

Original Article

**Existence and Needs: A case for the equal moral considerability of non-human animals**

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**Abstract:** This paper reflects on the question, “Is there a sound justification for the existential view that humans have a higher moral status than other animals?” It argues that the existential view that humans have a higher moral status than animals is founded on a weak and inconclusive foundation. While acknowledging various arguments raised for a common foundation between human and non-human animals, the paper attempts to establish a common ground for moral considerability of human and non-human animals. The first common foundation is based on the existential notion of being in the world, which is common for both human and non-human animals. The second idea is based on the common desire to actualize different needs. The paper demonstrates these common foundations by referring to Heidegger and Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

**Keywords:** Animal rights, existentialism, needs, bioethics, moral consideration

**Introduction:** Since the onset of human civilization, humans have viewed non-human animals as inferior on the hierarchy of being and have hence treated non-human animals as instruments for promoting the welfare of humans. It is only in the past century that this position has received serious critical attention and has been challenged by an increasing number of scholars. From the distant past, and still dominant currently, scholars such as Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, and Kant have held the view that only humans have moral standing and moral agency and hence are the only species worth moral consideration. For instance, Immanuel Kant, considered one of the greatest thinkers in philosophy, in his discourse on whether animals have a moral status to foster the possibility of animal rights, believed that animals have no moral status and rights. For Kant, in a section titled *Of Duties Towards Animals and Spirit*, the only way to consider animals for morality is through indirect duty – duty directed at other humans only through moral treatment of animals<sup>1</sup>.

The whole of this debate emanates from the idea that human and non-human animals are essentially different. Numerous views have been provided to underscore the weakness of this view<sup>2</sup>. This paper seeks to add to this debate by attempting to find the common themes that run through the human and non-human worlds. Specifically, this paper advances two arguments, an argument from existentialism and an argument based on the hierarchy of needs to demonstrate how both human and non-human animals participate and seek to fulfill certain aspirations as their definitive elements. To achieve this, the paper has three sections. In the first section, the paper expounds on the common view that regards humans as having higher

moral status than non-human animals. The paper then draws arguments that have been previously advanced against this view to show that this common view is unfounded and lacks merit in a number of considerations. Then finally, the paper presents its main arguments, drawing evidence from science and philosophy to show that in fact human and non-human animals have a lot in common and that they all are worth moral consideration.

**Existentialist justification of humans' higher moral status:** The existentialist argument justifying the supposed higher moral status of humans may be traced in both the Greek and Judeo-Christian (traditional) understanding of existence and in modern existentialism, which reached its climax in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Determination of higher moral status between non-human and human animals was founded on the exposition of the link between essence and existence. Essence referred to “what it is” (it is the definition of a thing) and existence meant “that it is” (to be). The difference between the traditional approach and the modern existentialist approach lies in the explication of existence. In traditional perspective, explication of existence departs from the objective consideration of essence, which is regarded as the primary element that determines everything that can be said about existence. It is the essence of a thing that determines its status and role in the world. In modern existentialism, explication of existence builds on a subjective view, where existence is given preference as coming before the essence of a thing<sup>3 4 5</sup>. This link is explained depending on either an atheist version of existentialism, which excludes God in existence (Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir)<sup>6</sup> or on one that accommodates God (Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel). In the paragraphs that follow, we discuss arguments that support the higher moral status of humans in the Greek and Judeo-Christian tradition and modern existentialist versions.

The first argument used to justify that humans have a high moral status than other animals is based on the famous Aristotelian claim that the essence/definition of a human being is “a rational animal”<sup>7 8</sup>. Rationality (form) is therefore a defining element responding to “what it is”. In his ontological hierarchy of the soul, Aristotle classifies the soul into three forms, namely, vegetative soul, appetitive soul, and rational soul. Vegetative soul describes the nutritional needs of all living beings. This is the basic category of the soul and there are some living things such as plants that only belong to this category. Appetitive soul is responsible for emotions and feelings. This category consists of all animals including humans. The rational soul is the highest category that includes all human beings. A human being is hence regarded highly due to the claim that he or she has nutritional, appetitive as well as rational aspects<sup>9 10</sup>.

