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# Serious Moral Concern Is Not Species-limited

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## Summary

This paper discusses the moral implications of harming someone – in this case primarily non-human beings – in order to provide benefits for others, primarily human beings. It makes the central argument that human beings, by their very nature as potentially compassionate and rational beings, cannot continue to support activities which cause harm to others, regardless of species and whether benefits would be derived.

Keywords: compassion, ethics, fairness, human animal, humane treatment, kindness, moral agents, moral patients, morality, non-human animal

For many years, I was involved, either principally or as a spectator, in activities in which non-human animals (animals<sup>2</sup>) were harmed, killed or demeaned. This included eating animals or wearing parts of them, research, teaching, entertainment, fishing and 'pest' control. In the area of vision research, I received several large grants from the National Eye Institute and published numerous scientific papers. I believed that using non-human animals by human beings was permissible, albeit with the usual and trite caveat that they should be treated 'humanely'. I had not, however, carefully explored the ethical considerations of this value judgment. I did to other animals things I would never have considered doing to my fellow human beings. Nor would I have considered doing these things to other animals even of the same species routinely being used and killed in the lab if these individuals were my companions, such as my dogs.

Such a duplicitous – and morally inconsistent – argument eventually plagued me to the point of re-examining the issue honestly and by avoiding preconceptions. When people consider the issue of using animals, there is essentially always the tacit assumption that human concerns tower above that of others. This was a formidable obstacle when debating my colleagues and others. When I completely rejected this notion, it became clear to me that *human beings do not have a moral right to use other animals, if they are unwilling to apply the same treatment to fellow human beings*. Human animals, *particularly when they claim to be acting as moral agents*, do not have a right to use other animals in ways they would not permit themselves or, especially, human moral patients to be used.<sup>3</sup> This is relevant to the *serious moral concern* to which I refer in the title.

The major defence put forth for our destructive use of animals is that human beings – or other animals – derive benefits from this use. This notion, that the 'end justifies the means,' is something we reject when it comes to our interaction with each other.<sup>4</sup> We do not condone harming or killing other human beings – even just a few – regardless of how beneficial it might be to the majority. When we do this to other animals, we need to ask ourselves if we are behaving in a manner that is

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This is the front paper in a series on exploitation of non-human beings by human beings. Other papers in the series discuss the use of non-human animals in the areas of research ([2018,2019](#)), food and fibre production ([2022](#)), product 'safety' testing ([2018,2022](#)), dissection ([2018](#)), surgical training ([2022](#)) and trapping ([2022](#)).

2 Purely for the sake of convenience, I may refer to animals other than human beings as "animals", recognizing that all are animals of one kind or another; there is no intention to imply that any, even a human being, is morally superior or intrinsically more valuable than another.

3 By "moral agents", I refer to individuals who can develop, articulate and apply principles of right and wrong. By "moral patients", I refer to individuals, regardless of species, who cannot logically be expected to understand and live by the principles developed by moral agents nor can they necessarily give their consent to be research subjects. There are, of course, ways in which such individuals show their lack of consent, including hiding, biting or other behaviour ([Silverman 1978](#)).

4 I realise that there are legitimate situations in which the end does justify the means. For example, in order to expedite the healing process in the case of a fractured femur or severe laceration, you may have to subject the patient to restraint, anaesthesia and medications. A human child or dog so injured may be terrified at such treatment and the postoperative recovery phase may be very unpleasant. The intent in situations such as this, however, is to help the individual *directly*. No one is being used as a means to another's ends.

consistent with our own code of conduct or consistent with the best we could be as a species, intellectually and spiritually.

Furthermore, when we try to justify this conduct by claiming that we are helping other *animals*, we need to admit that such claims are specious at best and dishonest at worst. Almost always, the “other animals” are those from whom human beings will be deriving a benefit; if we are providing treatment to a cow who is lame, we are hardly looking out for her best interests given that we plan to kill and eat her at some point.

Even if the animal is not going to be consumed, for example someone’s companion dog, what we are really concerned about in almost all instances is the person to whom the dog is attached. Otherwise, how could we justify killing a different dog in a surgical training laboratory for veterinary medical students or why would there be concern about veterinary medical students doing something for the first time on a client’s dog? Any argument supporting the destruction of one dog to “help” or “save” another is necessarily incoherent and morally bankrupt.

