

Europe should embrace a cosmopolitan approach to animal rights

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/01/05/europe-should-embrace-a-cosmopolitan-approach-to-animal-rights/

05/01/2015

The issue of animal welfare has become increasingly prominent across Europe in recent decades, with several animal rights parties now competing in European elections – most notably in the Netherlands where the Party for the Animals (PvdD) is currently represented in the Dutch parliament. But how should animal rights be incorporated into political communities? [Steve Cooke](#) writes that adopting a ‘cosmopolitan mindset’, where human beings act with humanity toward other sentient beings, would offer the best principle for establishing animal rights in practice.



Traditionally, animal rights theorists have argued that species membership, like skin colour, sex, height, or number of toes, is morally arbitrary. Simply being of the species *homo sapiens* does not count as a good reason for granting rights. In response to those who claim that humans are special because they possess rationality, moral personhood, or language-use, animal rights theorists remind us that many humans do not possess those capabilities.

There is in fact no non-arbitrary characteristic possessed by all humans and no non-humans. Therefore, we must either deny rights to some humans, or grant them to some non-humans. Animal rights theorists think it preferable to do the latter. Even if humans are special in some way, being special may count as a reason to grant rights, but it doesn't follow that therefore others are denied them. As the ancient Greek philosopher [Porphyry](#) wrote:

It does not follow, if we have more intelligence than other animals, that on this account they are to be deprived of intelligence; as neither must it be said, that partridges do not fly, because hawks fly higher.

Animal rights theorists contend that so long as a creature can feel, and thus can experience pain and pleasure, then that creature matters morally for its own sake and has rights. Sentience, not rationality or genetic code, is the necessary and sufficient condition for rights-ascription.

If a being has rights, then those rights ought to protect it from harm and from being used as the mere means to benefit others. Rights mark out that area of morality that should be enforced by coercive means. If I have a right, then you would be wrong to violate it, and others would be right to prevent you from doing so. This means that rights are very clearly a matter of political concern.

Despite this, very few animal rights theorists have given thought to how political communities should relate to animals. With [few exceptions](#), they have argued that granting non-human animals rights requires that we leave them well alone and lead separate lives, phasing out domestication and ceasing to interfere in the wild. Neither have they considered what we should do when animal rights are violated. This 'let be' approach has quite rightly been criticised for being undesirable and unrealistic. Instead of looking for ways to merely avoid harming animals, animal rights theorists need to develop principles of peaceful coexistence between political communities and other species. But, what would a political theory of animal rights look like?

Cosmopolitanism and animal rights

One way of thinking about animal rights is as an extension of cosmopolitan principles. Cosmopolitans hold that all

human beings, merely because they are human, are members of the same moral community and are therefore owed the same basic rights regardless of their citizenship status or identity. Cosmopolitanism is not just a moral principle, it is also a way of thinking. The cosmopolitan mindset is open and accepting of difference.

A key cosmopolitan principle is that respect for the fundamental rights of others does not depend upon whether we can identify with them or whether we are enmeshed in a relationship with them. What marks us out in our humanity is not just what we will do for those we love, but how we respond to strangers. Cosmopolitanism is, above all, an ethic aimed at bringing peace to the world.

However, because animals have been largely absent from cosmopolitan discourse, the cosmopolitan peace has been paradoxically tolerant of mind-boggling levels of industrialised violence against hundreds of billions of sentient beings. By drawing the boundaries of the ethical community on 'common humanity', cosmopolitans have left them vulnerable to the charge of speciesism. We can thus regard animal rights as a way of widening the cosmopolitan circle of ethical concern to include non-human animals. What matters when thinking about fundamental rights is not who we are, where we are from, or what nation or species we are born into, but that we can feel. If a being's existence matters to it, then it ought to matter to us.

How do we build political communities that are accepting of the differences between humans and animals, whilst also ensuring respect for their rights? One way to do this, drawing from themes found in Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace*, is to adopt a cosmopolitan ethic of hospitality towards strangers. Kant argues that as humans spread across the globe, they will encounter strangers whom they struggle to understand and have little in common with. Nevertheless, Kant argues, we ought to approach one another peacefully, seeking fair terms of cooperation and coexistence: "so long as he conducts himself peaceably, he must not be treated as an enemy." Our limited ability to communicate with other animals, and the differences between us, mean that we can think of animals as paradigmatic strangers. A truly cosmopolitan mindset thus means extending this right of hospitality to strangers across the species barrier.

The right of hospitality applies first, where animals enter into human political communities and second, where human activities intrude on the activities of animals living in the wild. In the first case, such as when animals enter our communities in search of food or whilst migrating, the duty requires us to treat them peacefully. This duty holds so long as they pose no threat. Thus, we are not required to allow in the malarial mosquito or man-eating tiger any more than we are required to offer hospitality to the murderous gunman. Rather, where there is little threat, we must avoid causing harm, and we must make limited accommodation. In other words, we must act in ways that are mindful of the interests of peaceful non-human animals.

The principle of hospitality can also form the basis of a just domestication of non-human animals. Kant argues that strangers, having presented themselves peacefully, may enter into agreements and join the political community. Obviously, animals cannot literally enter into agreements, but they are capable of expressing preferences, and it is possible for us to live mutually beneficial and mutually enriching lives. Thus, we might make use of heuristics such as Rawls' *hypothetical consent* or an *Impartial Observer Theory* to determine the parameters of a just relationship. The second case, where humans intrude on the lives of wild animals, can also be governed by Kantian cosmopolitan principles. As Kant writes:

| *...we cannot be infinitely scattered, and must in the end reconcile ourselves to existence side by side.*

Animals, because they lack rational agency, cannot be duty-bearers, and so they cannot strictly be hospitable towards us. However, we can nevertheless approach them peacefully, using violence only in response to threat, and in ways that minimise harm to them. In other words, we should enter the territories of wild animals as if we were their guests, respecting their rights as we do so.

The existential gulf between humans and animals means that they will always be strangers to us. At the same time, they are clearly worthy of moral concern. Because of this, we should adopt a cosmopolitan mindset and let our interactions be governed by cosmopolitan principles. Animals who pose no threat have a right not to be treated as enemies. The animal liberation movement can be thought of as the natural endpoint of cosmopolitanism. Humanitarian principles do not just mean protecting the human, they also mean acting with humanity towards other sentient beings.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: Dirk-Jan Kraan (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1BywBOx>

About the author

Steve Cooke – *University of Sheffield*

Steve Cooke is a University Teacher in Theory and Animal Rights at the University of Sheffield. His research interests lie in the intersection between animal ethics and political philosophy. He is currently researching a cosmopolitan theory of civil disobedience. For more of his work see his recent articles in *Political Studies* and the *Journal of Terrorism Research*.



-