

WHY SHOULD WE RESPECT ANIMALS? SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

SHOULD WE JUST BE CONCERNED WITH THE ANIMALS HUMAN EXPLOIT WHEN THERE ARE OTHERS SUFFERING IN THE WILD?

Even if we oppose animal exploitation, animals will go on suffering in the wild for many reasons, including disease, parasitism, attacks by other animals, starvation and natural disasters. We shouldn't view the problems wild animals face as any less urgent than we view the problems of exploited animals. Moreover, animal exploitation harms terribly many animals, but the number of those who suffer in nature is significantly higher. The harms that some of them suffer are caused by humans. But in other cases they are harmed for natural reasons in situations in which we could help them. We shouldn't look the other way. We should reject speciesism and try to aid them as we would if they were humans.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP ANIMALS SUFFERING AND AGONIZING IN THE WILD?

Cases of people rescuing animals in nature who would otherwise die include stories of animals trapped in frozen lakes, wells, ponds or muddy graves, of stranded aquatic animals who are brought back to the sea, of animals victims of natural disasters and fires. In some places there are animal hospitals for injured or sick animals. In other cases, starving animals in droughts or harsh winters have been provided food and water. Animals have also been vaccinated against diseases such as rabies or tuberculosis.

In the long term, the best way to help animals living in the wild is by spreading the idea that we should be concerned with the harms they endure, rejecting the view that we should leave them alone to suffer and die and trying to learn what can be the most effective ways in which we can act in ways that favor them.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP ANIMALS?

There are several things you can do:

- You can help us spread the word about the injustices nonhuman animals suffer by sharing our publications on Facebook: [animal-ethics.org/fb](https://www.facebook.com/animal-ethics.org/fb) and Twitter: twitter.com/animalethics
- You can avoid using products resulting from animal exploitation.
- You can also become an activist and advocate on behalf of animals. You can join those who are already defending animals and help fight for an end to speciesism. There is a need for people to bring public awareness to the situation of nonhuman animals and to educate others about how and why nonhuman animals should be respected. You can collaborate with Animal Ethics or other antispeciesist organizations.

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WHY SHOULD WE RESPECT ANIMALS? SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Human beings are capable of experiencing suffering and feeling joy. That is why we can be harmed or benefited by the ways we are treated by others. This is something we are well aware of, so we do not accept it when anyone causes unjustified harm or takes advantage of us. Therefore, it seems wrong that someone would take advantage of anyone else. This is the reason why slavery is considered unfair and unacceptable.

Nonhuman animals are also capable of experiencing suffering and feeling joy. It is unfair to oppose the suffering of humans while accepting the suffering of nonhuman animals as simply a fact of life.

If one were to argue that discriminating against and exploiting nonhuman animals is justified because they are less intelligent, or because we are stronger and have more power, then one would have to accept that this type of exploitation can be applied to those humans who are less intelligent or less strong as well. This would mean discrimination against the very young and very old, the handicapped, and injured members of our society. And who would accept that?



WHAT IS SPECIESISM?

Speciesism is the moral discrimination against certain individuals because of their membership to a particular species. This includes undervaluing a being's life or disregarding her suffering because she does not belong to a given species, such as the human species.

Speciesism is similar to racism and sexism. Sexism means disregarding the interests of others solely because they do not belong to the same sex, and racism is the disregarding of the interests of others because they have a different skin color. Speciesism means disregarding the interests of other individuals simply because they do not belong to the same species as oneself, or to some other favored species.

Clearly, the characteristics of sex, skin color, and species are not morally relevant to whether or not we should care that someone can be harmed or helped by our actions. Another common reason for disregarding animal interests, intelligence level, does not justify discrimination, either. In the throes of agony, understanding algebra is of little comfort, and bliss is not limited to those who write poetry.

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WHAT DOES SENTIENCE HAVE TO DO WITH RESPECTING OTHERS?

Sentience – the capacity to experience suffering and joy – is the only thing that matters when discussing those to whom we should give moral consideration. Giving moral consideration to someone simply means considering how they will be affected by our actions and decisions. It means being concerned for their wellbeing, so that we would contemplate a different course of action if we knew that our current one would lead to their suffering.

