

Between Advocacy and Academy

A Report on the *MAI2 Conference*, Ethics Institute and Faculty of Veterinary Science, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands, July 3rd-6th, 2012

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Three years since the first conference, held in Newcastle in 2009, *Minding Animals International* has organized the second international meeting in the civic centre in Utrecht, in The Netherlands, where John Coetzee's public lecture opened up the talks on the evening of Tuesday July 3rd, 2012. On the same afternoon two other important events were also taking place in the city centre, namely the *ICAS Satellite Symposium* and the *Interfaith Service*. It was apparent that the people from all over the world who came to listen intended to make the most of this valuable opportunity to work together on Animal Studies. The conference continued over the following days in the modern building of the university of Utrecht, not far from the city centre and ended on July 6th evening with Marc Bekoff's public lecture, held in the Dom church.

During the first public lecture Coetzee delighted the public by reading his inedited work, *The Old Woman and the Cats* where the main characters were an old lady called Elizabeth Costello, her child – a middle-aged American professor – and the 'embodied souls' – nonhuman and human – who lived with her. The evocative atmosphere of The Dom Tower delighted the audience while Coetzee's words provided food for thought with the soul seeking questions posed by main characters: the professor attempted to understand why his mother had chosen to live in a remote village in Spain, sharing her home with a feline colony and with a bizarre man called

Pablo, all of whom she took care of. However, his questions, which embodied Western rational and functional mentality, were not entirely satisfied by Costello's wise answer, as in the case of the question of controlling the reproductive life of the cats – and thus of each living being. This issue is addressed by Elizabeth when taking into consideration the right every soul has to incarnate in a body and enjoy life: "There will never be too many children" she stated. In our view there could not have been a more appropriate opening for a conference brimming with ideas about our relationship with nonhuman animals.

Over the following days there were several important lectures, presented by scholars from all over the world. Though all remarkable, it is not possible to comment on them all here. However, Will Kymlicka's and Sue Donaldson's lecture is very much worth mentioning. They posed the question "Do we need a political theory of animal rights?". The speakers suggested:

As agents, animals act upon their subjective experience of the world, and we can gain insight into this subjective experience – this inner life – by entering into intersubjective relationships with them. What kinds of relationships do humans have with animals? What kinds of communities do they form? What kinds of relationships do animals desire? And this is where political theory kicks in. It provides conceptual tools for thinking about the various ways that agents both human and animal can be related to political communities. The issues of membership status require the conceptual tools of the social sciences and of political theory, as a supplement to the long-standing concepts of both ethology and moral philosophy.

Between the keynote lectures which took place there were parallel sessions, simultaneously held in different rooms of the university building. Each session dealt with a specific subject and some of them, dealing with the wider aspects, were developed throughout the whole day and over the following days. The main topics covered were: *Animals and Law*, *Political Philosophy and the Representation of Animals in Politics*, *Public Perception of Animals*, *Animals in Art*, *Animal Ethics*, *The Human-Animal Relationship*, *Animal Welfare and the Environment*, *Animals in Popular Media*, *The Human-animal Relationship: Various Cultural Expressions*, *The Influence of Animals on the Physical and Mental Health of Humans*, *Animal Welfare: the Veterinarian Role*, and *Animals and Religion*.

In the meantime, for the whole of the three day period a *Protecting the Animals Seminar Series* was taking place, opened by Jill Robinson's lecture. Furthermore, during the lunch break of the conference it was possible to see movies, take part in the study circle discussions, and view the poster presentations. It was quite a challenge to keep up with all the meetings but not an impossible one.

Looking more closely at the parallel sessions again, though all remarkable, it is not possible to comment on them all, however it is worth mentioning the *Animals and Law* and the *Political Philosophy and the Representation of Animals in Politics* panels where one of the most significant points at issue was the way of representing animal interests in political systems. They involved animal advocacy, political philosophy, veterinary practices and deeply investigated the matter of animal rights and whether they should be implemented into current laws.

In particular the topic *Animals and Law* was interesting as an analysis of the current way of protecting animals by the law, in accordance with the new perceptions that advocate the necessity to make a substantial change in how society treats animals. As a matter of fact, in the modern era, the liberal representation of society is consistent with a regulatory policy that allows an alliance between law and current moral code. Ethics and politics are intimately linked. In the EU, ethics is even an essential component of the idea of the same European citizenship.

The presenting authors focused their papers on the Animal Rights debate. They noted that public attitudes toward animals are changing rapidly and they tried to explain that if the change would take a political dimension, it could lead to a more real protection of animals.

From this perspective, the question of whether animal rights could be a means of protecting animals was shown as particularly pertinent in view of the difficulties of current animal protection laws to address the regulation of the human-animal relationship in line with the changing public attitudes to animals.

These two parallel sessions aimed to present a discussion about the theories concerning animals from a legal and theoretical point of view, with regard to the significant approaches that could consent to construct a legitimate position on the intention of including animals in our political communities.

Much reflection was stimulated as far as Animal Rights were concerned and whether they are duly reflected by the law. Indeed it is clearly evident that some discrepancy exists between the theory of Animal Rights and the way animals are considered by the law. Furthermore, the bias of some laws towards animal exploitation still renders the protection afforded to animals largely dependent on the animals' designated uses.

