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"An Animal: What Is It?"

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This paper will argue that posing the question 'what is an animal?' is neither irrelevant nor futile. By looking more closely at four conceptions of what is an animal as held implicitly by the general public, - by certain philosophers of animal liberation, by apologists for zoos and by the community of zoologists - it will attempt to show that the first three are partial and decontextualised. On the other hand, the zoological account is obviously more comprehensive, and it will be argued that, if suitably teased out, it involves a properly contextualised conception set against the notions of species, habitat, ecosystem and of evolutionary processes in the past (as well as the future). Such a rounder and more historical characterisation will transcend the usual polarisation between so-called individualism and holism in environmental philosophy. The transcendence of this perceived dichotomy is shown also to have practical implications for environmental policy-making with regard to issues like biodiversity and the saving of animals from extinction.

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