Animal Rights and Animal Welfare
Do all animals have rights?

- Are humans the only animals with rights?
- Do humans have any obligations or duties toward non-human animals? If so, what?
- Is it only wrong to harm animals when it is also against the interest of humans?
- Is it wrong to use animals for medical research?
- Is it wrong to kill animals, whether for food, clothing, entertainment?
- Do animals have any intrinsic rights? If so, what are they?
Some traditional approaches to animal rights

• 1) The Judeo-Christian tradition:
  - Animals are put here for our benefit (God gave human beings dominion over other animals (Genesis 1:26))
  - Using animals is morally right even if treating them cruelly is not
  - A slight exception to this view: St. Francis of Assisi, e.g.

• 2) Hinduism – teaches respect for all creatures since the Divine exists in all beings, human and non-human

• 3) Early modern philosophical tradition in Europe (Descartes, Kant):
  - Traditionally excludes non-human animals from rights accorded to persons
  - One reason for this: Descartes thought that animals did not have souls (they were, he thought, basically like machines) and therefore could not feel pain
  - Even though Kant recognizes that cruelty to animals is a vice, not a virtue, and therefore is unethical, he otherwise agrees with Descartes that we have no moral obligations to animals (Kant is more concerned about the effect of animal abuse on humans’ disposition towards other humans)

• 4) Social Contract theory:
  - Concerns agreement only among people
  - Excludes any rights for animals
What are some organizations concerned with animal welfare?

- Humane Society of the United States
- ASPCA = The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
- Animal Protection and Rescue League
- PETA = People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
- Animal Legal Defense Fund
- Best Friends Animal Society
- Four Paws International
- International Fund for Animal Welfare
Animal Rights I: Peter Singer

• An Australian, Peter Singer (b. 1946) has taught for many years at Princeton University

• His book *Animal Liberation: A New Ethic for Our Treatment of Animals* (1975), has been very influential

• Singer is a vegetarian, often a vegan too

• A utilitarian, he supports animal rights

• He says that insofar as animals feel pleasure and pain, just like human animals, we have moral obligations to them

• We should maximize pleasure and minimize pain for all animals, both human and non-human
Characteristic quotes by Peter Singer

All the arguments to prove man’s superiority cannot shatter this hard fact: in suffering the animals are our equals.

— Peter Singer —

“If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit non-humans?”

Peter Singer, Animal Liberation
Tom Regan (1938-2017) was for many years a professor of philosophy at North Carolina State. He strongly supported animal rights. He was a vegan. He rejects utilitarianism. A Kantian, he says non-human animals should be treated with respect and dignity, as ends in themselves, just like human animals. All animals have an inherent value (a value for its own sake), not an instrumental value (a value for others). They have this inherent value equal to humans based on their being “subjects-of-a-life”. As a result, animals have the right to live free, away from pain, suffering, exploitation, etc. It is wrong to treat them as commodities, as resources for human use.
Goals of the Animal Rights Movement, according to Tom Regan

• Total abolition of the use of animals in scientific research
• Total dissolution of commercial animal agriculture
• Total elimination of commercial and sport hunting and trapping
• Part of the “rights view” – a view that rejects tolerance for any and all forms of racial, sexual or social discrimination and denies that we can justify the use of immoral or evil means that violate individual rights because of good consequences or results

• Regan claims that the rights view should not be limited to humans

• Animals have inherent value and worth because, like humans, they are also “experiencing subjects of a life”

• Cf. Paul W. Taylor’s “The Ethics of Respect for Nature” – Kant-like respect for nature; All living things have inherent worth
Characteristic quotes by Tom Regan

Being kind to animals is not enough. Avoiding cruelty is not enough. Housing animals in more comfortable, larger cages is not enough. Whether we exploit animals to eat, to wear, to entertain us, or to learn, the truth of animal rights requires empty cages, not larger cages.

— Tom Regan

"It is not an act of kindness to treat animals respectfully. It is an act of justice."

- Tom Regan
What is speciesism?

It is a prejudice or bias in favor of the interests of one’s own species often against those of other species (the term “speciesism” was coined by British psychologist Richard Ryder in 1970).

Conventional utilitarian view: morality and ethics are dependent on what people think and whatever social contract has been formed by them.

Critics of this conventional utilitarian view: all animals have inherent value, even if they are not moral agents.
Peter Singer on Speciesism

- Speciesism is wrong for the same reasons that racism and sexism are wrong.
- Principle of equal consideration: the pain that non-human animals feel is of equal moral importance to the pain that humans feel.
- Utilitarianism shows that we have a moral obligation to non-human animals.
A rebuttal to the claim for animal rights

- Carl Cohen (b. 1931) was a professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan until June 2017; he was also a member of the Medical School there for 10 years
- Cohen challenges Regan’s Kantian analysis attributing rights to animals
- Cohen: Only humans are moral agents with rights: “Rights arise and can be defended only among beings who actually do or can make moral claims against one another.”
- Since even disabled humans or babies or other humans with limited functioning ability belong to the same species as those humans fully capable of moral deliberation, they have the same inherent value and rights
- But nonhuman animals do not have such a capacity (they are subject more to desire and need alone) to so they cannot possess the same rights as humans (Roger Scruton makes a similar argument in his book *Animal Rights and Wrongs* (2003))
- Seeing no alternative to the use of animals for medical experiments, Cohen finds it justifiable
- We have obligations to animals, but that does not mean that animals have rights
- Question: Is sentience (the ability to feel sensations such as pain and pleasure) enough to confer moral standing to nonhuman animals, or is moral agency (the ability to reason, to reflect on moral principles, etc.) required?
Final question: how does our understanding of the moral status of animals affect our perceptions of global environmental issues and policies?