Beyond A Simple Dichotomy: The Interdependence of Rights and Interests in Animal Ethics

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Abstract. This paper examines the principal conflict in animal ethics: whether moral consideration for nonhuman animals is to be based upon inherent rights, as Tom Regan argues, or upon interests that are morally relevant, as Peter Singer claims. The paper traces the philosophical origins of this dispute, starting with John Locke's human-centred rights doctrine, and continuing with the utilitarian conception of Singer and the deontological rights-based view of Regan. This paper argues that these two do not have to be seen as mutually exclusive. Rather, this paper contends that rights and interests are interdependent. Rights protect fundamental interests, and these fundamental interests (e.g., the avoiding of suffering) form the basis for both human rights and broader moral rights. It is concluded that a synthesis of the two approaches into an "interest-derived rights" theory yields a more viable, and ethically coherent, theory of animal protection, and avoids the practical traps of pure utilitarianism and the possible rigidity of a pure rights-based formalism.

Keywords: Animal Ethics; Animal Rights; Utilitarianism; Interests

1. Introduction

The moral status of non-human animals and the ethical foundation for their treatment is one of the most pressing problems of moral philosophy today and one that has yet to be resolved. Historically, such questions have been framed within a human-centered understanding, and philosophers such as John Locke have played an influential role in promoting this agenda. Locke argued that natural rights which applied to human beings could be found in the state of nature, where it was recognized that only rational beings (humans) could hold equal natural rights to life, liberty, and property [1]. This traditional understanding of natural rights implies that animals are implicitly excluded from direct moral consideration and explicitly so on a number of occasions, supporting a presumption that animals may be used as mere means to human ends [2].

In the last few decades, this consensus has come to be powerfully challenged by two opposing, but dominant, ethical paradigms. The first is a utilitarian, interest-based approach championed by Peter Singer. Singer's perspective is that any being capable of suffering (sentience) has interests; furthermore, all interests are to receive equal consideration, regardless of species [3, 4]. The second is the deontological, rights-based approach of Tom Regan. Regan contends that certain animals, as "subjects-of-a-life" have intrinsic worth [5] and, consequently, inviolable moral rights which cannot be overridden by utilitarian considerations.

These two approaches are often presented as an unyielding dichotomy which forces a choice between a supple (but potentially self-sacrificial) calculus of interests and a rigid (but protective) framework of rights. This paper traces the development of this debate and rejects the acceptance of this mutual exclusivity. In fact, this paper argues that rights and interests are complementary and interdependent. The animal's most fundamental interests, especially the interest in suffering avoidance, are of such moral significance that they must be regarded as the basis for the granting of corresponding rights. This 'blended view', which finds echo in contemporary efforts to unite these approaches [6, 7] escapes from the theoretical extremes represented by either paradigm alone and offers a more substantial framework of animal ethics.

2. Lockean Moral Hierarchy

One paradigm in animal ethics is rights-based. First reasoned by Locke, right designates a justified claim or entitlement that others have a duty to respect. He asserts that "[t]the state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obligates everyone", revealing that natural rights are empowered by the wise creator, and beings are all equal and independent that no one can harm another's life, health, liberty, or possessions [1]. Being rights-holders, mankind fulfills the criteria of living as rational agents; therefore, this theory indicates that creatures lacking such faculties were excluded from this community's rights, which potentially eliminates animals from sharing these rights.

Animals, though sentient, lack the rationality and autonomy Locke took to be the mark of a rights-bearer. Therefore, they have no rights against humans. Their welfare matters only indirectly as killing or harming living creatures may entail humans "lose that tenderness, which is natural to them, by imbibing cruel habits" [2]. This concept gradually forms the long-lasting human-centered liberal tradition where rights could be a shield for individual autonomy and welfare, but do not extend to animals. Locke's reliance on "rationality" as the requisite for rights, however, presents a significant limitation, prompting subsequent ethicists to challenge this standard. Peter Singer, for instance, dramatically shifted the criterion from "rationality" to "sentience".

3. Sentience and Interests in Utilitarian Ethics

In contrast, the interest-based paradigm holds that any being with morally relevant interests deserves ethical consideration. An interest is a stake in an outcome that matters to a being - typically including avoiding pain and pursuing well-being [3]. Peter Singer is the most prominent advocate of this view. He contends that it is unnecessary for animals to advance obscure natural rights, but rather that it should be recognized that animals have interests (notably the interest in the avoidance of suffering) and that those interests should receive equal consideration. Singer's idea is based upon the utilitarian tradition of Jeremy Bentham, who memorably asked, "Can they suffer?" thereby making suffering the criterion [8].

