



Non-human animal theories: from mechanism to abolitionism

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ABSTRACT:

Domestic animals, which started to live with human-animals thousands of years ago, were regarded as “things” which were created for human service and deprived of emotions until the end of the 18th century. This idea of “animals are machines” began to change in 1789, when the British writer, philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham wrote that “The question is not, «Can they reason?» nor «Can they talk?» but, «Can they suffer?» Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?”. Bentham added that “The time will come when humanity will extend its mantle over everything which breathes.”. Today, despite a general tendency for adopting legislation aiming to protect non-human animals and to criminalize animal mistreatment and abuse, the reality is that there are still improvements needed to be done in order to consider animals as sentient beings. This reviewing paper identifies and discusses the different philosophies and theories that are in the basis of the animal rights, which include mechanistic, utilitarianism, welfarism and abolitionism.

İnsan haricindeki hayvanlarla ilgili teoriler: mekanizmden abolisyonist düşünceye

ÖZET:

Binlerce yıl önce insanlarla yaşamaya başlamış olan evcil hayvanlar, 18. yüzyılın sonuna kadar insan hizmeti için yaratılmış ve duygulardan yoksun olan “nesnelere” olarak kabul edildi. Bu, “hayvanlar makinedir” görüşü, İngiliz yazar, filozof ve sosyal reformcu olan Jeremy Bentham’ın 1789’da yazdığı şu cümlelerle değişmeye başladı: “Asıl soru, Onlar fikir yürütebilirler mi veya konuşabilirler mi değil, acı çekebilirler mi? Yasalar neden herhangi bir hassas varlığı korumayı reddetmeli?”. Bentham bu yazısına şöyle devam etmiştir: “İnsanlığın derisinin nefes alan her şeyi kaplayacağı zaman gelecektir”. Günümüzde, insan olmayan hayvanları da korumayı amaçlayan yasal mevzuatın oluşturulması ve insan dışı hayvanlara kötü muamele ile suistimali cezalandırmak için genel bir eğilim olmasına rağmen; hala daha hayvanların canlı ve duyguları olan varlıklar olarak algılanmaları için iyileştirmelerin yapılması gerekliliği de bir gerçektir. Bu derleme makalesi, mekanistik (mekanizm), faydacılık (utilitarizm), refahçı yönelim ve abolisyonist (köleliğin kaldırılması) akım içeren ve hayvan haklarının savunulmasına dayanan farklı felsefeleri ve teorileri tanımlamakta ve tartışmaktadır.

1. Introduction

Philosophically, animal rights are characterised by a concept where some or all animals have a right to live in an environment meeting their physiological, behavioural and emotional needs during their lifetime. Although the concept of animal rights is claimed by most of the authorities, there is still a debate on this topic (13). In several countries, the law already covers basic animal rights, and further, the constitutional consecration of these rights is already present in Germany, Austria and some other countries (3). Those who defend animal rights reject the concept that animals are defined as mere capital goods or property for human use or benefit. However, the opponents of animal rights have sought to identify morally relevant differences between humans and non-human animals in order to justify the allocation of rights and interests of human animals at the expense of non-human ones (16).

Since Pythagoras, Seneca, and Porphyry, it has been said that the condition of every living being designated as an animal has an inseparable bond with the tree of life. In common, equalizing them is of a fragile nature, vulnerable to disease and death, well-being and the good itself, constitutes what can be called “animal life” (10). The philosophy of animal rights does not necessarily support the premise that human and non-human animals are equal. For example, animal rights advocates do not support the right to vote for non-human animals. Some of the authorities differentiate sentient and self-conscious animals and other forms of life (4). Others may extend this right to all animals including those that do not have a high-developed nervous system or self-consciousness (25). There are also activists who support the idea that any human being or institution that uses animals for food, entertainment, cosmetics, clothing, vivisection or any other reason, infringes the rights of animals that deserve possessing their own lives and pursuing their own ends (11).

After all the question is what animals do think and feel. Safina (25) tried to answer these questions by describing his experience and the experience of other academics, by mentioning that the ability to feel, to love, to cry and to pay homage to their dead, is not derived exclusively from human or animal sentience. However, this debate has not always been like this. Animal sentience has long been discussed until recently. On July 7, 2012, some scientists have proclaimed the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, where it is stated that “The absence of a neocortex does not appear to preclude an organism from experiencing affective states. Convergent evidence indicates that non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviours. Consequently, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Nonhuman animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates” (18).

The defence of animal rights has its basis on quite different philosophical strands, developed below in this paper, with absolutely antagonistic positions that can be summarised as:

- a) The abolitionist position defends that the animal rights should be based on the principle of non-violence and education of veganism as a way to put into practice the changes in the daily life (12);
- b) Welfarism that defends a rights-based theory (20, 21);
- c) Utilitarianism which focuses on advocating improved treatment of animals, but at the same time accepts that they can be legitimately used for the benefit of humans or other non-human animals (28); and
- d) Mechanistic, advocated by Descartes, that reduces animals to automatons and denies the possibility of assigning feelings to animals.

