals or humans. Because people who display a lack of respect for animals in this sense are more likely to also abuse them in other ways that are directly harmful for animals or other humans. This may not only impact people's attitudes and behaviours towards animals but also their overall character development with unwelcome consequences for their social interactions in general.²⁰ And even if these tendencies don't materialise in those individuals involved in such acts, they might still be setting a bad example for others and thus contribute to the prevalence of problematic attitudes and behaviours in society.

But while many people may consider these forms of interactions disrespectful of animals, it does not follow that those very people necessarily also object to using, killing and eating animals in ways they do consider respectful. Even people who oppose to any attempt at turning their dogs into a billboard might well happily take them to a dog show in order to win a prize. Here, instrumentalisation plays some role as well, but one that seems to be in line with what they think can be legitimately done to animals. And even those who are outraged by obscene pictures taken with animal carcasses might well be all in favour of killing animals for food. Although killing another being for one's own purposes is in fact the ultimate form of instrumentalisation, those people feel that this doesn't interfere with the concept of respect, nor does it seem to constitute a violation of animal dignity or natural purposes. That is to say they don't use respect in the sense of consideration for the interests of those affected (RC).

If we take into account the perspective of the animals affected by these actions, quite a different picture emerges. Human assessments of what constitutes respectful use are hardly linked to the experiences of the animals in question. Respect for persons is all about protecting persons with regard to their vulnerabilities resulting from their specific personhood-related abilities. However, respect in the above examples admits of serious violations of animal interests while protecting them in other regards that they don't actually benefit from subjectively or care about actively. From the animals' perspective, only two aspects of respect make sense as they help protect them from actual harm: in terms of persons' attitudes, its pedagogical thrust; and in terms of behaviours, the direct or indirect beneficial consequences of actions. All the rest doesn't.

²⁰ Kant and St. Augustine provide classic instances of this pedagogical argument.

4.2 Respecting animals as instruments

To some degree, this category overlaps with the previous one. However, it focuses on what is widely considered legitimate forms of use and instrumentalisation carried out in a respectful manner. Two practices feature prominently here: so-called humane farming and so-called ethical hunting or respect-for-life hunting. Since hunting also plays a major role in the following section, we will limit our discussion here to humane farming.

One author puts it like this: respect for animals “means not torturing or abusing animals unnecessarily, even if we eventually dine on them.”²¹ And one humane farmer (who also seems to be quite a philosopher) argues: “We feed cows grass [not corn], and that honors and respects the cow-ness of the cow.” He’s also strongly opposed to debeaking poultry as well as other practices of manipulating animals for maximising human profits. Instead he advocates forms of animal breeding and husbandry that allow animals to live in accordance with their natural way of life before getting killed and eaten.²² So, here respect implies something like species-appropriate treatment while using, harming and killing them for human purposes. Again, the issue here is not instrumentalisation per se but inappropriate instrumentalisation. As inappropriate instrumentalisation seems to include essentialist as well as welfare-related elements, this is a conflation of RR and RC – namely admiration and reverence on the one hand and consideration of interests on the other.

Species-appropriate and humane treatment as well as the prevention of cruelty are clearly in the interest of animals. However, it largely remains a mystery what exactly unnecessary suffering and cruelty, or species-appropriate treatment constitute in this context. Usually, suffering is qualified as unnecessary when (i) it doesn’t serve an important human end, or when (ii) there is an alternative means to achieve that end. If, however, a harmful practice serves an important human end and there is no alternative means available, then this practice may be considered legitimate. Of course it is completely up to humans to determine which ends qualify as important.²³ Obviously, the latter author uses a rather wide sense of harm. Because he doesn’t simply focus on the experiential harms such as physical, emotional and psychological suffering, but also seems to include metaphysi-

²¹ Kristof 2013.

²² Ostrander 2011.

²³ Tuider 2013.

cally charged notions such as essence and naturalness. Not only is it totally unclear what the “cow-ness of the cow” is supposed to mean; it also remains completely mysterious what follows from it and why this should matter at all as the cow herself doesn’t seem to have even the remotest idea of it.

