

Beyond Humanist Ethics: Towards a more inclusive philosophy of life

by Steve McRoberts

We consider it a "given" that humans are the highest form of life on this planet: the "Master Species," if you will. We think this position gives us the right to use the lower forms of life in any manner we see fit. It little matters if such usage harms or kills them, so long as we benefit from it. We sometimes draw the line at harming or killing them just for the thrill of inflicting pain and death, but when we do so it is to prove our moral superiority, not because they have any rights of their own. And, in fact, since the concept of "rights" is a human invention, no animal, human or non-human has inherent rights, anymore than anything is inherently good or evil. All such things are assigned by human minds. So, the issue is not whether non-human animals have rights, but whether a consistent system of ethics requires that we assign them rights.

The common view in Western culture of non-human animals is that we needn't be concerned with them since the majority of people do not want to see them suffer. But though they may not want to see it, the fact remains that animals do suffer and die to supply meat, leather, and fur.

Apart from subsistence societies, it is unnecessary and counterproductive to use animals for food and clothing. Frances Moore Lappé called meat production a "protein factory in reverse" in her seminal work *Diet for a Small Planet*. Meanwhile, nutritionists are telling us that a meat-centered diet is unhealthy for humans (see, for instance, the [Healthy Eating Pyramid](#) on the Harvard School of Public Health's website which calls red-meat "really unhealthy" and states "Eating a plant-based diet is healthiest.").

Yet, according to the USDA, over nine billion animals are killed in the U.S. for food each year: working out to about 37 animals a year per U.S. resident. So we are left with the conclusion that many people do, in fact, acquiesce in the suffering and death of animals for the trivial pleasure of wearing and eating parts of their dead bodies.

But, unless we assign rights to non-human animals, why should their suffering concern us? If our ethical system does not require assigning rights outside of our own Master Species, then the fact that our most trivial interests (such as the flavor of meat, or the feel of leather or fur against our skin) are served by their most vital interests (e.g. their lives) is as it should be.

So, we need to examine on what basis we assign rights. If we assign rights based on another's belonging to our race, then we are racists. If we use sex as the criteria, then we are sexists. So, we use the all-encompassing word "human": as long as beings belong to our human species we will grant them rights. Unfortunately, humanism is not as all-encompassing as we first thought; we share this planet with others, and we've just defined ourselves as speciesists.

"Racism, sexism, and speciesism [are] all part of the same attitude of one group dominating or making use of an allegedly inferior group."

-Peter Singer in *Herbivore* 07/2007.

It is clear that we don't withhold rights from non-human animals on the basis of intellect or capacity for feeling. If these were the criteria, we would also withhold rights from infants and severely retarded adults. To take one example: we don't see retarded or brain damaged humans cemented into cars to test the effects of crashing into brick walls: rather, we conduct these unnecessary tests on chimpanzees who are capable of learning, using, and teaching sign language.

"If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans?"

-Peter Singer in *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, 1989

The thalamus is the most primitive part of the brain, nicknamed the 'reptilian brain' because it has not changed since our ancestors were in the reptilian stage. This is the part of the brain which experiences pain and contains the instinct for survival. So we share these same feelings to the same degree with every species from the reptiles on up. If any species suffers less, it is we who can foresee an end to pain and put it in perspective.

If we assign the right to freedom from unnecessary pain and death to humans with less intelligence than non-humans, and we assign this right only to humans, when nonhumans are equally capable of suffering, it is clear we are assigning rights simply on the basis of an individual's belonging to our group. In this case the group is a species rather than a race or a sex, but the reasoning is the same as the racist and the sexist.

But why shouldn't we be speciesists? Historically we have fought hard against the elements and other species to eke out an existence, and finally get to where we are today. Should we now embrace those we've fought so long? Should we even be bothering with other species when so many of our own are denied basic rights throughout the world?

Well, things have changed. Due to our technological advances we now have an advantage over the environment and all other species: we can easily destroy and exterminate everything now. While it may have been necessary for our own survival thousands of years ago to kill members of other species on sight, the reasons for such actions have disappeared: it is now no longer in anyone's best interests.

People hostile to the idea of assigning rights to non-human animals sometimes accuse those of us in favor of the idea with being more concerned with non-human animals than with our own species. In a way, that's true. Those who argued for the abolition of slavery were naturally more concerned with the plight of the slaves than with the wealthy, white plantation owners. And those who marched for women's rights were more concerned with women than with the men who already had the rights they were denying women. But that is not to say that people who advocate rights for the disfranchised cease caring about members of their own group.

Just because I think rights should be extended outside my own species doesn't mean I will no longer uphold rights for those within my own species. It is terrible that humans are denied rights, but none of us are arguing that this denial of rights is morally acceptable. In the case of non-humans, however, people have argued that denying them rights is morally acceptable--that's why we are addressing the non-human rights issue.

A racist might accuse a humanist of betraying "white supremacy", but we expect more from a humanist than to make a similar charge against a fellow humanist whose "circle of rights" has extended beyond the boundaries of our species.

TWO ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

1. If nature has endowed an organism with sentient life accompanied by the instinct for survival, then ethics requires that we assign that organism the right not to be murdered by us.
2. If nature has endowed an organism with a capacity to feel, then ethics requires that we assign that organism the right not to have pain forced upon it by us.

