



# Philosophical approaches to animal ethics

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# What this lecture will do

- Clarify why people think it is important to think about how we treat animals
- Discuss the distinction between animal welfare and animal rights
- Describe key underlying moral philosophies

# What reasons do people give for worrying about how we treat animals?

- “People care about how animals are treated.”
- “The law (or my profession) requires certain treatment.”
- “A healthy animal is a productive one.”
- “Animals are sentient (feeling) organisms.”
- “Animals have rights.”



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# Some related moral philosophies

- Virtue theory: “Good people treat animals well.”
- Ethics of care: “There are professional/legal requirements regarding them.”
- Utilitarianism: “Maximize aggregate happiness.”
- Rights views: “Individuals have moral ‘trump cards’ against utilitarian arguments.”

Utilitarianism and rights views get a lot of attention because they are related to the distinction between “**animal welfare**” and “**animal rights**.”

# A popular/political conception of the distinction

## Animal welfarists

- Moderate/reasonable
- Revisionist
- Work within the system
- Calm/reasoning
- Well informed
- Scientists

## Animal rightists

- Radical/extreme
- Abolitionist
- Advocate violence, liberation
- Emotional/unreasoning
- Uninformed
- Animal activists

# How philosophers conceive of the distinction

## Animal welfarists

- Utilitarian thinking
- Focus on maximizing aggregate happiness

## Animal rightists

- Rights-based thinking
- Focus on the individual's rights

Each view grows out of a major tradition in moral philosophy. Various philosophers have written carefully reasoned discussions of each view.

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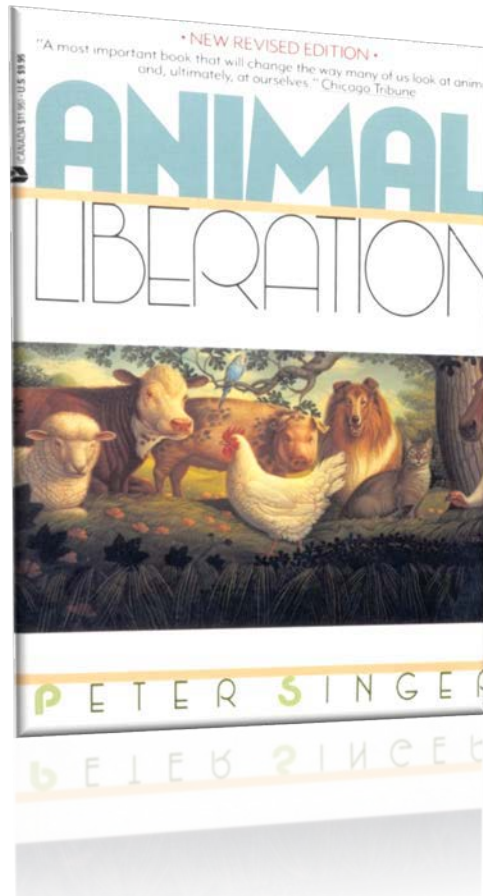
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**Utilitarianism’s focus on maximizing aggregate happiness focuses attention on the suffering of animals.**

# Peter Singer's utilitarian view



“All Animals Are Equal” is Singer’s most widely reprinted essay and chapter one of *Animal Liberation* (1975).

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# Peter Singer's utilitarian view

1. Singer argues that our ideal of “moral equality” requires equal consideration of the interests of all affected.
2. He argues that “sentience” (the capacity to experience pain or suffering) is necessary and sufficient for having interests.
3. Singer says that many non-human animals are capable of suffering physical or psychological pain.
4. He concludes that all sentient animals deserve equal consideration of their interests.
5. Singer also argues that if we gave equal consideration to animals' interests, we would stop using animals in ways that we wouldn't use our fellow human beings.

# Peter Singer's utilitarian view

Singer's use of the term "speciesism" made the word famous.



1. He defines it as "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species."
2. He compares it to racism and sexism, because each involves ignoring or differentially weighting the interests of members of other groups.
3. He argues that speciesism is reinforced by ignoring relevant comparisons between species (e.g. behavior, neurophysiology, and evolutionary continuities).

