

IS IT IMMORAL TO KILL ANIMALS?

By Wyle Tan

In recent years numerous questions were raised about the morality of killing and eating animals. Do animals have right to live and not made to suffer? Should people stop eating animal meat? Should laws be enacted to protect animal rights?

This essay suggests the following two theses. 1) Animal rights arguments are not logically conclusive, 2) Someone may develop reasons in the future, but for now, there is no morally compelling reason to stop eating animal meat.

I shall address various major arguments for animal rights and their weaknesses.

Animals can suffer and we should minimize suffering of all beings.

First, animal rights activists declare that it is immoral to cause animal suffering and death. They believe that animals can suffer and avoid pain. As we do not torture other humans, we should also not cause animal suffering. Killing animals for human consumption inflicts a large amount of animal suffering in exchange for fleeting gastronomic pleasure. Instead, we should minimize suffering and promote the well-being of all living beings.

A critique

Animal rights activists' argument based on animal suffering is inconclusive because if we can eliminate animals' consciousness of suffering, then killing such animals would not be morally wrong. This can be done by anaesthetizing animals before slaughter.

Furthermore, in nature, animals kill other animals for food. Obviously, animals eaten by other animals suffer. If animal suffering is to be minimized, then we are morally obliged to stop animal predators from killing their preys. But to stop lions from killing and eating antelopes would cause great suffering for the lions. Imagine putting a lion on a vegetarian diet! Isn't it absurd? As we do not consider it wrong *intrinsically* for a lion to kill other animals for food, why should we think it is immoral for a man to kill an animal to feed his family?

Animals have innate rights to life equal to human rights.

Many animal rights activists realized that the argument couched in the terms of animal suffering is not convincing enough. A more forceful argument from inherent rights has been proposed. They see their efforts to promote animal rights as similar to human rights

movements. We recognize the immorality of slavery, racism and gender inequality because there is no justifiable reason to treat other humans unequally. All human beings are born with equal intrinsic rights.

Humans and animals have many similarities. Both are conscious and have a similar drive to live. Various studies have shown that animals, like humans, can think purposefully, feel various emotions and bond with others. So humans should not regard themselves as in any way superior to animals. Animals are neither our properties nor slaves to be treated without any rights. Therefore animals, like all humans, are to be treated with intrinsic rights equally.

As we legally forbid treating others as inferior beings or slaves, we must likewise at least accord animals the right to live and to be treated compassionately. Humans have a moral duty not to harm another living being that possesses a will-to-live. Tom Regan, a strong defender of animal rights, clearly states:

“...all have inherent value, all possess it equally, and all have an equal right to be treated with respect, to be treated in ways that do not reduce them to the status of things., as if they existed as resources for others....For either of us to treat the other in ways that fail to show respect for the other’s independent value is to act immorally, to violate the individual’s rights.”

(Taken from Tom Regan and Peter Singer, *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, 2nd edition, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall, 1989.)

In short, humanity is not a superior species. If anyone claims that only humans have inherent value, he is guilty of “blatant specieism”. Regan insists, “reason - not sentiment, not emotion - reason compels us to recognize the equal inherent value of these animals and, with this, their equal right to be treated with respect.”

A critique of animal rights

The concept of Rights is meaningful within the context of a social contract forged by intelligent beings. Humans alone have this ability to agree to a mutually binding contract.

But animals do not participate in such a human-constructed social contract. Hence it is meaningless to speak of animal rights. So called animal rights are foundationless.

Yet some animal rights activists may counter that as unborn children, young children and mentally challenged adults have rights even though they have not assented to the social contract, so likewise animals can be indirect beneficiaries of a human contract. Humans can act on behalf of these animals.

However, this animal rights argument fails to differentiate a potential human from non-human animals. Unborn babies, young children and mentally challenged adults are members within the human family.

Yes, this is specieism. There is nothing immoral about caring for our own family members before others. Intuitively, we accept a moral hierarchy where we accord priority to our immediate family before other humans. Humans then precede our pets. Pets come before other animals.

Let's imagine a possible scene where you, your child and a dog are in a sinking boat that can support only two. Which one will you throw overboard in order to save two? Most likely the dog has to go. None will judge you as immoral to do so. You have acted according to an intuitive parental instinct to protect your child. It would be grossly immoral if you were to keep the dog and throw your child overboard.

Animal rights activists' position seems arbitrary. Where do they draw the line between what they give the right to life and what they accord no rights? Animals with consciousness have rights, but insects and microorganisms do not. Why not? Aren't insects and microorganisms alive? Isn't vegetation alive too?

Surely animal activists are not stricken with grief when they swat mosquitoes to death or destroy harmful microbes. Is it because we should only accord rights to higher-level animals that are more like human conscious? They have picked human consciousness as a standard for rights-giving. If so, these activists have fallen into blatant specieism, which they object to. Their claims are self-contradictory.

Perhaps, it is impossible to remove specieism as the *perceived* world in which we live is a human world. We look at everything around us with *human* eyes. Without any human consciousness, there is no perceived lived-world.

In addition, animal activist are inconsistent. As much as child has a right to be protected by adults from harm, the activists should protect animals from their predators. Only by doing this the activists will be consistent in attributing rights to animals. Here is a dilemma. If we see no wrong for a lion to hunt and kill an antelope for food, human-predators do no wrong in killing animals for food too.

Furthermore, this line of reasoning is consistent with the way animal activists place humans on the same footing as animals or vice versa. If an animal's consciousness is similar to human's (with no morally significant difference to avoid specieism), humans are similar to animals too (if $p=q$, $q=p$ is true). Evolutionists can accept this conclusion. Man is merely a highly complex animal in the history of evolution.

If we accept the evolutionism, there's no moral compulsion to stop human-predators from hunting and eating other animals. Humans, like all animals, follow a natural instinct.

For animal rights activists, a way out of this dilemma is to claim that only mankind possesses a morally developed conscience. Man, in his natural state, has a compassionate heart for all suffering animals. Such a maneuver assumes man's distinctive difference and superiority over all lower animals. But this seems to contradict the activists' earlier basic claim that man is in no way significantly different from animals.

Further, man's moral sensibility must be grounded on a metaphysical moral standard. Otherwise, morals merely reflect social conditioning. In brief, if morals are not a priori, moral sentiments are subjectively personal expressions. As the saying goes: One man's meat is another's poison!

Without an ultimate foundation for morality, activists only can support vegetarianism with an argument for compassion. The question why must we be compassionate towards animals remains unanswered. The activists can reply that we should be compassionate towards animals because they can feel pain and feeling pain is evil. Why should we care about animals' pain, they can answer because animals have inalienable rights.

Such replies by the activists bring us back to the issues at the beginning of this essay. Isn't it logically circular?

Hence we are left with an unsolved puzzle: Are there compelling logical reasons to treat animals with an equal right to life?

Conclusion

Animal activists have not been successful in building a logically compelling argument for abolishing meat consumption.

Animal activists have awakened us to a need for more humane treatment of animals' welfare, based on one's sense of compassion, without this need being necessarily true for all.

We are left to decide on whether to eat meat or not according to our emotional response and a view of our ideal self.