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Chapter I

Introduction and summary

Wikipedia

*In philosophy, **animalism** is a theory about personal identity according to which personal identity is a biological property of human beings, just as it is for other animals. Animalism is not a theory about personhood, that is, a theory about what it means to be a person. Animalists could hold that robots or angels were persons without that contradicting their animalism. According to the German philosopher W. Sombart, “Animalism”, in opposition to “Hominism”, contains every ideology that gives up the notion of humans possessing a life-form of their own, and understands them as a part of nature, as an animal species.*

“The greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated”, Mahatma Gandhi said many years ago. Somewhere between this observation and the sustainability debate in recent years it has gone wrong. If we look at the many sustainability indicators that have been developed over the years, it is striking to see that animal-wellbeing hardly plays a role. Biodiversity and ecosystems indicators put more emphasis on the number and variety of different species than their well-being. Assuming that the words of Gandhi make sense, can we then conclude that the concept of sustainability has nothing to do with civilization? Or is it that animal-wellbeing is a blind spot in the sustainability debate?

Of course our interaction with the environment, other people and other animals is part of our civilization. The reason that ‘animals’ and ‘sustainability’ are not often mentioned together in one sentence is likely to be found in the fact that the sustainability debate has been hijacked in recent years by industry and governments; their view regarding sustainable development has significantly been subordinate to the dogma of economic growth with little regard for animal welfare. How short-sighted this is has been illustrated by the various outbreaks of animal diseases in intensive farming and the development of antibiotic resistance of many pathogens, in large part because our farmed animals are given too many antibiotics. These are just some examples, but it is increasingly clear that our own well-being is closely connected with the welfare of the animals with whom we live.

Pets, for example. Research shows that people with a pet are in general healthier than non-pet owners. Pets also increase the capacity for empathy and social contacts among children (which are useful characteristics for a healthy and happy life). Furthermore, people who are heavily involved in animal welfare appear to have more compassion for the problems of people. Of course, this supposes a good care of the (domestic) animal. Keeping animals just because it’s (temporary) fun / useful / convenient for us, of course, is not always the most sustainable course of action. We all know the stories of neglected pets and there is also a relationship between domestic violence and animal cruelty.

Some more examples: we are happy for animals in the zoo to have large enclosures, but if we have bought a ticket we do want to be able to see them. We like to eat meat, but we

prefer not to be confronted with pictures of battery cages. We are vegetarian ourselves, but still have a large dog that eats meat. We live in glasshouses.

With this thesis, we study the sustainability of our relationship with animals. By looking at animals, you can put the sustainability debate on the map in an engaging way. Animal welfare should therefore be central in the sustainability debate: what we term ‘sustanimalism’ (in Dutch, the combination of ‘dieren’ (animals), and ‘duurzaamheid’ (sustainability) leads to the neologism ‘dierzaamheid’). With this in mind, it is also practical and easy to make a contribution to a sustainable society. Acting animal-friendly – for example, take good care of your animals and eating less meat – is not only beneficial to your health, but also to a better and more civilized world. We hope to encourage people to think about our interaction with the animals that surround us. What is sustainable and what is not, is not a black and white story.

Without claiming to cover the full complexity of our relationships with animals, in this thesis we explore the sustainability of the relations humans have with the non-humans we are living with on various levels of interaction. Chapter 2 gives an overview how our relationships with animals has evolved over time and what different relationships we have. On the one hand, animals can serve instrumental purposes: we currently use animals for clothing, for testing a range of human products, for gaining basic insights into human biology and behavior, and as food. On the other hand, human-animal relations are social. The clearest example is the practice of pet-keeping, with people attributing a special status to their pets. We review the current state of research on human-animal relations by focusing particularly on pets and on the psychological mechanisms involved in this special relationship.

In Chapter 3 we move closer into the relationships we have with our pets, in particular cats and dogs. In this chapter, we present, amongst others, information on how the attachment level of companion animal owners correlates to their attribution of emotions to their companion cat or dog. Our findings suggest that respondents attributed all posited basic (anger, joy or happiness, fear, surprise, disgust and sadness) and complex (shame, jealousy, disappointment and compassion) emotions to their companion animals, with a general trend towards basic emotions (with the exception of sadness) being more commonly attributed to companion animals than complex emotions. All pet owners showed strong attachment to their companion animal(s), with the degree of attachment (of both cat and dog owners) varying significantly with education level and gender.

In Chapter 4 we go another step deeper into the relationship we have with our pets. Regarding dogs and cats, most people that live together with these companion animals claim to recognize emotional facial expressions and body postures in their pet. However, the ‘decoding’ of facial expression across species has been rather limited. In this chapter

we used photographs of dogs and cats to which companion-animal owners attributed an emotion and compared their assessments with those made by independent experts.

Chapters 5 and 6 broadens the analysis of our interaction with animals, by looking at the social context and culture of the individual in relation to their attitude towards animals. We look how ethical ideologies relate to public attitudes toward animals, and analyse a number of factors including: sex, age, nationality/ethnicity, residence area, animal related activities and hobbies, food habits, culture/religion, education, and pet ownership among others. Chapter 5 presents a case study on Dutch and Belgian high school students; Chapter 6 analyses the data we gathered for the Dutch population.

In Chapter 7, we assess the impacts of companion animals on the environment, by introducing the “ecological paw print” (EPP). Here, we explain the impact of companion dogs and cats; quantifying their dietary EPP and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions according to data we collected from China, the Netherlands and Japan, and discuss how to reduce their dietary EPP and GHG emissions in order to understand the sustainable relationship between companion animals and the environment.

Finally, in Chapter 8 we broaden the scope again by looking at policy determinants and cross-country differences in animal protection policies. Based on a review of relevant literature and borrowing concepts from environmental policy research, we suggest three broad factors to be positively related with stricter animal protection policies: economic development, democracy, and civil society. Results suggest that countries with stronger democratic institutions and more civil society groups focused on animal protection are likely to have stricter animal protection policies. For economic development and broad civil society strength we do not find significant effects.