

# Animal Ethics and the Anthropocene: Moral Progress and its Difficulties

*Simone Pollo*

*University of Rome “Sapienza”*

## *Abstract*

Animal ethics theories aim to provide arguments in favor of assigning a moral status to non-human animals (all or some of them) and, consequently, of transforming or abolishing some of the ways in which humans interact with them. Therefore, philosophical analysis regarding animals' moral status aims at fostering moral progress in the field of human/animal relationships. According to a basic and naturalized definition of moral progress, this takes place when sympathy is extended to subjects previously ignored or underestimated. From this perspective, the current state of affairs in human/animal relationships is puzzling. On the one hand, philosophical and public debate on the moral status of animals is spreading as never before (and this has led also to some legal protection of animals). On the other hand, the number of animals being exploited and killed by humans for food has reached unprecedented levels (i.e. the 62% of mammals' biomass on Earth today is primarily made up of livestock). A distinction between a “conceptual” dimension of moral progress and a “factual” one could thus help animal ethics to deal with this puzzling context.

*Keywords:* Animal ethics, Moral progress, Anthropocene, Moral sentimentalism, Animal farming.

## 1. Introduction

Animal ethics theories aim to provide arguments in favor of assigning a moral status to non-human animals (all or some of them) and, consequently, of transforming or abolishing some of the ways in which humans interact with them. Indeed, human-animal relations today are a subject of public discussion in society, policymaking, and the law. If the aim of animal ethics philosophers is to help to transform animals' moral status and to reform human/animal relations, then it must be acknowledged that, at least *prima facie*, this aim has partly been achieved (mostly in democratic and more economically developed countries). For example, the European Union's *Lisbon Treaty* (a sort of constitutional amendment for Europe) recognizes animals as “sentient beings” and prescribes that the various uses to which animals are put is only permitted if due regard is given to their

welfare (European Union 2021). Article 13 of the *Lisbon Treaty* does not assign animals any fundamental rights, but recognizes that they can no longer be regarded as mere things that are fully exploitable for human purposes. This new status of animals in the EU—of which many other examples could be provided—can be regarded as a sign of “moral progress” in society. According to a general and basic definition, “[m]oral progress occurs when a subsequent state of affairs is better than a preceding one, or when right acts become increasingly prevalent” (Jamieson 2002: 318). A norm prescribing respect for the welfare of animals can certainly be regarded as promoting a state of affairs that is better than one in which no protection is provided for animal welfare.

Here my aim will be to discuss the state of the art of moral progress with regard to animals’ moral status and the transformation of human interactions with them. This discussion will be developed from the point of view of moral philosophy. This means that I will first give a general account of how the concept of moral progress should be understood through philosophical analysis. Such an account will be articulated within a naturalistic framework—that is, an evolutionary view of human nature and morality. This naturalized account of moral progress will provide a theoretical framework for interpreting the roots of the current advances in the moral view of animals. These roots are certain cultural, scientific, and societal events that took place in the 18th and 19th centuries (mostly in Europe). As elements such as Article 13 of the *Lisbon Treaty* show, a form of moral progress with regard to animals seems to have occurred and is ongoing. At the same time, however, a closer and different look at the global state of the art of human-animal relations today can lead to the opposite conclusion. The figures concerning the use of animals in factory farming, for example, challenge the idea that the animals’ present conditions can be regarded as a state of affairs “better than a preceding one”. As a matter of fact, moral progress with regard to animals is a two-sided coin. More precisely, the current state of human-animal relations seems to be an excellent case study for analyzing the concept of moral progress and reflecting on the difficulties it poses.

## 2. A Naturalized View of Moral Progress

“Moral progress” is a controversial idea that is particularly hard to define. In the debate about moral progress, two claims are often made. They can be made separately, but they are often presented in tandem. First, from a theoretical point of view, moral progress can be regarded as a concept that is hard or even impossible to define. More precisely, moral progress can be regarded as a “slippery” idea insofar as a shared and “universally” accepted definition of it seems impossible to achieve. Definitions of moral progress follow from metaethical and normative ideas about the good, values, rights, and so on. Therefore, the plurality of understandings of the idea of moral progress mirrors the plurality of perspectives in metaethics and normative ethical theory. A realist view of moral progress will be different from an anti-realist one. Utilitarians will define moral progress differently from Kantians, as will virtue ethics supporters. The second claim is made from an empirical point of view. Moral progress is denied in its historical dimension: it can be defined and imagined, but it does not really occur. More precisely, the empirical denial of moral progress can take two forms. First, it can be claimed that we do not have the capacity to ascertain if moral progress takes place (i.e. historical reality is too complex to measure whether some progress has happened). The second form is