Animal welfare science and related disciplines have conclusively demonstrated that animals are sentient beings: they experience themselves, their world and the surrounding world in ways that are 'meaningful' to them. This remark deals with the fact that all living entities have interest to be protected, even by the legal system. The European Community Treaty rec-

ognizes that animals are sentient (i.e. that it acknowledges they can suffer and have interests that are relevant to them) and mandates that member states pay full regard to the welfare of animals when formulating policy. This, however, does not mean that Animal Rights have been established. In addition, Europe is a pluralist society where individuals have varying beliefs about how animals ought to be treated. Even the laws which seem relatively progressive regarding animal protection do not always have notable consequences.

Too often animal ethics is irrelevant as far as the law and practical purposes are concerned; there is little effort being made to change circumstances in order to reduce and remove the perceived need to cause animals harm. Also when the law acknowledges the interests of animals besides the benefits to humans, the critical prohibition on beating and killing animals is often reduced to ‘unnecessarily’ and ‘needlessly’. Additionally, the way of striking a clear balance of interests may not be that easy each time; sometimes human interest overcomes that of the animals, and pain and suffering might lawfully occur. In addition, the resources available can hinder governments and the legal system from providing a useful solution.

But taking seriously the moral demand arising from the fundamental connection that humans have to animals, that is empathy – understood as the manner in which we access the foreign consciousness of another psychic being, regardless of its species – a sort of ‘hybrid’ ethical-political system should be set up. It could grant the development and preservation of ethical relationships with animals that are rooted in our recognition of them as beings with interests, needs, and emotional lives of their own.

Consequently such an ethical-political system would need to be maintained and protected legally, to avoid failure. Prospective regulatory options should be appraised and evaluated using impact assessments on animals. In fact, if the interests of a party are not explicitly considered during appraisal of options, these interests are more likely to be undervalued or even ignored.

However, there is no formal, explicit method to assess impact on animals’ interests in the policy cycle (nor in the consequent laws). A sentient animal’s principal interest is its own welfare. Still, we know that the concept of animal welfare encompasses a broader spectrum beyond mere ‘wellbeing’. Animal welfare is a complex concept, involving physical (health/function), mental (feelings) and nature-based (naturalness) determinants. Besides, in some policy areas, the interests of animals might not be aligned with the interests of human society. However, it is only when the interests of animals are considered in the policy process that the intent of the protection of animals as sentient beings will be achieved.

In conclusion, it emerged how the importance of Animal Welfare has led to an improvement in Animal Welfare Legislation, which has been ameliorated and adopted by an increasing number of countries. However, in order to fulfill the aim of directly protecting entities other than human beings, a delicate balance between the protection of these entities, on the one hand, and the protection of human interests, namely social and economic considerations, on the other, is still required. To converge public attitudes regarding animal protection with the degree of animal protection afforded in relevant policy processes, to identify reforms that might promote social justice for animals it is important to consider:

1. The need of an appropriated institutionalized legal and political status for animals.
2. The need of a Government institution focused on advancing animal protection.
3. The risks arising from the omission of animal interests from fundamental policy instruments such as Impact Assessments.
4. The consequences of the lack of policy strategies to advance animal welfare.
5. The need for human beings to extend their ethical concern to nonhuman beings.

Looking back at the structure of the conference, on Thursday evening a Podium Discussion was held on *The Future of Animal Politics*, chaired by Frans Brom. Marcus Düwell, Andrea Gavinelli, Ludo Hellebrekers, Will Kymlicka, Frauke Ohl, Peter Singer joined in the discussion. As written on the presentation material:

Animal politics faces new challenges. The place of animals in our social, moral, legal and political discourses is undergoing serious changes. It is difficult to foresee how these discourses will develop. What topics will be on the agenda of animal politics and what topics should there be? How will regulatory frameworks, both in different countries and on a global level, develop? What importance will animal politics have in the context of globalization, a changing economic world order, and the challenges of climate change? How can sustainable animal stewardship be achieved? This discussion aims at an investigation of different perspectives on the future of animal politics.

The conference closed on Friday evening with Marc Bekoff's public lecture, *Minding Animals Redux: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why?*. Stemming from his studies on the rich nature of the emotional lives of animals, Professor Bekoff examined the emotional and moral intelligence of animals; in this sense he looks at the social behavior of animals, as play. In fact, as the Professor said:

When animals play they carefully signal their intentions to cooperate and to play, they trust that playmates will obey the rules of fair play, and they forgive one another and apologize to one another so that play can continue as play and not escalate to aggression. There are negative consequences of not playing fairly. Humans are a big-brained, big-footed, arrogant, and invasive species. We constantly make decisions about who lives and who dies using flawed speciesist criteria. An emerging field called 'compassionate conservation' could lead the way to a more harmonious and peaceful world in which there is more social justice. By minding animals we can expand our compassion footprint and make the world a better place for all beings.

As the conference came to an end, people started to go home. It had been a really demanding few days, starting each day at 9 and ending at 10 pm but I imagine most of the participants are looking forward to join the next *Minding Animals Conference*, which will be hold in India in January 2015. We cannot but express our gratitude to the conference organizers: Tatjana Visak, Rod Bennison, and Kim Stallwood.