Adding a further argument, our farmer-turned-philosopher goes on to claim: “A culture like ours—that views plants and animals as inanimate piles of protoplasmic structure to be manipulated however cleverly we, in our hubris, can imagine—will soon view its citizens and other cultures in the same kind of disrespectful way.”²⁴ What he seems to be insinuating here is that a lack of respect for the natural order, of which animals are one part, will backfire badly. This is a variation of the pedagogical argument mentioned in the last section and has a strong prudential thrust: at the end of the day, respect for animals and nature is conducive to respectful social interactions between humans and thus in our own interest. However, such a transparently instrumental use of the term, it would seem, can hardly qualify as a genuine expression of respect for animals; neither can any attempts at bringing in metaphysically charged notions. All this nicely illustrates the immense confusion surrounding this concept.

4.3 Respecting animals as equals and instruments

This is a special category that covers primarily the practices of indigenous people such as Native Americans, the Inuit etc. Their relationship with, and treatment of, animals is often considered ethically superior to how we interact with animals in our so-called modern civilisation – exactly because of their special attitude of respect for animals, embedded in a certain traditional, culturally informed world view. And since this form of respect is often invoked as a role model, we will be looking into it in more detail.²⁵ Needless to say that we cannot do justice to all differences and particularities here. Instead we will limit ourselves to highlighting some of the most notable general features shared by many of these cultures when it comes to respecting animals. Since critical discussions of indigenous practices are prone to cause controversy, three preliminary remarks are in order.

²⁴ Ostrander 2011.

²⁵ We focus on indigenous subsistence hunting as this is generally considered to be easier to justify than recreational hunting because preserving one’s life or one’s traditions and cultural identity seem more worthy causes than fun-seeking or trophy bragging. We don’t believe recreational hunting to be ethically justifiable at all (Tuider/Wolf 2013), which is why we leave it unaddressed here.

First, given the unspeakable injustices indigenous people have suffered at the hands of western colonial powers, critique of indigenous practices – especially when articulated from the perspective of western culture – is often considered problematic.²⁶ While sharing all concerns regarding past injustices, we believe the opposite to be true: unless we engage indigenous cultures in critical discourse, we add to their unjust treatment in the past and prolong it into the present. Because this would imply treating them as outsiders, as people who are (or whom we at least deem) incapable of critical reflection as well as of cultural and moral progress rather than as persons on equal footing.²⁷ All cultural and moral progress is dependent on critical debate. And all cultures are capable of it. Declaring indigenous practices taboo amounts to denying this fact and constitutes a serious violation of the ideas of human equality and respect for persons.

Second, some current indigenous practices – especially when it comes to hunting animals – may have less of a traditional or cultural origin than is commonly assumed but may – ironically – be the result of colonial influence. Some claim that, before any contact with western civilisation, many indigenous people in North America, for instance, apparently had been farmers with a long-standing tradition of and great expertise in cultivating crops. And their dietary mainstay seems to have been plant-based foods.²⁸ They only picked up large-scale hunting once horses and firearms were introduced to them by western colonisers.²⁹ This sheds quite a new light on some allegedly indigenous practices and claims of authenticity.

Third, subsistence hunting to ensure one's own physical survival is exempt from ethical debates as this presents a situation with no alternative besides one's own demise. So, the following critical discussion does not rule out the ethical permissibility of genuine subsistence hunting. And some of the practices criticised below may well have a place in such a context. However, the subsistence criterion doesn't apply to most current indigenous hunting practices given that so-called modern civilisation has reached even the remotest parts of the globe and

²⁶ While criticising these practices as such shouldn't be considered problematic, two other things definitely should: outlawing these practices without sufficiently engaging said groups and trying to get their consent; and unequal treatment of these groups and their practices in the face of similar practices of other groups with comparable effects. Both could well be seen as instances of post- or neo-colonial abuse of power.

²⁷ Tuider/Wolf 2013.

²⁸ The fact that most food plants we use today have originated there goes to substantiate that claim (Laws 1994).

²⁹ Laws 1994.

alternative ways of survival are available. Now it might be argued that subsistence hunting may also be legitimate to preserve not only one's physical existence but also one's cultural heritage and traditions. This is more problematic. Because it could be argued that culture and tradition can be kept alive without harming and killing animals. One could, for instance, institutionalise more symbolic variants of hunting practices or carry out all preliminary steps but forgo the harming and killing. And it would seem hard to argue that harming and killing are integral elements of a specific tradition or culture which make it valuable. That being said, let's now look into the issue of indigenous respect for animals – especially in the context of hunting.