an empirical denial in its proper meaning: we are able to evaluate the state of world's moral progress (given a precise definition of it) and we conclude that moral progress has not happened. Here I will try to avoid these objections by providing a very simple definition of moral progress. Such a definition cannot aim to be regarded as universal, but it is fundamental enough to be shared by different normative views. Such a definition is focused on an increase in sympathy for others' suffering. Given this basic definition, an empirical evaluation of the state of moral progress seems a feasible task. Here, the empirical state of moral progress in human/animal relationships will be discussed with regard to the evolution of the status granted to animals, and in contrast to their actual living conditions.

In order to achieve a general definition of moral progress, two premises regarding the philosophical method underlying this endeavor are necessary. First, the possibility of defining moral progress is strictly dependent on an understanding of the aims and scope of philosophical analysis. Since naive moral language and the popular understanding of ethics both make use of the notion of moral progress, philosophical analysis is bound, at least *prima facie*, to analyze and discuss it. The presence of the idea of moral progress in everyday moral discourse does not in itself mean that a philosophically satisfactory definition of it could be provided. Nonetheless, such an effort is required in philosophical ethics' commitment to providing an understanding of human morality in everyday life.

Second, the commitment of philosophical analysis to ordinary moral life requires a naturalistic method, insofar as such a method seems to be the most reliable in accounting for human behavior and practices, and the motives and capacities that underlie them. The idea that a naturalistic approach to ordinary human moral experience is the most apt for a philosophical analysis of ethics has a long and articulated tradition. Such an idea is expressed in a very simple but effective way by David Hume's remark about the method he will adopt in his *Treatise of Human Nature*. His empiricist method will be a "cautious observation of human life" (Hume 2007: 6). Humean empiricism entails both that the observation of ordinary experience must be the primary source for philosophy and that such an observation must not be overwhelmed by theoretical prejudices. A contemporary naturalistic method in tune with Hume's empiricism seems to be the so-called "liberal naturalism" approach (De Caro 2022). Liberal naturalism states that philosophical explanations must take only empirical facts into account and that the primary and fundamental source of knowledge of empirical facts is science. At the same time, the relationship between philosophy and science is not a reductionist one. Within the framework of liberal naturalism, there is still room for philosophical debate about concepts such as norms, duties, rights, and so on. From a liberal naturalism perspective, an explanation of moral progress cannot be reduced to scientific facts, and its normative dimension must be preserved. Nonetheless, science can provide the basic framework for understanding moral progress.

Analyzing the phenomenon of ethics and its philosophical explanations from a naturalistic perspective means adopting Darwinian evolutionary biology as the main resource to explain its origin and development. First of all, this means profoundly challenging any objectivist and realist claim about moral norms (values, principles, etc.). As clearly explained by the so-called "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments" (EDA) (Kahane 2011), the non-teleological nature of biological evolutionary processes entails the non-realist and non-objectivist nature of moral norms (Street 2006). From a Darwinian naturalized perspective, moral progress

cannot therefore be regarded as the process of identifying and accumulating real and objective moral facts in the world.<sup>1</sup> Abandoning a strong objectivist and realist view of moral progress does not necessarily mean renouncing the idea of moral progress. As a matter of fact, a naturalized non-realist account of moral progress can be developed from a Darwinian reconstruction of the evolution of ethics.<sup>2</sup>

Sociality is an evolutionary strategy “discovered”<sup>3</sup> and developed by many species to improve the chances for survival and reproduction. The evolution and refinement of different forms of cooperative, altruistic, and helping behavior can be explained within this picture. A naturalized view of moral progress must proceed from this core evolutionary explanation of morality. Darwin himself provides an outline of this view in *The Descent of Man* by transitioning from an explanation of the evolution of social and moral behaviors to a picture of the basic mechanisms involved in civilizational processes. Such processes are driven by sympathy and its extension. Through the evolution of sympathy, humans extended social and moral behaviors beyond their family clans and small tribes. Thus defined, civilization consists in the extension and refinement of sympathy in a way that *apparently* clashes with the process of evolution by natural selection. In a famous (and controversial) passage of *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin writes:

The aid which we feel impelled to give to the helpless is mainly an incidental result of the instinct of sympathy, which was originally acquired as part of the social instincts, but subsequently rendered, in the manner previously indicated, more tender and more widely diffused. Nor could we check our sympathy, if so urged by hard reason, without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature. The surgeon may harden himself whilst performing an operation, for he knows that he is acting for the good of his patient; but if we were intentionally to neglect the weak and helpless, it could only be for a contingent benefit, with a certain and great present evil. Hence we must bear without complaining the undoubtedly bad effects of the weak surviving and propagating their kind [...] (Darwin 1981: 168–69).

