Animals and friendship : a reply to Rowlands

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Can humans be friends with animals? If so, what would the moral implications of such friendship be? We maintain that there is space to interpret Aristotle’s account of friendship as including a type of qualified friendship (type (c) below) that could exist between a human and an animal, at least in some circumstances. When such friendships exist, a special set of moral obligations obtain. Examples include the obligation to look after the animals which are in one’s care and assure their welfare; however, these obligations do not extend to wild animals, as no special friendship of the appropriate kind exist with them.

In his well-argued and thought-provoking reply, Rowlands raises two objections. Firstly, Rowlands objects that even though we can be friends with the animals in our care, it is not clear why we should or ought to be. Rowlands asks us to consider the following example:

My name is Smith F. I am a farmer of sorts – at least I like to call myself that – and I have several billion pigs who spend the whole of their miserable lives in enclosed hog farms, and then suffer deaths that would make the most twisted horror movie look positively tame. They are certainly of advantage to me. I am not of advantage to them, but I could be if I so chose. If I were a different sort of person, perhaps I would have been friends with these creatures. But, as things are, I am not their friend, and they are not mine. Can you give me any reason why I should be their friend? (p 6)

We agree that the farmer in Rowlands’ example has no reason to befriend his pigs. However, that does not entail that there are no Aristotelian grounds on which a set of moral obligations towards his unfortunate animals could be based. Examples of such obligations could be not to torture, or deliberately maltreat them for no good reason, as that would qualify as vicious behavior. No fully virtuous agent would treat his pigs as the farmer in Rowlands’ example does. Some of the virtuous agent’s obligations stem from considerations that have little or nothing to do with the specific virtue of friendship. It can plausibly be argued that an agent who has fully instilled virtues such as moderation, kindness and justice would not abuse animals in his care. Such behavior would be a manifestation of a severe flaw and reveal a less than virtuous character.
On a superficial reading the above response might come as a bit of a surprise as we in the original article explicitly stated that Mary ought to be the friend of her cow Rose. However, the case we describe is different. The number of animals in our example is small enough to practically enable the farmer to be the friend of the individual animal. Naturally, ‘can’ does not imply ‘ought’ (although ‘ought’ implies ‘can’) but in our view Mary’s obligation to become the friend of her cattle arose at the point in time when she took over the farm and decided to become the owner of the animals. This moral obligation is based on an all-things-considered take on what the virtuous life involves.

To bring home the first objection Rowlands also offers a second example involving a cashier in the local grocery store:

> When I go to the grocery store, I pay at the checkout. I depend on person there: if I can’t pay for my food I can’t (legally) take it home with me. They depend on me: without regulars like me, the store’s profits might drop and cashier in question might lose their job. We regularly communicate our needs to each other: ‘I need this food’; I need you to swipe your debit card’, etc. Can I be friends with the cashier? Of course, I can. Should I be friends with the cashier?

There is no should here. It is a matter of choice, or predilection, not obligation.

We, however, would be inclined to argue that Professor Rowlands should, at least to some extent, be friends with the cashier. Further to this we suspect that Rowlands understanding of this type of friendship is far stronger than ours. All we maintain is that, if Professor Rowlands is in fact served by one and same cashier several times a week this interaction brings about some additional obligations which would not pertain if he was to meet a new person every time. The type of obligations we have in mind would include greetings and small talk.

Rowlands second objection concerns the logical structure of our argument. While he accepts the claim that qualified friendships (between humans and animals) could obtain, he argues that no moral conclusion follows from this. To be more precise, he accuses of us of violating Hume’s is-ought thesis: Our factual premise that, “To some extent Mary [the farmer] and Rose [the cow] are friends” does not entail the moral conclusion that “it would be wrong for Mary to treat Rose in a purely instrumental sense”.

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Unsurprisingly, we disagree with Rowlands. Our argument is not at odds with Hume’s is-ought thesis, which is best understood as a claim about the logical structure of deductively valid inferences. In our paper, we made no attempt to formulate the argument as a deductively valid inference, but to do so is of course easy:

(i) Mary and Rose are friends (of type (c)).

(ii) It is morally wrong for friends to harm each other.

(iii) It is morally wrong for Mary to harm Rose.

The moral conclusion stated above follows from the two premises. Premise (i) is a factual claim, and (ii) is of course a moral premise. However, if this deduction is to be of any philosophical interest its two premises have to be fleshed out a bit – and that is precisely what we do in our paper. Evidently, our argument assumes a virtue approach to ethics, but that fundamental premise is not the topic of the paper and therefore not defended.

Towards the end of the paper Rowlands sketches a way to extend the minimal notion of friendship we defend. As explained in our article, Aristotle argued that there are three main types of friendships (which sometimes overlap).

(a) friendship based on mutual admiration
(b) friendship based on mutual pleasure
(c) friendship based on mutual advantage

While we claim that friendship of type (c) can obtain between humans and some animals, Rowlands seems to advance the argument. In the final section of his paper, Rowlands suggests that given that humans can derive a lot of pleasure from the company of animals, and vice versa, thus friendship criteria (b) could also be met in these relationships. Indeed, he takes it even further by couching this pleasure in sense of admiration (real or imagined) of the other. This is a very strong claim, as it suggests that the finest and most complete friendship, (i.e. friendship of type (a)) could, in certain circumstances, exist between humans and
animals. While we are yet to be convinced we find this proposal both interesting and refreshing!