There is little question that the primary issue with respect to using non-human animals by human beings is one of morality. If it was not, then we would be compelled on a purely scientific or practical basis, to use human beings for all research aimed at understanding human diseases or tests of drugs for toxicity even if it meant harming or killing them. An appeal to utilitarian principles would demand this. It is irrefutable that this would provide human beings – as a whole – with far greater benefits and safety – and far more quickly – because a human being is the perfect and only reliable “model” of another human being. When people say that we could not have done certain things without the use of animals, or that we could not continue doing these things, that is not strictly true; anything we have done using other animals could also have been done using human beings. But, to subject human beings to most of the things to which non-human beings have been – *and continue to be* – subjected would be immoral. I do not advocate such treatment of human beings regardless whether we might derive benefits. It is, however, *precisely* for the same reasons that such treatment must be considered immoral if applied to other animals.

When it comes to human beings, we do not accept the notion of a master race. We do not believe that there is an inferior race of people which could be practised on or used for the benefit of others. Nor do we believe that having the strength or other ability to overpower someone gives us the right to exploit them. We do not allow the prospect of benefits to the human species as a whole – *no matter how monumental they may be* – to guide our conduct towards each other. Further, we refrain from harming each other not just out of fear of retaliation. These restraints are part of our moral code. This is, of course, the ideal. I realise that not all people treat each other with respect nor hold to the highest moral principles. It would be inappropriate and self-defeating, however, to consider a moral principle invalid simply because not all adhere to it.

In the case of animals other than human beings, the vast majority of human beings disregard this moral code. In the name of science – and other activities – we do to other animals things we would consider highly unethical and immoral if done to each other – or to our companion animals even if they are of the same species we are exploiting. We do not even do these things to people who are guilty of vile transgressions against society – people who have perpetrated the most heinous of crimes and have forfeited their right to freedom, pursuit of their interests, sometimes even their lives. We are, nevertheless, willing to do these things to other beings who are “guilty” only of being alive on this earth. No one, however, has ever put forth a coherent, *non-self-serving* argument demonstrating that other animals are not deserving of the same degree of moral concern we have for members of our own species or for those animals we consider our companions.

Our sense of morality in dealing with each other stems from our highest capacity for benevolent action. This is not simply because we call ourselves human beings. If I labelled a chair a “human

being”, it would not make the chair an object of moral concern. Cutting off one of its legs would not matter to the chair. But, it would matter to a human being, even if an anaesthetic or analgesic was used, and regardless whether this was done for her or his benefit, for the benefit of others or gratuitously.

The reason it is wrong to harm another human being, therefore, is not simply because he or she is called a human being. Nor is it only because pain or suffering might result. It is wrong to harm human beings because it *is* possible to harm them. That is, there is no question in our minds that we can cause harm to each other. A person has certain qualities that are important to consider and protect. The person is an individual who has a life which fares better or worse depending on what happens to that life; no such claim can be made for inanimate objects. The person has value which is independent of their utility to another; the value of an inanimate object is negotiable. The person has interests whose pursuit is an important component of their life; such a notion does not appear to make sense in the case of inanimate objects.<sup>5</sup> These traits are fundamental to the so-called *inalienable rights* we confer on each other. Even people who have no concept of what is right or wrong and who have no obligations to others – moral patients – are granted these minimal rights.

*Non-human animals* are just like human beings in these important ways. In fact, we use these individuals in research, for example, because we recognise the similarities to us. Unfortunately, we stop short at anything other than physical similarities in governing our behaviour towards them. We cannot, however, rationally argue that at least other mammals share with us more than just anatomical or physiological features. We are learning more and more that these individuals share emotions, intelligence, self-will and other traits that we value in ourselves. Moreover, it is unquestionable that these animals can experience more than just physical pain; we recognise that they also show anxiety and fear, which we exploit in studies on these phenomena while, sadly, failing to allow this to affect our willingness to continue this subjugation.

