

Animal Rights

We all recognise some sort of obligation not to use others in ways which are harmful to them. These obligations centre around 'unnecessary' harm. For example, we do not condone unnecessary violence. We wouldn't want to stop people from partaking in violence if for good reason (ie, to defend themselves), however in all situations where there was no good reason such as this we would want to forbid it. This sort of protection against needless harm is the foundation of our rights – we all have a right to live, and to live free from needless suffering.

This behaviour doesn't just relate to humans though. We have realised that where we don't need to, we shouldn't use animals in harmful ways either. In growing numbers people have begun buying products which are not tested on animals for instance, as it becomes increasingly clear that companies have other methods at their disposal – and so it is needless to harm these animals for this use. After all, for every cosmetic there exists an alternative which was not tested on animals. Similarly most, if not all of us will recoil in disgust if we see a shaking dog being kicked in the street, as there is no good reason to partake in that sort of needless violence against any living creature.

This is where animal rights begins. Animals are vastly different to humans, but they still need to be granted rights to protect them against such needless harm. After all humans and animals both experience life – both would suffer under torture, and both would fare worse if their lives were ended. In this, humans and animals are the same, so in this their rights ought to be the same too. We would not withhold the right to live from a human, regardless of their intelligence or physical characteristics, so why would we do it with animals?

The only reason people put forward is the ability to think morally. Humans can respect other's rights, whereas animals can't – so why should animals have equal right to life?

Well the answer of course is that not all humans can respect other's rights. Young children and many mentally impaired humans cannot understand rights, and cannot respect them any more than many animals (say a dog, or a pig) can. We would view it wrong to disrespect a child or a disabled person's right to life, and would surely protest their unnecessary deaths for cosmetic testing, so there is no reason not to think the same for animals. Regardless of mental or physical attributes, all humans and animals have a right to live – and this hinges only on their ability to live, nothing else.

So how far do animal rights stretch? Humans have of course used animals in many different ways for thousands of years, so there are obvious practical issues that crop up which do not appear in the issue of human rights. Well we already know that cosmetic testing is wrong – there is no justification for causing harm to a living individual for our cosmetic wants.

What of vivisection though? Of course there are many drugs that we have nowadays which help people to overcome disease, most have been tested on animals. Well the simple answer is that we don't really need vivisection anymore either. There are alternatives which are better than every animal method these days, and the truth is animal testing continues through industrial habit (every scientist learns vivisection is needed, and few question or research it.)

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This forces huge ethical concerns. If we detest cosmetic testing on grounds of it being unnecessary, then we must do the same to vivisection. It may have had results in the past, but there is no evidence that better results wouldn't have been achieved without it. And for the future: well we know vivisection is expensive and largely inefficient with the methods available these days. All we can do is protest/avoid as many of these products as we can (without damaging our own health) until the pharmaceutical industry is made to evaluate it's methods.

One final issue that animal rights must approach, perhaps the most prevalent in the UK, is that of food. If humans need to eat animal products (such as meat, milk and eggs) to live, then the argument of animal rights is mute in this area. After all if we need to eat animal products, then this use of animals isn't unnecessary. So the argument as a whole comes down to whether we need to eat meat, eggs or milk. Well, is there nutrients that humans need to consume, which they can only get from these sources? In short, no. We used to think this was the case, we thought we needed omega 3 from fish, protein and iron from meats, calcium from milk... All of which we now know to be false. All the nutrients gained from animal products can be gained from plant sources – and perhaps more importantly – all can be gained in much higher quantities (protein is found in higher concentrations in beans, calcium in denser quantities from green veggies etc.) Science has in a sense liberated us from having to live in a way in which we have to harm other animals.

Practically speaking of course it is this issue, food, that makes the most difference to animal's lives. Refusing to buy cosmetics may dent profits of companies that do test on animals (which has to be applauded), but statistical studies estimate that somewhere around 90 less animals a year are slaughtered just by one person not eating animal products. This is simply because if we do not demand meat, eggs or milk, then business will not create them. If we are to consider the amount of lives we can make a difference in, and the amount of difference any animal issue can make, then abstaining from consumption of animal products is by the far the biggest difference anyone can make.

These are the main issues which the subject of animal rights demands we consider, but they are not the only ones. There are similar arguments, which I'm sure are obvious after reading this, which implore us not to wear leather or other animal skins, and even not to visit zoo's, animal circuses, or support cruel sports like horse racing or bull fighting. These issues are all tied under the same strong argument for animal rights, which stem from the very simple issue of needless harm. So before next buying a pint of milk, a pack of bacon, or supporting any of these products/events, please consider how much your tastes really matter compared to the whole lives of those that have been used to fulfil them. And then remember, tastes can change.

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