

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review
of
*Animal Rights Without Liberation: Applied
Ethics and Human Obligations*

Alasdair Cochrane
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In this text, Alasdair Cochrane argues for an animal rights theory intended to “decouple animal rights from animal liberation” (19). By liberation, Cochrane is referring to the belief that it is wrong to exploit or own animals in any way. This viewpoint is often accredited to philosopher Tom Regan’s seminal 1983 book, *The Case for Animal Rights*. Cochrane states that this belief is central to the animal rights movement and is in contrast to theories of what he and others call “animal welfarism”, which refers to an interest-based utilitarianism made famous by Peter Singer’s 1975 book, *Animal Liberation*. Singer, as opposed to Regan, does not necessitate the liberation of animals from ownership and exploitation, but emphasizes liberation from speciesism through equal consideration of the interests of all sentient beings.

These two philosophies have existed for decades with little overlap. Cochrane, however, presents an alternative theory that argues that animals indeed do have rights, but the right to be liberated is not one of them. This is because he believes that, “the majority of sentient animals...lack the capacities of autonomous agency” (11). By autonomous agency, Cochrane is referring to the capability and interest in framing and pursuing long-term life goals. Therefore, he argues that animals are not necessarily harmed just by being owned or exploited and are unaware and lacking of any interest, and thus right, to be liberated from ownership and exploitation. As follows, Cochrane contends that we have a moral obligation to end practices that result in the suffering and death of animals, but not to liberate them from ownership and exploitation.

Cochrane’s interest-based rights theory is grounded in the capacity for well-being or the ability to lead a life that can go well or poorly. This is his criteria as to what makes a being sentient.

He emphasizes that sentient beings have prima facie rights not to be harmed or killed. Similar to Singer's preference-based utilitarianism, rare exceptions to this rule would arise when there is an interest to kill or harm an animal that carries more moral weight than that of the being's interest not to be killed or harmed. For example, Cochrane reasons that it is not immoral for an Eskimo tribe to hunt a whale if the alternative is starving. However, in most modern societies, where human well-being can flourish without eating meat, it would not be permissible, as the whale's interest in continued life and not experiencing pain in a hunt exceeds that of the human desire to eat it.

The philosophy that animals do not have a right not to be owned or exploited creates some interesting deviations from mainstream animal rights theory. For example, Cochrane maintains that it is not wrong to experiment on sentient beings if it does not harm or kill the animal. This is in sharp contrast to animal liberation theories. However, as he points out, experiments that do not harm or kill are rare, thus calling for an overhaul of the current state of animal research. He also argues that it is not wrong to use animals in agriculture if it does not cause them harm or death. Therefore, a transition to veganism is not necessary as a limited amount of dairy and egg consumption would still be permissible. This, however, is questionable, as the scale of these industries would have to be so drastically reduced that it's hard to imagine in a world of over seven billion inhabitants. Nonetheless, Cochrane cleverly debunks the criticism that a transition to a more vegetarian or vegan diet would be devastating to those who make a living off of animal agriculture. He states:

There is often an economic cost to be paid for respecting the core interests of individuals, but that cost is rarely decisive in

deciding the moral issue. For example, there were economic costs in the abolition of slavery—particularly in the southern United States—but that did not render abolition the wrong course of action (85).

Cochrane is unafraid to address some of the stickiest animal rights dilemmas, such as invasive species and cultural and religious practices that use animals. In Chapter 7 (“Animals and the Environment”) he maintains that sentient overpopulated and invasive species, although sometimes problematic, still have an interest to live, forcing us to acknowledge their rights. Therefore, overpopulated and invasive species should be addressed by methods other than culling. He criticizes culling as a very short-term solution that needs to be continuously adopted, resulting in the infringement of the rights of numerous sentient beings year after year. With the understanding that contraceptive programs have not been particularly effective to date, he advocates for further focus and investment on population control methods that are more effective and humane.

One concept that would have been interesting to see Cochrane develop further is sentience. He defines sentience as being able to experience and feel the world, therefore having a capacity for well-being. However, animal science has demonstrated that this concept is not always so clear. For example, some animals believed to be non-sentient have displayed primitive neurological responses that demonstrate an instinct to avoid harmful stimuli. Does this mean they can feel the world? Do they have a capacity for well-being? And furthermore, how will our definitions change as science continues to develop? Also, the assumption that most sentient beings do not have an interest in framing and pursuing their own goals seems reason-

able, but could also be a pitfall of our own speciesism. How would we really know?

Cochrane's book is a concise read that addresses a wide range of ethical dilemmas in our current relationships with animals. It provides a broad overview of many of the fiercest debates in the field and serves as a good introduction for someone new to the concept of animal rights while still being relevant to those better versed. It is a strong contribution to the animal rights discussion and challenges us to be open as to what the realization of animal rights means and should look like.

References

Regan, Tom. 1983. *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Singer, Peter. 1975. *Animal Liberation*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.