

2. Ethics and Philosophical Theories

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Introduction

Ethics are, in effect, a set of moral principles or code. A person's moral code is highly personal, and will be formed based on intrinsic factors and life experiences. This will change and evolve over time.

Personal ethics is a branch of philosophy, and animal ethics falls under personal ethics.

Ethics are important to the animal protection movement because people's morality and values underpin beliefs and behaviour, and these determine how people feel about animals, and how they treat them.

There are various factors affecting an individual's moral code towards animals, including:

External Factors

Culture

Religion

Education

Up-bringing

Internal Factors (Personal Traits)

Level of compassion

Ability to empathise

Depth of thinking

Strength of conscience

The Evolution of Morality

An historical study of certain societies bears out the development of morality in line with cultural (and individual) development. Gradually, exploitation, injustice and oppression are recognised and rejected - as can be seen with examples such as the abolition of slavery, the banning of racism and the introduction of sexual equality.

Naturally, moral codes concerning animal protection are also following an evolutionary trend. Animal exploitation and suffering is increasingly recognised and dealt with as such moral attitudes develop, but this invariably takes longer - as human identification with animal suffering is altruistic (without human vested interests), and requires a greater degree of empathy and compassion.

Our ethical foundations (especially in the West) have evolved as a human-biased morality, but the past 20 - 25 years have brought a significant change. Both the animal rights and the Green movements have shifted the focus of attention to include the non-human world.

This perspective is, in fact, not at all new. The ancient, yet living traditions of Indians and Aborigines show a reverence and understanding for the natural world, which combines a respect for the sustainability of the environment with a care for the individual animal. Also, the earliest Buddhist and Pythagorean canons, dominated perhaps by the creed of reincarnation, included the maxim 'not to kill or injure any innocent animal'.

The current climate is one in which leading philosophers and religious figures actively debate and write about various viewpoints on animal welfare; the media frequently highlights welfare issues; governments throughout Europe and beyond feel growing pressure from their concerned electorates in respect of animal welfare issues; consequently, parliaments (including the European Parliament) debate and legislate on animal welfare and respected fora such as the International Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the Council of Europe (the bastion of human rights in Europe) prepare conventions, recommendations and standards covering the protection of animals in different situations.

Moral Advance

There is undoubtedly a positive spread of moral codes, across regions and country boundaries. There is a moral influence from more ethical countries. There is also their role in regional and international meetings. Once the momentum has begun, there is no holding back the tide. We often see the situation where progress in one country takes a long while, then gradually other countries.

Sentience

One of the oldest ideas in philosophy is that animals act in a machine-like fashion with no conscious thought processes of any kind. The more we find out about animals, the more this idea is disappearing. Evidence is growing that animals have far more cognitive abilities than has traditionally been believed - they are sentient creatures.

Sentience means a level of conscious awareness – having feelings and able to suffer. These feelings are mental states, such as sensations or emotions. There is increasingly evidence of animal sentience, and this is influencing attitudes and treatment towards animals. This evidence comes from a number of sources, including: -

- Behavioural studies
- Evolutionary studies
- Physiology and anatomy

The European Union (EU) has included a reference to the sentience of animals in its constitution. There are also major campaigns for recognition of animal sentience in country constitutions.

Compassion in World Farming hosted an international conference on animal sentience in London in 2005, and has a Web Site dedicated to animal sentience (www.animalsentience.com).

In fact, sentience is not a new concept. Indeed, it is probably more difficult to understand why some countries still deny animal sentience (or refuse to act on it) than it is to appreciate the increased awareness and debate about sentience internationally. There is now a large body of scientific evidence that animals are sentient (have feelings and are capable of suffering), so denial is both anachronistic and illogical. Perhaps it is simply

that it takes time and reinforced evidence to change long-standing misperceptions, especially if changing your mind will mean changing aspects of your lifestyle?

Human/Animal Similarities

Scientific studies have made a huge difference in raising awareness about the plight of animals. The human/non-human differences which early philosophers emphasised (especially Descartes and Spinoza), have been explored in more depth during the 20th Century. Leading experts, including *Jane Goodall*, *Frans de Waal* and *Konrad Lorenz* all verify that although the intellectual powers of animals and humans vary enormously, the evident emotional similarities are far greater than was previously realised. Arguments drawn on exaggerated distinctions between animals and us, placing them outside our sphere of moral concern, are proving harder and harder to justify.

