

Representative Views on the Moral Status of Animals

<http://www-phil.tamu.edu/~gary/awvar/handout.summary.pdf>

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1. Animal welfare

We are stewards of animals. Their lives and experiences have intrinsic value, but it is up to us to decide how to maximize value in the aggregate by using animals in various ways.

Associated attitudes

Various traditional uses of animals are permitted, as long as they serve non-trivial ends and are conducted in ways that eliminate unnecessary animal suffering.

For example:

- medical research
- humane animal slaughter
- hunting, at least to prevent wildlife overpopulation

Typical underlying philosophical basis

1. We have a moral obligation to balance benefits and harms.
2. If an animal can suffer pain, then we have an obligation to balance this harm against the benefits of any human use of the animal.
3. So we should to use animals when the benefits to us outweigh the costs to them, but in doing so, we should eliminate unnecessary animal suffering.

2. Human dominion

We have dominion over animals. That is, they have value only as means to our ends.

Associated attitudes

Everything under animal welfare is permitted, plus things like:

- cockfighting, circuses, rodeos, and bullfights
- confined exotic animal hunting
- injuring animals for movies

Typical underlying philosophical basis

1. Animals have no moral standing, because they lack consciousness, including consciousness of pain.
2. So it doesn't matter, morally speaking, how we treat them; no treatment of animals can be judged immoral except in virtue of its indirect effects on humans.

Representative Views on the Moral Status of Animals, cont'd

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3. Animal rights

Animals have moral rights. And when individuals have moral rights, we cannot treat them as means to our ends.

Associated attitudes

Many or most traditional uses of animals are opposed, including everything listed as permissible under either of the above views, plus such things as:

- consuming animal by-products (like milk and eggs)
- captive breeding programs for endangered species
- keeping pets

Typical underlying philosophical basis

1. If you have rights, then we cannot justify harming you just because the benefits to us outweigh the harms to you.
2. Some non-human animals have mental lives similar to those of some humans (if only very small children).
3. So if we recognize rights for all humans (including very small children) then we should recognize rights for those animals.
4. And so, for those animals, we cannot justify harming them just because the benefits to us outweigh the harms to them.

Questions:

For those in the animal welfare and animal rights camps:

Which animals do you think are conscious and why? For instance, are sponges and barnacles conscious (these are both in the animal kingdom)? What about mosquitos and cockroaches?

What is the moral status of non-sentient animals?

For those in the human dominion camp:

What is the scientific basis for denying that animals are conscious?

And if you believe that (at least some) animals are conscious, but you believe we may do with them as we wish, what is the moral justification for ignoring any suffering we cause them?