In addition to the context of existence, the superiority of humans is extended to morality. By having and operating with reason, moral discourse is possible only among human beings. For example, Descartes who developed further the centrality of rationality (of course he didn't want to consider rationality as given, but wanted a scientific foundation for understanding everything), stressed that every possible form of knowledge is founded on reason, which accords humans the ability to act or engage in moral discourse and not other animals who lack reason<sup>11</sup>. According to Descartes, there are two kinds of entities: physical entities and

mental entities. Although things in the natural world are closely associated with physical bodies, it is only humans that are not identical with their bodies. Rather, they are identical with their souls, or the immaterial, mental substance that constitutes their consciousness. Descartes believed that human beings have two characteristics that accord them moral worth, namely, the complexity of their behaviour/actions and speech. Speech (language) is mentioned because it is associated with rationality (thought is expressed through language). However, animal behaviour does not require this kind of assumption; besides, Descartes argued, “it is more probable that worms and flies and caterpillars move mechanically than that they all have immortal souls”<sup>12</sup>.

The second argument justifying the higher moral status of humans is that the essence of a human being is characterised by his or her status of being an image of God. This comes from the biblical understanding that God created humans just like other living and non-living things but what defines them is the status of being images of God. In Genesis 1:26-30, the essence of a human being precedes his or her existence and his or her superiority gets its supporting arguments. In verse 26, the bible indicates: “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, after our likeness, so they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move on the earth’”. The creation of an individual human being is therefore seen as a situation (existence) that instantiates the image of God. Thomas Aquinas commented further on this in the following passage:

I answer that, since man is said to be the image of God by virtue of his intellectual nature, he is the most perfectly like God according to that in which he can best imitate God in his intellectual nature. Now the intellectual nature imitates God chiefly in this, that God understands and loves Himself. Wherefore we see that the image of God is in man in three ways. First, in as much as man possesses a natural aptitude for understanding and loving God; and this aptitude consists in the very nature of the mind, which is common to all men. Secondly, inasmuch as man actually and habitually knows and loves God, though imperfectly; and this image consists in the conformity of grace. Thirdly, in as much as man knows and loves God perfectly; and this image consists in the likeness of glory<sup>13</sup>.

From verse 28-30, humans are given authority to rule over all the other creatures (including animals). The superiority of man flowing from this essence (image of God) is twofold. First, humans are superior because they are created in the image of God and no other animal instantiates this essence. This image is explained in Aquinas with reference to the intellectual nature of a human being. Intellect/reason is the nature of God given that God is in some respects defined as *Logos* which refers either to reason or word. God is regarded as perfect reason and has different attributes in the Judeo-Christian perspective such as omniscience/being all-knowing. By possessing reason, humans are also expected to have attributes similar to God’s. Second, superiority entails authority that man was given over all other animals.

Furthermore, the dignity of human beings is explained as following from the dignity of the creator. God created all human beings out of his love, and they have unalienable dignity. Morality in this context is instructed by God who gave a code of conduct in line with his goodness and demanded that all human beings follow/practice it for their own good. Moral consideration is therefore seen as following from God.

The third argument justifying the higher moral status of humans may be traced in existentialism with respect to existence and essence. While the traditional conception of existence and essence reflected on rationality and the image of God as given in the understanding of humanity, existentialists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries argued against this position and departed from the consideration of the meaning of being (Heidegger; Sartre). Essence in existentialism is an outcome of the subjective experience of an individual in the world (essence comes from “to be”). According to Sartre, “thrown into an open-ended existence, our essence — who we really are — will be the sum total of all our actions and responses to the circumstances in which we find ourselves”<sup>14</sup>. Essence is therefore what an individual human subject lives (experiences) in a particular environment. This fundamental doctrine of the existentialists is summarised in Sartre’s expression that “existence precedes essence”. Commenting on this expression, Sartre wrote:

What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself<sup>15</sup>.