Speaking in an article, 'Clark's View of Animals and How They Stand', Stephen R.L. Clark has emphasised the influence of 'humanism' on our moral tradition, and the effect this has had on placing animals outside our sphere of moral concern: *'the greatest fear of humanistic moralists until recently was that the barrier between animal and human should be broken down.'*

Range of Views on Animal Issues

There are many different viewpoints concerning man's relationship with animals, ranging from exploitative to liberationist.

The animal liberationists (including key proponents such as Singer and Regan) believe animals should be freed from all human exploitation, whereas animal welfarists believe that animals can be used by man providing their welfare is assured throughout. More recently, animal welfarists appear to be taking their animal welfare view a step further, their aim is now that animals should live lives free from *avoidable* suffering and that the different purposes for which animals are used by man should be critically and regularly evaluated.

Summary of Approaches

The variety of approaches to animal issues is entirely consistent with the fact that ethics vary from person to person. The main views can be summarised as follows: -

- Animal exploitation
- Animal use
- Animal control
- Animal welfare
- Animal rights
- Animal liberation
- Vegetarianism
- Veganism

Animal exploitation represents abuse of animals, outside the law. An example would be those involved in illegal dog fighting.

Animal use represents legal use of animals, such as animal experimentation, farming etc.

Animal control represents legal (animal population) control - for example, stray control agencies.

Animal welfare denotes the desire to prevent unnecessary animal suffering (that is, whilst not categorically opposed to the use of animals, wanting to ensure a good quality of life and humane death).

Animal rights denotes the philosophical belief that animals should have rights, including the right to live their lives free of human intervention (and ultimate death at the hands of humans). Animal rightists are philosophically opposed to the use of animals by humans (although some accept 'symbiotic' relationships, such as companion animal ownership).

Animal liberationists are fundamentally opposed to animal use/ownership by humans, and some will resort to illegal activities to release/rescue animals, because they believe that they have moral right on their side, and that existing laws are inadequate (some will also damage property, and the most radical will even risk injury/death to people).

Vegetarians - The reasons for people becoming vegetarian are numerous, but for many it is through an ethical objection to eating the flesh of dead animals and/or concern about the suffering of animals - particularly in intensive farming systems.

Vegans do not consume any animal products (including eggs and milk) often this is because they believe their production is inextricably linked to farming systems involving animal suffering.

Other Important Concepts in Animal Ethics: -

➤ ***Anthropomorphism***

Attribution of human characteristics to an animal. This is a charge frequently made against animal protectionists.

➤ ***Speciesism***

Discrimination against animals on basis of species. Akin to racism or sexism.

The Moral Standpoint of Animal Protectionists

The term 'animal protectionist' is a general one encompassing all categories of people seeking to improve the status and situation of animals: it covers a wider span of beliefs than the category 'animal welfare' given above.

The moral standpoint of animal protectionists is based on the belief that each individual animal has an intrinsic value, and should be respected and protected. Animals have biologically determined instincts, interests and natures, and can experience pain. They should, therefore, be permitted to live their lives free from avoidable suffering at the hands of humans. Indeed, it is the duty of humans to provide for the welfare of other species.

Summary of Philosophical Beliefs

Ancient Philosophers

Pythagoreans (after the Greek philosopher ***Pythagoras***, (582-500BC)) were vegetarian, but mainly because they believed in the transmigration of souls, so feared that by eating a

piece of pork, for example, they could in fact be chewing on the implanted soul of an ancestor. Pythagoras once reputedly stopped someone from whipping a puppy on the grounds that he could hear the soul of a dead friend within the dog.

Aristotle (Greek, 384-322BC)

Arguably, it was Aristotle who was initially responsible for the superior attitude that many Western countries have taken towards animals. For Aristotle, animals were devoid of reason, and reason was what clearly distinguished humans from animals. He was firmly of the view that animals were on the earth for the use of man: -

"Plants exist for the sake of animals, and brute beasts for the sake of man - domestic animals for his use and food, wild ones for food and other accessories of life, such as clothing and various tools. Since nature makes nothing purposeless or in vain, it is undeniably true that she has made all the animals for the sake of man."

