

Animals in Anglo-American Philosophy

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Philosophers, both ancient and modern, have had much to say about animals. This review will, therefore, of necessity, be extremely selective. First, I'll consider only recent material from, roughly, the early 1970s to 2005. Second, I'll confine the discussion to Anglo-American, rather than Continental philosophy. Third, I'll consider only two areas of philosophy: philosophy of mind and ethics. I'll focus on animal ethics. But since most ethical arguments about animals depend on some view of what animals are *like*, I'll begin by looking at some work on animal minds.

Investigation of animal minds is complex and multi-disciplinary, the territory of psychology, cognitive ethology, and biology as well as philosophy. Answering central questions such as "Do animals feel pain? Are animals conscious? Can animals think, even if they are non-linguistic beings? Is there some sense in which we can regard animals as rational?" requires empirical as well as philosophical work. Even asking questions of this kind is problematic. These questions imply that there is a single category "animal," rather than many individual animals, of many species, at different stages of maturity. Further, they suggest that there is some agreed upon meaning for terms such as "pain," "consciousness," or "rationality" although much of the philosophical argument has, in fact, turned on what these very terms should be taken to mean.

Unsurprisingly, those who work on animal minds debate the kinds of mental capacities animals might have. Virtually without exception, philosophers accept that animals are in some sense able to feel pain, and many agree that animals—or mammals and birds at least—can have simple beliefs and desires. Beyond this point, however, there is considerable disagreement. Peter Carruthers (2004), for instance, argues that animals may be able to suffer, but that this does not mean that they have “experiential subjectivity.” In other words, he argues that we can't say there's “something that it's like from the inside” to be an animal. Other philosophers attribute much more sophisticated mental capacities to at least some animals (in particular the great apes). One important and interdisciplinary book here is by Allen and Bekoff <http://mypage.iu.edu/%7Ecolallen/SpeciesofMind> (1997). The authors argue that sometimes

it is justified, on the basis of inference to the best explanation, to attribute mental states to animals. Their study focuses in particular on the kinds of mental states involved in social play and anti-predator behavior among social mammals and birds.

I'll now move on to animal ethics. Here, a number of questions have been central. Do humans have *any* ethical responsibilities directly towards animals? If so, what *sorts* of ethical responsibilities are due to animals? How *strong* are these responsibilities (for instance, in comparison to those we might owe other humans)? And *to what kinds* of animals do humans owe responsibilities? Answers to these questions are very often (though not always) closely tied to views about animal minds. Generally speaking, philosophers who argue that animals have sophisticated mental capacities also argue that humans have more and stronger ethical responsibilities towards animals. The less sophisticated the view of animal capacities philosophers endorse, the fewer and weaker their claims for ethical obligations to animals.

The most influential book in the field of animal ethics has been Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975). Singer's claims here have been central to debates in animal ethics. The first claim is factual: animals feel pain. Singer gives three reasons for thinking this: animals behave as though they feel pain; they are physiologically similar to humans in relevant ways; and they share a close evolutionary history with humans, in an evolutionary context where a capacity to feel pain enhances survival. Singer then argues that pain (and pleasure) matters ethically. The "capacity for suffering and enjoyment is a *prerequisite for having interests at all.*" A stone feels no pain and for that reason it (usually) doesn't matter what you do to it. But because animals feel pain, they are of ethical significance. What's more, pain is pain. Whatever species the being is that is undergoing it, the same amount of pain is just as ethically important whether inflicted on an animal or a human. Denying this, Singer argues, using the models of racism and sexism, is to adopt an attitude of *speciesism*, where one is prejudiced in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species.

It's important to note what this view does not imply. First, it does not necessarily mean that all animals and humans require equal *treatment*. Singer's concern is with equal *consideration*. And second, this is an account about pain, not about killing. Singer does not say, in *Animal Liberation*, that it is equally as bad to *kill* an animal as a human. (His ideas about killing are developed in much more detail elsewhere, most prominently in his chapter on animals in his 1999 book *Practical Ethics*).

Singer's book has had a huge impact, in particular because of the practical conclusions he draws. In terms of ethics, he maintains that painful experimentation on animals is deeply problematic, and vegetarianism, in a factory farming system at least, is required. However, some philosophers consider that his arguments did not go far enough, most prominently, Tom Regan. For although Singer is often thought of as upholding an "animal rights" position, the concept of rights is not central to his argument. Singer is a philosophical utilitarian, not a rights theorist. In *The Case for Animal Rights* (1984) Tom Regan argues that all adult mammals have a right to respectful treatment, incorporating a right not to be harmed or killed. He maintains that adult mammals, at least, have a range of mental capacities including sentience, preferences, interests and desires, memory, self consciousness, and a sense of the future. It is these characteristics that make mammals what Regan calls "subjects of a life," the kind of beings that possess inherent value and possess it equally. These kinds of beings, Regan maintains, should never be sacrificed or traded-off to achieve some greater good, nor treated solely as a means to an end. So, for instance, it would not be ethically permissible to act on a calculation that more happiness would be brought about in the world by experimenting on a few animals painfully in order to produce greater benefits, whether the benefits accrue to humans or to other animals.