Darwin’s insight into the key role of sympathy in the process of civilization extends and advances the explanations of sociality and morality provided by moral sentimentalists such as David Hume and Adam Smith (who crucially influenced Darwin’s theory: see e.g. Huntley 1972). Furthermore, neuroscience and ethology increasingly underscore the centrality of sympathy (redefined as “empathy” in the jargon of contemporary cognitive science) in the evolution of morality (De Waal 2006).

<sup>1</sup> This is the position held, for instance, by Michael Huemer (2016), according to whom moral progress in human history cannot be explained through non-realist accounts of morality.

<sup>2</sup> A sophisticated and influential effort to present an evolutionary account of moral progress is presented by Philip Kitcher in *The Ethical Project* (Kitcher 2011). Whereas Kitcher’s theoretical framework is pragmatist, here the philosophical roots must be found in the moral sentimentalism of David Hume.

<sup>3</sup> The verb “discover” here should not be misunderstood. Sociality is not consciously invented, but is the result of natural selection. In a nutshell, some organisms are more inclined to sociality because of behavioral traits they happen to possess, and such organisms are more likely to survive and reproduce than “selfish” ones thanks to their cooperation with other pro-social organisms. At least in the early stages, sociality and cooperation arise by chance and are stabilized and improved by trial and error.

From a naturalized perspective, a very basic understanding of moral progress can describe it as the advancement and increase of cooperative, altruistic, and helping behaviors by moral agents driven by sympathy. The enlargement of the circle of moral consideration and respect to formerly ignored or undervalued new subjects can be regarded as a part of moral progress thus conceived. Darwin himself regarded the idea of non-human animals as worthy of moral consideration as a recent development in moral progress, driven by the refinement of sympathy: "Sympathy beyond the confines of man, that is humanity to the lower animals, seems to be one of the latest moral acquisitions" (Darwin 1981: 101). In a sense, understanding moral progress as an expansion of the circle of moral consideration driven by sympathy is a "pre-philosophical" statement. Recognizing (as Darwin does) that human society and civilization are ruled by that fundamental process does not correspond to a normative idea of ethics. Provided that they are committed to a naturalistic understanding of the phenomenon of human moral experience, different normative approaches to ethics should accept that reconstruction of the basic process of sociality and civilization.

### 3. A New Understanding of Animals

Ethical issues in human-animal relations and the question of the moral status of animals have aroused curiosity and debate since the dawn of philosophy (Steiner 2005). This interest has not really been widespread and has essentially failed to trigger broader societal debate and change in the various contexts of human-animal interaction, however. From the point of view of moral progress, as defined above, no particular changes seem to have occurred over the centuries, except for the occasional philosopher or social group advocating the morality of vegetarianism. Turning points in philosophical reflections and societal debates about animals and their treatment by humans are to be found in the 18th and 19th centuries. More specifically, during the 18th century the recognition of animals as worthy of moral respect was part of the transformation of morality triggered by philosophers and social events associated with the Enlightenment. The culture of the Enlightenment did not only lead to the invention of human rights and their political affirmation, but also favored the philosophical recognition of animals' moral status and the birth of animal advocacy. This process continued in the 19th century and intersected with the other fundamental event for animal moral progress: Darwin's Scientific Revolution.

Enlightenment philosophies make up a multifaceted and complex family, and the same must be said for the political ideas of that age. Within this family a specific trend can be identified: the "Enlightenment of Sympathy", according to the definition of it given by Michael Frazer (Frazer 2010). The Enlightenment of Sympathy consists of a family of authors and ideas united by the idea that passions, sentiments, and sympathy are the very core of human nature. These authors share the view that human affective states contribute to explaining social life and have moral and political value. According to historian Lynn Hunt's insightful reconstruction, a fundamental contribution to the invention and political vindication of fundamental human rights came from a "turn" in philosophy and common sense. This turn consisted in a new appreciation of the moral value of passions and of the inner emotional life of individuals. The dominant tradition in Western ethics (mostly of Christian origin) did not recognize suffering as something morally despicable, regarding it as unavoidable in human life and, in some cases, as

a means to access a superior spiritual condition. On the contrary, the Enlightenment of Sympathy brought suffering under the lens of moral reflection, based on a new idea of moral subjectivity which was made up of passions and sentiments (Amato 1990; for an “inside” critique of the Christian tradition from a religious perspective: Sölle 1975). The devaluation of suffering (and the appreciation of pleasure and suffering) is a product of the Enlightenment, but mostly of the sentimental branch of Enlightenment philosophy. The rationalistic Enlightenment contributed less, or even nothing at all (Kant’s denial of the moral value of compassion is paradigmatic in this respect).

