

# Animals lack a moral status philosophy essay

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



This paper will be organized into three main sections. The first section Background Information will introduce the broader subject of animal ethics. The second section, The Argument, will begin by presenting arguments from philosophers, including Rene Descartes and Thomas Aquinas. In this section, I will discuss why these philosophers refuse to give non-human animals a moral status. Next, I will be supporting the second premise by appealing to recent examples in the animal kingdom, and by referring to arguments from Peter Singer and Robert Garner. Finally, I will conclude in the final section, “Conclusion,” by asserting that because humans and animals have a lack of relevant differences (with respect to what makes humans moral beings), animals do have a moral status.

So, what does the animal ethics issue deal with? First, there are still many problems with the way we treat animals today. It is not an exaggeration, as some say, when animal rights activists point out that humans submit animals to unimaginable atrocities. To test for the safety of a shampoo, for example, rats are subject to experiments in which shampoo is placed in the rats' eyes to test for irritation in the retina. In a weapons facility in Germany, a German Sheppard was exposed to many toxic gases to test for the effectiveness of a gas mask (PETA, 2011). In many farming facilities today, cows, pigs, and chickens are placed in cramped cages where there is no room for them to turn around or lie down. In the past four years, PETA has cracked down on several cases of animal abuse. They uncovered inhumane practices in turkey farms, pig-killing companies, and cow farms, negligible treatment to pets in the pet supplies company, PetSmart, and horrendous practices in labs at universities such as the University of California, University of North Carolina,

and Columbia University (PETA, 2011). Who knows how many cases go unreported? As we can see, animal abuse touches almost every part of our lives, from our cosmetics to the pets in our homes. The issue of whether or not animals should be given equal moral consideration can change animals' status in our society and alter the way humans act towards animals.

And why do many humans treat animals like mere objects? Do animals not have many of the same fundamental qualities of human beings? What makes an animal's suffering different from that of a human? In this exploration in animal ethics and morality, it is important to define which animals we focus on in this controversial topic. For most people, granting a moral status to an animal depends greatly on the type of animal. For example, does an earthworm have a moral status? What about a pig versus a dog? To consider that all biological organisms have a moral status and therefore, rights, seems quite absurd. People who advocate for animal rights largely concern themselves with the "higher animals." Higher animals are those that can possess memories, participate in a social community, are conscious and aware, and can plan ahead. Many animals display a wide variety of behaviors that indicate that they have these characteristics. For example, wolves are among one of the most sociable animals that have an intricate social structure, where members earn positions that they usually keep throughout their lifetimes. There is also similar social behavior in several primates. In a recent trip to the Prospect Park Zoo, the behavior of the Golden Lion Tamarins displayed that they had an apparent social hierarchy, and participated in both food sharing and partner grooming. Bacteria, most invertebrates, plants, and other very simple organisms are not cases to be

considered for animal rights because as Peter Singer argues: “[for] a being that is not capable of suffering, or of enjoyment, there is nothing to be taken into account” (Singer, 2006). There are some disagreements between certain other animals, such as cattle, birds, and small animals such as rats. Yet even some of these animals display sophisticated social behavior as will be discussed further on.

First, why do animals lack a moral status? Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas, basing his idea on the bible, argued that all non-human beings existed for the sake of humans. He believed that “[animals] are merely instruments [that] exist for the sake of people that use them, not for their own sake. Since animals cannot direct their own actions, they are merely instruments and exist for the sake of the human beings that direct their actions” (Wilson, 2001). God made the universe based on a hierarchy where those on the preceding levels to our own, must serve us. In addition, Aquinas says that animals do not engage in rational thought and therefore do not think, are not conscious, cannot behave morally, and lack free moral judgment, but that they instead rely on pure instinct (Wilson, 2001). Rene Descartes, who further explained animal’s inferiority to humans, also shared this thought.

Descartes was one of the most prominent proponents of the 17th Century to argue against the idea that animals have any conscience. He argued that animals might only seem to present some conscience but that in actuality, they did not (Singer, 1990). Instead, their behaviors could be explained using Occam ‘ s razor, whereby the simplest explanation is considered the best,

and would involve using a mechanistic approach in explaining the complex behaviors of some animals. Instead of saying that animals behave like us, or have a will and conscience, this approach indicates that it is more likely that animals behave through mechanical principles, and they do not have souls. In contrast, humans are exempt from this mechanistic approach because we have behaviors that are more complex, and can therefore express a higher level of intellect (we, for example, use reasoning and speech that involve the expression of thoughts).

As a way to start my case, I will begin with an argument from the Conceivability-Possibility Principle. According to the Conceivability-Possibility Principle, in order to figure out if something is possible, you can consult with that which is conceivable. For example, although there are no purple elephants, there is nothing contradictory in the notion itself that prevents us from conceiving of, or imagining, purple elephants. Purple elephants are therefore possible. To better understand this, let us take a look at something that is not conceivable. Married bachelors are not conceivable because by definition, bachelors are men who have not married. Unlike purple elephants, the notion of married bachelors presents a contradiction. Because there is a contradiction, causing it to be inconceivable, it is not possible. For non-human animals to have a moral-status (that is, for an animal to think rationally, be conscious, and behave morally), there is no contradiction that prevents us from imagining it. Therefore, because the notion that non-human animals have a moral-status is conceivable, then it is possible.

