

Aging Gracefully: Compassion for Nonhuman Animal Elders

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Margo. Margo is a 52-year-old chimpanzee (*Pan troglodytes*) living at Artis Zoo in the Netherlands. She came from the wild and has had a long life including as a high-ranking female and the mother of four babies. She is loved and cared for by the troop, giving her the nest she chooses and treating her with respect. Only the teenagers like to tease her by poking her with sticks; she does her best to make them stop. She used to run after the one poking her to grab the stick and break it in half, but now that she is older, she asks others for help. Margo likes to interact with the caretakers when food and enrichment are delivered, and some of her favourite foods are endive and bananas. For enrichment, she likes the tubes with some peanut butter, honey, or a green smoothie that she needs to manipulate with a stick to reach and eat. She loves building large nests with blankets and sheets.

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Margo has a kind personality and comforted her daughter Saphira when Sabra died. Her best friends are Leentje and Quincy, and she is still seen interacting and grooming with other group members

Abstract

Many nonhuman animals (hereafter animals) grow old within zoos. Aging animals undergo innumerable bodily and mental changes, some of which lead to suffering and keep them from flourishing while others move them towards other roles, opportunities, and standing. Those who take care of aging animals are confronted with various moral considerations of what it takes to care for these animals. Increased human intervention in the later stages of the lives of animals can make it more difficult to find one's bearings. Conspecifics in the wild gradually become less of a guide for shaping the lives of geriatric animals in confined spaces. Perhaps to take care is to be responsive to the individual animal, both to understand how they have been shaped by living their lives within a zoo and to explore and make available ways for them to continue to exert agency over the later stages of their lives. Moral deliberation helps to engage with the moral issues of taking care. Compassion comprises a vital part of moral deliberation and appears especially promising to care for animals in the later stages of their lives.

Keywords

Nonhuman animals · Zoo · Aging · Animal elders · Animal welfare · Animal agency · Wisdom · Compassion

1 Introduction: Caring about Animal Elders

The start and end of animal life often attract a lot of attention. A newborn polar bear or elephant in a zoo is quickly picked up by media and the public. Likewise, the end of animal life often raises discussion, especially when death comes unexpected or is unwanted, for instance, in the case of the killing of the gorilla Harambe, a 17-year-old western lowland gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*). To protect the 3-year-old boy that had entered the enclosure, zoo personnel had to quickly decide upon the best course of action, resulting in the fatal shooting of Harambe. This common emphasis on the start and end of animal life in the confinement of zoos makes the stages in between, especially the aging animal, a blind spot. Do we pay enough attention to the frailty of animals of old age in zoo enclosures? In empirical terms, aged animals confront us with questions of changes in, among others, health, individual and social behaviour, and feeding behaviour. In this chapter, however, we focus on the moral reasons to focus on the aging animals. The process of aging raises moral considerations. While aged animals generally need more care and attention, what this involves is not always self-evident. What does it take to take care?

In this chapter, we first discuss the concept of aging. Next, we focus on the impact of aging in terms of animal welfare and animal agency. As a background for these considerations, we bring out the cultural setting in which these animal elders find themselves, as well as the changes to how animals are viewed within human cultures. From that point onwards, we develop a view of morality and moral deliberation in the context of taking care of aging animals. We highlight compassion as highly relevant for taking care of aging animals, as it fosters a genuine curiosity for how animal elders experience their lives alongside the motivation to take care in whatever way appears the most appropriate.

2 Aging

Aging refers to the relation between an individual and time, usually concerning specifically the later stages in life. An individual's age relates her or him statistically to the life span of a species, population, or another subset of individuals, for instance, a community of animals confined in a zoo setting. In that sense, it is a relative term, subject to alteration. The baseline for being old as a human being, for instance, has dramatically shifted over the last two centuries. A similar shift has introduced differences between many but not all animal species when comparing confinement and the wild (Tidière et al. 2016).

Aging implies change. Most basically, aging tracks the progress of time, which might be interpreted in terms of a linear progression as ever-continuing change. The present appears to slide into the past, always edging into the future. With the flow of time, physical bodies change just as much as mental experience. Such changes are not necessarily for better or worse. However, when an individual reaches the later phases of her or his life span, senescence—the processes of physiological deterioration—may lead to disability and disease, potentially hindering individual flourishing (Crews 2007).