Another influential account of animal ethics was proposed by David DeGrazia, briefly in his *Very Short Introduction to Animal Rights* (2002) and in considerably more detail in his earlier book *Taking Animals Seriously* (1996). DeGrazia's account is particularly useful in its study of animal minds in an ethical context. He argues that animals can experience a wide range of feelings; that they have beliefs and desires; that they can remember, anticipate, and have some conscious sense of time (171); and that while self-awareness can come in different forms, at least some animals manifest self-awareness. DeGrazia defends an "equal consideration" view in which equal moral weight should be given to "relevantly similar interests, no matter who has them" (258). This leads him to adopt conclusions such as that "any harm-benefit standard invoked in the name of making a research animal suffer is acceptable only if applying the same standard to human subjects would be acceptable" (264).

Although these accounts differ in detail, they all maintain that humans have strong ethical obligations to animals. Accepting these arguments would certainly mean wide-ranging social changes, for example, with regard to eating meat, experimenting on animals, and hunting. It's worth noting that some philosophers, while accepting the widely held view that animals are sentient, do not share this conclusion. Raymond Frey and Carl Cohen have views of this kind. An

accessible way into Frey's work is his paper "Moral Standing, the Value of Lives and Speciesism" (1988 [2002]). Here Frey argues that although animal life has some value, not all animal lives have the same value. Moreover, normal human lives are worth more than all animal lives. Most humans, he argues, have richer and more varied lives than most animals, and thus they count for more. Frey calls this the *unequal value thesis*. Cohen makes a similar argument in "The Case for the Use of Animals in Biomedical Research" (1986). He accepts that, as sentient beings, animals have moral status, but in opposition to Regan he maintains that animals cannot be rights holders. Only humans have the higher level capacities that are required for rights possession; in particular, only humans have moral autonomy. So only humans can have rights. Human rights trump the interests of sentient animals; hence animals can be used in experimentation to benefit humans. Speciesism, in Cohen's account, is "essential to right conduct" (97).

Both Cohen's and Frey's work inevitably raises questions about human beings who temporarily or permanently lack the high level mental capacities that both Frey and Cohen consider to characterize human life, such as fetuses, babies, and people with mental handicaps or in comas. In response to these worries, Frey maintains that it is *capacities* that matter, not species. If a human has the same capacities and richness of experience as an animal, then it's permissible to treat the human as one would treat an animal. So, if it's permissible to experiment on an animal because of an animal's lesser capacities, then it should be permissible to experiment on a human, if the relevant human has no more sophisticated capacities than the animal. Cohen, on the other hand, controversially argues that to be a member of a species that characteristically manifests these high-level capacities is enough to be credited with the status of the typical member of the species. The issue is, he says, "one of kind." So, in his account, all humans may be treated differently from all animals, whatever an individual human's level of mental sophistication, because humans are all of the same kind.

One further strand of debate in animal ethics should be mentioned here. Most of the work I've discussed thus far arose out of concerns for the well-being of *domesticated* animals bred by humans for use in farms and laboratories. However, the kinds of obligations outlined here seem to be universal: that is, they apply to all animals, or at least to all those whose mental capacities reach whatever level is thought to be required for moral status. But does this suggest, for instance, that to reduce animal suffering in the world, humans should intervene to prevent wild predation, or should we provide medical treatment to wild animals? The possibility that "animal liberation"

positions might carry some such implication for the wild has been of concern to another group of philosophers—environmental ethicists. In "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair" (1980), J. Baird Callicott argues that if one starts from the perspective of a land ethic, ecological "wholes" such as ecosystems and species are of primary ethical significance. In this context, *individual* wild animals are important only inasmuch as they contribute to the flourishing of such systems. Seen from this perspective, hunting, for example, is ethically permissible (even ethically required, in the case of a sentient animal population that threatens the health of an ecosystem). Arguments of this kind have led to a divide between the focus on *individual animals* that has characterized "animal liberation" approaches to ethics and the focus on *ecological wholes* that has characterized some forms of environmental ethics. Recently, however, a number of philosophers (including Dale Jamieson and Gary Varner: see references below) have made attempts to bring philosophical animal liberation and environmental ethics back together again, though there is some disagreement as to how successful these attempts have been.

Finally, in 2003 a classroom reader, *Animal Ethics*, edited by Susan Armstrong and Richard Botzler, was published. It contains readings on theories of animal ethics; on animal minds and emotions; on religion and animals; and on a number of ethical issues such as vegetarianism, animal experimentation, biotechnology, hunting, and zoos. It offers an excellent starting point for someone who wants to delve further into central questions in this field.

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