2. Mechanistic

In the seventeenth century, René Descartes argued that “irrational” animals were mere machines and that God was their builder. However, in his view, non-human animals were much more admirable than any other machine that has already been built or may be constructed by human ingenuity (7). Descartes shows, in the penultimate chapter of his work, Discourse on Method (7), the practical application of the method to some scientific questions. This thesis, which is also designated of mechanistic theory of animal nature, was intended to demonstrate the plausibility that any behaviour of the non-human animal can be explained without recourse to a supposed thought or conscience (22). It was

described that non-human animals were complex organic machines. Descartes suggested that even supposing that animals have impulses of anger, fear, and hunger, among others, these are sensations only insofar as they depend on a corporeal organ and, for this reason, can be explained only by means of material movements. Thus, according to this hypothesis, not only can non-human animals be machines insofar as they do not think discursively, but their impulses of anger, fear and thirst, for not involving an idea, can be explained without appeal to the thought. For this very reason, these are not properly sensations. This philosopher admitted the possibility that if there was a man-made machine that imitated a particular animal perfectly, there would be no way of distinguishing the false animal from the true one (7).

Descartes' thesis only recognises to non-human animals the first degree of sensation, which involves only stimuli and bodily movements, and a possible expression of this movement, but denies the possibility of attributing sensations or feelings or affective states to animals. It was denied the second and third degrees of sensation, that is, the consciousness of sensation and the judgment that involves sensation, which implies that he does not even contemplate the possibility of animals being able to feel suffering, hence his well-known experiments with animals to prove his theory (29).

Later, in the work *Treatise of Man*, Descartes (8) presented his last step of the argument, mentioning that recourse to the sensory and vegetative parts of the soul is unnecessary and added the metaphysical principle according to which "nature always acts by the simplest and easiest means". The conclusion is that animals have neither reason nor, therefore, sensorial experiences (5).

However, the statements of Descartes about animals were not supported by several other philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. According to Rousseau, in the preface to his work *Discourse on Inequality* (23), human beings are animals, not meaning that non-human animals have all the same rights that humans do, but only that to harm another sentient creature is universally wrong. Furthermore, since all animals are sentient beings, they should also participate in natural law and man is responsible for the performance of some duties, specifically one has the right not to be unnecessarily mistreated by the other. Voltaire was another philosopher that also refuted Descartes. In his *Philosophical Dictionary* (32), it can be found the following: "(...), what a sorry thing to have said that animals are machines bereft of understanding and feeling, which perform their operations always in the same way, (...) Is it because I speak to you, that you judge that I have feelings, memory, ideas? Well, I do not speak to you; you see me going home looking disconsolate, seeking a paper anxiously, opening the desk where I remember having shut it, finding it, reading it joyfully. You judge that I have experienced the feeling of distress and that of pleasure, that I have memory and understanding. (...) You discover in it all (for Voltaire "all" were the animals vivisected by Descartes) the same organs of feeling that are in yourself. Answer me, machinist, has nature arranged all the means of feeling in this animal, so that it may not feel? Has it nerves in order to be impassible? Do not suppose this impertinent contradiction in nature."

In this respect, we should also emphasise David Hume's words "Next to the ridicule of denying an evident truth, is that of taking much pains to defend it; and no truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endowed with thought and reason as well as men. The arguments are in this case so obvious, that they never escape the most stupid and ignorant." (17).

3. Utilitarianism

In the fourth century BC, Aristotle argued that animals were far from humans in the "great chain of being" or "natural scale". Claiming irrationality, he concluded that animals would have no self-interest, and only exist for the benefit of humans (33).

Later in the eighteenth century, one of the founders of modern utilitarianism, the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham, argues that the ability to suffer, rather than the capacity for reasoning, should be the measure for how we treat other beings. "The question is not, «Can they reason?» nor «Can they talk?» but, «Can they suffer?»" (1). If the ability of reason was a criterion, many human beings, including infants and the severely cognitively disabled, would also have to be treated as such. However, only in the early 1970s, a group of philosophers at Oxford University began to question why the moral status of non-human animals is necessarily lower than that of humans. This group included the psychologist Richard Ryder, who coined the term "speciesism", used on a privately distributed leaflet to describe

discriminatory behaviour of humans towards other animals (24). Despite this, the utilitarian philosophy or position has, as its main representative, the Australian philosopher Peter Singer. Singer is mistakenly considered the founder of the animal rights movement; yet his position on the moral status of animals is not based on the concept of rights but on the utilitarian concept of equal consideration of interests. In his book *Animal Liberation*, argued that humans should base moral consideration not in intelligence, or on the ability to make moral judgments, or on any other attribute that is inherently human, but in the ability to experience pain (27). Recognising that animals also experience pain, Singer argues that excluding animals from this consideration is a kind of discrimination called “speciesism”. Furthermore, he stated that the most common forms where humans uses of animals are not justifiable because the benefits to humans are ignorable compared with the amount of pain that is inflicted to the animal in order to obtain those same benefits. These same benefits could be obtained in ways that do not involve the same degree of animal suffering. However, his position is close to classical welfarism, even defending organic meat and some animal experimentation. In conclusion, *Animal Liberation* (27), often cited as the “bible” of the animal rights movement, in reality, does not grant moral or legal rights to non-human animals, because it is based on utilitarianism.

