CHAPTER 17

FOUR LEGS GOOD, THREE LEGS BAD? THE AESTHETICS OF ANIMAL DIGNITY

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Introducing Moon

Moon is a 23-year-old Arab mare who joined my family in 2003 after I sustained numerous head, neck, and back injuries following a disabling fall from another horse while conducting fieldwork for my PhD. I entered a deep depression after being discharged from hospital and struggled to motivate myself to engage in the physical therapy needed to walk again. Moon was offered to me by a neighbour to incentivize my recovery and rehabilitation.

After helping me to regain mobility and confidence, Moon had a successful county-level showing career, where she was judged according to her conformity to the aesthetic ideals expected of her breed. She also carried me tirelessly and enthusiastically during my doctoral fieldwork as I conducted research on foxhunting and hill farming (see Hurn 2008a and b, 2011, 2013). However, as I haven't ridden her since 2012, she has lived her own life at liberty or, as one of my interlocuters opined, as a 'field ornament'. This term denotes the widespread objectification of horses as aesthetic commodities whose function is to be ridden and has implications for their dignity as we shall see.

As Moon has aged, she has experienced several injuries and illnesses which have left her disabled too. These include a deformed forelimb catalysed by a kick from another horse, which has left her permanently unsound or lame. Her hind knee joint dislocates or locks periodically, also because of a kick from another horse. And she has Pituitary Pars Intermedia Dysfunction (PPID), commonly referred to as equine Cushing's disease, an incurable

condition that typically affects aged horses and causes erratic and excessive hormone production. Each time a vet comes to take her blood sample and sees Moon, they query her quality of life (and the expense of treating a horse who cannot be ridden) and suggest euthanasia as an appropriate course of action.

Yet, despite her physical disabilities, Moon is still arguably 'healthy'. Krahn *et al*. (2021: 2) argue that health has come to be recognized as a continuum as opposed to a static state. They suggest that health is 'the dynamic balance of physical, mental, social, and existential well-being in adapting to conditions of life and the environment' (2021: 1). Moon has successfully adapted to her conditions and is, for the most part, able to balance her physical, mental and social well-being, aided by her human caregivers, the other members of her herd (who accommodate her mood swings), and a supportive environment. For example, she currently lives on a large piece of land belonging to a neighbour, which is classed as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) due to the range of flora and fauna, and the diverse habitat which incorporates wildflower meadow, along with some rougher scrub grazing, woodland and stream. Here she is truly at liberty, as one side of the meadow backs onto open moorland and there is no need to stable her. For Moon, being stabled results in what might be interpreted as existential discomfort and compromised welfare.

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Ethologist Marian Stamp Dawkins suggests that an accessible and helpful definition of welfare needs to be concerned with 'what the animal wants' (2021: 8). Dawkins gives the example of a trapped bird fluttering against the bars of a cage. This individual clearly wants to be released, and so to continue to contain them negatively impacts on their welfare. Of course, there may be instances when confinement or other action taken that is not something

the animal wants may be in that individual's best interest (keeping an injured bird contained to enable healing, for example). But for the current purposes, acknowledging that other animals have a personal stake in their own welfare and are able to express their 'wants' is key. When Moon is stabled, her compromised welfare is expressed in the exhibition of stereotypies such as box walking, hyper vigilance (staring into the distance and calling frantically), barging at the stable door, inappetence, and loose stools. In such a situation, Moon clearly wants to be outside, appears concerned by her change in environment, and is unable to adapt.

In response to her disabilities, Moon has developed her own stumbling and irregular gait, which, according to normative equestrian ideals is ugly, ungainly, and unsound. To my mind, however, it is beautiful, as is her uneven musculature, which has developed over the years as she compensates for her disabilities by using her 'good' legs to support her. Moon can engage in all 'normal' equine behaviours to varying degrees – she can move through all the gaits, including gallop when the mood or circumstance takes her. She can lay down, roll, get up again, groom herself and the other horses, graze, and drink. But she cannot easily navigate over some of the obstacles within her field such as fallen trees, steep riverbanks, or very uneven ground. While she limps and occasionally falls in the field, her disabilities don't seem to bother her. But in 'allowing' Moon to exist in such a manner, am I compromising her dignity?

