

## **Environmental and Animal Ethics in Light of the Functionings Approach**

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The purpose of this paper is to show how the Functionings Approach applies to the debate about ethics related to the environment and non-human animals. To this end, the paper is divided into two stages. In the first, we will highlight the theoretical pillars of the Functionings Approach that allow us to respond to criticism about the anthropomorphization of non-human functional systems. Thus, we intend to offer an adequate response to expand the discussion, advocating a broader moral community. The second stage seeks to show to what extent the Functionings Approach offers a more adequate answer to Biocentrism and Preference Utilitarianism. At the end, we intend to be able to present the moral commitment that we human beings have to other types of functional systems, as suggested by the Functionings Approach.

To address issues relating to ethics that go beyond the traditionally named human dilemmas is always a challenge that requires patience and dedication. The situation becomes even more complex and difficult if we try to insert non-human animals and the environment into our moral consideration. This is because there is an arsenal of socio-cultural and economic practices, as well as, of course, solidified ideologies going against any attempt to include non-human functional systems in our moral community, impeding the expansion of our ethical commitments. Such barriers are substantiated under the anthropocentric aegis that guides our view of the world around us and thus defines our hierarchical place in the world. Above all, they are self-justified through the affirmation that each and every ethical proposal will always be anthropocentric, since it is we human beings who are morally judging the world. Such a justification, obviously, intends to lead the interlocutor to think that proposals to expand the moral community, including non-human animals and the environment, would actually be an anthropomorphization of those systems. That is, it would be a projection based on our functionings that would not correspond to the needs of the same.

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Given this scenario we intend: (1) to apply the Functionings Approach (FA) to prove that the inclusion of non-human animals and the environment in our moral circle does not necessarily involve the anthropomorphization of the same; and (2) to demonstrate the advantages of adopting the FA when facing biocentrism and utilitarianism, two ethical proposals that are competing for a position as a non-anthropocentric ethics. Thus, we will argue that it is not only possible, but it is morally desirable to include non-human animals and the environment in our community as functional systems.

Many are the theoreticians who categorize animal ethics as a branch of environmental ethics, whether this be for axiological reasons or even ontological ones (Naconecy, 2014). According to this narrative, environmental ethics would therefore be responsible for expanding the field of our moral concerns beyond human needs and interests. Regardless of the reasons and motives behind this categorization, here we shall classify animal and environmental issues separately for at least two reasons. First of all, we seek to highlight both the animal issue and the environmental issue as associated ethical dilemmas, with each one demanding of us specific attention.<sup>3</sup> The second reason concerns the way in which the FA mobilizes these two fields (animals and the environment), which is, proposing an alternative form of inclusion to the other contemporary theories that deal with this debate, such as utilitarianism and biocentrism,<sup>4</sup> as we shall see below.

(1) The argument of the supposed “anthropomorphization” functions as a fallacious variant of anthropocentrism, the latter which is a point of view we intend to invalidate as a moral and political proposition. Besides being produced and reinforced by an anthropocentric approach, the argument of anthropomorphization sets up a false polemic in our context, since we can demonstrate that the FA is formulated specifically to cover the needs of each functional system, that is, of beings and of nature, without that involving us adapting them to our own needs.

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<sup>3</sup> Which also responds to the anthropomorphization argument.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, in responding to the second reason we will also be responding to the second problem addressed in the beginning of this paper.

Why and how are the environment and non-human animals important? In an attempt to answer this question it is first necessary to understand the critique proposed by Maria Clara Dias in the formulation of the FA, concerning the concept of the “individual self” designed in the times of modernity. According to Dias, it is an absurd concept that does not allow us to understand how each and every one of us is. It is not by chance that we see the human being occupying a central role<sup>5</sup> in the Enlightenment. The inferiority of non-human animals also finds acceptance in the notions that our rationality and capacity for self-determination should form the bases for the construction of our morality. Since non-human animals and the environment do not share such characteristics, such an argument is used as a justification for instrumental and often utilitarian treatment. They would not be “ends in themselves” since they do not have the capacity to self-determine themselves, are not rational, nor are able legislators. Such logic is the base that synthesizes the support of a moral ranking that promotes and reiterates the objectification of non-human functional systems.