We cannot provide an adequate defence against re-evaluating our treatment of animals in the light of their overwhelming similarities to us. Animals *can* be harmed. They have lives which fare better or worse depending on what happens to those lives. Their lives can be enriched or impoverished, especially at our hands. What happens to them *does matter* to them. Like human beings, other animals have interests, although they may be difficult to define and may be different from those of human beings. They can experience pain and pleasure and most can probably suffer in the general way in which human beings do. When you examine the issue without prejudice – *and with humility rather than arrogance* – there do not appear to be any *morally relevant* differences between human and other animals which justify denying other animals similar consideration, respect or treatment, *based upon their interests* or whether what we propose to do *matters* to the individual. There are no morally compelling differences between human beings and other animals which justify treating other animals so markedly differently from the manner in which we treat human beings or even our companion animals.

Physical or intellectual equality is not mandatory in order to propose equal consideration. Human beings want inalienable rights not because all people are created equal. Quite the opposite, such rights are a means of protecting disadvantaged or other individuals from subjugation by some people. The differences between various people, for example intelligence or physical strength, as well as differences in gender or race, are *biological* and are irrelevant from a moral perspective. In the case of other animals, the major differences from human beings also are biological and usually a difference in degree – not in kind. But, more to the point, every characteristic stated to be important and uniquely human is shared to some degree with many other animals and does not even exist in some human beings. Language – in a broad sense, not just the artificially narrow human construct – thinking, intelligence and other characteristics which

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5 The pursuit of interests, of course, must be balanced against the impact on others.

people try to use to separate human beings from others exist in many other animals<sup>6</sup>. For example, experiments have shown that non-human animals can seriate and that they use at least some of the important information management processes exploited by human beings<sup>7</sup>. They have memory similar to that of human beings<sup>8</sup>. They may be able to use non-verbal communication to determine when conspecifics are in pain<sup>9</sup>. Other arguments put forth by some, for example that other animals do not have political systems or do not compose symphonies, are nonsensical, vacuous or morally irrelevant.

On the basis that pain and suffering, which are important moral principles, can occur in all mammals, Ingrid Newkirk made the oft quoted statement that "...a rat is a pig is a dog is a boy." Those arguing against equal consideration for other animals frequently use this quote out of context in an attempt to portray those who argue for better treatment of non-human animals as not valuing human life. This is absurd for many reasons, not the least of which is that they leave out the critical first part of the phrase, the one which puts it in the context of pain and suffering. To equate human beings and other animals in this context is scientifically correct. It emphasises the biological, and moral, similarities between all mammalian species as a start. Even those who support vivisection, for example, believe at least the physical aspect of this analogy. After all, they argue that rats are 'models' of boys when they justify experiments on the rats.

People who defend the harming and killing of non-human animals in education, entertainment, research, zoos and a myriad of other situations, argue that the individuals are "protected" by review committees and laws and are treated humanely.<sup>10</sup> This is patent nonsense, especially when the animals are deprived of a normal life or are purposefully harmed or killed. One has to wonder whether people who believe they are being "humane" or that the animals are "protected", have critically evaluated these issues or whether they are in deep denial. Would they consider it "protection" if someone was legally allowed to subject them to surgery unnecessary for their health or to kill them as long as it was in the name of science? When a committee reviewing animal subjects determines that a particular project is "reasonable", the obvious question begged is, Reasonable to whom? Certainly, no animal, human or other, would knowingly submit to experiments – even if they were non-painful – if they knew that death was the endpoint.

To be humane is to have sympathy for another, to be merciful and compassionate. If you provide pain relief after you have done surgery on a dog or a rat as part of an experimental study, in what way can this be considered humane? If it were not for you, there would have been no pain in the first place. It is particularly disingenuous to take credit for helping victims you have created. Considering yourself to be acting humanely in this instance is a little like giving someone a sedative before raping them; or breaking someone's leg and then offering them a crutch to use. Even if you support the use of animals in ways that are harmful to them or result in their destruction – even if painlessly – considering the situation to be "humane" is deplorable and dishonest. If you do not believe this, take any paragraph that describes a use of animals that is acceptable to you and which you believe to be "humane". Then, substitute the words "human child" or similar for each reference to an animal. Read it back to yourself and see if you still think this constitutes humane treatment. For example, consider two sentences taken from the Experimental Procedures section of a 2013 paper reporting a United Kingdom study using rhesus macaques, approved by the UK Home Office and in compliance with the guidelines of the European Community for the care and

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6 [Barner et al 2008](#); [Bekoff 1997](#); [Brannon & Terrace 1998](#); [Chamove 1989](#); [Chittka & Niven 2009](#); [Fiorito & Scotto 1992](#); [Frost et al 2007](#); [Hauser et al 2007](#); [Matsuzawa 1990](#); [Mitani et al 1992](#); [Natale et al 1988](#); [Savage-Rumbaugh & Lewin 1994](#); [Wood et al 2008](#)