Dignity

The *Cambridge Dictionary* (n.d.) provides two definitions for dignity, the first of which is 'calm, serious, and controlled behaviour that makes people respect you', which certainly doesn't apply to Moon. Her behaviour is often erratic, she is highly strung and impulsive.

However, the second definition acknowledges 'the importance and value that a person has, that makes other people respect them or makes them respect themselves.' Whether the other horses in her small herd 'respect' Moon is difficult to assess. They certainly respond to her aggressive outburst with little or no retaliation. They also engage in mutual grooming practices, which suggest they at least regard her with some affection. When it comes to humans, her size and bulk demands respect for her potential to cause bodily harm. But as noted at the outset, respect for her integrity, importance and inherent value is a source of conflict between her human caregivers, and the professionals (especially veterinarians and farriers) who provide specialist care and for whom her disability is problematic.

Much extant literature equates dignity with humanity, perpetuating the status quo of human exceptionalism – a means of differentiating humans from other animals by way of discrimination that serves to limit the rights and freedoms of other animals. This has implications for some humans as well as other animals, as Meyer explains:

> The concept of human dignity purports to safeguard human lives equally, but in fact, because it grounds human inviolability in the violability of animal lives, it exposes and endangers those human beings whose racialized, gendered, and embodied differences have been historically constructed through animality.
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> (Meyer, 2020: 205).

The term dignity has been dismissed by some bioethicists, with Macklin for example stating 'Dignity is a useless concept in medical ethics and can be eliminated without any loss of content' (2003: 1419–20). Macklin argues that 'respect for persons' is more precise and therefore preferable. However, Hauskeller (2011: 54) presents two objections to Macklin's stance. First, 'respect for persons' fails to articulate why persons are to be respected or to

clarify what differentiates persons from non-persons, and second, as an ethical principle 'respect for persons' lacks the scope and nuance of dignity. Hauskeller argues that in contemporary bioethics, 'respect for persons' is synonymous with respect for autonomy, which implies that those lacking in autonomy or with diminished autonomy are less deserving of respect. While Hauskeller is writing about human embryos, the distinction has relevance to the current discussion of animal disability. Hauskeller proposes *bonitas* as a more inclusive alternative. He argues that while dignity might indeed be something to be respected, *bonitas* invites responses of awe – an 'immediate value experience' grounded in emotional affect (2011: 56). Contrary to dignity and respect, which are attributed to others based on certain pre-determined traits or characteristics (such as being human, or having autonomy), awe is an emotional, affective response that arises from experience or encounter with the awe-inspiring being or entity. Such a line of argument resonates with anthropological discussions of personhood as something that can be perceived and then known about another through embodied experiences and interactions with the 'person'.

Perceiving personhood, perceiving dignity?

An embodied approach to dignity therefore might help to challenge the exceptionalism of human dignity. Anthropologists Tim Ingold and Gili Palsson (2013) argue that individuals experience the world as both biological and social beings. First, the way they encounter and experience the world is mediated, limited, or facilitated by their biological form – for example, their species, and their genetic heritage, or their disability. But individuals don't just experience and understand the world as a result of their biological selves. Social interactions with others and the fusion or entanglement of biological and social selves result in a relational process that Ingold and Palsson term 'biosocial becomings'. Anthropologists

Vivieros de Castro (2004) and Eduardo Kohn (2007) argue that individuals perceive the personhood of others through their subjective and relational states, which will vary between species as well as between individuals. Each will operate under the influence of a particular ontology as well as biological form, which enables them to relate to other beings as persons, while adhering to species-specific norms, behaviours, and preferences.

Such positions resonate with claims that while other animals may not have human dignity, they nonetheless possess their own versions of these characteristics which are in many cases, equivalent (Etinson, 2020; Gruen, 2014). As Gruen notes, Martha Nussbaum (2006) argues 'that the properties that are typical of proper species functioning, that allow an individual animal to live a characteristic life as a member of its species, should be respected' as species-specific animal dignity (Gruen, 2014: 236).