Now, we move on with examples for animals' capacity for rational thought. Thomas Aquinas argued that animals cannot engage in rational thought. In opposition to this view, there are countless examples of animals behaving in ways that are outside of basic instinct. According to biologist Bernd Heinrich, ravens, for example, punish their own if they are caught stealing food from another raven, showing they can possibly have some sense of justice (D'Havé, 2010). In addition, according to biologist Marc Bekoff, in lab experiments, rats would stop eating if another rat was shocked while they were eating, which he believes shows that they do feel something similar to what we call empathy (D'Havé, 2010). Therefore, it seems that some animals (the "higher animals") do possess similar emotions and behaviors to that of humans. Although no animal has a social behavior that is exactly like humans, it is unfair to use this fact, as many anti-animal rights activists have, to justify mistreatment or misuse of animals. Humans should treat all life with respect but it is important to note that we should only consider a higher moral status for the animals that possess the discussed characteristics and behaviors (i. e. all mammals and birds).

Next, Thomas Aquinas and Rene Descartes both argue that animals do not have a conscience, yet, there is one important example, the Mirror Test, which can demonstrate otherwise. The Mirror Test, developed by Gordon Gallup Jr. in 1970, measures self-awareness by having an animal look at its reflection in the mirror. If the animal is capable of recognizing itself, then, it is self-aware. Gordon explains why:

The ability to correctly infer the identity of the image in the mirror requires a pre-existing sense of self on the part of the organism making that inference. Without a sense of self, how would you know who you were seeing when confronted with your reflection in a mirror? Recent neuropsychological evidence is highly consistent with the proposition that self-recognition taps into the ability to conceive of oneself (Gallup et. al., 10)

According to the definition of “conscious” from the Princeton University website, to be conscious means to be able to “[know] and [perceive]; having awareness of surroundings and sensations and thoughts. If the animals that passed the Mirror Test (including some great apes, elephants, bottlenose dolphins, and elephants) are able to conceive of themselves, and, as Gallup later points out, of others in their surroundings, then the animals are also conscious.

In “Animal Liberation,” Singer asked his readers what are the properties that we hold exclusively that allow us to be the sole specie that can have a moral status. He points out that simply having human DNA and being Homo Sapiens is not enough to guarantee the possession of morality. Aquinas and Descartes said being rational, autonomous, or being capable of acting morally, gives us a higher status than non-human animal. Of course, non-human animals will not portray these attributes exactly the same as humans. However, as Garner points out, and as demonstrated by the above examples, non-human animals lack relevant differences (given the animals’ different biological background). Singer also supports a stronger argument from the marginal cases that I believe can drive this paper’s argument home.

People from the marginal cases may not possess all of these properties, so they also cannot merit a moral status. Singer's argument of the marginal cases states that in order for humans to be the exclusive holder of a moral status, there would have to be some property that only we possess. Since some humans lack this property (the marginal cases), but are still given a moral status, animals should be given a moral status as well (Singer, 1990). The marginal cases include people who are senile or severely disabled, and infants. Singer adds to this idea by saying that most animals possess the properties that most humans have. "If human beings with profound intellectual disabilities do not have the same right to life as normal human beings, then there is no inconsistency in denying that right to nonhuman animals as well" (Singer, 1990). In other words, Singer argues that if being rational, autonomous, and capable of acting morally are what gives us a moral status, then we would have to exclude the marginal cases—thus creating inequality in our race (which is not the case for marginal cases). On the other hand, if we were to go broader, saying that being sentient and capable of experiencing pain, love, and pleasure, accounts for our higher status, then wouldn't we have to include animals, as well? Animals have sentience, can think logically, and experience many of the emotions that we experience. Therefore, Peter concludes, animals are equal to us, and should be given the same moral status and rights that we possess.

If humans considered a moral status for non-human animals, the attitudes and behaviors towards them today would change. The human race has a higher intelligence, and we must use this intelligence to look out for the welfare of non-human animals. We still have a responsibility to treat animals



in a way that would be best for them. I do not believe that we can use animals to test for things like eye irritation in shampoos, cosmetics, or entertainment products, because it inflicts unnecessary stress and pain to the animals. Where an animal's suffering is unnecessary, it should be avoided in its totality. This includes their use in cosmetics, rodeos, underground dog fighting, and circuses. Animals may not have exactly the same emotions and interests as humans, but their respective properties must be taken into consideration because every life form must be treated with respect.

Finally, as a way to wrap up this paper, I will appeal to a video from Chile that involves a stray dog rescuing a second stray dog ("Hero Dog"). In this video, a dog spots another dog who had been hit by a car. The dog goes to the middle of the highway and attempts to help the injured dog by using its front paws to drag it to the side of the highway and into safety. The dog had no benefit in helping the second dog. In fact, it put itself in danger because it was crossing a busy highway and could have been hit. Therefore, the dog went above its basic instinct (contrary to Aquinas's argument that non-human animals act on pure instinct). What can this "hero" dog's behavior tell us?