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Becoming the good shepherds

Commentary on [Marino & Merskin](#) on *Sheep Complexity*

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Abstract: It is very important that we clarify what we owe to nonhuman animals. To that end, we need a better understanding of animal cognition and emotion. Marino & Merskin's target article is a welcome contribution to this project. Sheep, like most other animals, are sentient beings with interests of their own. It is wrong to discriminate against them based on species-membership or cognitive sophistication. We are morally required not to harm them, and to help them have the best possible lives, just as we would be in the case of human beings with similar interests. We must become the good shepherds, or stewards, of the other animals.

[Eze Paez](#) conducts research on what we owe to nonhuman animals from a variety of moral perspectives, including act- and rule-consequentialism, as well as Kantian ethics. He is especially interested in the wrongness of killing animals and our reasons for alleviating wild animal suffering. [Website](#)



Determining what we owe to nonhuman animals is an issue of the greatest importance. More than a trillion die under exploitation each year after lives full of suffering (Mood & Brook, 2012; FAO). Is it wrong to harm them as we do? In addition, more than a quintillion live in nature (Tomasik, 2009). Plausibly, they also have lives in which suffering predominates, even if it's due to natural events rather than human agency (Horta, 2010; Faria, 2016; Ng, 1995; Tomasik, 2015). Do we have reasons to help them and alleviate the harms they endure?¹ As these numbers show, most of the individuals presently existing are nonhuman animals, not human beings. It is likely that animals will continue to outnumber humans in the future. Thus, these are questions we cannot afford to ignore if we are to live ethically.

1. A better acquaintance with sheep

In order to give a proper answer to these questions, however, we need a grasp of the relevant facts — among others, facts about the psychological capacities of animals. In this sense, the target article by Marino & Merskin (2019) on sheep cognition and emotion is a welcome contribution to

¹ Suppose we answer yes, as I think we should. Even so, it would only be permissible to intervene if we were sufficiently certain that we would not cause more harm than good. At least regarding large-scale interventions, we still do not have the necessary knowledge. For this epistemic problem, see Delon & Purves (2018).

the project of nonhuman animal ethics and politics. Some of the commentators have raised several concerns about their methodology and some of their conclusions (**Horback**, 2019; **Peña-Guzman**, 2019; **Vonk**, 2019). This kind of disagreement, however, is to be expected from serious scientific inquiry and, as the authors themselves insist, further research is needed. Nevertheless, it seems beyond dispute that sheep are sentient individuals, with a capacity for positive and negative experiences. Moreover, it is apparent that, as **Webster** (2019) says, sheep do not merely live in the present. They can remember past beneficial and harmful events, as well as form positive and negative expectations about the future. They can experience “fear, anger, rage, despair, boredom, disgust” (p. 9) and maybe anxiety (p. 14). There is even the possibility that being subjected to a harmful environment in their youth affects their personality in a way that diminishes their capacity to enjoy their lives for the remainder of their existence (p. 9).

We need to take all these facts into account in order to identify the specific interests of sheep — or any other nonhuman animal — and to what extent they may be harmed by, for instance, the conditions in which they are reared and killed in the food industry. Of course, that is not enough to determine whether the harms inflicted on them are morally justified. Furthermore, we need some moral theory. In this sense, it is obvious that a majority of people in human societies believe that it is permissible to harm sheep (or pigs, cows, hens and fishes for that matter) so that we can enjoy their meat, make clothes out of them, or advance our biomedical knowledge. At most, they believe it would be nice if we could obtain all those things without inflicting so much suffering on these animals.

The latter seems to be the opinion of some of the commentators on the target article (see **Woodruff**, 2019 or **Horback**, 2019). They suggest that it is good that we learn more about sheep so that we can continue exploiting them without causing them unnecessary suffering. Marino & Merskin, for their part, defend the stronger view that we should stop using sheep for these purposes altogether. I believe that their position is supported by sounder arguments. Causing less harm is good, but causing no harm is better, all else being equal. If we can, that is what we have most reason to do.

2. Antispeciesist ethics

Sheep are sentient beings, capable of fairly complex emotions, with long-term memory and a capacity to anticipate the future, at least to some extent. Many people nevertheless insist that it is permissible to harm them to produce food or clothing. This is probably because they believe, more or less explicitly, that it makes a significant difference that sheep do not belong to the human species. They accept *speciesism*. This is the view that the interests of some individuals matter less than the similar interests of others simply because the former do not belong to a certain species (Dunayer, 2004; Horta, 2013; Ryder, 1983; Singer, 2015 [1975]).

As an ethical view, however, speciesism is, I believe, untenable. First, belonging to one species or another does not seem to be the kind of attribute that can have moral relevance. After all, it consists of having certain genes or a capacity to interbreed. These are not facts that can determine whether and to what extent an individual should be given moral consideration. Second, belonging to a certain species correlates only weakly with other attributes usually appealed to in order to justify the systematic discrimination of sheep or other nonhuman animals. Having sophisticated cognitive capacities is one of the attributes commonly put forward in this

discussion. It is true that, as a rule, humans are more complex cognitively than sheep. Yet it is equally true that some human beings are not — such as the very young or those suffering from severe cognitive impairment, whatever its cause. Most people rightly believe that it is not permissible to discriminate against these humans simply because of their less complex cognitive abilities. Most people would undoubtedly consider it wrong to subject young or impaired humans to the kinds of treatment imposed on sheep for human benefit. But, if so, consistency requires that we not discriminate against nonhuman animals on similar grounds (Dombrowski, 1997; Horta, 2014; Pluhar, 1987).

To deliberate morally is to choose among available alternatives based on the positive or negative impact they have on others. Beings that are sentient can be harmed and benefited by our actions, and by natural events. Hence it suffices that sheep are sentient beings to conclude that they should be given full moral consideration (Horta, 2018). Like all sentient individuals, sheep have an interest in not suffering and in enjoying their lives. Taking these interests seriously requires us to refrain from harming sheep for trivial purposes. We do not lose anything of importance by giving up lamb, hogget, mutton or wool (as we would if they were the only ways to feed and clothe ourselves). Humans can thrive on a purely plant-based diet (Melina et al., 2016). Thanks to synthetic fabrics, we can easily dispense with wool. Yet more than 550 million sheep die each year under exploitation ([FAO](#)). It follows that these practices cause serious moral wrongs.

Biomedical experimentation in animals poses a harder ethical problem, though only in cases where what is at stake is the chance of extending or greatly improving the lives of future individuals. We must consider the possibility that sometimes it may be permissible to impose certain harms on some nonhuman animals for the sake of other future animals and humans. Yet, even in this, our deliberation must be governed by the principle that similar interests matter similarly, irrespective of the species, or other attributes, of the individuals whose interests they are.

3. Conclusion

Sentient animals are, to borrow Korsgaard's (2018) phrase, our fellow creatures. We are all equal members in the moral community. Through scientific inquiry and ethical reflection, we will perhaps get better acquainted with them and our duties towards them. We may thereby become the good shepherds, or stewards, of the other animals, fulfilling our duties not to harm them, and to help all sentient beings have the best possible lives.

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