When animals grow old, like humans, they inevitably undergo various changes in their bodies, cognitive functioning, and behaviour (Krebs et al. 2018). These changes affect individuals in various ways across time, broadening welfare considerations across the life span of individuals (Brando and Buchanan-Smith 2018). A slow onset of arthritis, for instance, could make it increasingly difficult to roam the territory or maintain social status. Aging not only directly negatively affects welfare, but it also brings up the question to us what it implies for animals to age gracefully. In other words, it invites one to think about what wellbeing and flourishing mean for animals in the final stages of their lives.

2.1 Welfare of Aging Animals

Caring for aging animals calls for a responsiveness to the individual and the specific challenges that are raised simply by growing old. What this entails in practice, however, requires context-sensitive deliberation among those responsible for taking

care. In some cases, especially where suffering is profound and not expected to diminish in due time, euthanasia should be considered. Here, we understand euthanasia as the ending of a life being genuinely in the interest of the individual and with respect for animal welfare in the process (Fawcett 2013). In other cases, carefully starting up treatment can improve the welfare of aging animals, allowing them to continue to age. All these cases, whether considering euthanasia or determining treatment options, are permeated by moral concern for the individual elderly animal.

Care for the deteriorating wellbeing of an elderly animal sets these animals apart from the life they would have lived outside of human captivity. To the extent that the wild provides inspiration or a guide for shaping the lives of captive aging animals, this natural standard may become more and more difficult to approximate, if so desired. Increasingly individually tailored medical care and adaptation of the environment provide further opportunities for animals to become more geriatric. Paradoxically, while zoos strive to approximate the wild, one is inescapably confronted with the care for their lives in a way unparalleled in the wild. The older the animals get, and/or the more they are cared for, the less natural or wild their lives appear to become. This calls for careful reflection on what makes a (sufficiently) good animal life, into these later stages of life.

Animal welfare functions as an important (though not the sole) guide in such reflection. Especially as animal welfare (just like a conception of what makes a good life) involves an evaluative judgment, there are different views on what it entails specifically. That is, one's values determine in part what comprises animal welfare. David Fraser distinguishes between three prevalent value-laden assumptions often discernable in various animal welfare conceptions. These include (1) overall health and functioning, (2) experiential (affective) states or feelings, and (3) living according to one's nature in terms of species-specific functioning within an appropriate environment (Fraser 2009).

People will differ in their emphasis on these perspectives based on the values that they endorse. For some, aging diminishes animal welfare as soon as it limits natural living. Others look at the way in which mental and bodily changes affect the animal and limit his or her ability to adapt to the prevailing circumstances. Moreover, they might consider modifying the environment further away from the natural ideal, to adapt the environment to the altered abilities of the individual animals (Krebs et al. 2018).

2.2 Wisdom in Agency

There is more to the question of aging gracefully. Apart from the moral values at play in conceptions of animal welfare as indicated by Fraser, should aging animals have opportunities to make decisions about their own lives? Should one foster their agency, to allow and facilitate individual intentional action, that is, acting with a goal in mind (Delon 2018)? What range of opportunities is available to animal elders to shape their own lives?

Agency opens the door to freedom. It might do so to the extent of freeing animals from the confinement and captivity altogether. Less sweeping, at least it offers the

freedom to explore a range of opportunities. Doing so requires (1) a supportive environment and (2) individual ability. At the intersection of the individual and her or his environment, one once again must place her or his values on the table. If one values agency, what range of opportunities, in terms of both scope and content, should be available to animals?

The agency of aging animals itself reveals rather autobiographically the life story of an individual. Tracing back the historical and socioecological roots of an animal offers some insights into the agency he or she displays. Agency reflects how the individual has interacted with his or her surroundings and learned—and in some cases being trained, for instance to make possible veterinary treatment (Krebs et al. 2018)—to extend the range of intentional behaviour and shape one's own life (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2015; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2016).

Animal agency invites one to take an overview of the whole life of an animal: to both identify and promote opportunities for animals to make meaningful choices about their own lives, throughout their lives. It invites to consider what opportunities these animals have and, importantly, should have to shape their own lives. Rather than rendering an individual a mere member of a species, attention for agency aligns with respecting individual personality (Cole and Fraser 2018). It makes one wonder to what extent animals can and want to exert choice and control over their lives (Allard and Bashaw 2019). Especially when it comes to geriatric animals, for whom few natural benchmarks exist of what a good life entails, considering the animals' own ability to shape their own daily lives through their decisions may provide a key component of caring for aging animals (Krebs et al. 2018).