The existentialists argue that what makes humans different from other animals or things, is their capacity not only to be but also the ability to subjectively reflect on their own and other properties (conscious beings). Humans possess the potential of giving meaning to things and themselves as they are thrown in the world. For example, a human being and a dog can sit on a stone, but the difference is that a dog will not have a subjective experience of reflecting on this stone and produce meaning but a human being can. For this reason, Sartre argued that other entities such as animals exist in themselves (*etre en soi*) and this is what they are (essence), but human beings go beyond this. The potential to go beyond this aspect resides in the fact that human reality exists in itself and for itself (*etre pour soi*). The existence in itself will make humans similar to all other animals but for itself requires the active experience of self-consciousness as being in the world.

The difference between human beings and other objects may be further clarified based on the understanding of the existentialist argument that there are different modes of being. Heidegger discussed the difference between the existence of humans and other modes such as *zuhanden* and *vorhanden*. *Zuhanden* refers to ready-to-hand meaning that something is available. These are instruments that are defined by a society and whose properties are determined by their usage in a particular society. These apparently get their essence not on their own but are given by the community/society where they are utilised. *Vorhanden* refers

to objects of perceptual experience following from norms that govern perceptual givenness of an object. These apparently have their essence as determined by human scientific elaboration. The *zuhanden* and *vorhanden* can be true for all things, animals and human subjects but the speciality of humans consists in their subjective capacity to articulate meaning of these modes of being. For instance, humans have the subjective capacity to coordinate various properties in their actions/experience such as the colour of their physical appearances, the system of their beliefs and their belonging to a certain race. They go beyond (transcend) mere instantiation of properties in their lives as they willingly and consciously provide further interpretation and meaning.

**Against the existentialist justification of humans' higher moral status:** Does rationality, the image of God, and humans' subjective existence (reality to exist for itself/*etre pour soi*, self-meaning and choosing what one wants to be in the world) justify that humans have a higher moral standing than non-humans? In the following paragraphs, we argue against the existentialist justification of humans' supposed higher moral status.

Firstly, the existentialist emphasis on human higher moral status due to their claimed unique potential for being rational, conscious beings capable of providing meaning to their own actions and being, fails to take into consideration the distinction between moral agency and moral standing. The rational element of human beings accords them moral agency, however, this does not necessarily exclude animals as beings with moral standing<sup>16</sup>. Whilst moral agency pertains to the ability to make sound moral judgments, moral consideration pertains to ability to receive and react to moral treatment, consideration and participation in the moral community, which is not defined in terms of the intrinsic properties that beings have, but in terms of the important social relations that exist between beings<sup>17</sup>. With this understanding, non-human animals have, since time immemorial, been part of human social relations. More recently, studies have cemented this claim by positing that animals not only possess and develop social relations among themselves and even with humans, but they also have the capacity for "cumulative culture" – the ability to build up knowledge over generations. A study by the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and the University of Edinburgh found that, "like humans, baboons have the ability to transmit and accumulate changes over 'cultural generations' and that these incremental changes, which may differ depending on the chain, become structured and more efficient"<sup>18</sup>.

Furthermore, rationality is an obscure concept to the point that even when applied to humans it leads to the exclusion of some classes and individuals as irrational. For instance, great thinkers such as Hume, Immanuel Kant, Hegel, and Ley Bruhl have once fallen into the trap of categorising Africans as irrational (lacking the rational soul). Of course, modern existentialism managed to avoid this problem with the insistence of human essence following from human experience in the world. Nevertheless, the same concept though not explicit is central in providing meaning. The third problem is that rationality, while defined as separating humans from other animals, is not definitive for existence. In Aristotle, existence, while starting from the nutritive element, matures and becomes evident in appetites where it is directly connected with desire. This desire becomes an explanation of purposive

behaviour<sup>19</sup>.

Secondly, the Judeo-Christian argument based on God's creation falls short as a justification for humans' higher moral status as compared with animals<sup>20</sup>. There are two related problems connected to this, namely, the epistemological and ontological problem of the existence of God. The ontological problem regards the possibility of developing a logical argument that proves the existence of God as a necessary being and creator of superior human beings and other animals. Theologians and philosophers such as Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, and Leibniz have in vain attempted to establish arguments supporting the existence of God. For example, the ontological argument of Leibniz tried to establish the existence of God departing from the idea of a perfect being to the existence of such as being<sup>21</sup>. This argument failed because the existence of an idea of a perfect being does not necessarily imply existence. Similarly the five proofs of God's existence by Thomas Aquinas are well known to have failed to prove God's existence. The related epistemological question regards the possibility of "certain knowledge" with regards to the existence of a being known as God. The problem has roots in the possibility of knowledge beyond sense experience. This problem of founding moral considerability on the existence of a being beyond this physical world was worsened further by the Kantian epistemological response that it is impossible for human beings to know things beyond sense experience (*Noumena*). It is only the intellectual categories that give humans the possibility of what can exist in the phenomenal world. Although Kant did not intend to remove God from the possibility of existence, a general tendency of atheists and other thinkers has been that of ignoring the discourse on God.

