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## A humanist discussion of... ANIMAL WELFARE

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Most reasonable people think that we ought to treat other people well, that we should respect their rights and consider their welfare.  
**But should we also treat other animals well, and why should we?  
Do they, too, have rights that we should respect?**

Humanists seek to **live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs**. They use **reason, experience** and **respect for others** when thinking about moral issues, **not obedience to dogmatic rules**. Humanists have no "party line" on animal welfare, and no compulsory customs or religious food taboos that would influence their attitude to or treatment of animals. They have to **think for themselves**, and decide whether to extend their concern for welfare from humans to animals.

Humanists tend to put the needs of human beings first if there is a conflict, and to value animals and the natural world for human-centred reasons. But a rational non-religious morality, based on observation, experience and empathy, is likely to include **an unwillingness to cause animals suffering**, based on what we know about animal psychology and a respect and affection for animals.

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### Some views on animal welfare

#### Different cultures, different views

The debate about how we treat animals has gone on a long time, and some cultures see no reason to treat animals well. Religious beliefs that humankind is special and that animals do not have souls have sometimes been used to justify appalling exploitation and cruelty. But religious statements about other species tend to depend on the more general moral values of society and to change as we learn more about animal psychology. Some religious people think that God created the world and gave humans "stewardship" over it, or look to sacred text for guidance about how to treat animals - but humanists look elsewhere for reasons for caring about animals.

#### What have scientists and philosophers thought?

Scientists and philosophers have long argued about animal consciousness and suffering. In the 16th century Michel de Montaigne thought that animals were probably very like us:



**"Why should we think that they have inner natural instincts different from anything we experience in ourselves?"**

But in the 17th century, some people, for example the philosopher René Descartes, thought that animals could not feel pain and so we could do whatever we liked to them. A century later, the Scottish atheist philosopher David Hume wrote:

"We should be bound by the laws of humanity to give gentle usage to these creatures"



- which is probably a common view amongst humanists today.  
In 1789 the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham wrote of animals:



"The question is not, Can they reason?  
nor Can they talk? but Can they suffer?"

Also in the 19th century, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution taught us how closely related to other animals we are, and how like us they can be. In the 20th century ecologists reminded us of the interdependence of species and the importance of conservation. As a result people began to talk of "animal rights" and "speciesism", ideas pioneered by the atheist philosopher Peter Singer and still controversial; many people think that rights must be linked with duties and reciprocity, and it is difficult to see how animals can have duties or respect human rights.

### Can animals suffer?

Whether animals can be said to have rights or not, **concern for suffering** does seem to be the key issue. We do not, on the whole, think it is possible to be cruel to plants because plants do not have nervous systems which can feel physical pain, or minds which can feel psychological pain (for example, fear). But we have all seen miserable or frightened animals or heard them yelp with pain - it is difficult to believe seriously that they do not have feelings, and scientists have confirmed these everyday observations by methodical research. It is hard to be sure about the feelings of animals, but animal welfare scientists are beginning to work out more precisely what animals feel and what causes suffering. Research into the brains of animals shows that their brains and mental states are quite like ours and a great deal of testing on animals is done because we assume they are like physically and psychologically. But **the more like us they are, the more they can suffer like us** and the more they deserve our **concern** and **respect**.



## What do humanists think?

Humanists would prefer not to cause unnecessary suffering to sentient beings, and discussion tends to focus on what is "**unnecessary suffering**" and which animals are sentient. Most people think that fur coats are unnecessary luxuries and that the cruelty involved in farming or hunting animals for their fur cannot be justified. Many people also think that hunting and fishing for food or sport are cruel and unnecessary. Many people are willing to eat less meat, or no meat at all, in order to discourage what they see as the unnecessary cruelty involved in factory farming. (In Europe and the USA, 18 million pigs - intelligent animals - are kept in restrictive battery farm conditions.) Some people think that all killing of animals is wrong, whilst others argue that death cannot mean as much to animals as it does to us, so all that matters is rearing and killing them humanely. Humanists will not think that traditional religious ritual slaughter (where, unlike most of the meat we eat, animals are bled to death without pre-stunning, which evidence shows does cause suffering) should take precedence over killing animals humanely.

