

Nonhuman Moral Agency

A Practice-Focused Exploration of Moral Agency in
Nonhuman Animals and Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

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Can nonhuman animals and artificial intelligence (AI) entities be attributed moral agency? The general assumption in the philosophical literature is that moral agency applies exclusively to humans since they alone possess free will or capacities required for deliberate reflection. Consequently, only humans have been taken to be eligible for ascriptions of moral responsibility in terms of, for instance, blame or praise, moral criticism, or attributions of vice and virtue. Animals and machines may cause harm, but they cannot be appropriately ascribed moral responsibility for their behavior.

This thesis challenges the conventional paradigm by proposing an alternative approach where moral agency is conceived as the competence to participate in moral responsibility practices. By shifting focus from intra-individual to contextual and socially situated features, this *practice-focused* approach appears to make the attribution of moral agency to nonhuman animals and AI entities more plausible than commonly assumed.

Moreover, considering the current and potential future prevalence of nonhuman animals and AI entities in everyday settings and social contexts, a potential extension of moral agency to such entities could very well transform our social, moral, and legal practices. Hence, this thesis proposes that the attribution or withholding of moral agency to different entities should be carefully evaluated, considering the potential normative implications.