

IGN-Research Award 2021

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„*Instrumentalization. On the transformation of a fundamental category of moral in the ethics of the human-animal relationship*“

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Summary

How should we morally behave towards animals? Which actions with animals are allowed, forbidden or required? The moral philosophical treatise *Instrumentalization. On a Basic Category of the Ethics of Human-Animal Relationship* examines how the category »instrumentalization« can contribute to answering this question of the ethics of the human-animal relationship. First, it contributes to the metaethical question why instrumentalization is a moral category at all. Second, the conditions under which other animals can be instrumentalized in a morally relevant way are examined. Third, the author develops an assessment criterion to analyze and distinguish morally permitted and unpermitted modes of instrumentalization within animal ethics.

Three thematic fields of contemporary animal ethics serve as a starting point: first, the critique of utilitarianism and the adaptation of Immanuel Kant's prohibition of absolute instrumentalization within the animal rights theory; second, the bioethical discourse on non-sentientist evaluation criteria (»harmless wrongdoing«); and third, the violation of animal dignity »excessive instrumentalization« of the Swiss Animal Protection Act, which has been subject to criminal law since 2005. In methodological terms, this enquiry goes beyond other accounts of instrumentalization by means of a thorough exploration of the conditions under which instrumentalization is a category of morality in general and what this means for animal ethics in particular. Against the background of a critical appraisal of contemporary Kantian approaches in animal ethics, the animal rights theory, and the concept of animal dignity, the transformation of Kant's formula of humanity from the human to the animal field and related difficulties and possibilities are identified.

Building on these results, morally unpermitted and permitted forms of instrumentalization are differentiated. A comparative analysis of the phenomena of instrumentalization, objectification, and exploitation serves to identify morally unpermitted modes of

instrumentalization. Drawing from Kant's criterion of rational consent as actual consent and hypothetical consent, an assessment tool is proposed to define morally permitted modes of instrumentalization within a sentientist approach. The discussion of the criterion of the consent of animals is also of practical relevance. Today, practices in the fields of animal experimentation (e.g. research on primates), circus and dressage, hunting, ritualized slaughter as well as domestication and farm animal husbandry are still justified with the argument that the instrumentalized animals do not act under coercion but participate voluntarily. This thesis provides a systematic account of the conditions under which the instrumentalization of animals is of moral relevance; it proposes an assessment tool to distinguish between morally permitted and unpermitted modes of instrumentalization of animals.

In summary, it can be stated that the moral content of an instrumentalization can be analyzed and determined on the basis of the four parameters means, mode, and purpose of instrumentalization, as well as subject of action. Central to the moral content of an instrumentalization is the moral status of the means of instrumentalization. As soon as an entity counts morally, the way in which it is instrumentalized becomes relevant. The mode of instrumentalization thus moves into the focus of the analysis. Following Immanuel Kant's concept of instrumentalization, and contrary to the common-sense understanding of instrumentalization, it is argued that instrumentalization is not a pejorative category per se. In the context of an ethical debate, it becomes necessary to distinguish between morally permitted and unpermitted modes of instrumentalization. Significantly, virtually all approaches dealing with the instrumentalization of animals implicitly or explicitly refer to Immanuel Kant's Formula of the End in Itself, which explicitly does not include animals. Starting from this problem, contemporary Kantian positions are treated and critically appreciated, which argue for a moral status of animals contrary to Kant's own position and determine the Formula of the End in Itself as the central action-guiding principle. The investigation first reveals that the Kantian positions must employ different strategies and make various modifications in order to classify animals as morally relevant means of instrumentalization within a Kantian approach.

A research desideratum with regard to the necessary translation performance becomes particularly apparent in the way Kant's distinction between morally permissible and impermissible modes of instrumentalization (in Kant's wording: using »as a means« and misusing »as a mere means«) can be understood in the case of morally non-autonomous beings and thus how permissible and impermissible modes of instrumentalization can be identified. With a comparative analysis of the three terms »instrumentalization«, »reification«, and »exploitation«, the thesis then moves beyond Kantian ethics to show that impermissible

modes of instrumentalization can be determined more precisely with the phenomena of objectification and exploitation. Furthermore, there is a constructive contribution to the question how morally permissible modes of instrumentalization can be identified. In summary, it can be shown that, despite epistemological limitations – with regard to the (expressive) behavior of a heterogeneous category of all sentient animals, only very general statements could be made in this work – within the framework of sentientism, an adapted form of Kant's criterion of consent as factual and hypothetical consent can be quite profitable in order to distinguish between morally permissible and impermissible instrumentalization of other animals and to analyze and evaluate instrumental human-animal relationships in a differentiated way.

Take Home Message

Instrumentalization is a basic category of the human-animal relationship. As an ethical category, it is reasonable to distinguish between permissible and impermissible forms of instrumentalization. As soon as a being counts morally, it becomes relevant in which way it is instrumentalized. In this regard, the thesis provides a systematic account of the conditions under which the instrumentalization of animals is of moral relevance, and it proposes an assessment tool to distinguish between morally permitted and unpermitted modes of instrumentalization of animals. The discussion of Immanuel Kant's ethics as a central point of reference has shown that it is more differentiated but also more inconsistent with regard to the human-animal relationship than is generally received.

Vita

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Since 2012 at the Messerli Research Institute at the Vetmeduni Vienna, since 2019 Senior Scientist. His research fields are applied ethics, animal ethics and bioethics.

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1999 – 2019: After studying German and philosophy at the University of Zurich, he gained his doctorate in Zurich, New York and Vienna.

Sources

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