7 [McGonigle 1987](#)

8 [Martin-Ordas et al 2013](#)

9 [Morell 2015](#)

10 The relief of pain is an integral part of "humane" treatment. We often cannot, however, be certain when an individual is in pain ([Bradfield et al 1992](#)).

use of laboratory animals<sup>11</sup>:

Original wording: *"Each monkey was implanted with a custom-designed titanium head holder and recording chamber...fixed on the skull with stainless steel screws. ... At the end of the experiments, animals were deeply anesthetized with barbiturate and then perfused through the heart with heparinized saline followed by 10% formaldehyde in saline."*

Substituted sentences: *"Each [human child] was implanted with a custom-designed titanium head holder and recording chamber...fixed on the skull with stainless steel screws. ... At the end of the experiments, [the children] were deeply anesthetized with barbiturate and then perfused through the heart with heparinized saline followed by 10% formaldehyde in saline."*

Does this still sound "humane"? Bear in mind that "humane" logically has nothing to do with the purported purpose of the study.

If other animals are so similar to us, if they clearly have moral value based upon our own definition of morality, if what we do to them matters to them, what is absent that renders them unworthy of serious moral concern that provides them with true protection from harm by us? I submit to you that there is nothing absent; we are simply blinded by our self-centredness, fear, greed, arrogance and self-deception. When you critically and honestly evaluate the situation, it becomes clear that we do to other animals what we do, not out of some moral imperative and not because it is right or "humane". Instead, we do these things because it is believed that we – or someone we care about – will benefit in some way *and because we have the power to dominate those animals*. We tacitly act on the morally repugnant principle that *might makes right*: we can do it, so that makes it right. Most of us even delude ourselves into thinking that we are acting morally under these circumstances. But, if we consider ourselves to be acting morally, we should not be basing our decisions on whether we might derive benefits from exploiting other animals. Nor is it relevant whether there are adequate alternatives to situations in which we currently use animals. The questions we should be asking ourselves are whether our domineering behaviour is appropriate for such a highly developed, intelligent and potentially compassionate species such as ours; is our behaviour consistent with the best we could be as a species; is our subjugation of animals consistent with the reasons we care about each other? If we consider ourselves to be so much better than others, we behave in a most despicable – and self-degrading – manner by subjugating and destroying those we consider to be below us. We set standards of behaviour for ourselves, based on compassion, fairness and kindness – the best of human qualities – and then we systematically deny others the benefit of these standards because those "others" appear to be "different" from us or they are not our cherished companions. To consider other animals the moral equivalent of human beings in no way demeans human beings. Rather, it serves to raise the status of other animals.

Before ending this paper, there are three related subjects which I believe need to be dealt with, the first two which also need to be dismissed here. These have to do with the use of violence to further one's cause, the comparative valuing of human and non-human life and dealing with mortality.

Apparently because they do not want to carry on an intellectual dialogue or debate the substantive issues involved in the use of non-human animals by human beings, some proponents of such use resort to character assassinations or they attempt to divert attention to so-called terrorist acts. They paint the entire animal rights movement as one of human hatred and one which universally condones violence toward humans as a means to an end.

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<sup>11</sup>[Stokes et al 2013](#)

Let us assume that there are some who, while claiming to be part of the animal rights movement, espouse violence as acceptable means to achieve equality. To characterise the whole animal rights movement by the actions of these few, however, is as ridiculous as labelling all parents child molesters because of some who are. In all social movements, and human endeavours in general, it seems an unfortunate axiom that there always will be those who misguidedly believe that violence is an acceptable manner in which to achieve one's aims. Or, they fail to grasp the fundamental hypocrisy of their actions or, worse yet, their motives are couched in self-aggrandizement or sabotage.

Complicating the issue is the fact that illegal actions perpetrated upon exploiters of non-human animals are largely done by those who claim anonymously to be part of the animal rights movement. Just because someone may claim credit for certain activities as representing a particular philosophy, because the acts are done under the cloak of anonymity, no one except the perpetrators can be sure who really is responsible.

