

Exploiting Animals: A Philosophical Protest

Human ethical practices and attitudes with respect to the other animals exhibit a curious instability. On the one hand, most people believe that it is wrong to inflict suffering or death on a non-human animal for a trivial reason. On the other hand, we have traditionally felt free to make use of the other animals for our own purposes, and we have treated any use we may have for them, or any obstacle they present to our ends, as a sufficient reason to hurt or kill them.

We kill non-human animals, and sometimes inflict pain on them, because we want to eat them, because we can make useful products out of them, because we can learn from experimenting on them, and because they interfere with agriculture or gardening or in other ways are pests. We also kill them, and sometimes inflict pain on them, for sport in hunting, fishing, cockfighting, dogfighting, and bullfighting. We may even kill them because, having done some sort of useful work for us, they have outlived their usefulness and are now costing us money.

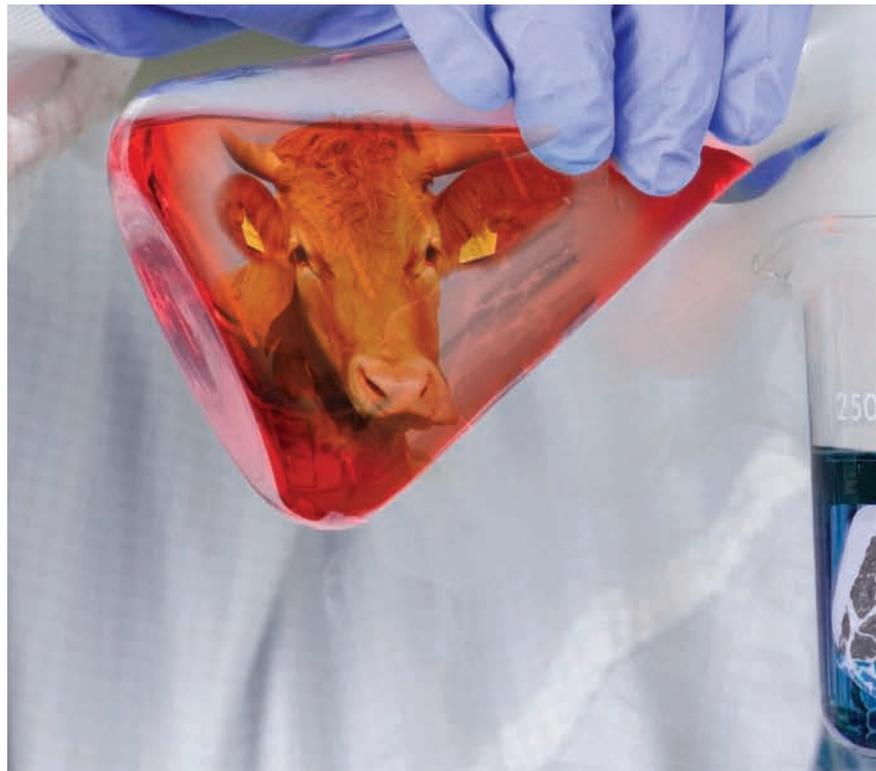
What, if anything, could justify the way we treat the other animals? What gives us the right to hurt or kill them? And what gives us the right to treat them as mere means or obstacles to human ends?

From the time of the Enlightenment up to the present, the study of ethics has been dominated by two major traditions of philosophy. Those in the utilitarian tradition, originating in the work of Jeremy Bentham¹ in the late eighteenth century and John Stuart Mill² in the nineteenth, believe that the right action is the one which does the most good, where “doing the most good” includes importantly, if not exclusively, maximizing the amount of happiness and pleasure and minimizing the amount of misery and pain in the world. Unsurprisingly, philosophers

in the utilitarian tradition have been champions of the extension of moral concern to the other animals, and have done important work in the world to promote that cause.³ If the point of moral conduct is to maximize happiness and minimize misery, surely there is no reason why we should not include the pleasures and pains of the other animals when we tally up the consequences of our actions. Utilitarians have argued

that much of the suffering we inflict on animals when we make use of them for our own purposes is unnecessary and so wrong by their standard. But there is a further question, one that the utilitarians haven’t raised. Why should we have the right to make use of them at all?

Those in the older tradition deriving from the work of Immanuel Kant in the 18th century argue for a very different conception of what is morally required



of us and why.⁴ At the center of Kantian ethics is the idea that every human being is an “end-in-himself” who is never to be exploited as a mere means to another person’s ends. The idea has found its way into our moral culture: “You are just using me!” is one of our most familiar forms of moral protest. That each of us necessarily regards himself as an end-in-himself, Kant argued, shows up in the simple fact that we choose to pursue the things that we believe are good *for us* as if they were good *absolutely*. We treat our own good and that of our loved ones as something objectively valuable, as something that there is reason to pursue. We also demand of others that they should respect our right to pursue it, consistent with a similar right for all, and that they should be willing to help us when we are in need. It is as if each of us said to herself, “The things that matter to me are important, because I am important; what happens to me matters, because I do.” Then seeing that others are in the same position as we are, we accord the same moral standing to them.

