

## Animal Rights v. Environmentalism?

### 1. Rights and Interests

We've seen before that there are various ways to argue that we ought to include animals in our moral community.

Singer's strategy: sentient animals have interests, as we do, to avoid pain and suffering, and that we are morally obliged to treat all such comparable interests on a par. So animal pain is no more or less important to consider than human pain, if one is considering action from a (hedonic) utilitarian point of view.

Rights strategy: (sentient) non-animals have rights, as we do, to certain minimally acceptable treatment. These might be negative rights (rights not to be interfered with) or positive rights (claims on others to be provided something). (Sagoff, 41)

We have also considered arguments against these strategies:

Anti-utilitarian: Utilitarianism is an unacceptable moral theory because it doesn't accord with our ordinary intuitions about what is right and wrong. It is both too demanding (it requires too much of us, morally speaking) and not demanding enough (it doesn't protect basic human rights). (See the "Three Moral Theories" handout.)

Anti-animal rights: Rights are claims within a community of moral agents who can understand the nature of reciprocal duties. Non-human animals are incapable of this, so non-human animals do not have rights.

### 2. Environmentalism

We have also considered several forms of environmentalism.

*Anthropocentrism*: only human beings have direct moral standing. (Baxter)

*Sentientism*: all and only sentient beings have direct moral standing. (Singer)

*Biocentrism*: all living beings *because they are living* possess direct moral standing.

*Eco-centrism*: ecosystems, because of their functional integrity, are the primary bearers of direct moral standing. Individuals within ecosystems may have secondary moral standing. (Leopold?)

**Broad Environmentalist Principle (BEP)**: Because of their intrinsic value, we have a pro tanto obligation to avoid destroying animals, and healthy ecosystems (of a certain degree of complexity) independent of human attitudes towards them or good they may bring to humans. (See the "Environmentalism" handout.)

### 3. Sagoff's argument

- 1) If we are obliged to respect the interests of non-human animals to the same extent and in the same ways we respect the interests of humans, we would be morally required to intervene in ecosystems to prevent the suffering of animals.
- 2) If we are obliged to respect the rights of non-human animals to the same extent and in the same way we respect the rights of humans, then animals would have positive, not just negative rights; and we would be morally obliged to intervene in ecosystems to provide physical security and minimum subsistence to non-human animals because this is what we are required to do for humans.
- 3) Environmentalists are not concerned with individual non-human animals, but with *ecosystems*. The interference in ecosystems to protect individual animals is not morally permissible.
- 4) Therefore, including animals in our moral community – either because of their interests or rights – is not compatible with environmentalism. “Environmentalists cannot be animal liberationists. Animal liberationists cannot be environmentalists. The environmentalist would sacrifice the lives of individual

creatures to preserve the authenticity, integrity and complexity of ecological systems. The liberationist – if the reduction of animal misery is taken seriously as a goal – must be willing, in principle, to sacrifice the authenticity, integrity, and complexity of ecosystems to protect the rights, or guard the lives, of animals.” (Sagoff, 42)

**Questions:**

- 1) Is Sagoff right that if non-human animals have rights, they must have positive rights? What if they only have negative rights? Would that avoid his conclusion?
- 2) Is Sagoff right that a utilitarian such as Singer would be committed to giving birth control to wild animals so that they don't overpopulate (and other ridiculous seeming interventions into nature)? Why or why not?
- 3) Are there forms of utilitarianism other than hedonic utilitarianism that might be invoked to defend a more plausible animal liberation argument?
- 4) Is Sagoff's version of environmentalism the most plausible? Is animal liberation incompatible with BEP? Is it incompatible with an anthropocentric environmentalism?

Sagoff, Mark. "Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Bad Marriage, Quick Divorce." In *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works*. 2nd edition. Edited by David Schmidtz and Elizabeth Willott. Oxford University Press, 2011.

© Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/fairuse>.

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.03 Good Food: The Ethics and Politics of Food Choices  
Fall 2012

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.