This new moral role assigned to affections contributed to the “invention” of human rights as a tool for respecting individuals as capable of morally valuable mental states regardless of the color of their skin or their sex. According to the historian Lynn Hunt, the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* is the outcome of fresh attention being paid to human passions as the result of a general refinement of sympathy (Hunt 2007).<sup>4</sup> On the theoretical level, the most philosophically original and sophisticated expression of the new moral appreciation of passions and sentiments was the new theory of utilitarianism developed by Jeremy Bentham (Bentham 2007). Bentham clearly highlighted how the recognition of the moral importance of pleasure and suffering must lead to the inclusion of non-human animals in the circle of moral consideration. While Bentham’s utilitarianism opened the theoretical path that in the long run led to the contemporary discussion on antispeciesism and animal ethics (as we will see below), animal advocates began to organize and raise their voices to demand legal protection for animals. In accordance with the idea that compassion, *including* in relation to animal suffering, is a moral requirement, the first animal protection law, the Martin Act, was passed in England in 1832, and the first Society for the Protection of Animals (SPCA; later the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals, or RSPCA) was established in 1822 (Ryder 2000a).

In the same years that philosophers were advocating the moral significance of non-human suffering and animals were gradually being brought under the protection of the law, Charles Darwin was unleashing one of the greatest scientific revolutions in human civilization. There is no need to recap the essential features of Darwin’s theory here, but it is enough to highlight how it forever changed our understanding of the nature of non-human life and its relation to humans (for a detailed account, see Rachels 1990). The moral consequences of the assertion that humans and animals are of common descent were immediately evident even to Darwin himself. During his painstaking development of the theory that he would present in the *Origin of the Species*, he wrote in one of his notebooks:

Animals whom we have made our slaves we do not like to consider our equals. — Do not slave holders wish to make the black man other kind — animals with affections, imitation, fear of death, pain, sorrow for the dead. — respect.  
The soul by consent of all is superadded, animals not got it, not look forward. if we choose to let conjecture run wild then our animals our fellow brethern in pain, disease, death & suffering, & famine, our slaves in the most laborious works, our

<sup>4</sup> This role assigned to sentimentalistic philosophies and ideas does not imply the denial of the contribution of other views to the development of the idea and practice of human rights (for sure also Kant’s work also played a role). Nonetheless, the focus on passions has been more productive on and it is essential to explain the link between human rights development and the moral attention to non-human animals.

companions in our amusements. they may partake from our origin in these one common ancestor; we may be all netted (Darwin 1987: 231).

In principle, Darwin's revolution in biology forestalled any possible attempt to argue for a moral difference between human and non-human suffering. The absence of ontological differences between *Homo sapiens* and all the other species debunks any argument for valuing human suffering differently.

The moral understanding of animals which resulted from the Enlightenment's recognition of the disvalue of suffering as well as by the Darwinian dissolution of anthropocentrism is embodied in a concept that, over the course of the 20th century, gave rise to a systematic philosophical analysis of the ethics of human-animal relations: namely *antispeciesism*, as defined in 1970 by Richard Ryder (Ryder 2000b) and further elaborated by Peter Singer (Singer 1975). Discussing the importance of this concept for the birth and development of animal ethics, or presenting a taxonomy of animal ethics itself<sup>5</sup>, falls outside the scope of this paper. For my present purposes, I simply want to highlight how the concept of antispeciesism summarizes the fundamental lines of development of the new attitude toward animals presented above.

Of course, it cannot be argued that we live in antispeciesist societies, but some antispeciesist claims (and their underlying motives) now commonly inform people's attitudes toward animals and are reflected in institutions and laws (such as the article from the *Lisbon Treaty* quoted above). All the laws and regulations which pay attention to animal welfare—not just in the European Union, but everywhere—cannot be regarded as radically antispeciesist insofar as they allow animals to be used (as well as their killing). To cite a notorious conceptual taxonomy in animal ethics, those laws are “welfarist” rather than “liberationist” (see Francione 1996). Nonetheless, they are the product of the spreading throughout society of the core idea of antispeciesism—that is, the idea that animals cannot be denied moral respect just because they are not human.