Respect plays a prominent role in many indigenous people's overall purportedly noble attitude towards animals. This attitude may include, but is not limited to, the following components: (1) As its basis, it emphasises similarities and the interconnectedness between humans and animals rather than differences. Animals are often viewed as equals or even family members or as sharing a common ancestry. This is an instance of RR in the sense of reverence or admiration for what animals are or which function they fulfil. This has practical implications. (2) When it comes to hunting and killing animals, certain principles are acknowledged – the most prominent of which include: reduce suffering; harm and kill only when necessary (not for fun or sport); use every bit of the animal (to avoid waste and thus also reduce the number of animals killed). And finally, (3) there is a range of respectful rituals, including apologies and expressions of gratitude before and/or after the hunting or killing. Again, those are embedded in, and informed by, complex mythological and metaphysical background assumptions.

Despite being metaphysically charged, indigenous views emphasising phylogenetic continuity are actually more in line with modern biology and evolutionary theory than the traditional western conception of the human-animal relationship with its strong ontological dualism – placing humans and animals in categorically different realms. In addition, some of the practical principles this entails are in fact beneficial to animals. Adherence to the principle of minimising suffering may certainly help ensure welfare standards for those animals directly affected by hunting practices – at least to some extent. Owing to the principle of killing only when necessary, indigenous respect for animals may indeed help prevent certain excesses such as slaughtering large numbers of animals or killing them only for fun or single body parts. Although this doesn't actually benefit those individuals being killed, it does so with regard to those who are spared, creating a better overall balance in the process. The same holds true for the princi-

ple of making use of all body parts of animals rather than letting them go to waste.³⁰ These are, more or less, all instances of RC namely consideration for the interests or wellbeing of animals.

However, the indigenous attitude of respect towards animals is not without its problems; neither are some of its practical implications. For a start, it is doubtful whether the motives are really as noble as is commonly assumed. Because many aspects of this so-called respectful attitude and its prophylactic and curative rituals are the mere result of fear of punishment – that is to say a concern that the spirit of the animal killed might haunt the hunter and take revenge on him. Here, RF in the sense of fear of danger comes into play. Accordingly, it would seem to be a matter of prudence rather than ethics to refrain from harming animals. Moreover, there is a strong tendency to invoke dubious metaphysical assumptions which probably work as coping mechanisms, serving psychological hygiene. It has been suggested that indigenous respect for animals (and corresponding rituals) may have originated from a psychological need to compensate for feelings of guilt or conflict arising from taking another individual's life.³¹ For instance, some indigenous people in the Americas believe in some great circle of all life – with animals and humans sharing common ancestry or even family relations. Accordingly, hunting takes place in cooperation with the animals, who agree to their being hunted, offering themselves freely as prey or sacrificing themselves for the benefit of an indigenous group. These assumptions are easily revealed to be totally misguided as soon as one witnesses how desperately and vigorously animals fight for their lives in such situations, obviously refusing to play the part assigned to them. In addition, metaphysical assumptions are sometimes combined with purely strategic considerations: some indigenous people openly admit that they show respect in order to secure hunting success. Because, according to their beliefs, only respected animals will give themselves up to the hunters and sacrifice their lives, whereas disrespectful conduct may bring bad luck in the future. However, strategic and instrumental thinking of this kind seems hard to reconcile with the concept of respect.³²

³⁰ It is also important to note that a problematic practice (say, indigenous hunting) can't be justified by referring to the existence of a more problematic practice (say, factory farming). A lesser moral evil cannot be justified by invoking a greater moral evil (Tuider/Wolf 2013).

³¹ Höffe 1993.

³² Paradoxically, here some form of anthropocentric instrumentalism seems to enter a worldview that is traditionally considered to be closer to the holistic end of the spectrum.