Several hundred years after Aristotle, the humanitarian philosophers of the Roman Empire, among whom **Seneca**, **Plutarch** and **Porphyry** were the most conspicuous, preached humanity and spoke out vociferously against animal cruelty. "Since justice is due to rational beings", wrote **Porphyry**, "how is it possible to evade the admission that we are bound also to act justly towards the races below us?"

Plutarch (Greek, 46?-120 AD) spoke in favour of vegetarianism, questioning how man first came to eat the flesh of animals, an act which he found unnatural. He pointed out that the shape and conformation of man's body did not bear out the claim that we are natural carnivores - we have no roughness of tooth, claws or talons, but have smooth tongues and a slow stomach for digestion. He did not support the view that animals were put on the earth to be preyed upon by man, and pointed to the intrinsic value of animals, and their beauty, grace and the way in which they enrich nature.

Unfortunately, these and others who shared their outrage were not enough to change the general ethos of the times. It is a lamentable fact that during the churchdom of the middle ages, from the fourth century to the sixteenth, from the time of Porphyry to the time of Montaigne, little or no attention was paid to the question of the rights and wrongs of the lower races. **Aquinas** (1225 - 1274), for example, claimed it was acceptable to kill animals and treat them in any useful way.

Renaissance Philosophers

Michael de Montaigne (French, 1533-92) was a humanist, famous for his philosophical (and very personal) 'Essais'. He denounced any form of cruelty, whether towards humans or animals.

Michael de Montaigne pointed out that animals communicate effectively amongst their own species, and that it is arrogance in the extreme for humans to refer to their lack of communication skills simply because humans did not understand their particular form of communication. How could humans logically label animals as stupid and unfeeling because their own inter-species communication did not accord exactly to that of ours?

Descartes (French, 1596-1650)

Descartes, the French philosopher and mathematician, believed that animals were like machines or 'automata', not capable of experiencing pain. Therefore, he had few qualms about experimenting on them without administering any form of anaesthesia. The main

reason for his belief was that animals were not capable of using speech or other signs of placing their feelings on record.

Descartes' beliefs aided and abetted the culture of domination through 'scientific rationalism', which seeks understanding through separation rather than connection, and constructs hierarchies of worth based upon empirical (often unquantifiable) criteria.

Spinoza (Dutch, 1632-77) combined Orthodox Judaism with the teachings of Galileo and Descartes. He was a rationalist who believed in the necessity of associating ourselves with our 'fellow-man', but not with 'beasts' whose nature he saw as 'very different from our own'.

Enlightenment Philosophers

With the period known as the Enlightenment, philosophers interests centred on Rationality. The study of human nature in literature and philosophy stressed the superiority of the human mind, with its power to reason. Little regard was given to the laws of nature or the importance of feelings and Human Rights and Morals were defined from this basis.

Voltaire (French, 1694 -1776) stressed that speech was not necessary in conveying feelings. In the same way that we could tell a person's mood from his demeanour, we could tell when animals were experiencing feelings such as pleasure, anxiety, suffering etc. He pointed to the physiology of animals, such as the dog, which closely resembled that of man - having pain receptors, nerves etc. Why would they be made in this way, if they were not to feel sensations such as pain?

Kant (German, 1724-1860) was a rationalist philosopher who did not consider that man had any direct duties towards animals although he denounced cruelty and believed that man should be kind to animals because this would develop humane feelings towards mankind.

Schopenhauer (German, 1788-1860) censured Kant for following the mistakes of his contemporaries by placing disproportionate store on reason. He felt the similarity between humans and animals to be incomparably greater, both physically and somatically, than any differences. He realised that the morality of Christianity had no consideration for animals, but felt that to be a defect that would be better admitted than perpetrated.

Utilitarianism

David Hume (Scottish, 1711-76) had the key counter-argument to the reasoning/rationalist philosophers, he thought that the ability to sympathise, rather than reason was at the root of moral behaviour.

