Animal Rights versus Animal Welfare

Fact Sheet 753

Cooperative Extension

Larry S. Katz, Ph.D., Extension Specialist in Animal Science

Confusion over the meaning of the terms and the philosophies encompassed by animal rights and animal welfare leads to misunderstanding and misdirected efforts by animal scientists and animal producers. Those who believe that animals can contribute to human welfare (e.g., by providing food, fiber, work, companionship, entertainment, or by serving biomedical research or education) believe that humans have moral obligations to protect the welfare or provide for the well-being of animals. How this is achieved depends upon our definition of welfare, our ability to assess welfare, and then our willingness to implement changes where problems exist. Animal rights philosophy, on the other hand, is diametrically opposed to the concept of animal welfare. The animal rights philosophy is opposed to any use of animals, holding that it violates the "moral inviolability" of an animal to consider it as a resource for use by people. In the words of one animal rights activist: "I don't believe human beings have the 'right to life.' That's a supremacist perversion. A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy."

Rights

The philosophy of animal rights rejects the idea that one can evaluate the appropriateness of some action, e.g., killing an animal, by weighing the benefits of this action, e.g., finding a cure to a disease, against its cost (animal death or suffering). In other words, the ends do not justify the means, especially when the means, i.e., animal use, are wrong. If one were considering behavior only as it applies to humans, most would agree with this philosophy. Some people concur that we shouldn't kill another individual even if we could save many in so doing (capital punishment notwithstanding). For example, even if your neighbor's lungs could be used to cure all people with cancer, it would be wrong to take those organs without permission. But, if a monkey's or a dog's or a mouse's lungs could cure cancer, most people would find little difficulty making the morally correct choice.

This simplistic metaphor boils down to the basis of the disagreement between animal rights and animal welfare. The animal rights philosophy argues that there is no morally relevant difference between humans and other animals. Furthermore, it is argued that animals have an interest in living and in avoiding pain, therefore humans must consider animal interests when assessing our behavior towards them. This argument is frequently expanded by enumerating the characteristics in common between animals and humans. Some of these generalities include: the ability to suffer, the capacity for self-awareness, intentionality in behavior, the ability to communicate, and many others. Humans grant themselves certain rights, such as the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and if there is no morally relevant difference between humans and animals, then it is argued that animals should be granted rights, too.

What are Rights?

Much has been written on this subject. The basis of rights originates from law, moral philosophy and a combination of these. Defined, rights are just and fair claims to anything (life, power, privilege, nondiscrimination, etc.). One school of moral philosophy holds that claims are in all cases made only by individuals who comprise a moral community, i.e., moral agents. Humans make moral choices, humans evaluate their actions in moral terms, and only humans construct moral laws, and are therefore moral agents. It might be argued that animals make no moral judgements and do not have the capacity to understand moral concepts, therefore animals are not moral agents and thus possess no rights. It is important to recognize that many animal species exhibit behaviors similar to human characteristics, as listed above, but those characteristics do not make these beings moral agents. Rather, these characteristics influence the moral evaluation of human behavior directed towards them. In other words, the way we behave towards a chimpanzee is probably different from the way we treat a cow, or a rat, or a cockroach, because we recognize that different species have varying abilities to have interests or experience pain or suffering, etc.

Welfare

If animals have no rights, don't humans then have the right to treat them any way we want? Can we justify cruelty and abuse on the grounds that animals have no rights? The answer should be absolutely not. But the reasons are based on the appropriate moral evaluation of human behavior, not possession of rights by non-humans. Because we recognize that some animals are capable of having interests or suffering,

RUTGERS
New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
88 Lipman Drive, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8525
Phone: 732.932.5000

we have evolved culturally to respect those interests. One might argue that we don't strive to save endangered species, wilderness preserves, oldgrowth forests or the coral reefs because they have rights. Rather, we place value in these rare or complex systems because our moral laws teach us to preserve and protect our environment, whether it is the physical or biological environment.

