

# Animals: Ethics, Agency, Culture: Introduction

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Until fairly recently, philosophers, especially moral philosophers, have had surprisingly little to say about (non-human) animals. Why is this surprising? On the one hand, many if not all animals are sentient beings, with lives and interests of their own, capable of suffering and at least in some cases plainly capable of enjoyment and happiness. On the other hand, our own strange success as a species has depended to a large extent on our ability to make use of animals, which we do and have done in myriad ways. We have eaten them, experimented on them, tested medications on them, kept ourselves warm with their fur and skin and feathers, used them for transport and for heavy work like pulling plows, enlisted them in our wars, employed them to sniff out bombs and drugs and to track the missing, made them fight and race for our amusement, and found joy and comfort in their companionship. Because of the ways we are able to use animals, human beings have been able to inhabit nearly every terrestrial environment on the planet, to feed our own explosively growing population with food that we like, and to cure or mitigate the illnesses and suffering to which we, like all of the other animals, are subject. But this use has to a large extent been at the expense of the interests of the animals themselves, whom we have genetically altered by selective breeding to suit our own purposes, made to work beyond their capacity, subjected to torments in laboratories, and confined to factory farms where they lead short lives in deplorable and unnatural conditions. Even when we do not *use* the other animals, we have been heedless of their welfare, freely killing them whenever they are a nuisance to us, and depriving them of the habitat on which they depend for leading their own lives. There are surely important moral questions about what, if anything, could justify the ways we treat our fellow creatures, who are like us in

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so many ways. But in the past, and even now, most moral philosophers, like most people, simply noted that we ought to treat the other animals as humanely as “possible”—where the limits of “possibility” are set by the far greater weight we assign to human interests.

This began to change in 1975, when Peter Singer published the first edition of *Animal Liberation*.<sup>1</sup> Singer took his cue from the early utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who famously claimed that the important moral question about animals is not whether they can reason or talk, but whether they can suffer.<sup>2</sup> Singer defended the claim that every being capable of suffering is entitled to equal moral consideration. For utilitarians like Singer, what that means is that the pains, pleasures, and preferences of the other animals should get as much weight as the equivalent pains, pleasures, and preferences of human beings in calculations aimed at determining how we can bring as much pleasure and satisfaction as possible into the world. Singer’s defense was followed in 1983 by *The Case for Animals Rights*, in which Tom Regan developed an alternative account of our duties to animals.<sup>3</sup> Regan’s account grounds our duties to animals in the claim that many animals, like us, are “subjects of lives”—beings with beliefs, desires, emotions, a sense of their own identity over time, a capacity for pleasure and pain, and interests of their own. Regan argued that in virtue of that fact, animals have rights not to be used as mere means to our ends, rights which we ought to respect and uphold.

With two rival positions on the table, philosophers could begin to do what philosophers like to do—develop their positions by arguing against each other. So in the years immediately following the publication of these two books, Singer and Regan’s views were regarded as the main theoretical options. At first, the attention of these two philosophers and those who studied them was focused primarily on domestic animals, and on the direct harms we do them. Much of *Animal Liberation* is devoted to explaining what actually happens to animals in laboratories and factory farms, and the book made many people aware for the first time of how cruelly domestic animals are treated in those contexts. But in the decades since, the philosophical conversation about animals has expanded in various important ways, ways that are on display in the articles in this issue of the *Harvard Review of Philosophy*.

Singer and Regan’s views grounded the claims of animals in their capacities: the capacity for suffering, in Singer’s case, and the capacities that make an animal the subject of a life, in Regan’s. In this issue, Clare Palmer and Lori Gruen emphasize that we should also think of our duties to animals in terms of the relationships in which we stand to them. In “Should We Offer Assistance to Both Wild and Domesticated Animals?,” Palmer asks whether we might have different duties of aid to animals who are related to us in different ways. Our duties to domestic animals, whose lives we completely control, might be different from our duties to the wild animals who live independently of us, and those in turn might be different from our duties to commensal animals, like the rats and sparrows who live among us in ecological niches created by human activity. In “Entangled Empathy: An Interview with Lori Gruen,” Gruen explains her idea of “entangled empathy,” an alternative theoretical framework for understanding how we should treat animals, which emphasizes the development of empathy through careful attention to animals in the context of our relationships with them.<sup>4</sup>