This would mean that we can say the FA allows us to affirm that we are blindfolded, if not by a moral blindness, as a function of an inheritance that forges a false understanding about ourselves. This is because, in a sense, we think we are made out of nothing, that our identities are constituted predominantly in an isolated way. The notion of the construction of the self and of autonomy is presented as an unworkable independence, where this notion is at the least naïve and at the most worthy of questioning and attention. To think in this way deeply compromises our self-description as moral subjects and makes it appear that we can live in isolation, according to Dias.

It is true that this description of hers could be understood as another approach, among many, hostage to the anthropocentric premise: arguing for human exceptionalism. Such an argument would allow the inclusion of non-human animals (and, in this case, the environment) in our moral community only when they were in some way associated with human beings and their (in)direct interests. In this sense, the argument Dias describes would be fairly similar to the proposal by Kant in “Lectures on

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth pointing out that at that time the Enlightenment was responding to theocentrism, trying to firm up the bases upon which human culture, understanding, freedom, autonomy and rationality could constitute themselves tools against dogmatism and the interference of legislation of the faith and of religion, always appearing with political powers. In this sense, the philosophy of Illustration left us a bonus and an onus, which were: to value reflection, on one hand, and anthropocentrism, on the other.

Ethics”, when the philosopher accepts the existence of an ethical relationship with non-human animals (in Kant’s example, a dog) as long as the relationship is associated with the life of a human being, in this case the “animal’s owner”. Here we have an answer that does not serve us fully, since it excludes the animals with whom we have no contact, maintaining a kind of “weak” anthropocentrism in effect. Therefore, Dias does not support the argument made by this model and offers an alternative. Having rejected the alternative of an abstract self, mentioned previously, she indicates the need to undertake an “empirical investigation about the various existing forms of life which, in a more or less explicit way, were progressively incorporated into our moral universe” (Dias, 2015, p. 21). In questioning the notion of the absurd self, and the resulting anthropocentric view, Dias questions the deeply rooted thinking that impedes us from seeing that non-human animals, as well as the environment, must be recognized as constituent parts of who we are and of how we live a good life.

The immediate consequence of adopting this alternative, according to Dias, is the turning of the focus of our moral conception of justice toward the needs of each functional system, that is, its basic functionings. In addition, the self is reinserted into the universe that forged it: the world. For Dias this gives the FA at least one point of agreement with the ethical view of Aristotle, which is, that specific view in which the philosopher conceives of morality as a practice concerning ourselves and not only something exterior or different from us.

Having expanded our moral circle to other functional entities, it is appropriate to now argue for the constitution of a universal moral community, non-anthropocentric, non-anthropomorphic and non-utilitarian or biocentric.

If we were to expand the moral community from a Biocentric approach, for example, we would have to understand every form of life based on the notion of moral *status*. The concept of life, in this case, would be in itself sufficient to determine that which possesses moral *status*. There would not be a commitment to the quality of a life specifically, but to life in itself. This approach, nevertheless, compromises us with some problems. One of them, for example, concerns feminist demands for the right to abortion, since each and every life would have an independent intrinsic value. The FA, on the other hand, may be differentiated from that ethical theory because it does not

conceive of life in itself as a value. It is the basic functionings of each functional system that deserve attention.

As for Utilitarianism, an approach supported by the basic principles of the reduction of pain and the maximisation of pleasure as a way of guaranteeing a worthwhile life for sentient beings, the FA questions precisely the criterion of sentience. Because it leaves out a broader (systemic) understanding of how the identities of beings are formed, the preference Utilitarianism of Singer, for example, finds itself incapable of including non-sentient beings or even inanimate objects in its moral community. Additionally, it finds itself hostage to a hierarchy that the FA does not accept. This model, as the FA suggests, would negatively affect the quality and performance of functional systems that are formed based on encounters with that and those which would be outside of that utilitarian moral community. In addition, contrary to preference utilitarianism, the FA does not rank human beings as morally superior due to their ability to envision future projects.

We do not need to renounce any of the characteristics that many of us share and that comprise what we think about ourselves to recognize the urgency and legitimacy of an environmental and animal ethics. To the contrary, it is a part of those abilities to take care of the other and to build joint relationships with others. In the name of *what* will humanity come to agreement on concrete changes in the world, in our models of education and public policies? It is urgent for us to find an answer, which may replace our unsustainable, exclusionary, egocentric and anthropocentric rancidity “for a more inclusive moral point of view”! The FA allows us to bring this commitment to fruition. Let us all, therefore, each and every one of us, definitely do our part in favour of a better world, uplifted by a universally binding approach capable of perceiving us as part of a whole, where we are that whole as well.