If we were to assess the state of our societies with regard to human-animal relations by using the idea of moral progress sketched above, we could say that, *prima facie*, some progress has been made. Generally speaking, animals today are regarded as morally valuable and worthy of respect to a much greater degree than in the past. This condition has largely been achieved through the expansion of sympathy, which has led to the recognition of animal suffering's moral significance.

#### 4. Humans and Animals in the Anthropocene

Animals and their suffering are seen and perceived differently today than in the past. This new understanding of animals is inspiring reforms in human-animal relations that are supported by a slowly but steadily growing segment of public opinion. This segment of the population is acting personally to avoid or minimize animal suffering, for example by changing their eating habits and reducing or eliminating the consumption of animal products. Is this enough to affirm that

<sup>5</sup> A complete discussion of the concept of speciesism should also include the criticism of it which was formulated by those scholars who share the idea of enlarging the circle of moral respect to non-human animals. For example, an influential and convincing view of this kind is that elaborated by Mary Midgley (1984).

moral progress with regard to animals has occurred and is likely to continue to occur? Unfortunately not.

In evaluating the state of moral progress, at least two indicators should be taken into account. The first could be called “conceptual”, the second “factual”. Roughly speaking, the conceptual indicator is represented by the way in which the extension of sympathy leads to the recognition of new subjects as worthy of moral status and to the identification of moral issues in areas and practices that were regarded as morally neutral or acceptable in the past. In the case discussed here, the new subjects are non-human animals and the practices are, generally speaking, those in which animals are used by humans (in farming, scientific research, and so on). From a conceptual point of view, a degree of moral progress in human-animal relations is detectable, because human beings have developed sentiments, ideas, and arguments leading to the inclusion of animals in the moral domain, following an expansion of sympathy. In a nutshell, animals nowadays have a “place” in human morality that they essentially did not have in the past.<sup>6</sup> The factual indicator, however, is more directly related to the real-life consequences of this development. In this case, the indicator is related to human behaviors and their effects on animals. How much animal suffering caused by humans is present in the world? How many human beings behave in a way that is somewhat consistent with the recognition of the moral value of animal suffering?

The distinction between a conceptual and a factual dimension to moral progress could be regarded as rough and imprecise. For example, from a naturalistic point of view, conceptual advancements themselves are definitely factual. The labels “conceptual” and “factual” should therefore not be taken too literally. The former is useful for identifying transformations in moral reflection—that is, in (at least some) people’s ways of feeling and thinking. The latter helps us to focus on behaviors and practices that depend on how humans feel and think. This conceptual distinction could be regarded as somehow identical to the classical distinction between “theory” and “practice” that is made in common-sense conversation. This claim is in a sense correct, but some clarifications are required. In general, the distinction between theory and practice means that someone can agree on some moral idea/value/principle and pay lip service to it, but that she/he is not willing to act upon it (different nuances of the theory/practice distinction are possible, but basically it refers to the difference between what one believes and what one does). The philosophical distinction between conceptual and factual dimensions of moral progress also aims at grasping what happens in ordinary moral experience, and is represented by the theory/practice difference as well. The conceptual/factual distinction tries to philosophically represent and formalize at a general level what we express in ordinary experience in terms of the theory/practice distinction. Someone can be moved by leaked videos from factory farms and slaughterhouses and can change his or her ideas about animals’ moral status. Nonetheless, that very same person might still be unable to give up or reduce his or her meat consumption. When speaking of such a person, we could say that she or he represents a case of the distinction between theory and practice. From a philosophical and more detached perspective, such a person’s case is one of the

<sup>6</sup> In general, the idea of the “conceptual” dimension of moral progress aligns with the view put forward by Michelle Moody-Adams (1999). According to Moody-Adams, moral progress mainly consists in some kind of revision and extension of previously existing and accepted moral concepts.



many that make up the reality we can analyze when speaking about the conceptual/factual distinction.

