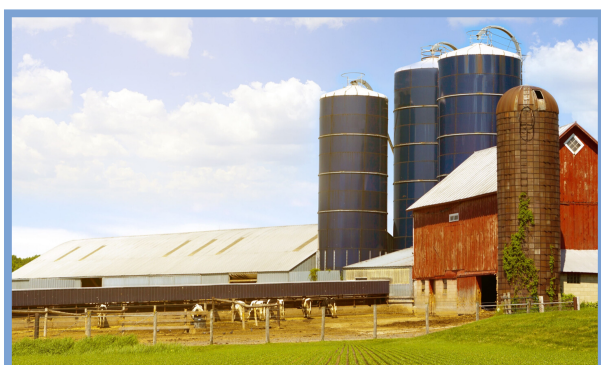


Issues in Animal Ethics

1. **What** are the key issues in animal ethics?

Human beings cause a lot of pain and suffering to animals; however, some human activities are especially harmful, and inflict considerable quantities of pain on millions or billions of animals every year. These activities are all key issues in animal ethics, because they stimulate significant debate about the extent to which human beings should be allowed to inflict pain and suffering on other living things. Although there are several key issues in this branch of applied ethics, three of the most important are farming, medicine and science, and sport.

Farming: the issue of whether or not human beings should use animals for meat and other products (e.g. eggs, and milk); and, if so, to what extent. Farming is harmful to animals, because it routinely involves confinement in overcrowded and restrictive cages (e.g. battery cages for chickens, and gestation crates for pigs), mutilation (e.g. debeaking of chickens, and castration and dehorning of cattle), and other problematic and potentially painful practices (e.g. in the egg industry, discarding male chickens into bags in which they are crushed alive).



A dairy farm: factory farmed cows are milked continuously for five years before slaughter.

Medicine and science: the issue of whether or not human beings should use animals for experiments in medical and scientific research; and, if so, to what extent. Animal experimentation is harmful, because it routinely involves inducing diseases in animals (e.g. cancer, and diabetes), or observing responses to shock inducing injuries (e.g. gun shot wounds).

Sport: the issue of whether or not human beings should use animals for sporting pursuits; and, if so, to what extent. Several sports culminate in the deaths of animals, which can sometimes be painful and protracted (e.g. bullfighting), whilst others are dangerous and routinely lead to avoidable injuries (e.g. horse racing).

2. **How** are the key issues in animal ethics approached?

The two significant approaches to environmental ethics are human supremacy and animal liberation. Farming, medicine and science, and sport are addressed differently depending on which approach is adopted.

Human supremacy: human supremacists are anthropocentric, which means they believe human beings are the most important things in the universe. They argue that human beings should be free to use animals as they wish, for both apparently vital purposes (e.g. food, and medical and scientific research) and relatively trivial purposes (e.g. entertainment). Generally, human supremacists argue that the interests of animals should not be considered in ethical decision-making, and that any use of animals is acceptable as long as it does not harm other human beings.

Animal liberation: members of the animal liberation movement are biocentric, which means they believe life is the most important thing in the universe. Moderate members of this movement argue that the interests of animals and human beings should be given equal consideration in ethical decision-making, but the use of animals is acceptable if it does not cause pain or suffering.

Alternatively, radical members of this movement argue that human beings should not use animals, even if the use does not cause pain or suffering, or the use will save the lives of human beings (something moderate members of this movement allow in exceptional circumstances). Radical members of this movement argue that human rights should be extended to animals.



Animal experimentation: a controversial subject in the animal liberation movement.

3. **Why** are the approaches to the key issues in animal ethics important?

The approaches to the use of animals in farming, medicine and science, and sport are important for several reasons. Arguably most importantly, the approaches influence what the lives of animals look like. Radical members of the animal liberation movement advocate for all animals to live free from human interference; moderate members of the animal liberation movement advocate for sentient animals to live free from human interference, unless the interference is painless or there are exceptional circumstances; and human supremacists advocate for human beings to have the right to use animals as they wish. Generally, members of the animal liberation movement work to reduce the amount of pain and suffering inflicted on animals by human beings, whilst human supremacists work to increase it, as a byproduct of exploiting animals for food, medical or scientific research, or sport.

Nevertheless, animal ethics is important for other reasons as well. First, the harmful effects of human activities on animals are pervasive; they affect billions of farm animals and hundreds of millions of laboratory animals every year, not to mention those affected by other activities. Second, animal ethics is potent; it boils the blood of a significant minority of people in societies around the world, and it provokes some to acts of vandalism and violence (e.g. the Animal Rights Militia). Finally, animal ethics raises problematic issues in other branches of philosophy: if God does not exist, then what makes human life more valuable than animal life? If their value is the same, why do human beings not conduct experiments on severely mentally disabled people instead of animals? In brief, the approaches are important because there are several potential responses and the problems they address are significant.

George Thinks

The issues in animal ethics expose an uncomfortable truth about modern life: it's intertwined with practices that inflict pain and suffering on animals. First and foremost, most people eat meat and other animal products, which perpetuates factory farming and the pain and suffering it inflicts on billions of animal every year. Beyond this, bullrings, circuses, and racecourses are responsible for a huge amount of unnecessary suffering, which is endured for the sole purpose of entertaining people. Likewise, laboratories injure and kill hundreds of millions of animals a year, and yet the cosmetics industry has demonstrated that most animal testing is avoidable, and the scientific community has admitted that the majority of animal experiments reveal little of importance.

However, meaningful change means making a lot of sacrifice. In brief, people would have to become vegetarian or vegan, forsake medicines approved via animal experimentation, and forgo traditional forms of entertainment widely thought acceptable. Actually addressing the issues in animal ethics requires radically adjusting our lifestyles, at least for most people. In fact, it's something I'm struggling with myself; although I wholeheartedly accept the ethical argument for vegetarianism, I can't quite bring myself to become one. Yes, I'm a monumental hypocrite; this is the only way of describing the difference between what I believe and how I behave. So, as you can see, these are the kinds of dilemmas that animal ethics puts us in!