Individuals are intimately attuned to their environment to the extent that it becomes difficult to definitively demarcate one from the other. Interdependence between individual and environment shows up as the accumulated knowledge and skill set of an individual at a particular point in time, as these can (hypothetically) be traced back to the unique range of learning opportunities experienced over time. It calls for a biographical understanding of individual animals. Such an understanding provides a viewpoint to assess the skills and knowledge that animals have acquired throughout their lives. Aging animals may very well, for instance, lack various skills that are invaluable to living outside the confines of zoo enclosures, as they have not encountered the learning opportunities to acquire these skills. Their knowledge and skills will reflect social learning in a confined setting (Swaigood 2010). This includes their capacity to deal with novel choices, opportunities, enrichments, abilities to control, etc. Depending on their familiarity with opportunities provided, promoting agency could also backfire, as geriatric animals living in zoos could lack the ability to meaningfully engage with such kind of unfamiliarity (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2016; Krebs et al. 2018).

2.3 Cultures of Animal Elders

The interdependence between individual animals and their social and ecological context brings us to another way of looking at aging animals, as members of a

particular culture. As indicated, social learning situated in a particular socioecological setting results in a particular set of skills and abilities. Different populations of a particular species may exhibit differences in their behaviours due to these manifold differences found in terms of both intraspecies interaction and ecological backdrop (Swaigood 2010). As social learning takes place in social groups that—despite their similarities—vary from each other in myriad ways, cultural differences are to be expected.

Some might push back at this point to argue that culture is sole human provenance. Much depends on how one defines culture. However, if one takes culture as “the inheritance of an array of behavioural traditions through social learning from others” (Whiten 2021), it does capture the way in which many nonhuman animals learn from their conspecifics.

This prompts one to consider the cultural setting of aging animals. Different populations in the wild display relevant cultural differences (Brakes et al. 2021). All the ways in which geriatric animals have interacted with conspecifics, not to forget animals of other species and humans, cannot but result in a diversity of cultures across zoos. Discovering the intricacies of animal culture in more natural settings invites us to consider the ways in which zoo settings restrict and/or promote the development of distinct zoo cultures and to ask, for instance: “What is the role of animal elders in their respective culture?”

When one asks questions about the culture of aging animals that have been living in zoos for a long time, potentially troubling aspects of zoo life could arise. If one wants to explore the moral dimensions of taking care of aging animals, these could enrich such reflection and engagement. For instance, it might point out that breeding strategies in place, including the ending of individual lives for reasons other than being genuinely in the interest of the animal, or translocation could disrupt pathways for social learning and show how human-animal interaction is shaping behaviors in particular ways (Hosey 2013). In addition, husbandry configurations themselves might fail to replicate features of a natural socioecological context, which affects social learning (Swaigood 2010). The range and richness of culture may be impoverished for these reasons, for some a shadow of the cultures that have developed outside of human captivity. Such questions together invite engagement with the broader context of how these aging animals have lived their lives before becoming the elders that they are now.

3 Animals in Human Culture

Zoos reflect the human culture in which they exist. If one looks at the history of zoos, it becomes apparent that zoos themselves are interwoven with cultural views, both of animals and in more general. Zoos today are descendants of the early menageries where animals were put on display primarily to entertain the privileged class of society, where exoticism and rarity functioned as status symbols. Today, many zoos have been and are transitioning away from the remnants of earlier exoticism to become centres that endorse conservation, education, and research and

focus on animal care and welfare. The gradual transitioning to conservation and education correlates with an increase in public concern about the natural world (Boachá Sampaio et al. 2020).

An awareness of nature increasingly informs zoo practice. The natural lives of animals in their natural habitats provide a standard of species-specific potential, urging zoos to develop facsimiles of natural habitats. Alongside the call for nature, one hears animal voices. In many countries, animals gain recognition as sentient beings. Animal welfare and intrinsic value have become guiding principles, aligning with individuated care. Growing acknowledgment of the moral status of animals translates into more stringent demands on how humans ought to treat them, raising all kinds of considerations, some of which raised earlier in this chapter: Should ailing animals (of age) receive intensive veterinary treatment? Should animals in zoos age beyond their capacity to live a more-or-less natural life? Does death harm an animal when he or she has no anticipation nor suffering from it being brought about? Should animals be subjected to the human gaze? Do animals benefit from interaction with humans, and if so, in what way? In what way can these considerations help to bolster and foster care for elderly animals?

