Abstract - Fraser

A short history of animal ethics

How should we treat non-human animals? This question has been answered in many different ways since pre-history. Many indigenous cultures saw animals as equal or superior beings that should be treated with respect. Pastoralist cultures typically saw animals as having been entrusted to people for appropriate care and use. Agrarian cultures tended to see animals as fellow participants in the natural cycles of rural life. Industrial cultures tended to assume that efforts to increase productivity and efficiency would lead to a better life for all. The Romantic Movement, reacting against industrialization, emphasized emotions and valued naturalness as important for a good life.

Since ancient Greece, various formal theories of animal ethics have been promoted. These have based ethical decisions on the consequences of actions, or on adherence to fundamental rights and rules, or on respecting the relationships we have with animals, or on the virtuous intentions of the person, or on the principle of conserving animals and nature.

With the complexity of issues that now arise over the many effects we have on animals, I argue that no single tradition or principle provides adequate guidance, and that a “practical ethic”, based on several different principles provides the best way forward.

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