

Topics / Animal Rights / Animal Rights: Overview

The legal and moral rights of animals is a topic that can arouse great passions, both pro and con. Traditionally, the law has conveyed no rights upon animals, but in the past two centuries more and more people have come to argue that animals do have moral rights and should have legal rights. The debates over these rights have left the classroom and the courtroom in recent years and become the subject of strident activism, which at times has led to attacks upon scientific laboratories that use animals as test subjects as well as upon individuals wearing fur coats. Animal rights activists have formed powerful organizations to protect everything from domestic pets to chickens destined for the dinner table to whales in the deep sea.

Throughout human history we have always interacted with animals. Animals have provided us with food, with clothing, with labor, with transportation, and much more. For centuries, the exploitation of animals was taken as a human right; animals existed to serve mankind and little thought was given to their welfare or happiness. The treatment of animals has varied from culture to culture. Some cultures revere cattle, while others see cattle as a cheap form of protein. Some cultures view dogs as "man's best friend" and others see them as a main course for dinner. Beginning in the 19th century, moral philosophers and lawyers in the West began to question whether animals were simply property to be used or abused as their owners wished. The movement for animal rights had its origin both in the growing recognition that domestic pets, now known as "companion animals," should be protected from abuse, and examples of blatant and unnecessary cruelty that alarmed and disgusted the public. For instance, in 19th century New York City, the way cartmen (property movers) treated their horses gave rise to the formation of societies for the protection of animals.



Today the debate over animal rights is international and has drawn in philosophers, scientists, lawyers, and activists. There is no clear consensus in this debate over a particular approach to the problem or whether all or only some animals should have rights. On the one hand, there are those who argue that all animals, even insects, have some degree of moral and legal rights. This extreme view has even led some to argue that it is wrong to eradicate the virus that causes smallpox or polio because humanity should never drive another species to extinction. Others would argue that only some animal species have any rights at all. Some argue that only the so-called "companion species," those like dogs and cats who are kept as pets, should have rights. Others would extend rights to such domesticated species as horses, but no further. And some would argue that animals have no rights at all and exist solely for the use of humanity, following the Biblical notion that God gave humans "dominion" over all animals.

One of the great difficulties in discussing animal rights is the lack of a consensus as to upon what basis a theory of animal rights should be built. Is the central question whether animals are sentient? Or is the key question whether animals can feel pain and fear? Or should the key issue be whether use or abuse of animals is pragmatically unwise? There is also the question as to the origin of such rights, if they exist. Are animal rights derived solely from human action? If so, one must then conclude that humans can as easily deprive animals of their rights as bestow them. If the rights of animals are not solely derived from human legislation and morals (i.e. they are "natural rights" or rights derived from a deity), then one must deal with all of the issues surrounding such rights including religious and philosophical issues. Finally, there is no clear consensus, even among those who favor animal rights, as to the extent to which such rights exist. Some would say that animals have the right to be free of pain and suffering,

including being put to death. Others would limit animal rights to freedom from cruelty and a guarantee of a "humane death." Others would make these rights far more extensive, even to argue that animals have a right to be free in the wild, even if this means preserving wild spaces for animals.

The subject of animal rights is one which has engaged various individuals and groups throughout the world. Many organizations exist to foster and preserve such rights. Some, such as the various national "societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals" have been in existence for decades. Others, such as the radical People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, are of more recent vintage. Given the many roles animals play, from providing food to acting as medical and cosmetic treatment test subjects to standing in as substitutes for human beings in dangerous situations like space exploration or warfare, animals and humans constantly interact. As long as this situation exists, controversy over the rights of animals will continue.

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Further Reading

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[back to top](#) **Entry ID: 913334**