Over the course of my research into the care of and attitudes towards disabled animals, I have begun to wonder whether there is a risk that the argument presented by Nussbaum and others in defence of animal dignity could in fact be used to undermine the dignity of *individual* animals who, by dint of their age or disability, are not necessarily able to 'live a characteristic life' of a member of the species to which they belong.

Moon can do pretty much everything the other horses in her herd can do with some limitations and adjustment (e.g., daily drugs to manage her pain and other symptoms), but she can't be used for human ends as she can't be ridden. Because of this, she does not 'live a characteristic life' as a member of the (domesticated) species to which she belongs. But does this mean that she is less dignified than her able-bodied conspecifics? Or that by intervening and removing the barriers that she experiences as a disabled individual, her dignity is undermined?

Gruen (2014) argues that when humans make other animals behave in certain ways that, following Nussbaum, are not species-specific (Gruen gives the example of animals

wearing costumes and performing in a circus) their dignity is being compromised. Gruen states that 'when animals are forced to be something other than what [and I would add who] they are […] this is disrespectful and their "animal dignity" is being denied' (2014: 235). Previously I have argued that forcing other animals to wear clothes (even something as seemingly benign or in their interests as horses wearing rugs [coats] during inclement weather) can constitute a disrespectful act (Hurn, 2011). But this is perhaps only in cases where it is done for human benefit rather than out of respect or concern for the animal's interests and inherent value. So, rugging and clipping a horse to keep them clean and readily accessible for riding at the rider's convenience is very different to rugging a horse because they are old, ill and unable to thermoregulate. The way humans go about engaging with horses often has the potential to undermine equine dignity, but it depends on the individuals involved, and the context.

Further, Gruen argues that dignity, like personhood, is a relational concept. An individual (regardless of species) might be accorded dignity on the basis of how they are perceived within their social context, and whether or not the behaviour of that individual is deemed 'worthy of respect'. The act of riding itself is not necessarily dignity denying but can be if the way it is enacted (e.g., using whips or spurs to force horses to do things they'd rather not) can undermine dignity. Gruen argues that this way of conceiving of dignity helps us understand why dignity is often invoked in situations where it has been denied – when individuals are treated in a disrespectful manner, their value has not been recognized and in the process, the offender also loses 'some of their own worth as a moral agent' (Gruen, 2014: 234).

Overcoming aesthetic anxiety

In human medicine, disability was traditionally viewed as a pathology to be overcome or eradicated. As Taylor (2011: 193–4) has argued, this 'medical model' of disability sees disability as a 'deviance' and positions 'the disabled body as working incorrectly, as being unhealthy and abnormal, as in need of cure'.

However, following civil rights movements in the 1970s, a shift was made to what is termed the 'social model' of disability. This approach argues it is society that disables human individuals, and not their physical or mental differences. In other words, the construct of disability is imposed on individuals by powerful social systems and institutions such as government, healthcare providers and legislature. Consequently, the social model of disability advocates supporting disabled individuals, enabling them to surmount the barriers they encounter, including pain and other symptoms, but also helping them overcome social and ideological obstacles, such as how medical professionals, caregivers and employers, perceive and treat their disabilities.

Much writing about disabled humans has highlighted that when encountering physical disabilities, nondisabled people can experience existential, affective and aesthetic anxieties – in other words, nondisabled observers can feel uncomfortable around disabled bodies (e.g., Harris, 2019). It has been argued that this is because of the stigmatized and objectifying ways in which disabled bodies are viewed and associated with negative states of being such as ill-health and deficiency. In the process, the dignity of the disabled individual is compromised.

Animal caregivers and members of the veterinary profession in particular have much to gain from embracing the social model of disability. To do this, they need to re-evaluate the aesthetics of dignity and come to perceive disabled individuals as awe-inspiring with the potential to flourish when given the right support to overcome obstacles to their health and wellbeing. Admittedly not all companion animal guardians will be willing or able to provide the care, resources, or environments necessary for their disabled or elderly pets to thrive, and

not all disabled individuals will be able to cope with their conditions sufficiently for pleasure to outweigh their suffering. Nonetheless, more nuanced approaches to treating disabled and elderly animals are needed, which recognize them as dignified individuals, who, with appropriate care and support, can flourish and enjoy intrinsically valuable lives worth living.

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