

Animal Rights (Academic version)

The modern animal rights movement has been growing in activist and scholarly circles for the past forty years; however, despite an increase in awareness of animal issues, our use and exploitation of animals on a global scale has been increasing (Jones, 2015; Kim, 2015). Considering animal rights means exploring ethics and morality, and critically evaluating the hierarchical structures of our societies.

Dominant, western culture subscribes to the ideology of a “circle of moral consideration” (Balcombe, 2016) which is essentially a list of criteria such as race, religion, gender, and species that determine who is deserving of rights in our societies. Throughout history white, heterosexual, able-bodied men have been placed in the centre of that circle and have thus been awarded the most privilege, meaning they have an advantage in our society with their access to things like rights, education, jobs, and safety. Many [social justice](#) movements, such as the civil rights, women’s rights, and gay rights movements are pushing for oppressed groups of people to be granted the same consideration, privilege, and rights of the dominant group within the circle of moral consideration. This has been framed as a fight for equal *human* rights, to combat racism, sexism, ableism – the notion that a particular race, gender, physical or mental capacity among humans is better than another (Corman, 2016). However, what is often left out of discussions about equality is speciesism, the notion that certain species have greater value and are more deserving moral consideration than others (Singer, 2005; Jones, 2015). In fact, a common tactic used to deny people basic rights is to animalize them - to attribute animal qualities or liken them to a particular species - to make sure that they are considered not fully human and therefore not worthy of being included in the circle of moral consideration (Hardy, 2015; Kim, 2015).

By placing nonhuman animals firmly outside the circle, in a position of inferiority, we think of them as less than, as other, as everything that humans are not and therefore not deserving of rights (Balcombe, 2016; Hardy, 2015; Taylor, 2011). However, the criteria that have been created to determine what are human and what are animal qualities are constantly changing as we learn more about animals and the complexities of their intelligence, emotionality and sociality (Balcombe, 2016; Hardy, 2015). Criteria such as “[r]eason, language, self-consciousness, a sense of time and the future” (Kim, 2015; p 31) once thought to be exclusively human abilities have all been proven to exist in nonhuman animals.

The most basic way that we determine a being’s value is their sentience, “the ability to feel, to experience, to perceive” (Taylor, 2011, p 198; Balcombe, 2016). Historically, animals were not considered to have the capacity to feel pain or suffer (Kim, 2015), but now, due in part to countless studies that have documented a variety of animals’ capacities to feel pain (Balcombe, 2016; Novek, 2005), it is understood that animals can suffer. Yet suffering is more than just physical pain, it can be mental or emotional pain as a result of confinement, stressful housing conditions (Novek, 2005), or social trauma. However, it is important not to put too much weight on the victimization and suffering of nonhuman animals and to acknowledge that their

sentience includes the capacity for joy through play, sex, sociality, emotionality and complex societies.

Yet, even as the criteria of inclusion into the circle of moral concern expands, it is still based on the notion that there will always be outliers to this circle who are not deserving of rights. It assumes a human-centric viewpoint that gradually accepts nonhuman animals based on their proximity to human qualities, such as the Great Ape Project which relies on the similarities of Great Apes to humans as a means to assign them rights (Corman, 2016). Anthropomorphism, the attribution of human traits to nonhuman entities, has been proven to elicit moral concern when applied to nonhuman animals (Plante, 2018). Like animalization which can be used to devalue human life, the humanization of animals makes them seem worthier of moral consideration, again reinforcing the hierarchy of humans over animals. There are also arguments that anthropomorphism is unscientific and harmful to the objective study of animal behaviour; however, there is great value in the way that anthropomorphism can lead to an increased awareness of nonhuman animal sentience and emotionality by making their behaviour accessible to us (Bekoff, 2013). Variation in opinions is common among animal advocates and there are different schools of thought about what our relationships with nonhuman animals should involve.

Many animal rights scholars and activists take an abolitionist stance which condemns using animals for any purpose that benefits humans based on an ethical philosophy that all animals possess inherent, moral rights (Regan, 2005; Jones, 2015). Abolitionists argue for the eradication of all practices that use nonhuman animals including the consumption of meat and other products such as dairy and eggs; testing for medicine or cosmetics; using them for clothing such as leather, fur, and wool; or using their labour such as pulling carts, carrying goods, or service dogs. Utilitarianism is another moral philosophy which operates on the principles of equality and utility and leaves space for using animals in situations that “bring about the greatest possible balance of good over evil” (Regan, 2005, p 42; Jones, 2015). This stance argues that the interests of individuals should all be considered equally, including nonhuman animals, but acknowledges that equal consideration of interests does not necessarily equate to equal treatment or equal rights (Singer, 2005). For example, not granting pigs the right to vote is not denying them rights but rather acknowledging that they have no interest in voting. However, considering the interests of nonhuman animals to not suffer means changing our consumptive use of them in industries that cause suffering for nothing more than our enjoyment which, in many cases, includes meat and labour since alternatives exist (Singer, 2005).

Animal welfare, on the other hand, generally operates from the assumption that the rights and interests of humans are greater than those of nonhuman animals, though we should work to alleviate their suffering within this framework (McCausland, 2014). This means that the welfare groups work to combat suffering and fight for freedoms of nonhuman animals within an industry that violates or ignores their rights – such as in agriculture where those animals will ultimately lose their lives. Generally, this moderate approach is more accepted by mainstream culture, while animal rights activists are portrayed as dangerous, misanthropic terrorists intent on causing destruction to industry and even threatening the rights of humans (Kim, 2015). As a

result, some activists will promote their cause as one of welfare instead of rights to avoid the connotations of radicalism or fanaticism and increase their chances of public or political support (Kim, 2015). These differing views towards animal usage can cause contention among animal advocates, as rights activists may believe that the work of welfare groups may in fact be hindering the liberation movement, while welfare groups argue that changes in industry practices will affect and improve, even if marginally, the lives of billions of animals. Clearly, there are no set criteria for the degree of consideration and rights of nonhuman animals. However, animal rights should not be considered a stand-alone issue and must be included in the [social justice framework](#) to fully assess the importance, implications, and even possibility of changing our current model of domination and exploitation in a way that does not further oppress other marginalized groups.

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Questions

In general, does the text give a good overview of the problems related to animal rights or do you think there are better ways to cover this issue?

Does this need more background info?

Is it easy and interesting to read? Does the English need editing? Can you suggest edits?

Are parts of the text irrelevant, repetitive, or should be rephrased or deleted?

Are there any relevant issues that are not covered by this text? Would you be able to add them or just list them to be added by us?

Can you suggest a person or an institution that might have the right experience and perspective to rewrite this text? Are you happy to forward this text to them?

This is the academic version of this issue. Are you interested in writing the shorter, non-academic version? If not, could you suggest what parts are the most relevant to be kept in the shorter version?

Do you know of any academic work related to the subject that can be added to the academic version of the text?

Any comments?