Metaphysical and strategic issues aside, however, the crucial point is this: even if this special traditionally and mythically informed attitude of indigenous groups towards the animals they hunt were unproblematic in terms of motives or general ontology, it still completely ignores the perspective of those affected by it – namely animals as sentient individuals. From their perspective, it makes no difference whatsoever whether they are being hunted and killed respectfully in the context of indigenous practices and the observance of traditional rules, or whether this happens in a purely commercial context out of mere calculation and greed for profit.³³ Or to put it differently: animals don't care whether a hunter feels some connection with them and practices certain prophylactic or curative rituals of respect, gratitude or apology, or whether he merely considers them objects and means to his ends. Unlike persons, animals, to our best knowledge, have no understanding of concepts such as respect and reverence. And they lack all comprehension of concomitants such as the hunter's motives or mental states. Let alone do they believe in any sophisticated metaphysical background assumptions. What they do experience, though, is fear, panic and physical suffering in the process of being hunted and killed. All indigenous rhetoric, mythmaking and storytelling is insufficient to cover the animals' perspective and their subjective experience. Again, there is no sign whatsoever of animals' readily and wilfully offering and sacrificing themselves for the benefit of humans. And even if animals could appreciate such expressions of respect, it would be more than doubtful whether that would suffice to get their consent.

Taking the perspective of individual animals as sentient beings seriously, there is actually another, rather technical aspect of indigenous hunting that speaks against it. For authenticity's sake, it often implies the deployment of archaic hunting and killing methods and the use of simple weapons. This may result in more suffering on the animals' part, especially when larger species are targeted with inadequate weapons that do not guarantee a fast kill, or when the use of more adequate weapons is limited for economic reasons.³⁴ From the animals' perspective, it would seem that suffering trumps respect.

³³ Tuider/Wolf 2013.

³⁴ A drastic illustration is provided by Hänggi (2001) in his report covering indigenous whaling in Greenland: the whale gets harpooned with a mine that explodes behind his head without killing him instantly. Instead of using a second charge (for economic reasons), the whalers shoot the slowly dying whale with guns for hours on end. As this example goes to show, more modern hunting techniques and equipment do not warrant less suffering per se. And of course this is not to suggest backwardness of indigenous groups as they often deploy modern methods as well. This then, how-

4.4 Respecting animals as equals with rights

In animal ethics, animal rights is the strictest position regarding the moral standing of animals. It holds that there is no fundamental moral difference between humans and animals. Instead, humans and animals are basically considered moral equals.³⁵ And just like humans, animals are accorded certain inalienable basic moral rights.³⁶ These rights protect individuals against becoming mere means to serve human ends and being treated as mere objects of purely strategic and instrumental considerations. So, basically, the animal rights position calls for a fundamental and radical overhaul of our relation with, and treatment of, animals. It doesn't simply problematise the manner in which some practices are being carried out but questions the ethical legitimacy of those very practices. (This is what sets it apart from the classic animal welfare position, which holds that there is a fundamental moral difference between humans and animals. According to this position, animals can be used as means to further human ends – on sole condition that they receive what is often called 'humane' treatment. This implies the rejection of cruelty and the avoidance of 'unnecessary' suffering. So, basically, the animal welfare position doesn't grant animals rights that work as trumps against instrumental considerations but simply calls for a 'humane' reform of established practices, aiming at improvements.)³⁷

The original formulation of this idea goes back to animal rights pioneer Tom Regan and also involves the concept of respect. Following Kant, he extends the idea of 'respect for persons' to include all beings with certain cognitive capacities capable of leading their own lives. These beings may not have full-blown autonomy but something that Regan calls preference autonomy, and he doesn't refer to them

ever, raises a further problem: does it make sense to try and preserve a tradition with non-traditional means (such as firearms and explosive charges)?

³⁵ The notion of equality requires some qualification: it doesn't mean that animals should have the very same rights as persons – the right to vote for dogs or the right to education for cows make no sense. Instead, it means that animals should be entitled to equal consideration in those respects which are relevant for their wellbeing and which can be meaningfully protected by rights – such as their interests in freedom from harm, suffering and killing.

³⁶ However, there is some disagreement as to which moral rights animals should be accorded. Most theorists agree that animals should have a right not to be harmed or killed. However, some thinkers on the more liberationist/abolitionist end of the spectrum would like to add to these the right not to be instrumentalised for human purposes – regardless of whether this involves any harming or killing.