4. Welfarism

The term “welfare” refers to the state of an individual in relation to its environment, which can be measured. The failure to cope with the environment is an indicator of poor welfare (2). The term “animal welfare” can have several distinct and even contradictory meanings. For instance, if used by an “animal industry”, it may refer to the assurance that non-human animals are treated well and their basic biological needs are satisfied. Animals have a wide range of needs that are a consequence of the many functional systems that make life possible, being minimised by obtaining a particular resource or responding to a particular environmental or bodily stimulus (14). For some opponents of non-humans use, the term “animal welfare” in such context rather denotes ill fare for no matter how “humanely” non-humans are treated, the industry has to compromise on their complex social and biological needs and at the end, they are still slaughtered (30). Apart from this, these voices argue that animals do not have the capacity to enter into a social contract (or exercise contractualism), which is defined by a class of theories that try to explain the paths that lead people to form states and/or maintaining social order (21). However, philosopher Roger Scruton accuses animal rights advocates of “pre-scientific” anthropomorphism (26).

In summary, those who hold this view argue that there is nothing inherently wrong to use animals for food, among entertainment or scientific research, although humans, nevertheless, have a duty to ensure that animals do not suffer unnecessarily (15). These statements have been classified by welfarism and have been advocated and spread by some of the oldest animal protection organisations. However, advocates of animal rights, whom identify in this argument one speciesism position, refute this concept (31).

5. Abolitionism

Abolitionism was the political movement aimed at the abolition of slavery and human trafficking, mostly of African origin. It developed during the illuminism of the eighteenth century and became one of the most representative forms of political activism of the nineteenth century (6).

The animal abolitionism is a social movement that fights against any use of non-human animals, which does not accept that the non-human animals are, in any way, the property of human beings, or used for human benefit or purposes. It is a social movement that advocates not only the regulation of the use of animal by humans, but seeks to include them in the moral community, to ensure that their basic interests are respected and have equal consideration in relation to human interests. Gary Francione was the first academic lecturing on the subject of the animal abolitionism in the USA. He is also known for advocating the inclusion of all sentient animals in the moral community (12). By suggesting the abolition of the condition of animals being property, the term abolitionism is used to designate this idea. The abolitionist position believes that the animal rights movement should be based on the principle of non-violence and education to veganism as a way to put into practice the changes in the daily life (12). The objective is that animals

are not considered, neither legally nor morally, property or “natural resources” and its use is unwarranted. It argues that non-human animals should be respected in the likeness of human rights (9). Furthermore, Francione maintains that giving the status of family members to dogs and cats and at the same time killing chickens, cows and pigs for food, illustrates a society that suffers from “moral schizophrenia” (12).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

If modern moral and political philosophies proclaim the principle of equality as the foundation of human legislation, one must wonder from what criteria equality is being measured. It is no longer the species, in the biological sense, that makes its members equal, but some characteristics selected within the scope of the species, such as soul, intellect, language, autonomy and reason, among others (19). It is not just a matter of defending animals – as one who tires of humanity – but of defending humans with the same vigour: it is in the same moral fabric that the rights of both are sewn together (21).

The philosopher’s job is to push reason to the limit, and in return to celebrate the good arguments that compel everyone to new ways of living: changing habits requires changing mindsets, says Regan, betting that his philosophical contribution to the question of the animal and human rights is marked not by emotion and sentimentality, but by reason and the weight of rational argument (19). Tom Regan, therefore, maintains that animals have rights on the grounds that humans have rights. His main objection to theories such as contractualism and utilitarianism is that they produce unacceptable moral results not only for animals but for humans as well. Regan asserts that an adequate moral theory for human beings must include moral rights (the moral rights in question are the right to life, to bodily integrity and to freedom) (20).

Not seriously considering these rights can easily lead to the view that individuals have only instrumental value, that is, that they have value only for the benefits they can provide for others. When moral rights are not taken seriously, the “inherent value” of an individual is ignored. As an ethical theory, therefore, Regan regards utilitarianism as insufficient for the defence of animals, since it is qualified as incompatible with human rights (19).

There are a number of issues at present that consider non-human animals to have rights. Some issues are more concerned with animal liberation and others institutionalise exploitation, but somehow both aim to alleviate the ill-treatment of animals and to protect them. Although the concept of rights creates confusion and sets the distance between the protagonists of animal protection, the discourse of rights has a great practical function: it strengthens the claims of the movement that demands the broadening of the human moral horizon.

Once the argument of non-paradigmatic cases is accepted, the attribution of moral rights to animals imposes itself. The main challenge is to determine what these rights are and how to implement them.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions

Sandra Duarte Cardoso was responsible for the conception and design of the work and for drafting the manuscript. Yasemin Salgirli Demirbas was responsible for the critical revision of the manuscript. Ceres Berger Faraco, Liliana de Sousa and Gonalo da Graa Pereira were responsible for the critical revision, general coordination, administrative support and supervision of the manuscript.

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