Keeping these two dimensions of moral progress in mind, the contemporary state of human-animal relations seems blatantly paradoxical, or frankly schizophrenic. On the one hand, the philosophical and ordinary consideration of the moral status of animals today has, on the conceptual side, reached a level of development unprecedented in the history of human civilization. The variety, articulation, complexity, and theoretical robustness of contemporary arguments for extending moral considerations beyond humanity is without precedent (for an overview, see Beauchamp & Frey 2011). Furthermore, the “animal question” is present in public debate as never before. On the other hand, the situation is much more complicated on the factual side. It is true that in a large number of countries today, the number of laws that in some way protect animals has led to an unprecedented situation in human-animal relations. Similarly, it is very likely that the number of humans voluntarily adopting a diet without animal products (or only carefully selected ones) is without precedent in human history. Nonetheless, a general look at the figures regarding the use of animals on Earth in the 21st century provides a scenario that dramatically conflicts with the idea of ongoing moral progress in human-animal relations. Despite animal protection laws and the increase in behaviors such as “veg” dietary habits, the situation for animals seems to have worsened.

Some figures are particularly useful in sketching out this scenario. At present, the biomass of mammals on Earth consists of 4% wild mammals, 34% human beings, and 62% livestock. *Homo sapiens* and the animals they raise for food account for 96% of the mammalian biomass on Earth (Ritchie 2022). The situation is not much different in the case of birds: 29% of living birds on Earth are wild, while the remaining 71% are farmed (57% chickens, 14% ducks and turkeys) (Ritchie 2022). This situation is the result of the dramatic increase in the number of animals farmed and slaughtered over the last few decades. Just to give a few statistics, in 1961 6.58 billion chickens and 376 million pigs were slaughtered per year; in 2021, it was 74 billion and 1.4 billion, respectively. The increase in the number of animals slaughtered does not correspond to the increase in human population, either. In 1961 the world’s human population was three billion, while today it is eight billion. Thus, the growth in the number of farmed and slaughtered animals is part of the phenomenon that has been described as the “great acceleration”—that is, the increase in resource consumption, industrial production, and pollution caused by human beings since 1945 (McNeill & Engelke 2016). This phenomenon lies at the core of the Anthropocene—i.e., the age we are currently living in, which is characterized by the massive and global impact of *Homo sapiens* upon the Earth. As is now widely known, the most relevant feature of the Anthropocene is ongoing climate change and global warming. There is no need to discuss here whether this great acceleration represents the start of the Anthropocene or whether it is merely the radicalization of something that had begun long before (i.e., with the Neolithic revolution). It is enough to note that we are living in the Anthropocene and that human-animal relations are an essential part of the circumstances of this age.

The condition of farmed animals in the Anthropocene radically undermines the idea that moral progress in human-animal relations is clearly and unequivocally discernible. Certainly, in terms of the factual dimension, no moral progress can be affirmed. Moreover, at the moment no signs of a reversal of this trend can

be detected. On the contrary, a further increase in the number of animals raised and slaughtered is very likely to occur in the coming years. For example, the building of skyscraper-factories for pig farming in China<sup>7</sup> is an indication of the continual increase in factory farming to meet the growing demand for meat in developing countries. Perhaps in the future new technologies, such as cultivated meat, could meet the market demand for meat and replace animal farming, either partially or completely. This is a possibility, but at the moment the reality is the continuous and unstoppable growth of animal farming and slaughter.

Animal farming is critical not just from the point of view of the ethics of human-animal relations and animals' moral status. As is well known, animal farming is also a major source of greenhouse gases, accounting for at least 16.5% of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions (Twine 2021). Furthermore, farming is responsible for massive land consumption and pollution. In general, farming today is one of the most significant human activities that are contributing to the climatic and environmental crisis. From a broader perspective, the recognition of the environmental consequences of animal use in farming can help us to further reflect on the idea of moral progress and its difficulties and contradictions. Indeed, the increasing use of animals for food (but also for scientific purposes, something that I will not discuss here) is more than merely a threat to the moral advancement of human-animal relations and to moral progress in general (since it contributes to climate change, which is a threat to the whole process of civilization). From another point of view, the increased availability and consumption of animal products has ensured better nutrition, health, and welfare for a large number of human beings. So, on the one hand the use of animals seems to have contributed to moral progress; on the other, it seems to threaten it.