Recent philosophers have also zeroed in on practical questions. In “The Ideology of Meat-Eating,” Michael Allen Fox identifies and explores the “ideology”—the underlying system of values—on which the practice of eating animals rests, with a view to exposing

some weaknesses in the usual reasons people offer in favor of eating meat. In “The Moral Problem of Other Minds,” Jeff Sebo raises an important question at the intersection of ethics and epistemology. Moral debates about how we should treat animals often become enmeshed with scientific debates about the nature of animals’ experience: whether certain animals are sentient and how their subjective experiences, if they have any, are different from and similar to our own. Sebo asks: *given* that we are in fact uncertain about these empirical matters, and likely to remain so for some time if not forever, how should we treat the animals in question? He identifies and examines different principles for dealing with this kind of uncertainty to determine which makes the best sense.

Sebo’s question represents a point at which the concerns of animal ethics overlap with issues in the philosophy of mind, another area in which questions about animals are now getting philosophical attention. The early modern philosopher Rene Descartes is supposed to have believed that animals are mindless automata, unconscious and incapable of feeling, and that only human beings have minds or souls and therefore only human beings are conscious. There is some debate about whether Descartes himself actually believed that, but it seems certain that many of his followers did. At the opposite extreme we find the view that philosophers call “panpsychism,” according to which many things have some degree of conscious awareness or subjective experience, possibly including even inanimate objects like rocks or machines. Philosophers who think this is possible argue that because we have no real understanding of how the structures of the brain give rise to conscious experiences, it is conceivable that consciousness might inhere in anything. In “Consciousness as a Biological Phenomenon: An Alternative to Panpsychism,” Catherine Wilson defends the view that consciousness evolved to solve the problems of “mobile, self-propelled, self-protective biological individuals”—that is to say, animals—and is likely therefore to extend to all or most animals and not to other things. In “Do Apes Attribute Beliefs to Predict Behavior?” Kristin Andrews raises a question about what exactly the other conscious animals think *about*. We human beings not only have conscious minds, but think about one another’s minds, attributing beliefs and desires to others and sometimes guiding our conduct by thoughts about how the world seems from another’s point of view. This has occasionally been offered as one of the many possible candidates for a uniquely human attribute, but recent work with apes suggests that they sometimes seem aware that others see the world differently than they themselves do. This suggests they may know that others can have false beliefs. Andrews asks why in ordinary contexts we human beings think about each other’s beliefs. On the basis of her answer, she proposes that apes can understand that their fellows are minded creatures with goals, emotions, and perceptions, and that this understanding guides apes in ways required for socially cooperative living. Andrews argues that apes do this without thinking about the beliefs and desires that we use to *explain* what our companions do.

The early discussions of the ethics of our treatment of animals emphasized questions about *what we do to animals*, while the emphasis in Wilson and Andrews’s arguments about animal minds is on *what animals themselves do*, and need to do, in order to survive, both in general (in Wilson’s argument) and in the context of cooperative social life (in Andrews’). But our understanding of the nature of animal agency has ethical ramifications as well. Although the reasoning is hard to pin down, many defenders of animals believe that some conception of human uniqueness is part of the basis of our tendency to disregard the interests of animals or to treat them as less important than our own. Many claims about hu-

man uniqueness are breaking down as we learn more about the lives of animals—animals use and make tools, have culture in the sense that some knowledge and practices are passed down through the generations, can be taught to use language, and so on. But in “Animal Agency,” Dale Jamieson points out that the view that there is something special about human agency persists. Some philosophers believe that that animals are not really agents at all, while philosophers influenced by Immanuel Kant (myself included) argue that there is something distinctive about human or rational agency. Jamieson challenges these claims both from “above” and “below.” He reviews evidence that shows that much human action is not as rationally sophisticated as we like to think, while we have learned that animal action is far more sophisticated than we have traditionally supposed. He speculates that a desire to preserve the idea that human beings have a special or unique moral importance motivates the claims about the uniqueness of human agency. In “Animal Agency, Captivity, and Meaning,” Nicolas Delon argues that because animals are agents, they have the capacity to lead meaningful lives. A creature’s life is meaningful when that creature contributes to valuable states of affairs through intentional activity, and animals can do that. However, Delon argues, we deprive animals of that possibility when we keep them in captivity, which curbs their capacity for intentional agency.