There have been apparently bona fide cases of those opposed to animal rights having acted as agent provocateurs in an effort to destroy the credibility of the movement. For example, John Newberry-Street, a hunter in the United Kingdom, has admitted to making hoax bomb threats in the name of animal rights activists and to having placed a home-made bomb under his car while blaming animal rights activists for the action<sup>12</sup>. In another case, James Como, James Clough, John Wooley, Douglas White and Patrick Fish (*not* the environmental and animal rights activist of similar name residing in central New York) apparently broke into one or more laboratories at the State University of New York at Buffalo and committed burglary. Two of these men have admitted their involvement in the crime and that they tried to blame it on animal rights activists<sup>13</sup>.

Another example demonstrates true terrorism openly perpetrated against those who support a kinder, gentler view of the world. This involved the July 1985 bombing of the ship *Rainbow Warrior* in New Zealand, just before it was to be part of a peaceful protest of nuclear testing. French Lieutenant Colonel Alain Mafart and an accomplice pleaded guilty for this action, done under the aegis of the French government, which also was responsible for the death of a photographer who was on board at the time<sup>14</sup>.

Those of us who criticise the exploitation of non-human animals often are accused of having a hatred of human beings or that we place non-human life above human life. This is absurd. It is irrational, at best, to equate concern for the suffering and death of non-human animals with a hatred of humans. Disgust with the *actions* of particular people does not logically lead to a hatred or loss of empathy for those people. I know of no one in the animal rights movement who could be labelled as being truly misanthropic. In fact, most are married to people and even have human children. Many people, like myself, are part of body donation schemes in order to help improve the welfare of other people after we no longer are alive. Most of us are opposed to the death penalty on moral grounds. Furthermore, most people in the animal rights movement also are deeply involved in the recycling of resources for human use. I cannot imagine any substantive argument based upon misanthropy to explain such apparent concern for future human beings.

People often ask questions such as, "Who would you save in a situation where your mother and your dog were in mortal danger?" Such questions, although interesting, do not bear on the question of whether human or non-human life is more valuable. Rather, they deal with the question of which *individual* is more valuable to *another individual*. Suppose that the situation was a life or death scenario between two human beings in which a choice had to be made between saving your daughter or someone else's daughter. I believe that most people would choose their own child over

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12 [Clifton 1991-04-01](#)

13 [Clifton 1991-07-01](#)

14 [Clifton 1991-09-01](#)



another. This does not mean they are callous or that they do not value other human life. They simply have a closer, more familiar and more compelling relationship with their own child. Furthermore, such situations are exceptional and we do not base our standards of behaviour on them.

The final issue has to do with our mortality. We, as a species, generally behave as if we have not accepted the fact that we all will die some day. This is most evident in the situation surrounding the use of non-human animals for research into human conditions.<sup>15</sup> When we speak of 'saving' lives through this type of medical research, for example, what we really mean is *extending* lives. Although none of us can know how we will react when our life is in danger or when faced with a choice which may impact on our staying alive, I believe it is critical for each person to think deeply about this issue. Should you allow harm to another in order to advance yourself? Should, for example, a healthy pig be killed to supply a liver to a diseased human being dying of liver failure? Or, should tens of thousands of healthy mice be killed in an effort to develop a vaccine against the common 'cold'? In these cases you would be killing healthy individuals in an attempt to either extend a diseased individual's life or questionably improve the quality of life.

Appealing to the suffering of someone to justify your actions simply is not adequate from a moral perspective when you are proposing to kill or harm another. Why is one animal or group of animals more important than another? You may not consider human beings and dogs, for example, as moral equals. You cannot, however, rationally argue that there exist morally relevant differences between one dog and another. All the important ethical considerations which would apply in protecting a dog of one status – such as a dog who is a human companion – would apply equally to a dog in another situation, such as in a teaching lab.

Is it the fault of the other animals being used, harmed and killed that we human beings also are subject to disease and death? Why do we believe that, because we suffer, innocent others must pay a price? In that context, the harming and killing of other animals in the name of science appears to be an expression of unconscionable selfishness on our part, something which goes against all the best qualities of human nature. This is compounded further when the use of animals is for entertainment or other arguably trivial situation.

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<sup>15</sup> It effectively can be argued that this type of research may actually hinder progress or can be done more efficiently – and ethically – on human beings themselves, a subject of a different paper ([Buyukmihci 2019](#)).

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