3.1 What Is Morality?

Elderly animals, both frail and wise, prompt those who take care of them to consider what it takes to care for them. These considerations are thoroughly moral, as they require one to establish the needs and interests of these aging animals to flesh out what it means to take care. As those tasked with the responsibility of taking care of aging animals in zoos are inevitably faced with a plethora of moral decisions, can philosophy inform and support moral deliberation?

Philosophers have made various suggestions to address the question of what one should do. For instance, ethical theorists map out possibilities for moral action. These theories invite one to look at the world from a well-crafted, conceptual framework, to intuit and judge its fecundity in the face of a moral problem. When put next to each other, ethical theories may end up at different sides, fueling the question: Who is right? Here, adopting a single theoretical viewpoint may overlook the insights of other theories or those not articulated in competing theories. Perhaps ethical theories are best viewed as vehicles for our moral imagination to expand our views and moral perception to better address the complexities of the moral problems one faces. Their value lie in making sense with what one believes to be warranted upon reflection, enriching rather than ossifying moral views of the world. If these theories fail to do so, they might be counterproductive to moral engagement (McKenna and Light 2004).

Caring for aging animals in zoos will generally map onto the culture in the background. The cultural backdrop may harbour deep-seated ethical or even metaphysical beliefs informing such care, for instance, views about euthanasia, the role of medicine and science, the relation between individual autonomy and collective responsibility, and the position of humans in relation to animals and nature writ large.

Deliberation about caring for aging animals may require engaging with these underlying beliefs about societal norms and values and wondering how they relate to the caring for elderly animals.

Engaging with moral beliefs involves engaging with emotions. Perhaps, as philosopher Jesse Prinz suggests, morality arises out of ongoing emotional engagement of individuals with the prevailing social fabric of their lives. The interaction between the individual and her or his social and cultural environment attunes emotional responses in a particular way. Throughout one's life, emotional states, such as anger, guilt, shame, disgust, and admiration, are prompted in certain contexts, inhibited in others, resulting in a particular set of sentiments, one's moral perception of the world (Prinz 2006).

3.2 Caring for Others

If morality is emotional at its core, moral deliberation not only requires an open mind but also the ability to feel and to explore experiences. What lies beneath the principles that guide action and shape moral perception? How do you feel about each possible course of action to take care of an aging animal, and how have former experiences informed your view? Of course, opening to one's feelings and experience is not always easy, nor should it be demanded. An atmosphere of mutual respect and acceptance among colleagues could foster meaningful exploration of how one feels in all honesty about the moral issue at hand. Exploring your own experiences and feelings while attending to how others feel about the situation, if done in a respectful manner, can help to gain a deeper understanding of what matters for yourself and for others (Misak 2000). Through empathy, "feeling what one takes another person to be feeling" (Prinz 2011), one can look at the moral problem at hand from a different perspective, perhaps to the enrichment of one's own view of the matter. Moreover, empathy could also make you resonate with the experiential world of the animals in your care (Gruen 2013).

Despite the possible benefits of empathy, one needs to be wary of the ways in which it could interfere with moral agency. For instance, empathy could make you focus on the experiences of those you bond with, blinding you to others—both humans and animals—with whom you lack this way of bonding (Kasperbauer 2015). In other words, empathy might open you up to the experience of those elderly animals that happen to kindle your affection, while leaving you much less interested in the wellbeing of those that lack such affection. Affection and interest appear to join forces. Empathy could also misfire, attributing mental states to others that misalign with their actual feelings. This is something particular at risk when approximating the experience of members of another species, where the projection of human characteristics—anthropomorphism—eschews the reality of animals themselves (Gruen 2013). While empathy provides a potential way for humans to engage with the animals in their lives, we need to be careful not to overdo it. However, there is also a risk of swinging the pendulum too far the other side. As Frans de Waal puts it, we need to avoid not only anthropomorphism, but also anthropodenial, which he

defines as “a blindness to the humanlike characteristics of other animals, or the animal-like characteristics of ourselves” (de Waal 1999). Given the extent to which humans share their evolutionary history with other animals, we need to be careful not to overlook the biological overlap between humans and other animals. To escape the perils of anthropomorphism and anthropodenial, de Waal suggests heuristic anthropomorphism, where identification with another animal can enrich scientific practice, by fostering empathetic thinking within the realm of developing testable hypotheses. Empathy could also prove too powerful, too emotionally exhausting, if one vicariously experiences the suffering of others. Relying on empathy alone makes one vulnerable to empathic distress, “a strong aversive and self-oriented response to the suffering of others, accompanied by the desire to withdraw from a situation in order to protect oneself from excessive negative feelings” (Singer and Klimecki 2014).

