BOOK REVIEW

ANIMAL RIGHTS: WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW

Paul Waldau
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Ethics students always seem a little hesitant when I turn to the subject of nonhuman animals. I am never sure if this is because the topic is much less familiar to them than most of the core course materials, or because they like cheeseburgers. Whatever their reasons, animal ethics is one of the fastest-growing areas of study in law, literature, religious studies, sociology, psychology, and ethics. This means that no matter how hesitant students seem to be, animal ethics will be on the table in every ethics class that I teach—as it should be in every ethics class.

Paul Waldau’s recent publication, Animal Rights: What Everyone Needs to Know, joins a growing body of literature responding to the new demand for books in the field of animal studies. His book contains a list of essential introductory materials, as well as an interesting smattering of bonus topics. Waldau spends the first two chapters examining two words that lie behind the focus of his writing: “animal” and “rights.” He notes that our use of “animal” is rich with contradictions—even in our dictionaries, which posit animals first as “all living beings,” and then as “brute, or beast, as distinguished from man” (p. 5). He compares this with our equally schizophrenic linguistic use of the term: In a society that practically worships science, we fail to apply our biological knowledge of “animal” in daily language. While most of us use such terms and “genes” and “photosynthesis” flawlessly, we are unable to apply the simple term “animal” so as to include Homo sapiens (a decidedly passive-aggressive method of distancing ourselves from kin).

Waldau also explores which species attract our attention and which are commonly viewed as deserving recipients of rights. In the process, he notes which species we arbitrarily reject without examination, such as tiny creatures seen only with a microscope and the fishy creatures of the world’s waters. Ironically, Waldau’s topic reminds me that my students
are invariably eager to talk about microscopic life forms—or more commonly insects and “pests”—when we turn to the topic of animal rights. Students in my classrooms rarely move of their own free will to discuss cattle, chickens, or pigs. Instead, it is beetles and bacteria that attract their interest. One would think that Americans held a deep concern for insects and microbes, or the astute observer would realize that cheeseburgers have weighed into the conversation. Waldau’s discussion will help students to recognize their tendency toward species favoritism, and would likely spark lively discussions.

In the process of outlining his subject matter, the author asks why the realities of other animals matter, then offers a handful of answers: pursuit of truth, to better understand ourselves, ethics, assessing collective human knowledge of nonhuman animals, and for personal growth and happiness. He focuses most strongly on the second option, exploring commonalities such as brain structure, emotions, consciousness, and genetics. All of these subjects are rich with implications that I anticipate will light up any classroom, but for me the hot-button in this section is a conspicuously absent response to Waldau’s question. Personally, if others study me, I would ask that I be their primary focus, and that those doing the studies have my interests at the center of their work. Interestingly, this is not an answer that is given, though it is perhaps assumed. Nonetheless, the absence of the best reason for meddling in the lives of others provides a perfect opportunity to discuss animal ethics. Why is this not a primary reason for studying animals? What does this indicate about human beings and our scholarly pursuits?

Among Waldau’s liveliest points of discussion, he argues (most delightfully) that human beings qualify as “companion animals” (p. 25), opening the door to an examination of terms, starting with “pet” but including everything from “circus animals” and “farm animals” to “lower animals,” “beasts,” and “brute,” and sexist slangs such as “fox,” “chick,” and “cow.” Many students who are not quite ready for animal ethics will perhaps be more comfortable crossing over into subjects such as sexism and racism, for example. By exploring animal terms used in a sexist or racist manner, students are more likely to understand the power and the immorality of such references—they are more likely to find common ground, a point from which they can come to care about animal ethics. Grounding animal rights in human rights—in the personal wishes and hopes and hurts of human beings—helps draw students into the subject and into discussions. Does anyone here want to be a “piece of meat”?
In two different chapters Waldau explores “rights.” Perhaps most importantly, he draws a clear distinction between legal rights and moral rights. Just as surely as meat-eating students turn animal ethics into a discussion of malaria-ridden mosquitoes and protozoa, they are sure to ask, “Should dogs be able to vote?” Waldau nips this tiresome and transparent topic in the bud by clearly explaining the difference between legal rights and moral rights. Legal rights, he explains, are more clear and decisive. Sometimes they have nothing to do with morality, like laws about which side of the road we should drive on, and sometimes laws are overtly immoral, such as laws that once forbid inter-racial marriages in the United States, and contemporary laws that forbid gay marriage and allow for government subsidized coronary surprises—cheeseburgers (p. 58). Despite the limitations and flaws that are inherent in human laws, Waldau asserts that legal rights are a critical area for the expansion of animal ethics. He notes some of the important legal advances that have been achieved: Germany recently included “animals” in basic constitutional protections, while California recently banned the most egregious forms of confinement in animal agriculture (pp. 90, 91).