How do we accomplish our animal welfare goals? Of course, many regulations are in place to serve as guideposts. The following table highlights some of the existing regulations, guidelines and resources providing useful information on animal welfare. Honest differences exist over the definition and assessment of animal welfare. Some suggest that production can be used as an assessment tool, but this is a problem when production is measured by evaluating the output of the whole production unit, which may be a group of animals or a building, and not the individual animals. While poor production might be indicative of animals experiencing some degree of distress, good production does not assure the absence of distress in individuals. Others suggest that physiological indicators of stress, such as blood hormone profiles or immune function reflect an animal's state of well-being. But, pre-pathological conditions or some chronic stresses may be missed by these measures. Many now believe that evaluation of animal behavior can be used to monitor animal welfare. This may be true, but animal scientists are still not sure what specific behaviors to consider in all cases. Moreover, not all animals respond to stress in the same manner, so interpretation becomes difficult. Given the tremendous variability in the manner in which animals may deal with stress, there is no single measure of animal

Source	Description
Federal Animal Welfare Act	Regulates research facilities, animal dealers, exhibitors (including zoos, aquariums, circuses, etc.) and intermediate handlers of animals, including air and truck lines. Concerned primarily with basic animal husbandry and veterinary care.
Public Health Service Policy on Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals	Requires written assurances for research facilities' commitment to animal welfare. Requires establishment of Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees responsible for review of animal facilities and the program of animal care, including review of all procedures using animals.
Good Laboratory Practices	Addresses all areas of laboratory operations, including provisions relating to care and housing of test animals. Studies which require submission of data to either the Food and Drug Administration or the Environmental Protection Agency must conform to GLP rules.
1958 Humane Slaughter Act	Regulates slaughter practices, requiring the rendering of animals unconscious before stunning or hoisting.
State and Local Laws	Varies by state and community with respect to: pound animal use, animal cruelty, regulation of research facilities, and animal use in education.
Organizations developing voluntary industry guidelines	The Association for the Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care International, the American Veterinary Medical Association, the National Cattlemen's Association, the Pork Producer's Council, the American Veal Association, the Livestock Conservation Institute, the Fur Farm Animal Welfare Coalition, the Southeastern Poultry and Egg Association, and most national scientific organizations, etc.
NIH Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals	The Guide addresses institutional policies, laboratory animal husbandry, veterinary care and facility requirements. It is the resource for requirements enforced under the PHS policy on animals in research.
Guide for the Care and Use of Agricultural Animals in Agricultural Research and Teaching	Guidelines for the husbandry of cattle, horses, poultry, sheep and goats, swine, and veal calves in agricultural research and teaching.
2007 AVMA Guides on Euthanasia	The recognized scientific authority on acceptable methods of euthanasia.

well-being. However, the careful interpretation of several measures, both behavioral and physiological, may prove useful to assess animal welfare. Recently, research emphasis has been placed on developing tests to evaluate the feelings or perceptual states experienced by animals. For example, one can design preference tests or measure how much work an animal is willing to perform in order to gain some reward, such as the opportunity to dust bathe. This approach may give animals the opportunity to "tell" us what they prefer. Unfortunately, animals don't always choose what is best for their own health and welfare, and scientists don't always give the animals the ideal alternatives from which to choose.

In the United Kingdom, the Farm Animal Welfare Council has established regulatory guidelines referred to as the "Five Freedoms." These codes of recommendation include: freedom from hunger and malnutrition; freedom from thermal and physical discomfort; freedom from injury and disease; freedom from suppression of normal behavior; and freedom from fear and stress. Some argue that these codes represent the "Bill of Rights" for farm animals. However, the motivation underlying the development of these codes is to provide an environment for animals that fosters both physical and psychological well-being. The moral philosophy underlying this belief is the philosophy of animal welfare. Even though animal scientists and veterinarians have not perfected the system of defining or assessing welfare, as of yet, the field is growing rapidly, and the beneficiaries of the efforts will be the animals, as well as the humans who care for them.

Suggested Readings

Cohen, C. (1986) The case for the use of animals in biomedical research. New England Journal of Medicine, 315:865.

Duncan, I., and J. Petherick. (1991) The implication of cognitive process for animal welfare. Journal of Animal Science, 69:5017.

Mench, J., and A. Van Tienhoven. (1986) Farm animal welfare. American Scientist, 74:598.

Nicol, C. (1991) A physiologist's view on the animal rights/ liberation movement. The Physiologist, 34:303.

Pardos, H., A. West, and H. Pincus. (1991) Physicians and the animal-right movement. New England Journal of Medicine, 324:1640.

Regan, T., and G. Francione. (1992) A movement's means to create its end. The Animals' Agenda, Jan/ Feb: 40.

Singer, P. (1990) Animal Liberation. Random House.

Smith, W.J. (2010) A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy: The human cost of the animal rights movement. Encounter Books.

© 2010 Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. All rights reserved.

For a comprehensive list of our publications visit www.njaes.rutgers.edu *Updated July 2010*

Cooperating Agencies: Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and County Boards of Chosen Freeholders. Rutgers Cooperative Extension, a unit of the Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, is an equal opportunity program provider and employer.

RUTGERS
THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
88 Lipman Drive, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8525
Phone: 732.932.5000