The problem of establishing convincing argument for the existence of God (ontology) and the provision of convincing evidence (epistemology) have led to three groups of thinkers. The first group is that of atheists who have completely eliminated the existence of God in absence of knowledge. The second group has decided to still maintain the existence of God. The last group has decided to remain neutral and indicate that they cannot conclusively know whether God exists or does not exist (agnosticism). Based on the existence of these three conflicting positions, basing the superiority of humans on the Judeo-Christian belief in the existence of God becomes problematic. Due to lack of scientific evidence with respect to the knowledge and existence of God, it is reasonable to hold the view of humans' higher moral status than other animals based on the argument of creation and God.

Thirdly, the existentialist attribution of a human being as different from non-humans because of its being for itself also fails in two ways. Firstly, there is no convincing scientific evidence supporting the fact that only humans experience *etre pour soi* and that non-humans experience only *etre in soi*. In fact, animals cannot be reduced to only possessing a set of nutritive and appetitive elements given that humans cannot with certainty claim knowledge of the cognitive experience of animals just depending on experiments. Cognition, which plays an important role in *etre pour soi*, requires a personal experience of being a cognitive animal. For instance, a human can only claim that he or she is a doubting things because of personal experience of doubting as it was in Descartes. Is it probable to claim that this experience does not occur in animals? Are animals deprived of personal experience? Existentialism even in its

19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century forms falls short because of a lack of adequate understanding of how non-humans become aware of their being in the world. There is no convincing argument to this effect apart from going back to the categorisation of human beings as rational animals, a point that can contradict the core of modern existentialism which is human meaning following from experience in the world. Secondly, although the distinction between humans and animals as shown above is problematic, there is also a moral problem that leads us to a form of utilitarian/instrumentalist ethics. This follows from the idea that a human being creates his or her essence through actions and choices (the way of existing). Human beings are conscious of objects, values, meaning, etc. as they construct their essence in the world. Morality in this context becomes a creation of human beings to serve man's needs. This is often the case in those existentialist philosophers who exclude God in their idea of existence and its finality (Sartre; Simone de Beauvoir).

**Equality of moral status between humans and animals:** The question of the moral status of non-human animals and humans should be based on common moral consideration grounds instead of what is assumed to differentiate them. We hold that human and non-human animals share numerous attributes, more than the attributes they differ on. The shared attributes range from physical to psychological dispositions. To this end, we argue that there is an existential common ground for both human and non-human animals qualifying them as worth of equal moral consideration. There are two important aspects that demonstrate this common existential ground.

The first idea springs from an ontological consideration of being in the world. Both humans and animals find themselves in a state of being in the world. Although Heidegger in his existentialism focused more on human subjects who are conscious of being there/their being<sup>22</sup>, we are arguing that animals also find themselves in this world and they are conscious of their being in their own way. In spite of this, the ontological consideration is difficult to establish as a strong case given that it is hard for humans to understand how animals experience their being in the world. It is only recently that some studies have begun to establish some elements of rationality, which only humans were thought to have. This gives an interesting panorama for exploring the possibility of self-awareness of animals as being in the world similar to what happens in human beings. For instance, Lori Marino and Christina Colvin<sup>23</sup> note that pigs are mentally and socially similar to dogs and chimpanzees. They write: "what is known suggests that pigs are cognitively complex and share many traits with animals whom we consider intelligent"<sup>24</sup>. Another study found that lowly pigeons provide insight into how young children acquire and learn language. Researchers studied pigeons' ability to name and categorize different objects and found that, like children, pigeons engage in a type of associative learning to learn new words. In an interview with The Huffington Post, Edward Wasserman said:

Our main thesis is that associative learning may underlie the acquisition of complex behaviours, including human language [...]. [I]f so, then our view of human language as altogether unique may need revision [...]. What we learn from studying a model animal like a pigeon may not only point to important interspecies parallels,

but also help us find ways for more effectively teaching children language, especially children with language disorders<sup>25 26</sup>.