Some people oppose using animals for our entertainment, in zoos and circuses, or as pets (sometimes bred for characteristics that make life very difficult for the animal, for example flat faces that interfere with breathing). Humanists make use of **reason** and **compassion** when thinking about these questions, and will arrive at different conclusions, often depending on specific circumstances or situations.



The sharpest divisions of opinion amongst humanists (and others) are over the use of animals in experiments. Most people, whatever their worldview, would probably agree that there are enough cosmetics and shampoos in the world to make the testing of new ones on animals unnecessary. But medical research is a different matter. Most of us would not want to use untested drugs or treatments, or to have new medicines tested on ourselves or other people. Many effective medicines and treatments have been discovered and refined in tests on animals, and many humanists would accept these tests as long as the benefits outweigh the costs - though this is not an easy calculation to make. It is also worth remembering that some research involving animals is intended to improve animal welfare - for example, animals need medicines too. But it is certainly right to ensure that animal experiments are kept to a minimum and conducted as **humanely** as possible.

Most responsible human beings, and that includes humanists, do not think that we should exploit or mistreat others just because they are different from us or we are bigger or cleverer than they are. Is this what we are doing when we mistreat animals? Most humanists simply do not want to be the kind of person who causes suffering or who tolerates cruelty, and for many that must include animals.

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### Questions to think about and discuss

- o Is the life or pain of a human being worth more than the life or pain of a rabbit? Two rabbits? Fifty rabbits? A thousand rabbits?
- o A rabbit is born and lives its whole life in a small barren cage. Does it make any difference to your moral views on this if it is kept (a) as a pet, (b) for meat, (c) for fur, (d) for medical experiments, (e) for beauty product experiments.
- o Do you think that animals have a different attitude to death from humans?
- o New-born babies could be said to be less sentient, less aware of themselves and others and the past and the future, than adult chimpanzees. Does that mean we should experiment on new-born babies rather than chimpanzees?
- o How consistent are you in your ideas about animal welfare? Do you tolerate some uses of animals and not others? Do you kill wasps and flies?



Do you eat factory-farmed meat or chicken? Do you avoid thinking about where your food comes from? Should we all be vegetarians? Do you think there should be some kind of sliding scale of concern?

Some ritually slaughtered meat is sold in butchers, supermarkets, canteens and Indian restaurants without being labelled. Do you think it should be sold or served at all? or just to the religious groups that require it? Do you think it should be clearly labelled? Would you buy or eat it?

- o What new issues of animal welfare (if any) does genetic modification raise? Is it right to genetically modify animals for organ donation to humans? Would there be anything wrong in, say, genetically modifying pigs so that they liked being kept in battery pens?
- o How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?
- o How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?

### Further reading

A more concise version of this perspective, together with many others designed for easy photocopying and much useful information for teachers, can be found in *Humanist Perspectives 2* available to buy at [www.humanism.org.uk](http://www.humanism.org.uk)

Also available from the BHA's website –

- o Other BHA briefings: **Thinking about ethics ; Vegetarianism, Nature, Environmental Issues** etc.
- o Humanist Philosophers' Group (2002), **What is Humanism?** (BHA)

Peter Singer, *Animal Rights*  
Julian Baggini *The Pig That Wants to Be Eaten: And Ninety Nine Other Thought Experiments* (Granta Books, 2005)  
Mary Midgeley, *Why Animals Matter*

### See also

BBC Religion and Ethics website survey of the religious and philosophical arguments about animal welfare -  
[www.bbc.co.uk/religion/ethics/animals](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/ethics/animals)

Farm Animal Welfare Council report on welfare of animals at slaughter  
[www.fawc.org.uk/reports/pb8347.pdf](http://www.fawc.org.uk/reports/pb8347.pdf)