## 5. A Not Very Ambitious View of Moral Progress

This situation is puzzling and would provide a perfect case study for justifying a skeptical attitude toward moral progress, or even to explicitly deny its possibility. It is nevertheless possible to attempt a defense of the theoretical adequacy and empirical possibility of moral progress. A remark made by Dale Jamieson may prove extremely useful in this respect. In *Is There Progress in Morality?* (Jamieson 2002), Jamieson addresses a difficulty with moral progress that may be relevant when discussing the problem of human-animal relations. In particular, Jamieson is concerned with the problem of “distance” in moral progress:

Generally, claims about moral progress presuppose that some significant relations obtain between the states of affairs being compared. Specifically, for the language of progress to take hold, at least the following must be true: there must be close causal, cultural, and temporal connections between the states of affairs in question. State of affairs A may be better than state of affairs B, but if there is no causal connection between A and B, then the transition from B to A cannot be said to constitute progress. For this reason it would make little sense to assert that any relations of moral progress obtain between classical Athens and the Inca Empire. Although there were causal relations between Europe and Africa, there would be little point in making claims about moral progress on the basis of comparing

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/nov/25/chinas-26-storey-pig-sky-scraper-ready-to-produce-1-million-pigs-a-year#:~:text=On%20the%20southern%20outskirts%20of,1.2%20million%20pigs%20a%20year> [accessed 26 August 2024].

sixteenth century Lisbon with twentieth century Maputo: they lack a common cultural milieu. Even if we suppose that causal and cultural connections run from fourth century BC Athens to twenty-first century Washington, it may still not be possible to assess in a meaningful way whether or not moral progress has occurred in this case: the relevant states of affairs are too temporally remote from each other. Finally, there is a general problem with sweeping claims about moral progress from epoch to epoch or society to society: there are an indefinite number of dimensions on which such judgements might be made, and no obvious way of aggregating them (Jamieson 2002: 332–33).

The problem highlighted by Jamieson regards temporal, spatial, and cultural distance in judgments about moral progress. The answer proposed by Jamieson is to regard moral progress in a “local” and “pragmatic” way:

The upshot is that judgements about moral progress are, in some sense, local and pragmatic. They do not issue from a vacuum. We want to know whether or not moral progress has occurred for specific reasons that serve particular purposes. Often what will be worth comparing are particular practices within communities over relatively restricted periods of time. This should not surprise us. In my opinion, many important judgements are local and contrastive despite philosophers’ penchant for seeing them as universal and unconditioned (Jamieson 2002: 333).

According to Jamieson, when talking about moral progress we should avoid being overly ambitious. We should rather focus on specific dimensions. With regard to the topic under discussion here, we could therefore accept the puzzling situation described above and recognize some moral progress in the conceptual dimension while acknowledging its limitations in the factual one. On the one hand, our beliefs about non-human animals and our feelings toward them have changed: non-human animals are now included in the moral domain. On the other hand, human behaviors and their effects on animal life have not improved in accordance with this development. These statements are quite general, and they require clarification. At the level of individual’s personal lives, we can appreciate that there is a correlation between beliefs about animals’ moral status and behaviors. Especially in more economically developed countries, for example, the number of vegans and vegetarians is considerable and steadily increasing. The mismatch between the conceptual and factual dimensions can therefore be affirmed as a general evaluation of the state of things in human/animal relationships. This evaluation is a cue for a reflection on the idea of moral progress.

Affirming this mismatch seems to me to be perfectly acceptable from the perspective of a secularized and naturalized view of ethics (and moral progress). Indeed, within such a framework morality is generally understood as a historical phenomenon without relying—as noted above—on any kind of objective and teleological metaphysical substrate. This means that moral sentiments, beliefs, practices, and behaviors in the real world may be inhomogeneous or even contradictory. The acknowledgment of a situation such as that presented by the present use of animals allows us to push Jamieson’s point a little further. The local nature of moral progress does not only concern historically and culturally distant situations, but also dimensions of moral progress that are much closer to us. In our societies, a new moral conceptualization of animals coexists with an increase in their use. We can recognize moral progress in one case, but not in the other.

Jamieson's view of the local character of moral progress is essentially descriptive. It says something about how moral progress can be empirically recognized. Nonetheless, moral progress is not just a descriptive concept; it is also a normative one. Of course, the normative nature of a naturalized and anti-realist conception of moral progress is profoundly different from a realist and strongly objectivist one. As noted above, a Darwinian understanding of morality views progress in ethics as a historically defined refinement of sentiments and an extension of sympathy. Such refinement and extension are triggered and produced by many causes that foster individual reflection and social conversations. These causes vary in nature: Lynn Hunt, for example, refers to the role that reading novels (especially epistolary novels) played in the expansion of sympathy that led to the invention of human rights in the 18th century. Philosophy is also one of these causes. In the case of human-animal relations, animal ethics has played an important role since the development of the idea of antispeciesism. Beginning with Singer's *Animal Liberation* and Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights*, the philosophical analysis of animal ethics has influenced ruminations on the ethics of human-animal relations far beyond the academic debate. Therefore, the theoretical nature of animal ethics is more than just a topic in academic philosophy, as it lies at the heart of the debate on how to contribute to moral progress with respect to animals. As Steve Cooke has persuasively argued, the possibility of furthering moral progress in human-animal relations largely depends on the cultivation of the human imagination, and philosophical animal ethics can play a crucial role in improving and refining human sympathy and imagination regarding animals (Cooke 2017).

