

# Relations

BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

7.1-2

NOVEMBER 2019

*The Respect Extended to Animals:  
Studies in Honor and in Memory of Tom Regan*

Conference Event Special Issue  
(Florence, Italy, February 20, 2018)

Edited by Francesco Allegri

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# The Importance of Tom Regan for Animal Ethics

## Introduction

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.7358/rela-2019-0102-all2>

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This special issue of *Relations* is dedicated to the animal ethics of Tom Regan, the American philosopher who passed away in early 2017<sup>1</sup>.

It is not necessary to explain in so many words the importance of Tom Regan to the readers of *Relations*, being a figure well present in the pages of this journal. He is the philosopher who, together with Peter Singer, in the seventies of the twentieth century marked a fundamental turning point in the moral consideration of non-human animals. If until then the prevailing philosophical thought had prescribed only indirect obligations towards sentient beings not belonging to our species (with several exceptions in the history of philosophy, as we will see from Vilma Baricalla's article), in the middle of the decade, with the publication of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* and Tom Regan's works, especially *The Case for Animal Rights*, animals enter fully into the moral community, as patients to whom we have direct moral obligations. As Cochrane writes,

The theories of Peter Singer and Tom Regan has been the most influential contributions to animal ethics: *Animal Liberation* and *The Case for Animal Rights* have provided a reference point for all subsequent scholarly works on debates about our obligations to nonhuman animals. (Cochrane 2012, 7)

If, in order to justify the attribution of full moral status to non-human sentient beings, Singer refers to a utilitarian moral theory, Regan instead develops an opposite approach, basing moral consideration towards other animals on deontological grounds and using the language of rights. But on a practical level his position is convergent with Singer's in con-

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<sup>1</sup> Exactly on February 17, 2017.

denying all human activities in which animals are denied the moral relevance they deserve.

A year after Regan died, in February 2018, the Italian Institute of Bioethics wanted to remember him by organizing a Conference in his honor entitled *The Respect Extended to Animals: Remembering Tom Regan One Year After his Death*, which was held in Florence. In addition to the writer, the conference was attended by Vilma Baricalla, Luisella Battaglia, Luigi Lombardi Vallauri, Corrado Migliorucci, Francesca Mugnai, Simone Pollo and Federico Zuolo.

In the following pages most of the papers presented at that conference are published in a revised and corrected version. The order in which the texts are placed is as follows. At the beginning we put a historical introduction to the theme of animal ethics. Then a presentation and an evaluation of the theoretical framework with which Regan believes he can justify his innovative positions in terms of animal ethics. Subsequently, the questions of practical ethics, which in the interventions of the Conference lead to issues of political philosophy. Finally, a memory and a testimony of someone who knew the American philosopher in person.

Vilma Baricalla introduces the topic of animal ethics through an excursus on some of the thinkers who in the history of Western thought have anticipated the current philosophical theses in defense of animal rights, moving against the prevailing approach that denied animals any moral status.

The article by Francesco Allegri reconstructs the theoretical premises of Tom Regan's animal ethics, focusing the attention on three key concepts of Kantian nature (used by the American philosopher in order to extend the concept of right to the animal world): respect, inherent value, subjects-of-a-life. The conclusions of the author are that, although Regan's theory still remains the most rigorous foundation of an animal ethics alternative to Peter Singer's utilitarian approach, it is not without unresolved problems or not entirely satisfactory solutions. In the final part of the paper Allegri points out some of them and he try to overcome them by inserting elements of gradualism into the Reganian theoretical framework.

The following two contributions are more specifically aimed at Regan's practical ethics, and in particular at the link between non-violence and the defense of animal rights.

Luisella Battaglia in "The impact of the Gandhian lesson on Tom Regan's thinking" analyzes the importance of Gandhian reflection for Regan's animal ethics. In particular, Battaglia points out that, although non-violence has often been defined as a patient acceptance of suffer-

ing, a passive resistance exemplified by the Gospel precept of turning the other cheek, it is in reality a strenuous commitment, a courageous action aimed at asserting conculcated rights, a strategy that aims at effectiveness in the search for justice. According to Battaglia, in opposition to the anthropocentric model of domination, in Gandhi as in Regan there is the full recovery of an ethical-philosophical tradition based on the model of kinship or fraternity and that insists on the possibility of extending the rules of justice to all living beings. The result of this perspective is the duty of vegetarianism and the radical opposition to any practice that treats animals as means at the service of human interests.

Federico Zuolo identifies an ambiguity and a potential contradiction in Regan's position about the conditions for the legitimate use of violence for the sake of animals. Although Regan does not shy away from the possibility that violence might be needed under certain circumstances, thus rejecting absolute pacifism, he says that such conditions are never met in practice. However, according to Zuolo, his overall position is more likely to justify violence than he admits. By means of a comparison between Regan's considerations on violence and just war theory, he shows that Regan is admittedly less supportive of violence than his theory would afford. Zuolo concludes by gesturing towards some possible changes that his thought should undergo in order to adjust this incoherence.

Finally we have the contribution of Lombardi Vallauri, who preferred to express his reflections on Regan through an interview. In it, in addition to recalling his personal encounters with the American philosopher, he highlights the points of Reganian animal ethics that most impressed and influenced him. In particular his connection with Gandhi and Indian thought.

## REFERENCES

Cochrane, Alasdair. 2012. *Animal Rights without Liberation*. New York: Columbia University Press.