If a being can suffer or enjoy, it has interests. Singer's core principle is the "equal consideration of interests": interests must be weighed equally, regardless of species. In practice, this means a dog's pain matters as much as a human's pain of a similar nature and intensity. Singer rejects speciesism - the prejudice of giving less moral weight to beings simply because they are of another species. He equates speciesism to racism: choosing not to consider an animal's suffering is no more justifiable than disregarding a person's suffering because of race. For Singer, what matters ethically is a being's capacity to suffer and the nature and intensity of their interests. Thus, he shifts the debate from rights to welfare and interests: animals should be treated well because they can suffer and have interests that deserve equal weight with human interests, unless there is a morally relevant difference (such as stronger future-oriented interests).

Singer also recognizes certain differences among beings. He distinguishes simple welfare interests (basic needs like avoiding pain or confinement) from preference interests (long-term plans or future goals). As all sentient beings share basic welfare interests, they count equally under his principle. However, beings capable of self-awareness or future-oriented desires – for example, normal adult humans and some higher animals – have preference interests that lesser animals lack. Therefore, when it comes to taking life, in extreme situations, "it is generally a greater wrong to kill a person than it is to kill a being that has no sense of existing over time" [4]. This distinction becomes ethically relevant as killing a being that has self-awareness thwarts more than killing a being that lives moment-to-moment. Crucially, Singer relates cognitive characteristics to preference interests, tying the differentiated treatment to traits, not species. He controversially asserts that if a comparison is made between a severely mentally impaired person and a highly intelligent non-human (like a dolphin), one ought not to automatically favor human life unless their mental levels are similar. Singer's equal consideration allows those beings with similar interests to be treated alike, but does not imply

identical treatment in all aspects. Higher intelligence or self-awareness can justify stronger interests, but the basic capacity to suffer gives all animals standing.

As per Singer's stance, he warns that talk of "rights" can complicate matters with metaphysical baggage: ultimately, any right ascribed to animals would rest on its interest (for example, pain causes suffering) [3]. Thus, he solely focuses on the suffering itself. Under this interest calculus, some moral tradeoffs are permissible if the human interest is substantially larger. Singer argues that a significant human interest may outweigh a lesser animal interest. For example, if a few animals in medical experimentation would remedy human suffering, great benefits might be gained for many humans. He also maintains that such tradeoffs are permissible in exceptional cases, such as euthanasia of animals in great distress, or sacrificing animals when the lives of many humans are in extreme danger. In such cases he weighs the moral worth of the action in which he is interested by the intensity and numbers of the interests and feelings involved, not by who has them [4]. This holds out in strong contrast to a rigid rights view, where it might be wrong to inflict harm upon any individual regardless of possible effects.

4. Rights and the Subject-of-a-life Criterion

Tom Regan offers a different perspective: animals possess inherent value and intrinsic moral rights, not just interests. He starts from a Locke-like foundation but extends rights beyond humans. Regan proposes the concept of "subject-of-a-life": any creature with beliefs, desires, memories, and an emotional life or a sense of future [5]. Beings who are "subjects-of-a-life" are not just receptacles of value of others; instead, they own "sufficient condition for possessing inherent value" [5]. This inherent value exists equally in all normal mature (above one year old) mammals. Because of this, these animals have basic moral rights, and the most important rights include the right to respectful treatment and the right not to be harmed or killed unnecessarily. Practices like using animals for food, testing, or entertainment treat them as mere means, violating their rights and failing to respect their value [5].

If an animal has a right not to be killed, then killing it even for a good human goal is prima facie wrong. He takes an abolitionist stance: animals should not be regarded as mere resources. He famously argued that in a lifeboat situation, he would throw the utilitarian (who would throw the dog overboard) instead of the dog, because individuals have inviolable worth. Regan also points out that denying rights to animals while granting similar protection to mentally handicapped humans is inconsistent. If it is claimed animals lack reasoning, one must either place those humans at the same level or also deny them full rights, which is unacceptable. Thus, Regan rejects ranking beings for intelligence for basic rights. For him, justice requires that the few cannot be sacrificed for many – everyone's right must be protected.