Getting in touch with the feelings underneath moral judgement not only deepens understanding but also helps to avert moral distress. Moral distress occurs when individuals find it difficult to act upon their core beliefs because of circumstance, for instance, peer pressure (Jameton 2013). In response to such distress, psychological numbing could function as a coping mechanism to offset the failure to live up to one’s own moral standards, resulting possibly in burnout in the long run and blunted moral agency (Oh and Gastmans 2015; Rushton 2017). Moral deliberation as sketched here effectively counters numbing for its engagement with feelings as a basis for aligning one’s actions with one’s beliefs. Genuine moral deliberation requires regular honest and respectful exchange of perspectives. Such open deliberative effort promotes the exploration of one’s own values and those of others, providing the basis for aligning relevant values with the practice of taking care. As such, moral deliberation helps to cultivate moral resilience, the ability to engage with moral complexity and difficulty in a way that seeks for possibilities rather than succumbing to defeat. In the process of learning to deal with moral difficulty, one also bolsters one’s own moral integrity (Rushton 2017).

3.3 Compassion for Animal Elders

To fruitfully engage in moral deliberation, it appears, one should not feel too much (risking empathic distress) or too little (risking psychological numbing). To navigate between these emotional extremes, some find guidance in compassion (Halifax 2011; Singer and Klimecki 2014). Compassion can be defined broadly as the “capacity to attend to the experience of others, to feel concern for others, to sense what will serve others, potentially to be able to be of service” (Halifax 2013). More narrowly, it combines the affective recognition of the suffering of others with a motivational state to help (Halifax 2013). Luckily, as compassion involves primarily a recognition rather than a resemblance of the emotional state of others, it is not associated with empathic distress (Singer and Klimecki 2014). As such, compassion is well equipped to propel moral action, as it circumvents vicarious suffering while nonetheless attending to it (Bloom 2017).

Compassion invokes a heightened sensitivity for the suffering of other individuals (and oneself) coupled with the aspiration to alleviate, diminish, or eliminate it. As such, it provides a motivational attitude that has been viewed as highly relevant to the practice of caring for others (Halifax 2011). In the process of aging, geriatric animals will be affected by changes to their bodies and minds. Part of taking care is to recognise (nuanced) indications of suffering and adversity, to handle being confronted with suffering, and to work towards alleviating suffering and fostering flourishing. For precisely these reasons, compassion appears profoundly relevant to the care for aging animals in zoos. It encourages curiosity and interest for the lives of elderly animals, to acquire a fine-grained view of their lived experience and to support them in ways that help them overcome or deal with the adversities, both great and small, that they face in the last phases of their lives. While compassion throws the interest of other sentient beings into sharp relief, aligning with the consonant call for the recognition of the intrinsic value of animals, what it entails at the practical level will be a question of honest, open deliberative engagement in practice. Here, both individual efforts (for instance, engaging in mindfulness or other forms of contemplative practices) and organisational initiative help to foster compassion for each other (Kirby et al. 2017).

4 Conclusions: Listening to Animal Elders

Aging animals have a story to tell. To take care of them requires that one listens, to the biographies of their lives and to the ways in which they tell us how they want to live their lives now that they have become elders. As they diverge further away each day from the lives they would have lived in a natural habitat, it becomes even more important to listen. The geriatric phase of the lives of animals will often resemble untrodden territory, especially for it being increasingly shaped by human intervention. Novelty and uncertainty together prompt an array of moral questions for those that take care of them. Compassion proves especially promising as a way of navigating these concerns, as it fosters a genuine curiosity for how elderly animals experience their lives alongside the motivation to take care in whatever way appears the most appropriate. In other words, it allows one to be responsive to their authentic interests, to enable these elders to age gracefully.

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