Jeremy Bentham (English 1748-1832) was the founder of Utilitarianism, a philosophy that believed in trying to find the action necessary to produce the best ratio of pleasure and happiness to pain and suffering amongst all those we affect. He attacked the narrowness of the 'rationality' argument directly. He said: "*the question about animals is not can they reason, nor can they talk, but can they suffer*". He likened the plight of animals to that of slaves, in that these represented a sector of the human species that was treated as 'lesser beings', not worthy of the legal protection given to other humans. He

held that the day would come when the rest of animal creation would similarly acquire the rights withheld from them by the hand of tyranny (in the same way as the slaves had).

John Stuart Mill (British, 1806-73) another 19th Century moral reformer, supported Jeremy Bentham's viewpoint. He felt that it was entirely natural - and moral - for man to care about the pain and pleasure of another species.

Romantic Revival

It was not until the Romantic era that the importance of feelings was given formal expression. **Goethe** was at the forefront of the movement. In his literary works he dealt with man's relationship to nature. In his scientific work, he investigated 'comparative morphology', looking at anatomical similarities between animals and humans.

Darwin and The Golden Rule

Charles Darwin (English 1809-72) explored the basis of morality in his book 'The Descent of Man', and this led to him to promote the Golden Rule 'as ye would that men should do to you, do ye to them likewise.'

Darwin felt the fact that lower animals were excited by the same emotions as humans to have been well established. He stated: - "The lower animals, like man, manifestly feel pleasure and pain, happiness and misery. Happiness is never better exhibited than by young animals, such as puppies, kittens, lambs etc., when playing together, like our own children." His observations showed that terror acts on animals in the same way as people - causing muscle trembling, heart palpitations, sphincter relaxation and hair to stand on end. He also stressed the positive feelings and emotions of animals, such as the enduring love of a dog for its master and the maternal affection of animals such as primates, and the display of altruistic emotions, such as sympathy.

Reverence For Life

Albert Schweitzer (German 1875-1965) was both a philosopher and a theologian (and a Doctor, musician etc.). His most lasting legacy is the articulation of his basic philosophy 'reverence for life'. Dr Schweitzer grappled with the paradoxes of the man-animal-nature relationship as no philosopher had done before, culminating in his two-volume *Philosophy of Civilisation*, which set out the meaning and implications of reverence for life. Schweitzer saw reverence for life as a practical lifetime ethic, rather than a philosophical message. He described it as the ethic of love widened into universality. Life was regarded as sacred, and adherents would go out of their way to avoid injuring anything living.

Contemporary Views

Desmond Morris in his book, 'The Animal Contract' has put forward a 'Bill of Rights' for animals: -

- No animal should be endowed with imaginary qualities of good or evil to satisfy superstitious beliefs or religious prejudices
- No animal should be dominated or degraded to entertain us
- No animal should be kept in captivity unless it can be provided with an adequate physical and social environment

- No animal should be kept as a companion unless it can adapt easily to the lifestyle of its human owner
- No animal species should be driven to extinction by direct persecution or by further increases in the human population
- No animal should be made to suffer pain or distress to provide us with sport
- No animal should be subjected to physical or mental suffering for unnecessary experimental purposes
- No farm animal should be kept in a deprived environment to provide us with food or produce
- No animal should be exploited for its fur, its skin, its ivory or for any other luxury product
- No working animal should be forced to carry out heavy duties that cause it stress or pain

Desmond Morris believes: “This Bill of Rights does not represent a whimsical idea. It is practical and feasible.”

Peter Singer with his book, ‘Animal Liberation’ published in 1974, did much to increase awareness of the inherent immorality of animal exploitation, which he felt to be the last remaining form of discrimination. ‘Animal Liberation’ explores the concept of ethics in the treatment of animals, and puts forward ‘the principle of equal consideration of interests’, asking such thought-provoking questions as “*Why do we lock up chimpanzees in appalling primate research centres and use them in experiments that range from the uncomfortable to the agonising and lethal, yet would never think of doing the same to a retarded human being at a much lower mental level?*”

Mary Midgley in attacking the Rationality argument asked, How can people justify callousness towards other species on the grounds that these creatures are irrational? *The crucial way in which these creatures might be akin to us is in their capacity for suffering and enjoyment*, and Darwin’s ‘Golden Rule’ should be followed for this overwhelming reason.