## 6. Conclusion

The present state of human-animal relations is paradigmatic of the theoretical and empirical difficulties posed by the idea of moral progress. I have attempted here to outline a naturalized approach to moral progress that is able to take into account both the varied condition of animals at present as well as the possibility of recognizing some degree of moral progress. In the case of philosophical reflections on animal ethics, this kind of approach can also provide a stimulus for the further development of such an analysis. The recognition of animals' moral status as morally valuable subjects is precisely the consequence of moral progress in its conceptual dimension, which is based on the development and refinement of sentiments and sympathy. The ongoing need to harmonize the conceptual and factual dimensions of moral progress is no reason to undervalue this achievement.<sup>8</sup>

## References

- Amato, J., 1990. *Victims and values: a history and a theory of suffering*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Beauchamp, T.L. and Frey, R.G., eds., 2011. *The Oxford handbook of animal ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Eugenio Lecaldano, Valentina Questa and Elenora Severini for their comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper. I want also to thank the anonymous referees of *Argumenta* for their remarks that helped me to improve the text.

- Bentham, J., 2007. *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation*. Mineola: Dover.
- Cooke, S., 2017. Imagined utopias: animals rights and the moral imagination. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 25(4), e1–e18, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12136>
- Darwin, C., 1981. *The descent of man and selection in relation to sex*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Darwin, C., 1987, *Charles Darwin's notebooks 1836–1844: geology, transmutation of species, metaphysical enquiries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Caro, M., 2022. Liberal naturalism: origins and prospect. In: M. De Caro and D. Macarthur D., eds. *The Routledge handbook of liberal naturalism*. London: Routledge, 205–217.
- De Waal, F., 2006. *Primates and philosophers: how morality evolved*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- European Union, 2012. Consolidated version of the treaty of the European union. *Official journal of the European union*, 26 October 2012, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF) [Accessed 26 August 2024].
- Francione, G.L., 1996. *Rain without thunder: the ideology of animal rights movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Frazer, M.L., 2010. *The enlightenment of sympathy: justice and the moral sentiments in the eighteenth century and today*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Huemer, M., 2016. A Liberal realist answer to debunking skeptics: the empirical case for realism. *Philosophical Studies*, 173 (7), 1983–2010.
- Hume, D., 2007. *A treatise of human nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hunt, L., 2007. *Inventing human rights: a history*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Huntley, W.B., 1972. David Hume and Charles Darwin. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 33(3), 457–470.
- Kahane, G., 2011. Evolutionary debunking arguments. *Noûs*, 45(1), 103–125.
- Jamieson, D., 2002. Is there progress in morality? *Utilitas*, 14(3), 318–338.
- McNeill, J.R. and Engelke, P., 2016. *The great acceleration: an environmental history of the anthropocene since 1945*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Midgley, M., 1984. *Animals and why they matter*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Moody-Adams, M., 1999. The idea of moral progress. *Metaphilosophy*, 30(3), 168–185.
- Pollo, S., 2017. Going veg: Care of the animals or care of the self? *Zoophilologica: Polish journal of animal studies*, 3, 143–154.
- Rachels, J., 1990. *Created from animals: the moral implications of Darwinism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ritchie, H., 2022. *Wild mammals make up only a few percent of the world's mammals*, <https://ourworldindata.org/wild-mammals-birds-biomass> [Accessed 26 August 2024].
- Ryder, R.D., 2000a. *Animal revolution: changing attitudes towards speciesism*, Oxford: Berg.
- Ryder, R.D., 2000b. Speciesism again: the original leaflet, *Critical society*, 2, 1–2.
- Singer, P., 1975. *Animal liberation*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Sölle, D., 1975. *Suffering*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

- Steiner, G., 2005. *Anthropocentrism and its discontents: the moral status of animals in the history of western philosophy*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Street, S., 2006. A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value. *Philosophical Studies*, 127(1), 109–166.
- Twine, R., 2021. Emissions from animal agriculture—16.5% is the new minimum figure. *Sustainability*. 13(11), 6276. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13116276>.