Sentience is the only factor relevant to determining whether someone's life can be made better or worse. Other factors affect the particular ways an individual can be harmed, but not the actual capacity to be harmed or benefited.

For example, if you like to read and someone takes away your access to books, you will suffer. A dog, on the other hand, will not suffer if she has no access to books because she cannot read, or even conceive of reading. But the fact that you can read only determines one of the particular ways in which you can be harmed. It does not determine whether or not you can be harmed at all.

A dog might suffer if she does not have something to chew on, and a cat if she has nothing to scratch. You probably will not. The desire to read and the need to chew or scratch are not relevant to the capacity to suffer or feel enjoyment. Rocks, plants, and some animals such as sponges do not have this capacity because they don't have any form of consciousness (the prerequisite to sentience) which enables them to feel good or bad. The animals we are most familiar with do have this capacity.

HOW DO WE KNOW THAT ANIMALS CAN EXPERIENCE SUFFERING AND JOY?

Most of us can see and realize that nonhuman animals are suffering or content by observing their behavior. For example, when they are injured they whimper, cry out, or try to get away from the harmful situation. Since their responses to physical pain are similar to those in humans, the connection that they are in pain can be easily made. It would be unreasonable to think they do not suffer.

There are also more in depth scientific reasons for concluding that nonhuman animals suffer. The reasons lie in their physiology.

What makes a being able to suffer or feel good is simply the possession of a centralized nervous system that can encode complex information. Many animals have nervous systems of this type. This allows them to experience the world, to feel and to be aware of what is happening to them. They are conscious beings. Consciousness is what makes it possible for them to experience suffering, unlike other living things such as plants, fungi, microorganisms, and animals without a centralized nervous system, such as hydras. Non-centralized nervous systems only transmit information relating to possible changes in the environment.



WHY ARE PLANTS NOT ABLE TO EXPERIENCE SUFFERING OR JOY?

The reason we are able to suffer and feel joy is because we have a centralized nervous system. When something happens to us, certain information is transmitted through nerves to our brain, and then encoded and converted into experiences. If this did not happen, we would not suffer or be able to enjoy our experiences. Therefore, for an animal to have conscious experiences, it is essential to have a system that encodes physiological information.

Plants and fungi, like other living organisms, such as bacteria, archaea, and protozoa, cannot suffer or feel joy, because they do not have centralized nervous systems. Some say that plants "look for" the light of the sun, and this means that plants feel. The reality is that they are simply reacting to stimuli. The mercury in a thermometer also reacts by rising when it is exposed to a heat source. Does this imply that mercury experiences sensations? Of course not.

The biological mechanisms at work in plants are obviously much more complicated than the workings of a thermometer, but like thermometers, plants don't have the structures necessary to give rise to consciousness. Therefore, they are not capable of having either positive or negative feelings, and they can't be harmed or benefited by what we do.

WHY SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED ABOUT ANIMALS WHEN SO MANY HUMANS ARE SUFFERING IN THE WORLD?

Some people think: "Surely, we should help suffering humans first, before we come to the aid of suffering animals, right?"

This question assumes that humans' interests are more important than those of other animals, something which there is no reason to believe is true. Nonhuman animals suffer no less than humans, and we should not ignore or undervalue their interests. Would we really say that we shouldn't be concerned with the suffering of women because men are still suffering? Or that the anguish of those with skin of another color is unimportant, since many of those who share our skin color are suffering in some way? One wrong doesn't diminish another; the ill-fortune of many humans does not mean that we can excuse animal exploitation, or consider it of less importance. The number of animals killed for food in one week outnumbers the whole human population!

ANIMALS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN USED FOR SOME PURPOSE!

The fact that something has been happening for a long time, or has always been done does not make it acceptable. For generations, the unfair feudal system of the Middle Ages was widespread across Europe. In certain parts of the world, young girls are circumcised in accordance with deep-rooted traditions. In many other places, women are considered the property of their fathers or husbands. Slavery and racism are far from eradicated. The claim that something has "always been done" is no justification for discrimination.