The last two articles in this issue represent a different way in which the discussion has broadened: they examine different cultural attitudes towards animals, and the practical effects of those attitudes. In “Wild Game Changer: Regarding Animals in Chinese Culture,” Deborah Cao examines the attitudes towards animals that have led to the endangerment of so many species, both within China and world-wide. The Chinese eat many more different kinds of wild animals than is usual in the West, and the use of animals in traditional Chinese medicine is contributing substantially to the endangerment of many wild animals. Although the traditional philosophies of China emphasize the unity between human beings and nature, she argues, it is also traditional to regard animals as mere means to human ends. Until people recognize that animals have a value of their own, these practices are unlikely to abate. Finally, the issue ends with a dialogue between Shih Chaohwei and Peter Singer in which they compare Buddhist and utilitarian attitudes towards animals, and their implications for practical issues like vegetarianism.

These days, the way that human beings treat the other animals is now drawing more attention, for two unhappy reasons. First, some scientists tell us that we are now living through the sixth major extinction event in the planet’s history. While no one knows exactly what the extinction rate is, it is plain that many wild animal species are disappearing. According to the World Wildlife Fund’s 2016 “Living Planet Report,” the world lost 58 percent of its vertebrate animals between 1970 and 2012.<sup>5</sup> The overall rate at which plant and animal species are disappearing is possibly as high as 150–200 species a day.<sup>6</sup> If true, this is 1000 times faster than what some scientists say is the natural “background” extinction rate of one to five species a year.<sup>7</sup> This is a serious threat to the biodiversity needed to sustain life as we know it. The second unhappy fact is climate change, and the realization that livestock farming is a major contributor to it.<sup>8</sup> These facts are related, because one of the main reasons the wild animals are dying away is loss of suitable habitat, and one of the main reasons for habitat loss is that we are taking over the to grow livestock. Livestock farming has rather literally taken over the planet, with a fourth of world’s surface used for grazing and at least a third of all arable land used for growing livestock feed.<sup>9</sup> A recent study found that 86 percent of all land mammals are now either livestock or humans.<sup>10</sup> As we seek to feed meat

and dairy products to the exploding human population, we are turning the Earth into a giant factory farm, with disastrous consequences for domestic animals, wild animals, and human beings alike. Of course we should not have needed these looming catastrophes to prompt us to think about the morality of the way we treat our fellow creatures, but they do tend to focus the mind. It is time for human beings to rethink our exploitative relationship to the other animals. That is an endeavor in which philosophy can and should play an important role.

## Notes

1. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975, 1990, 2002, 2009, 2015).
2. Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), chapter 17, note to section 4.
3. Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1983, 1985, 2004).
4. A number of other new theoretical approaches have also been developed in recent years. Rosalind Hursthouse recommends a “virtue ethics” approach thinking about animals and the environment, one that emphasizes what a person of good character would do, and what our treatment of animals makes of us. (See, for example, her “Virtue Ethics and the Treatment of Animals,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Ethics*, edited by Tom Beauchamp and R. G. Frey [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011].) In *Frontiers of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), Martha Nussbaum puts her “capabilities approach” to questions of justice to work on the question of animals, arguing that animals, like people, are entitled to the development and support of their characteristic capabilities. In *Zoopolis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka take animal rights theory in a political direction, arguing that domestic animals should be treated as citizens, commensal, or as they call them “liminal,” animals as something like to resident immigrants, and communities of wild animals as sovereign nations of their own. In *Fellow Creatures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), I work out a Kantian account of the ground of our duties to animals. These are just a few examples.
5. World Wildlife Fund “Living Planet Report 2016,” <https://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/living-planet-report-2016>. Accessed June 19, 2018.
6. These widely quoted (and contested) numbers are from the United Nations Environmental Program, in 2010. I am getting them from John Vidal, “Protect nature for world economic security, warns UN biodiversity chief,” *The Guardian*, August 16, 2010.
7. S. L. Pimm, C. N. Jenkins, R. Abell, T. M. Brooks, J. L. Gittleman, L. N. Joppa, P. H. Raven, C. M. Roberts, and J. O. Sexton, “The Biodiversity of Species and Their Rates of Extinction, Distribution, and Protection,” *Science*, May 30, 2014.
8. For one among many sources, see Alastair Bland, “Is the Livestock Industry Destroying the Planet?,” *Smithsonian*, August 1, 2012.
9. According to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization as reported in Bland, “Is the Livestock Industry Destroying the Planet?”
10. J. Poore and T. Nemecek, “Reducing Food’s Environmental Impacts through Producers and Consumers,” *Science*, June 1, 2018.

