

Topics / Animal Rights / Animal Rights: Outlook

The contemporary debates over animal rights have yet to find core issues. The extensive integration of animals into human society at every level makes the problem of animal rights one of the most complicated topics faced by modern philosophers and jurists.

While there is widespread acceptance in the West that animals must be accorded some minimal level of rights, if only against unnecessary cruel treatment, even this minimal view is disputed in other parts of the world. In the United States and Western Europe, the central issue is not so much whether animals should have some rights, but rather how extensive these rights should be. Multiple groups have lined up on various sides of the issue. On the one hand, businesses that utilize animals as food products, test subjects, or sources of labor have generally tended to oppose the extension of more than minimal rights. For example, the pharmaceutical and cosmetics industries, which use animal test subjects in their research, have opposed most efforts to grant more than the very barest rights to animals. The food industry, often notorious for cruel treatment of its animals, has also been an opponent of animal rights. Vegetarian and Vegan groups, as well as groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), whose interests extend far beyond food animals, have vigorously pushed for broad rights for animals. Some individuals and splinter groups have gone so far as to engage in what they consider "guerilla" attacks on industry and what industry considers "terrorism."



Debates on the use of animals for food are long-standing and will probably continue on into the indefinite future. However, it seems likely that the most controversial issues involving animal rights over the next decades will be those relating to the use of animals as test subjects, particularly in medical and pharmaceutical laboratories. Those who favor the use of animals in drug and medical testing argue that without such tests, it will be impossible to teach biology and medicine, to develop new drugs and techniques to cure human disease, and to push medical and pharmaceutical science to new advances. Most of those who support the continued use of animals in such teaching and research accept that test animals should not be subjected to unnecessary cruelty, but generally argue that it should be scientists who determine whether actions constitute cruelty and whether such actions are necessary. Opponents of this kind of animal use argue that humans do not have a moral right to sacrifice animals for their own benefit, especially if there are alternative means to achieve the same ends. In support of this arguments, animal rights activists point, for instance, to the growing use of computer simulations of living systems as a means to avoid the use of living test subjects. Activists also argue that scientists and researchers should not be permitted to determine what is acceptable in testing animals. They argue that only independent third parties, such as courts, are able to make such determinations fairly.

Legislative Action

Animal rights activists in the United States have adopted a strategy of not only looking to the federal government for action, but also to state governments. Many state legislatures have adopted strengthened laws against animal cruelty. In Kansas, for instance, the state legislature made animal cruelty a felony crime in 2006, an action which will permit state and local law enforcement to take vigorous steps against what they perceive to be abuses against animals. In Great Britain, Parliament in 2005 enacted a statutory ban on fox hunting with dogs, a practice considered to be cruel by many Britons.

Use of Animals as Test Subjects

The extensive use of animals as test subjects in scientific research laboratories has been a source of much protest in the United States and Great Britain. In the United States there have been repeated attacks on research facilities using animals. In many of these attacks, whole laboratories have been destroyed along with records of the research. Generally, test animals are "liberated," either released or taken away for release at a safe location. In a few cases researchers have been injured in such attacks. Although law enforcement agencies have investigated such attacks, they have had notably little success in apprehending the perpetrators.

There has also been some backlash to these protests against the allegedly cruel treatment of animals in research. The most of these anti-protests took place in Oxford, England in early 2006. Oxford University has one of the leading scientific research facilities in the world. Some of this research involves animals. When a new animal research facility at Oxford was proposed, it was met with a storm of protest by animal rights activists' intent on blocking construction. An Oxford high school student launched a counter-protest, in favor of research use of animals. This protest drew thousands of supporters of animal use in research to the streets of Oxford. The British parliamentary ban against fox hunting with dogs has aroused even a greater protest movement. Traditional rural organizations, including the Countryside Alliance, have used the ban as the centerpiece of its attacks on the present Labor government. Marches involving tens of thousands of hunt supporters have taken place across Britain and gained the support of celebrities including members of the British Royal Family. The Conservative Party has gone so far as to make the ban a central campaign issue, promising to repeal the ban if it becomes the majority party.

Outlook

There are no easy answers to the issues surrounding animal rights nor is there likely to be any early solutions. What is needed most is for philosophers, ethicists, and jurists to develop a consensus theory of what rights animals should have, on what basis these rights depend, and the extent to which and the means by which such rights can be enforced. Such philosophers as Peter Singer, Martha Nussbaum, and Tom Regan are actively working on these issues. Such lawyers as Cass Sunstein and Gary Francone have been attempting to provide legal tools for answering these questions in courts and legislatures. Until this theoretical work is finished, however, it seems unlikely that there will be a decrease in protests against the use of animals by researchers or perceived cruelty against animals by food producers and breeders. Further, as more individuals become aware of these debates it is likely that there will be more protests against the protestors, as occurred in Oxford.

Recently, a new issue surfaced in the animal rights debate with new publications by Peter Singer. Professor Singer, whose theory of animal rights looks to the existence of self-consciousness as a key factor in whether animals have rights, has recently argued that if one attaches rights to self-consciousness, then humans who do not possess this characteristic, including those who are in a permanent vegetative state, also do not possess rights and may be treated differently from other humans. This would, in theory, open the door to euthanasia and even the use of human beings with severe brain damage as test subjects. Professor Singer's most recent thoughts have made many animal rights supporters—who have used self-consciousness as a basis for according rights—extremely uncomfortable.

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