# Peter Singer's utilitarian view

But utilitarian arguments have been used to defend some of the same practices. For instance:

1. Some argue that animals' happiness is a simpler thing than humans' happiness, and that therefore using them in certain ways can be justified, even though using humans the same ways would not be justified.
2. For instance, some argue that medical research on animals is justified by the improvements in human and animal welfare that result.
3. And some argue that humanely raised and slaughtered farm animals add to the world's happiness.

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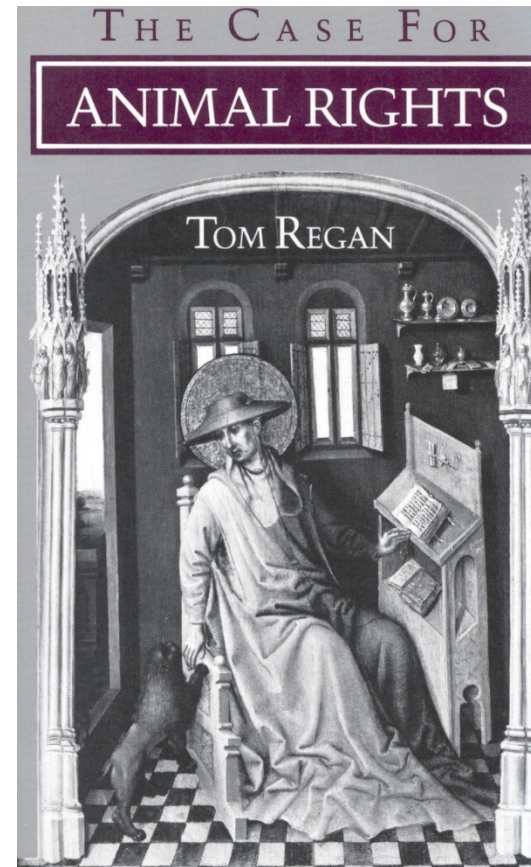


If animals have *rights*, then they may be due something more than “humane” treatment.

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# Tom Regan's rights view

Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983) makes a sophisticated argument for extending moral rights to some animals.



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# Tom Regan's rights view

Regan argues that widely shared beliefs about human rights rationally require us to extend moral rights to some non-human animals.

1. He conceives of moral rights as “trump cards” against utilitarian arguments.
2. Most people believe that humans have some rights in this sense, including humans who are profoundly cognitively impaired.
3. What grounds the attribution of rights to both normal humans and the profoundly cognitively impaired, Regan argues, is that all of them are “subjects of a life,” that is, they all have a psychological life that goes better or worse for them.

# Tom Regan's rights view

4. But then, Regan argues, consistency requires us to attribute moral rights to any non-human animals that are similar “subjects of a life.”
5. Regan argues that a range of animals qualify, including at least all normal, adult mammals and birds.
6. If these animals have moral rights, however, then they “have trump cards” against the utilitarian arguments that are commonly used to justify things like agriculture and medical research.
7. And if we wouldn't accept a utilitarian justification for using cognitively impaired humans for agriculture and medical research, then we shouldn't accept that justification in the case of these animals.

Philosophically, these represent two important ways of thinking about ethics:

## Animal welfare

- Utilitarian thinking
- Focus on maximizing aggregate happiness

Utilitarian thinking may leave room for various traditional uses of animals, with a focus on welfare-improving reforms.

## Animal rights

- Rights-based thinking
- Focus on the individual's rights

Attributing rights as “trump cards” against utilitarian arguments may call for an end to some traditional uses of animals.



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Utilitarianism and rights views receive the most discussion, but there are ethicists working in other ethical traditions.

# What reasons do people give for worrying about how we treat animals?

Other traditions in ethical theory include:

- Virtue theory
- Ethics of Care
- Contractualism
- Theology-based ethics
- Dominionist views



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Funded by a USDA Challenge Grant  
# 2014-70003-22509

Co-hosted by Purdue University and University of Maryland in collaboration with Michigan State University, University of Alaska, Anchorage and Texas A&M University.

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