Regan's view has a revolutionary conclusion: humans have a duty under natural law to avoid treating them as mere means to human ends, just as they must not harm other humans. Regan resorts to a Locke-type vocabulary of rights and asserts that the nonhuman animals have a claim against being harmed: if human animals are considered to be property of God with a duty not to kill one another, animals, as creatures of God, should receive that protection. He bases the rights of animals which are "subjects-of-a-life" upon equal treatment and equal worth. In practice, this means that we cannot treat animals as property any longer and must abolish those practices which involve needless killing or suffering, since every individual being has a right to be respected in its claim not to be a mere means.

5. Discussion: The Interdependence of Rights and Interests

Despite their differences, the interests and rights approaches are not only combinable but interdependent. What is often perceived as a conflict between interests and rights can instead be

understood as a relationship of mutual dependence. A close examination reveals that both views are inadequate independently of each other and are convincing when merged.

Singer's utilitarian calculus of suffering is so thoroughly inclusive that it leaves individuals out of account. If human interests as a whole (e.g., in research) can be considered vastly the greater, the interests of individual animals can be permissibly sacrificed. Hence, the protection of animals will be contingent rather than certain. On the other hand, Regan's deontological solution confers a strong protection on individuals but is liable to the objections of rigidity and of insufficient scope. His "subject-of-a-life" criterion [5] is purposefully narrow. It sets up a new hierarchy (e.g., between mammals and the other sentient beings) and is inflexible in a complex moral dilemma where harms are unavoidable.

The theoretical impasse has led contemporary ethical theorists to devise third ways. For example, Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka propose in Zoopolis that such a debate can be transcended by a political theory of animal rights, which divides the rights into different categories (such as citizenship, residency, and sovereignty), depending on the relation of the animals to human society [6]. Martha Nussbaum has also famously developed a "capabilities approach," which argues that the goal is not to protect rights or interests per se, but to ensure all sentient beings have the opportunity to flourish and exercise their essential life-sustaining capabilities [7].

While these newer models offer complex and valuable expansions, the foundational tension they all seek to resolve remains the one between individual inviolability (rights) and fundamental well-being (interests). This paper argues that a direct synthesis, which views these two concepts as interdependent, is still the most practically robust framework. Rights exist to protect important interests: for instance, a human's right to life protects the most fundamental interest in living. Similarly, if it is recognized that animals have an interest in not suffering or in continuing to live, it can be argued that they have a right to those things, since such interests are so crucial that others should be forbidden from overriding them. Even Singer sometimes uses the language of rights loosely as shorthand for protections that creatures ought to have, though he grounds those protections in interest [3]. Regan likewise implicitly acknowledges interests: an animal's right not to be harmed rests on the idea that being harmed would frustrate its interests.

Hence, instead of merely adopting interest or right, interests underlie rights, and rights amplify interests. The notion "interest-derived rights" suggests that some of an animal's basic interests—especially in avoiding suffering and staying alive—should carry the weight of rights [9]. For example, current animal welfare laws fail because they treat animals as property and balance their pain against human benefit, often with trivial human interests winning. Some ethicists (like Gary Francione) argue that animals need to be given legal rights, so they are not mere resources [10]. Combining the two paradigms together, it indicates that sentience is the starting point: without the capacity to feel, a being has no interests; but once it can feel and value its life, it deserves corresponding protections. Synthesizing the aforementioned perspectives, Singer is right that suffering is morally crucial, and Regan is also right that individuals matter as more than just vessels of pain—they should not be sacrificed for aggregate gains. It is impossible to grant rights to animals without admitting interests (sufficient, at least, to the animals), and conversely, an interest of any kind without any rights implies such a constant balancing of interests in which individuals always lose. This is the subtlety of Regan's phrase: animals are their own lives, and for that reason their interests have to count, respected as a matter of right.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper contends that the sharp distinction that is drawn between animal rights and animal interests is a false dichotomy. The most ethically consistent approach taken is through a synthetic model which acknowledges the interdependence of the two. Non-human animals do have morally significant interests, the foremost of which is the interest in being free from pain and in valuing the lives they themselves lead. These primary moral interests are so central to their well-being

that they must be regarded as possessing corresponding moral rights. To illustrate, a creature's capacity for suffering (its interest) brings with it an obligation on the part of humans not to cause unnecessary suffering (its right). Such a synthetic perspective resolutely avails itself of the maximized strengths of Singer's concern with sentience and Regan's respect for the individual by providing a systematized and more sophisticated framework within which to bestow justice and compassion upon all sentient beings.

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