No doubt weary of the meaty grins of those who jest about voting dogs, Waldau makes it clear that those talking about animal rights need to clarify which rights they refer to—legal or moral. Moral rights, he admits, are more difficult to apprehend. We can look on the internet to seek a list of legal rights for dogs or chickens (though we will not find a single legal protection for such individuals), but how will we know of a community’s moral rights? Nonetheless, Waldau asserts that pretty much every community offers moral rights to nonhuman animals, and they have done so as far back into history as we are able to reach.

The latter half of Animal Rights: What Everyone Needs to Know offers a series of chapters that leave readers well informed on key animal studies subjects, including the history of the movement, law, international politics, education and the arts, the sciences, the sciences, and animal activism. In the process, Waldau presents fascinating facts. For example, did you know that India’s citizens are expected to “have compassion for living creatures” (p. 90); horseshoe crabs are exploited to produce a substance that keeps surgical implants, pacemakers, and prosthetic devices free of bacteria (p. 43); “pecuniary” comes from the Latin “pecu” meaning “cattle or flock”, and “chattel” is related to “cattle” (p. 82); Bolivia prohibited the use of other animals in circuses while Spain passed a law granting legal rights to nonhuman great apes (p. 108)?
These later chapters are especially interesting because the author includes a wealth of examples. For instance, in the chapter on “Political Realities” Waldau lists an impressive number of accomplishments, including the 1916 convention between the U.S. and Britain to protect migratory birds, the European Union’s ban on ear cropping and tail docking, Bolivia’s law that bans the exploitation of animals in circuses, and a couple of monumental protections for nonhuman primates in various nations, including New Zealand’s prohibition against the use of hominids for experimentation and Spain’s “resolution granting legal rights to nonhuman great apes” (p. 108). Waldau notes that advancements in animal rights are greatly hindered by our tendency to be driven by economics rather than ethics; humans are too often manipulated by “the political clout of the huge corporations that control slaughter and meat packing” (p. 105).

As he nears the end, Waldau introduces major players in the contemporary world of animal advocacy, including pioneers (Henry Salt and Henry Spira), theologians (Albert Schweitzer and Andrew Linzey), early women in the movement (Ruth Harrison and Rosalind Godlovitch) key philosophers (Peter Singer and Tom Regan), those who have brought legislative changes (Richard Ryder and Bernard Rollin), those working at the intersections of oppressions (Betty Lawrence and Carol Adams), legal advocates for animals (Joyce Tischler and Steven Wise), effective citizen activists (Barbara Leonard and Martin Balluch), animal sanctuary founders (Carol Noon, Dame Sheldrick, Carol Buckley, and Lisa Kane), Indian activists (Maneka Gandhi and Raj Panjwani), activists in China (Song Wei and Jill Robinson), the most powerful and successful animal rights organization (Ingrid Newkirk of PETA), and activists cooperating on voter-based initiatives (Wayne Pacelle of HSUS and Gene Baur of Farm Sanctuary). For those who are new to animal studies, Waldau offers an excellent list of critical figures whose activities, books, and organizations are worth exploring.

Animal Rights: What Everyone Needs to Know closes with a glimpse of the future, but not before returning to initial questions: animal rights. As we broaden our moral circle, which animals are we to include, and why? Ultimately, the questions at hand are about tuna fish, crocodiles, and pigeons. If we are to answer this question with any integrity, Waldau notes that we must first increase our understanding of animals themselves. These difficult yet critical problems cannot be solved without a deep understanding of tuna fish, crocodiles, and pigeons: Animals are the core of animal studies.
And if we are to understand tuna fish, crocodiles, and pigeons, we will need more than one field of study. We must employ a rich diversity of human knowledge—sociology, biology, ethology, imagination, the arts, and ethics. As for the “we” who are involved in this process—who will bring about the many needed changes that are necessary if we are to realize animal rights?—the author closes by pulling the net around individuals, nonprofits, corporations, communities, provinces/states, and nations. What is a state but a host of individuals? The kinds of changes that we need can only come through human initiative—our initiative. Animal rights is about animals, but it requires human initiative.

At the end of his work Waldau includes a series of helpful appendices: a chronology of important events, a glossary of key terms, and a list of further readings. If I could add an appendix, I would add a few pages that briefly describe some of the ugliest aspects of animal agriculture, and/or a handful of online links that take readers to undercover footage from factory farms, laboratories, fur farms, and circuses. The importance of Waldau’s book can only hit home if readers understand how far we have strayed in our greedy exploitation of nonhuman animals, and the extent of our cruel indifference to their horrific sufferings.

My favorite parts of Waldau’s book are the wide assortment of engaging questions that he draws from readers, his well-categorized history of the movement, and updates on individual areas in the field of animal studies. Animal Rights: What Everyone Needs to Know offers an unusually broad and pleasantly accessible introduction to animal studies, and I trust this book will bring a few hesitant students to reexamine the ingredients that lie between the fluffy buns of their cheeseburgers.