³⁷ Tuider 2015b; 2016.

as persons but as subjects-of-a-life. Regan attributes to them what he terms inherent value, that is to say he considers them valuable in themselves, regardless of their utility for others. And it's because of their inherent value that "animals have a basic moral right to be treated with respect, something we fail to do whenever we use our superior physical strength and general know-how to inflict harms on them in pursuit of benefits for humans."³⁸ In other words: respect for animals implies acknowledging their intrinsic value as ends in themselves and not instrumentalising them but recognising them as moral equals who have basic moral rights to protect them. Regan calls this claim to respectful treatment the Respect Principle.³⁹

This position has profound implications: respect for animals in this sense means that animals must not be made to suffer, they must not be killed, and they must not even be used for human purposes. This is RC, namely consideration for their interests. Needless to say that animals benefit tremendously from respect in this sense as it protects them from serious harms at the hands of humans.⁴⁰ However, it is not the expression of respect as such that benefits them – as most animals are arguably not persons – but the consequences of acknowledging their rights. Here, respect is, as it were, a shorthand for rights. It is this sense of respect that most progressive animal advocates have in mind when they use the term nowadays.⁴¹

5. Vested interests and clouded judgments – the conditions of ethical reflection

Given the wide spectrum of interpretations the concept of respect for animals apparently admits of, a few cautionary remarks regarding a further potentially distorting factor are called for: our vested interests that cloud our judgements. Before we can think about and discuss ethical questions in general or the human-

³⁸ Regan 1996, 43.

³⁹ Regan 1987; Tuijter/Wolf 2014. We will not look into the problems of Regan's specific conception of animal rights here (such as invoking metaphysical concepts such as inherent value) as they are not pertinent to our discussion. Because rights don't presuppose such assumptions but can meaningfully be attributed to animals on sole condition of their being capable of having interests.

⁴⁰ Whether using animals in a way that takes their interests into consideration and yields benefits for both sides constitutes a form of harm to them is a complex question we will leave unaddressed here.

⁴¹ They may differ, however, with regard whether they mean it in the sense of respect for the liberty of animals or respect for their wellbeing.

animal relation and the concept of respect for animals in particular, we need to come to grips with the conditions under which all of this takes place. Because these conditions significantly impact our deliberation processes and the results thereof. The basic issue here is that we are strongly biased in this regard. It's not as if we could reflect on and decide these questions from some Archemidian point of view. This idea of neutral judgment is an illusion. Because it's not as if we chose only now whether we should use and abuse animals in order to satisfy our various needs. Instead, our established practices involving animals have always preceded our moral judgments about them – both ontogenetically and phylogenetically. And of course we have never actually decided on purely rational grounds to use, harm and kill animals in the first place. Instead, we have all been raised and socialised – and now live – in an environment where using, harming and killing animals and subjecting their lives and wellbeing to our interests has always been considered normal, natural and necessary⁴² – a given that we have never seen seriously questioned. And, quite naturally, we have grown used to this ubiquitous use, benefitting from and depending on it in various ways – long before we even start to critically reflect on these very practices. This is arguably the main explanation for the stability of the established system of animal exploitation. Now that this system is increasingly getting under attack, psychological defence mechanisms kick in massively, serving two purposes: On the one hand, they are about defending our behaviour and way of life. We don't want to give up cherished habits and behaviours. On the other hand, they are about our moral self-concept, the image of ourselves as moral agents, which we are keen to preserve to ourselves and to others. We strongly refuse to be declared a contributing factor to an ethical problem as this would interfere with our self-concept as morally good persons.

And, last but not least, for reasons of psychological hygiene, we have little interest in changing the status quo. Our established defence mechanisms do a pretty good job of dealing with cognitive dissonance resulting from the fact that our actions are not in alignment with our beliefs and values. Our biases, caused by our vested interests and stabilised by various psychological defence mechanisms, involve the danger of significantly distorting our perception of, thinking about, and judging of animal-related issues. We don't simply refuse to translate certain insights into action but often refuse to accept those insights in the first place, let alone even actively seek information that makes us feel uncomfortable. This is how we end up with ex-post rationalisations rather than being guided by genuine

⁴² Joy 2010.

reasons; and this is how we end up with self-delusion rather than self-critical reflexion. At the end of the day, all of this serves the sole purpose of avoiding the need to take action. One glance at the standard arguments and justifications brought forward in favour of our problematic practices involving animals goes to prove that. Lacking considered decisions and good arguments, all that remains is clouding one's own ulterior motives.