These studies show numerous cognitive abilities that inform the common experience between human and non-human animals, which may indicate that animals may also be conscious of their being.

The second idea comes from the understanding that both human and non-human animals have needs, which they live and seek to satisfy. Abraham Maslow proposes a hierarchy of needs consisting of basic needs, psychological needs, and self-fulfilment needs<sup>27</sup>. Among the basic needs, there are physiological needs (food, water and shelter) and safety needs. Among the psychological needs, there is the need to belong (make friendships and love) and the need for self-accomplishment. Finally, under self-fulfilment, there is self-actualization and creativity. A closer look at these needs reveals the common search and desire both human and non-human animals have to fulfil and satisfy these needs.

With regard to basic needs, both human and non-human animals require food and water for survival. Non-human just like human bodies demand and require important nutrients for continued existence in this world. Absence of these nutrients threatens the existence of all living beings. In addition, shelter is a fundamental need for many species, including humans, given that shelter shields their bodies and protects them from harsh weather conditions as well as adversaries. Both human and non-human animals have developed an inclination to defend their lives and those of loved ones from outside attack. Just as humans develop strategies for protecting life, non-human animals also have defence strategies against their enemies. A simple example is when a cow is being slaughtered; he or she will generally try to defend his or her life, although more often than not humans overpower the animal. Further, researchers have observed scouting behaviour in bottlenose dolphins, in that an individual dolphin may investigate novel objects or unfamiliar territories and alert the whole group<sup>28</sup>. All this justifies that the basic needs of human and non-human animals are similar.

With regard to psychological needs, recent studies have shown that different animals have a deep sense of compassion and care for their children and sometimes care for each other. For example, a study on dolphins has shown how they care for their young ones with a lot of affection. According to SeaWorld<sup>29</sup>, dolphins exhibit different social behaviours that mirror human social interaction. Bottlenose dolphins aid ill or injured dolphins. They stand by and vocalize, or they physically support the animal at the surface so he or she can breathe. Similarly, domesticated dogs and cats also show the need for care and friendship as they relate with their caregivers (humans) and among themselves.

The desire for self-fulfilment is demonstrated in some animals that show high levels of creativity and cognitive functionality. For instance, most recently, researchers found that ravens demonstrate high cognitive functionality comparable with that of apes, which have for long been studied and found to possess cognitive functions comparable with those of humans. It is reported: "Comparative data gives us insights about the building blocks of higher



cognition as well as the relationship between various brain measures and the cognitive performance<sup>30</sup>. Further, these highly intelligent birds are also known for such evolved behaviours as using tools, forming social groups and recognizing faces<sup>31</sup>. These forms of creativity and high cognitive functions demonstrate the shared dispositions between human and non-human animals.

The argument from needs ought to be understood within the existential argument for the equal moral consideration of non-human animals. As we have argued, rational and/or speech abilities in humans and non-human animals are existentially incomparable. Although some scientific studies have been undertaken to measure and assess non-human animals' ability of self-consciousness, rationality and speech, the studies are in infancy and some results inconclusive.

**Conclusion:** In this paper, we have argued that the rationale for the existential view that humans have a higher moral status than other animals is not adequate, and we have demonstrated the weakness of the claim and also the myriad problems that have resulted from holding and promoting such a view. We have proposed that, instead of striving to identify distinguishing elements between human and non-human animals, it is much better to focus on the elements that reveal striking similarities between the species. The similarities that we have advanced in this paper, the existential and needs theses are important and definitive elements of both human and non-human animals. With the advancement of science and research aimed at understanding the animal world, it is becoming apparent that human and non-human animals share a lot of attributes and some misconception of human superiority over non-human animals are being challenged and nullified. A worldview that considers human and non-human animals as having equal moral considerability is envisaged to bring about a better world; built on respect for life.

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