Animal Rights

Regan and other philosophers have put forward the argument about animals having rights. This is a particularly attractive proposition in the USA, where human rights evoke such a strong response. However, the argument has its drawbacks, as rights are seen to come with responsibilities, and how can animals be ‘responsible’ particularly in a legal sense?

Stephen Clark also supports the concept of animal rights, arguing that animals are much more like us than was previously thought, so they must be granted a moral status nearer to our own.

Bernard Rollin similarly argues that there are no morally important differences between animals and people that would justify excluding animals from moral concern. The interest of animals should be protected and their legal status raised.

Professor Gary Francione, Professor of Law, USA

Gary Francione has forced the AR movement to confront an enormous dichotomy that exists between a welfarist stance and an animal rightist philosophy. His viewpoint is that

if animals have any moral significance at all (i.e. they are not things to whom we have no direct moral obligations), then we must extend to them one right – the right not to be property. His is an abolitionist position.

How Francione differs from all other theorists who have gone before him, including Peter Singer, is that his theory does not rest upon cognitive capacity (beyond the ability to feel pain) for possession of this one basic right. Any being who is sentient by definition has an interest in continued life because sentience is only a means to an end – that of survival. Moreover, he argues, any being who is sentient is also by definition self-aware because when that being experiences pain, they know that it is they who feel pain, and not some third party who has the experience.

Further Resources

🔗 Web Sites

Sentience Web Site CIWF

<http://www.animalsentience.com/>

Ethical Matrix CIWF

<http://www.ethicalmatrix.net/>

Peter Singer Web Site

<http://www.petersingerlinks.com/>

Selected Internet Resources on the Moral Rights of Animals

<http://ethics.sandiego.edu/Applied/Animals/>

Philosophical Discussion of the Moral Status of Nonhuman Animals

<http://animaethics.blogspot.com/>

Society and Animals Forum

<http://www.psyeta.org/>

Journals

Society & Animals

<http://www.psyeta.org/sa/>

Books

Animal Liberation

By: Peter Singer. This book did much to bring attention to ethical issues concerning animals.

Publisher: Pimlico

ISBN: 0712674446

In Defense of Animals: The Second Wave

By: Peter Singer (Editor)

Publisher: Blackwell Publishing

ISBN: 1405119411

Animal Rights: a Very Short Introduction

Publisher: Oxford Paperbacks

ISBN: 0192853600

Animal Welfare

By: Sir Colin Spedding

Publisher: Earthscan

ISBN: 1853836729

The Animal Contract

By: Desmond Morris. Contains a 'Bill of Rights' for Animals, which Desmond Morris believes is practical and feasible.

Publisher: ISIS Large Print

ISBN: 1856950964

The Case for Animal Rights

By: Tom Regan. Rigorous exploration of the case for animal rights.

Publisher: University of California Press

ISBN: 0520054601

Defending Animal Rights

By: Tom Regan

Publisher: University of Illinois Press

ISBN: 025202611X

Ethics, Humans and Other Animals: An Introduction with Readings

By: Rosalind Hursthouse

Publisher: Routledge, an imprint of Taylor & Francis Books Lt

ISBN: 0415212421

Dominion

By: Matthew Scully

Publisher: Saint Martin's Press

ISBN: 0312261470

The Unheeded Cry: Animal Consciousness, Animal Pain and Science

By: Bernard Rollin

Publisher: Iowa State University Press

ISBN: 0813825768

Animal Rights and Human Obligations

By: Tom Regan/Peter Singer

Publisher: Prentice-Hall

ISBN: 0130375314

All That Dwell Therein

By: Tom Regan

Publisher: University of California Press

ISBN: 0520045718

Animals' Rights: A Symposium

Edited by David Paterson and Richard Ryder
Publisher: Open Gate Press
ISBN: 0900000902

Animals and Why They Matter

By: Mary Midgley
Publisher: University of Georgia Press
ISBN: 0820320412

Attitudes to Animals: Views in Animal Welfare

By: F. L. Dolins
Publisher: Cambridge University Press
ISBN: 052147342X