Animal rights or human obligations? An introduction to animal ethics  
[Direitos animais ou obrigações humanas? Uma introdução à ética animal]

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In the present discussion of our relation to animals, the concept of animal rights is often referred to. Both activists and philosophers claim that animals have absolute rights which cannot be violated. For most people this is an extreme view which is difficult to accept. If animals have rights, it does not seem morally correct to slaughter them for food or to use them as research subjects, practices that many of us have taken for granted. Irrespective of whether we agree to attribute rights to animals, the proposal forces us to re-think the way we look upon animals. What happens if we apply an ethical analysis on the human use of animals? In this presentation, I will introduce three important directions within modern Western ethics - rights theory, utilitarianism and Christian ethics - and discuss their implications for the way we look upon non-human animals.

The central view in rights ethics is that individuals are to be protected as such, and that one individual cannot be sacrificed for the good of somebody else. If animals can be said to have rights, as some activists as well as philosophers argue, this has far-reaching consequences for the way humans treat animals. According to rights ethicists, it is never morally justified to do harm to animals, even if it can lead to considerable human benefit. Whether or not animals can have rights is however a matter of dispute. Some ethicists argue that only individuals which can be hold responsible for their actions can have rights, and according to this view, it does not make sense to talk about animal rights. For the utilitarian thinkers, what matters morally is not rights but the interests different individuals possess. According to utilitarianism, all individuals which are capable of subjective experiences or feelings have interests. Since at least all mammals and birds can be assumed to feel pleasure and pain just as humans can do, the utilitarian sees no principal difference between these animals and man. They all have interest which has to be taken into account. These interests are then weighed against each other to achieve the best overall balance. Consequently, according to utilitarian thinking it is correct to sacrifice animal interests if it is a way to protect stronger human interests. Whereas neither animal rights ethics nor utilitarianism make a principal difference between humans and non-human animals, this distinction is important in Christian thinking. Man was created in the image of God and given dominion over plants and animals. Traditionally, this has been taken as a justification for the human use of animals. But many modern Christian ethicists place the emphasis on the great responsibility it means for man to have dominion over the divine creation.

Which are the consequences if we apply these different views on two important practices of animal use, such as intensive farm animal production and animal experimentation in biomedical research? Advocates of animal rights will find both practices unacceptable, since they violate the animals' right to live unharmed. Utilitarians weigh different interests against each other and is likely to find intensive animal husbandry morally wrong since it sacrifices strong animal interests (of avoiding pain, fear and frustration) in the benefit of rather weak human interests (of profit and cheap food). On the other hand, at least some medical experiments seem permissible from a utilitarian point of view since much stronger human interests are at stake. The Christian ethicist will probably come to a similar conclusion. Large-scale intensive animal production at the cost of both animal suffering and environmental damage can hardly be seen as a responsible way of handling the planet. But using animals to help relieving human suffering, as in the case of medical research, will be morally correct according to this view, which gives priority to humans.
In summary, we find that although different ethical views come to somewhat different conclusions in the two cases, none of them give full support for the present use of animals. This conclusion presents an important challenge for veterinary medicine and animal science to take up at a time when the public concern for bioethics is steadily increasing.