The two principles above are very important since they rule out the eating and wearing of animal parts. Why do ethics "require" these principles? Well, everyone has their own system of ethics, so my statements about what ethics "requires" are simplifications. Those who base their ethics on an authoritarian source, such as the Bible, are only required to do as it commands. Humanists, however, base their ethics on reason, so I feel justified in these statements since these principles are so basic that most humanists would have no problem agreeing to them.

My own ethical system is based on empathy. Empathy is the result of being acutely aware and highly sensitive to life around you. Intellectually we know we are all a part of one universe: all an emergence from the same "Big Bang", but empathy allows us to feel this fact. Because it pains me to see another in pain, I avoid causing pain. Because it makes me happy to bring joy to another, I strive to make others happy. Understanding firsthand what terror and suffering feel like, I know it is wrong to inflict them on others.

SOME OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED

Since a true ethical system doesn't deal in absolutes, its opponents may harp on examples in which its principles should be violated. For example, someone might point out that since Americans imprison criminals, they don't really believe in the right of freedom for the individual. Such a statement would be untrue. So too, just because I might hire an exterminator to deal with rats infesting my home is no reason to say that I am acting contrary to my stated beliefs in animals' rights. After all, I am an animal with a right to my territory too. Likewise, a humanist would defend his home from burglars without contradicting his beliefs in human rights. Killing the invaders would be the last resort in both situations. The error in thinking here is the attempt to infer a general rule from exceptional circumstances.

Another fact many people have difficulty with is that there is seldom a distinct line separating right from wrong. In some situations it is impossible to give an unbiased judgment based solely on reason as to whether an act is "right" or "wrong". Knowing that we cannot precisely define where to draw the line, some people conclude that there is no line at all, and therefore there is no right or wrong.

For instance: some diabetics need injections of insulin to survive. Before synthetic insulin was made available in 1982, animals were the only source of insulin. Even though the production of insulin involved the death of animals, we would not necessarily contradict the spirit of the animal rights movement if we held that such a sacrifice of animals was acceptable if done as humanely as possible while non-animal sources were actively being sought. Some opponents of the movement might try to extrapolate from this that since it was okay to kill animals in this instance, then it must be okay to kill animals. So, killing animals for food and clothing must be okay too. The error in this syllogism is in the second premise, which implies that any and all killing of animals is acceptable because it may be justified in some instances.

Where a direct relationship exists between prolonging human life at the cost of other animal life and no other alternatives exist, then the painless extinguishing of animal life may not be unethical.

Such a situation could, theoretically, exist in the realm of medical experimentation on animals. In practice, however, we find the situation to be far different.

First of all, a vast amount of painful "experiments" on animals are done for purely commercial rather than medical purposes. Every "new and improved" mainstream brand of toothpaste, deodorant, detergent, etc., is first used to poison a group of animals to death to ascertain its level of toxicity. These substances are also applied to the eyes of immobilized rabbits to determine what quantity is needed before irreparable damage results. Such tests are not required by law, nor are they necessary since almost every known substance has already been tested in these ways and their toxicity levels have been determined.

Looking into purely medical experimentation, we also find an incredible amount of waste and duplication of effort. Since every research facility wants to be the first to patent a cure and so obtain fame and royalties, no sharing of results occurs between the competitors. As a result, hundreds of thousands of animals are put through the same needless torture, not in the name of science or medicine, but in the name of greed.

Experimentation on animals also yields inconclusive results when applied to humans. The effects produced by a substance on one species may not reflect another species' reaction to that same substance. Two examples are: penicillin, which is deadly to guinea pigs, and thalidomide, which causes birth defects in humans, and is evidently harmless to the many animals it was tested on prior to its release.

The use to which we put the results of these experiments must also be questioned. When we ban cyclamates because rats died from massive overdoses, yet leave tobacco and alcohol on the shelves when these substances claim so many human lives, something is very wrong with the system. Many cruel and unnecessary experiments on animals have also shown the detrimental effects of tobacco and alcohol, so it seems the FDA doesn't really act on the results of these tests, but rather on the desires of the powerful sugar, tobacco, and alcohol industries.

It may be that we have gleaned some useful knowledge from animal experimentation (whether we could've gained the same knowledge without resorting to such experimentation, or whether such experimentation was really coincidental with rather than instrumental to the knowledge gained is certainly debatable.) It's not wrong to make use of knowledge we may have already gleaned in this way, but that doesn't mean that the procedures used in obtaining this knowledge can be morally approved. It could be that some very useful things were learned (or certainly could've been learned) from the experiments performed on unanaesthetized humans in the death camps of World War II. But no humanist would argue that any knowledge gleaned in this way justifies the manner in which the Nazi doctors obtained it. So too with the animal experimenters of our time. In both instances the experimenters have argued that their victims were about to die anyway, so why not put them to good use? The problem with this argument is that it ignores the individual's suffering, and lessens the amount of empathy in the world.

"All animals are somebody--someone with a life of their own. Behind those eyes is a story, the story of their life in their world as they experience it."

-Tom Regan in *Giving Voice to Animal Rights*

Americans today look back in shame at the racism and sexism of their ancestors who engaged in the genocide of the Native Americans, enslaved Africans, and denied women their rights. But future generations will quite likely look back at us in shame and wonder how we could consider ourselves humane and continue to do what we do to other species.