

# BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of  
*Animal Ethics: A Contemporary  
Introduction*

Bob Fischer  
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Many animal ethics courses engage familiar topics and figures. A typical class may begin with basic questions about moral status or the major ethical theories of consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics and then focus on discrete topics in animal ethics. In many respects, animal ethics courses cover a wide array of philosophical and ethical questions, questions that may be difficult for students to navigate. Bob Fischer's *Animal Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* is designed to help readers navigate this fascinating and important field.

Fischer is clear that his goal for the book is twofold: bring readers "up to speed" on present-day animal ethics and model "how animal ethics can be done" (2). To achieve the first goal, Fischer devotes chapters to more recent debates surrounding aquaculture, pests, and companion animals. This is in contrast to other introductory texts. For instance, Lori Gruen's wonderful *Ethics and Animals: An Introduction* does not, but Fischer's book does, devote chapters to fish, activism, and animal minds. Angus Taylor's impressive *Animals and Ethics* does not, but Fischer's book does, devote chapters to welfare and death, and institutional animal care. To achieve the second goal, Fischer regularly intersperses his views, reasonings, and personal experiences, but is clear that his doing so is pedagogical: "I have my views, and from time to time, I lay them on the table.... I'm not trying to convince you based on my say-so. Instead, I'm trying to model that I think animal ethics should go somewhere" (9). This approach brings the topics home, so to speak, for readers. For instance, Fischer describes his brother's experience growing up with cystic fibrosis and the profound positive impact that medical advancements made possible by animal research had on his brother. Readers will appreciate the humorous asides and colorful examples throughout the book.

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The book can be divided into two parts, one part foundational (chapters 2-5) and the other part topical (chapters 6-14). In chapter 2, “The Moral Community”, Fischer presents readers with theories of what makes a creature matter morally. The chapter begins by arguing that species-ism is problematic because it overlooks animal pain and cannot account for species overlap. This leads to the question of whether the moral community is scalar, with some animals “counting more” than others on account of their greater cognitive abilities. The chapter supports the inclusion of non-human animals in the moral community based on sentience, and this leads to chapter 3, “Animal Minds”, which helps readers think through two topics: how do we determine sentience and how should we act if we are unsure of sentience? Of particular note is the chapter’s discussion of fish and insect sentience. Here readers see philosophy in action—behavior, relative brain size, and evolutionary arguments may not give us convincing reasons to think insects, say, are sentient in a morally significant manner. Fischer concludes the chapter with the increasingly significant question of what to do when we are epistemically uncertain.

The foundational issues continue in chapter 4, “Welfare and Death”. Fischer presents readers with three philosophical accounts of welfare—hedonism, desire satisfaction, and perfectionism—and presents the rampant suffering of wildlife animals as a test case for thinking about welfare. Death is distinct from suffering, and so Fischer closes the chapter by discussing whether death is a welfare issue and whether it is bad for the animal. The final foundational issue comes in chapter 5, “Moral Theory”. It might be initially surprising that moral theory comes five chapters in, but the rationale is clear if one follows the book’s progression. Supposing everyone agrees that certain animals are sentient and sentience is what counts morally, “we

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haven't said much about how we ought to act" toward sentient animals (65). This chapter concisely introduces various ethical theories (e.g., consequentialism, virtue ethics, deontology, care ethics, ecofeminism, contractualism) and highlights how these theories apply to animals.

The remaining chapters focus on particular topics in animal ethics. Whereas other introductory texts on animal ethics may offer one chapter on raising and slaughtering animals for food, Fischer's book distinguishes between animal agriculture and aquaculture (chapter 6), production and consumption ethics (chapter 7), and fishing (chapter 8). Fischer begins in chapter 6 by explaining the rise of industrialized animal agriculture and aquaculture. A vivid description is offered of the lives of industrialized farm animals, followed by a vivid description of industrialized fishing. The goal here is to present an empirically informed account of what industrialized farming is like. Chapter 7 analyzes the ethics of producing, purchasing, and consuming animals. Fischer incorporates the various moral theories discussed in chapter 5 to condemn factory farming. Students will likely be interested in the rest of the chapter, for Fischer suggests that purchasing and consuming animal products may not be morally wrong even if factory farming is. Chapter 8 then discusses fishing, which is importantly different from factory farming of pigs and cattle, for fishing involves catching wildlife. In this chapter, Fischer introduces a radical idea, namely, wildlife fishing may not be bad for fish because they live otherwise terrible lives in the wild: "when we consider the scope of the harms to which wild animals are vulnerable, it becomes more plausible that it's better for fish to be killed by humans than to live a longer life in the wild" (129). This radical conclusion is defended from would-be objectors.

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The next three chapters engage animal research and preservation. Chapter 9, “Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees”, applies policies and procedures such as the National Research Council’s *The Guide for the Care and Use of Animals*, the Animal Welfare Act, and the 3Rs to research on turtles to suggest that existing policies and procedures may be inadequate or applied inconsistently. Chapter 10, “Animal Research”, focuses on cystic fibrosis to engage the question of whether it is morally acceptable to use animals for medical research. From a utilitarian perspective, Fischer suggests that some animal research is morally acceptable; from a deontological perspective, however, Fischer suggests that it is not morally acceptable. Chapter 11, “Zoos”, focuses on zoos’ (supposed) role in the preservation of various species of wildlife. This allows Fischer to introduce readers to the distinction between a species and an individual member of a species, before challenging the claim that zoos do in fact contribute to wildlife preservation and education; on the other hand, Fischer notes that many zoo animals can no longer survive in the wild. This creates a practical problem of what to do with them.

The next two chapters engage daily animal encounters. Chapter 12, “Pests”, introduces readers to the question of what can ethically be done about invasive species. Readers are asked to consider how many rats count for a human life. Readers are left with the practical dilemma of what to do, for Fischer closes by highlighting the impracticality of non-lethal pest control options. Chapter 13, “Companion Animals”, focuses largely on the question of free-roaming cats. Readers are presented, once again, with utilitarian and deontological considerations for and against, before Fischer argues in favor of confining cats indoors. This chapter would fit nicely with Fischer’s and Cheryl Abbate’s recent articles on the topic.

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The final topically-focused chapter, Chapter 14, is titled “Activism”. Readers are introduced to the barrage of ethical questions activism poses (e.g., breaking the law) before focusing on the following three topics: the limits of abolition, whether one should be an activist, and what one should advocate for. Readers are challenged to think about how adopting a minimal activist posture might promote animal harm but yet small scale changes might be more feasible than a more radical change.

This book will serve animal ethics courses well. It displays many of the virtues one looks for in an introductory text. Fischer seamlessly weaves contemporary debates in with long lasting debates, and he does so with a focused awareness of his intended audience. I close by making two observations. First, some of the chapters may appear duplicative to readers. For instance, the chapter on the empirical facts of industrialized farming (chapter 6) might be assigned along with the chapter analyzing the moral defensibility of industrialized farming (chapter 7); the chapters on animal research (chapters 9 and 10) might be assigned together. Second, although wildlife conservation is discussed at various points throughout the text, there is no standalone chapter devoted to it. This may pose a challenge for instructors who devote a week or two to the ethics of wildlife conservation.