

# Introduction to Animal Ethics

## 1. **What** is animal ethics and how is it approached?

Ethics is a large field that can be divided into three branches: applied ethics, meta-ethics, and normative ethics. Meta-ethics and normative ethics are both theoretical. Meta-ethics is concerned with investigating whether or not morality exists (i.e. whether or not the words "right" and "wrong" describe objective reality); on the assumption that it does, normative ethics is concerned with how to make moral decisions (i.e. how to decide which actions are right and wrong). Unlike these first two branches of ethics, applied ethics is practical; it takes normative ethical theories and puts them into practice in real-world situations. One of these is how to treat animals, which is also known as animal ethics.



**Animal rights activists:** a protest against animal experimentation.

There are two significant approaches to animal ethics, and every human being on Earth explicitly or implicitly adopts one of them. The first approach is human supremacy, which is the practice of using animals to serve the wants and needs of human beings (e.g. for food, and for testing cosmetic products). Most people in more economically developed countries adopt this approach, because eating animals and animal products is considered normal behaviour in these societies. The second approach is animal liberation, which is the practice of attempting to free animals from being used to serve the wants and needs of human beings. People who adopt this approach can take personal and nonviolent actions (e.g. becoming a vegetarian), or public and sometimes violent actions (e.g. vandalising laboratories).

## 2. **How** do the approaches to animal ethics work?

**Human supremacy:** people who use animals to serve their own wants and needs are inspired by anthropocentrism, which is the belief that human beings are the most important things in the universe. Some human supremacists justify their behaviour by arguing that ethical concerns are reserved for human beings, because they are human beings; however, this is not particularly convincing, because it is a circular argument. It is also a clear example of speciesism, which is the act of discriminating between different species despite their equal interests.

Other human supremacists justify their behaviour by arguing that human beings are unique, because of either their capacities or their personhood. In the past, some capacities (e.g. language, abstract thinking, and engaging in sex for pleasure) were thought to be unique to human beings; however, scientists have since demonstrated that other animals display them. Nevertheless, personhood may be uniquely human, because some philosophers ground it in the human ability to reflect upon thoughts (i.e. self-consciousness, or consciousness of consciousness). Some human supremacists argue that personhood distinguishes human beings from animals, requiring consideration of other human beings in ethical decision-making but not of animals.

**Animal liberation:** people who attempt to free animals from being used to serve the wants and needs of human beings are inspired by biocentrism, which is the belief that life is the most important thing in the universe. People

### Applied Ethics

A branch of ethics concerned with how to put ethical theories into practice in real-world situations.

### Animal Ethics

A branch of applied ethics concerned with the moral status of animals and how human beings should interact with them.

### Anthropocentrism

The belief that human beings are the most important things in the universe.

### Speciesism

The act of discriminating between different species despite their equal interests.

### Personhood

The state of being a natural or legal person with rights and responsibilities.

who adopt this approach use a variety of reasons to justify their behaviour; however, the most convincing is that almost all the animals that human beings use for food and experimentation are sentient. Sentience is the ability to feel sensations subjectively, which makes sentient animals (including human beings) able to experience pain and suffering. Many advocates of animal liberation argue sentience is the vital characteristic that distinguishes between those things that should or should not receive consideration in ethical decision-making. For them, sentience gives rise to interests (e.g. the interest to avoid pain), and interests are the basis of legal rights.

### Biocentrism

The belief that life is the most important thing in the universe.

### Sentience

The ability to experience sensations subjectively (e.g. to feel pain).

### 3. Why are animal ethics and its approaches important?

In brief, animal ethics and their approaches are very important, because they affect how much pain and suffering animals experience. Human supremacists do not consider animals in ethical decision-making, which means their interests are entirely disregarded; at the extreme end, kicking a cat down a road for entertainment is no more ethically questionable than kicking a stone. People who adopt an animal liberation approach advocate for the elimination of pain and suffering from the lives of animals. Whilst this benefits animals, because their pain and suffering is reduced, it has consequences for human beings. In a world run by supporters of animal liberation, everyone would be vegetarian or vegan, and potentially life-saving animal experiments might be prohibited.

### George Thinks

I think animal ethics is fascinating, because every day it raises an ethical question: should I eat this animal for my food? This question is an increasingly prickly one: science has already demonstrated that eating meat is unnecessary for our survival, and now it is increasingly showing that it's harmful to our health. Beyond these compelling reasons, factory farming is the only way of producing affordable meat, but its unavoidable byproducts include acute pain and suffering for animals, and the exacerbation of both climate change and world hunger. And yet I still eat meat! Despite the fact that animal ethics affects everyone on a daily basis, most people avoid thinking about it too much, which is as good a reason as any to start thinking about it now!