Should we also treat the other animals as ends-in-themselves? Before we ask that question, we must raise another, which is whether it is even possible for us to do so. Kant’s injunction forbids using another as “mere” means, not using another as a means at all. Human beings use each other as means, in the sense that we avail ourselves of each other’s services, all the time. According to Kant, what makes the difference between exploiting someone as a “mere” means, and using him as a means in a way that is morally permissible, is

whether you have his informed and uncoerced consent. We serve each other’s interests, consenting to do so, from motives of profit, love, friendship, or a general spirit of cooperation. But the other animals cannot give us their informed and uncoerced consent.

But this hardly means we have no option except to exploit them. We could still undertake to interact with them in ways to which we think they would consent if they could in ways that are mutually beneficial and fair. What would this permit? If we provide them with comfortable living conditions, in which they are able to lead something reasonably like their own sort of life, their use as companion animals can probably be justified. It is possible that their use as aides to the handicapped and to the police, search and rescue workers, and guards, can also be justified, if those tasks can be made compatible with a comfortable and natural life. Whether they could consent to provide us with wool, dairy products, or eggs, depends on whether there are methods of gathering those products that are genuinely compatible with a normal and happy life for the animals. Factory farming violates that condition in a scandalous way, but we can at least raise the question whether there is any mode of farming that does not. But to be hunted for sport, killed before their time in order to serve us as food, or subjected to painful medical experiments, are things to which we cannot plausibly say we would consent if we could.

Assuming that we can do so, should we treat the other animals as ends-in-themselves? Kant believed that moral concern is properly limited to rational beings, who are in a position to demand respect from one another. But what this leaves out is that what we demand, when we demand respect from one another, is that our *natural* concerns—the objects of our natural desires and interests and affections—be accorded the status of objective values, values that must be respected as far as possible by others. And many of those natural concerns—the desire to avoid pain is an obvious example—spring from our animal nature, not from our rational nature, and are concerns we share with the other animals. So while it is our rational nature that enables us to value ourselves and each other as ends-in-ourselves, what we value, what we take to be an end-in-itself, includes our animal nature as well as our rational nature.⁵

There is a more general, if more controversial, way to put this point. We are ourselves animals, who evolved on this planet along with the other animals. Like every animal, we have certain desires and interests that are given to us by our nature, as well as those we have developed through culture and education. Like every animal, we pursue the satisfaction of our desires

and interests and those of our loved ones as if it were an urgent matter. Unlike the other animals, we do this consciously and of our own free choice. We do not just pursue the fulfillment of our interests; we consciously *value* the fulfillment of our interests, and demand that others do so as well. The other animals, or so I believe, do not do that. And yet they do pursue their own interests as an urgent matter, for it is the very nature of an animal to do that. That, in a way, is what an animal essentially is, a being that actively pursues his or her own health and survival, and, in various ways, that of his or her offspring. To that extent, the other animals are in the same position as ourselves: they are animate beings, with an urgent concern, given to them by nature, to look after their own interests and the interests of those to whom they are attached. That natural concern is the origin of all value: there are things in this world that are good and bad, precisely because there are creatures *for whom* things can be good or bad. Those who share that natural concern for themselves and their families therefore share the feature of our nature for which we demand respect. They, like us, are beings for whom things can be good or bad. The other animals therefore have a claim both on our reason and on our feelings of solidarity. We should therefore respect them as ends-in-themselves. ■

REFERENCES

- ¹ Bentham, Jeremy. (1789). *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. (J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart, Eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- ² Mill, John Stuart. (1861). *Utilitarianism*. (George Sher, Ed.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979.
- ³ The immense influence of Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* (1st ed. 1975; 2nd ed. 1990; 3rd ed. (2002). New York: HarperCollins, is a case in point.
- ⁴ Kant’s views are found in his three main works on ethics, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Translated and edited by Mary Gregor with an Introduction by Andrews Reath. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Translated and edited by Mary Gregor with an Introduction by Christine M. Korsgaard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Translated and edited by Mary Gregor with an Introduction by Roger J. Sullivan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- ⁵ This view is defended at greater length in my “Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and Our Duties to Animals” in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*. (Grethe B. Peterson, Ed.). Volume 25/26 (2004). Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press; and on the Tanner Lecture website at www.TannerLectures.utah.edu.