It is in this regard that moral consideration of animals differs significantly from other ethical issues. Most of us in enlightened, progressive societies today are in favour of human equality, rejecting any discrimination based on sex, race, nationality, religion or political views. One of the main reasons why most of us are happy to consent is that by doing so we don't have to make significant changes to our conduct and way of life, that is to say: we have nothing to lose or sacrifice because in most instances, we don't actually benefit from those discriminating practices. As regards animals, however, it's quite a different matter. Because when we discriminate against animals, we all stand to benefit. Any changes here require behavioural changes with drastic consequences affecting all aspects of our lives, setting animal rights apart from all other social justice issues.⁴³ Additionally, social consensus and pressure here is pretty low compared to above mentioned injustices towards humans.

It's quite unlikely that we will ever completely overcome our biases and rationalisations here. Nevertheless, it's imperative to at least attempt to develop some awareness of this issue in both everyday life and theoretical reflexion. Because good philosophy, to our mind, may well sometimes be painful and shouldn't yield to personal comfort. Instead, it ought to be critical and uncompromising. Kant has a somewhat similar understanding when he says that "philosophy's job is to confront and challenge the hocus-pocus arising from misunderstandings, however many prized and beloved delusions are annihilated in the process."⁴⁴

Conclusion

Now, is respect for animals a meaningful concept or just a hollow phrase? As is the case with all complex matters, the answer to this question needs to be a rather nuanced one. On the one hand, there is the fact that respect is a strongly established

⁴³ The key factor here is considering animals to be food. Acknowledging animal rights would have serious implications every time we sit down to dine. We are also indebted to personal conversations with Alex Hershaft for this insight.

⁴⁴ Kant (1903/11): 10.

and acknowledged social value, and calls to respect are common elements in normative discourse – equipping it with significant appellative power. With most people having some basic understanding of the concept, this power can be used to serve an important pedagogical function, which may at least help avoid certain excesses and moderate human treatment of animals in general. It gives us pause to think. Even if this leaves out the animals' perspective to some extent, it can still be of great ethical significance as it touches upon the motives and attitudes of moral agents – and not merely on the consequences of their actions. And finally, there is no arguing that it is a sign of moral progress that we are even discussing the concept of respect with regard to animals. Some decades ago – at least in western countries – this would have been inconceivable.

On the other hand, and despite its initial appeal, most people don't seem to have a deeper understanding of the concept and – crucially – what it entails. In particular, it largely remains a mystery which practices exactly are compatible with respect for animals and which aren't – and which criteria come into play here. Obviously, it is anything but a clear concept. Our analysis has shown that there are different senses of respect for animals and that they admit of a wide range of different interpretations. And it has become quite clear that different people draw very different conclusions from it and consider very different practices and actions to be compatible with it – all owing to the fact that, contrary to personhood, there is no clear point of reference for respect for animals. Moreover, since expressions of respect for animals tend to involve asymmetric power relations, as we have seen, there is always an additional risk of our losing sight of the animals' perspective. This is aggravated by another fact: our strong vested interest in animal use and abuse, potentially clouding our moral judgment. At this point, we always need to bear in mind that human beings are infinitely creative in rationalising their problematic behaviours and deluding themselves when it comes to protecting their innumerable preferences and cherished privileges. That is why people – often subconsciously – tend to invoke respect for animals in a unilateral fashion, leaving out the animals' perspective at least to some extent, which is, in fact, incompatible with the concept as such. Then, all talk of respect for animals runs the risk of dwindling into a hollow phrase or, as Kant might term it, hocus-pocus. And even where respect is well-intended and fulfils all conditions of adequacy, animals only benefit from the behaviours that flow from it but can never appreciate the concept as such.

So, respect for animals can be a meaningful concept to some degree, but it always remains insufficient, unless we also spell out what exactly it means and what

it normatively implies. This, it would seem, calls for using it only in the strict sense of respect for animal rights – that is to say in the sense of consideration for their wellbeing, interests, needs, and vulnerabilities and in the sense of due regard for their corresponding moral rights. All of this, of course, amounts to RC. Then again, it might well be more to the point not to shroud matters in unclear terminology but to call a spade a spade and avoid all talk of respect whenever possible.

If we are serious about overcoming anthropocentrism in order to reconstruct the human-animal relationship, we had better acknowledge the fact that animals are feeling, intelligent and social individuals with complex needs and vulnerabilities – just like us. Once we accept this, we had better acknowledge that animals don't need respect – but rights.

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