COMMENTARY

Veterinarians as advocates for animal rights

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The aim of this commentary is to define the common ground between animal rights activists and veterinarians by presenting the case that both are united in advocating moral rights for animals. If we accept that the underlying motivation for both groups is a concern for animals, then we have already found a unifying goal with which to begin. By clarifying the term animal rights and separating it from the dominion of the animal rights movement, I hope to show that veterinarians are not only proponents for adequate animal welfare, but are actually animal rights advocates. Veterinarians hold a privileged place in society; we have a solid grounding in scientific knowledge and are, as a profession, held in high regard. We can be a powerful force in the promotion of humane treatment of animals if we chose to work toward inclusion, rather than exclusion and derision, of other groups who work for promotion of animal rights.

Animal welfare is a term comfortably used by scientists, as it is generally presented as objective, devoid of emotional tones, and guided by measurable parameters. Welfare is based on objective measures of an animal’s biological and mental well-being, as noted by animal welfare scientists, Professors Fraser and Broom, in Veterinary ethics: animal welfare, client relations, competition, and collegiality:

The assessment of welfare can be carried out in an objective way which is quite independent of any moral considerations. Mortality rate, reproductive success, extent of adrenal activity, amount of abnormal behavior, severity of injury, degree of immunosuppression or level of disease can all be measured... Such studies and a wide range of work on the basic biology of animals give information about the biological needs of animals.1

However, ethical concerns must be addressed when deciding which species are deserving of welfare considerations, which needs should be met, and the degree of welfare that should be provided. It is impossible to divorce welfare from ethics and animal rights, as Tannenbaum points out:

Sometimes a condition conducive to or constituent of animal welfare is so important to an animal that we can say the animal’s claim to this condition rises to the level of a right. Here, those of us who believe that animals have some moral rights would say is a right based on consideration of welfare.1

Most veterinarians describe themselves as advocates for animal welfare, but eschew the term animal rights. I believe the terms are inseparable, as animal welfare is determined by animals having certain fundamental rights. We take into consideration an animal’s well-being, or welfare, because we feel it has some rights (such as the right not to suffer unduly, the right to adequate nutrition, and the right to sleep) while under our care. A belief in certain rights for animals does not necessarily imply the right to life or that animals are equal to humans in importance. Most veterinarians will agree that we may use animals for food, pleasure, or research, but when we do, we must consider that they have a right to proper care and minimal suffering. These rights are the basis for animal welfare considerations.

Animal welfare considerations, based on animal rights, can generally be outlined as the absence of pain, suffering, distress, and other severe unpleasant sensations such as extreme or ongoing hunger, thirst, heat, cold, or cold; the absence of discomfort and other less intense negative sensations; the absence of anxiety, boredom, and other sophisticated unpleasant psychologic experiences; the presence of pleasurable experiences or the satisfaction of some preferences; the absence of illness, disease, or injury; and the absence of abnormal behavior. T

The Case for Animal Rights

There are various philosophic schools of thought that may be used to argue the promotion of animal rights. Two of the most convincing arguments are Peter Singer’s approach of rights from a utilitarian point of view and Tom Regan’s proposals that animals have rights based on inherent value.2-6

Ascribing rights exclusively to humans was historically done on the basis of several criteria, such as sentience, a sense of the self, rationality, and the capacity for language. That these criteria are limited only to humans is contentious with our present knowledge of the capacity for some nonhuman animals to have some of these traits. We agree that humans have the right not to be harmed. We believe this to be true because humans have value regardless of whether they are valuable to anyone else, possess usefulness, or have economic worth. Inherent value is a term that means an individual possesses value regardless of whether he or she is considered valuable to anyone else. We are valuable as subjects in our own life, a life that matters to us and can be made better or worse. Individuals with

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inherent value have a right to not be treated in ways that detract from their having this kind of value.

Advocates of animal rights based on inherent value point out that some humans, such as those in irreversible comas, those with severe mental retardation, and infants, may not possess sentience, speech, self-awareness, or rationality, yet these people are widely acknowledged to be deserving of, and are granted, rights. Tom Regan\(^4\) proposes that individuals possess rights on the basis of the criterion of inherent value, not sentence, self-consciousness, self-interest, or language. He states that individuals with inherent value have a right not to be harmed, as harming them means treating them as a means to an end. Regan takes the argument a step further to include nonhuman animals as right possessors on the basis of inherent value.\(^2\) If all humans possess inherent value, regardless of their mental or emotional status, age, sex, or race, then it should follow that moral rights are granted on the basis of inherent value. He argues that animals are valuable because they are subjects of their own lives; they have lives of value to themselves, lives that can be made better or worse and that can be independent of being the object of another’s interest or useful to another’s ends.\(^3\)

As inherent value is the criterion for human rights, it should also be the criterion for granting rights to animals, Regan claims.

**The Case for Animal Rights Based on Utilitarianism**

The second persuasive argument for the granting of rights to nonhuman animals is based on the philosophy of utilitarianism, originally proposed by Jeremy Bentham in 1823 and modified by Peter Singer in the 1970s.\(^5\) Utilitarianism was founded on the principle that it is the consequences of actions that determine whether those actions are right or wrong. Actions producing the most good for the greatest number of individuals are right, and we should try to maximize this good through our actions.

“Each to count as one and none to count as more than one,” wrote Jeremy Bentham in 1789. Thus, utilitarians argue that each individual’s interests are to be counted equally in making the decision of right action, despite each having differing abilities and interests. This was such a strong argument made on behalf of granting rights to slaves and later by the women’s liberation movement, that we now take for granted that men and women have equal rights, as do children, adults, and foreigners. At present, most people do not yet agree that animals have the same rights as humans. Jeremy Bentham did not limit his definition of individuals to humans alone, he recognized that animals also have preferences and interests and can gain satisfaction by choosing actions that allow these to be fulfilled. He believed that a day would come when animals would be granted rights based on their capacity for suffering and their interest in their lives.

Bentham is quoted by Regan and Singer\(^4\) as having said,

The day may come, when the rest of animal creation may acquire those rights which could never have been withheld from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may come one day to be recognized that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason or, perhaps, the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, a week, or even a month, old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they reason? Nor, Can they talk, but can they suffer?\(^4\)

Peter Singer, one of the founders of the animal liberation movement, is perhaps the most well-known proponent of the belief in equality of interests across species lines. He argues that just as racism and sexism are inherently wrong, so is speciesism, “[a] specialist allows the interests of his own species to override the greater interests of members of other species.”\(^6\) He argues that to avoid sexism, racism, and speciesism, moral equality of interests must be taken into consideration, “[t]he interests of every being affected by an action are to be taken into account and given the same weight as the interests of any other being.”\(^6\) He states that every sentient being has the capacity for life, a better or worse life, and has an interest in his or her own life. As interested beings, each should be treated with consideration for equality. The capacity for suffering and enjoyment is the basis for the right to equal consideration. In defining animal rights, Singer\(^7\) states that “[w]here animals and humans have similar interests—these interests are to be counted equally, with no automatic discount just because one of the beings is not human.”

An interest can be defined as a quality that matters to the subject. Philosopher Bernard Rollin\(^8\) argues that any living thing evidencing interest in its own life, with or without the capacity for suffering, is worthy of moral rights. Interests are based on the capacity to have desires, goals, and preferences. Animals and humans have basic interests in avoiding pain, gaining pleasure, and maintenance of life, among others.

**Animal Rights Versus the Animal Rights Movement**

Distinct differences exist between animal rights and the animal rights movement. It is important to recognize this because some of those in the movement are extremists and do not represent the movement as a whole. There are many definitions and many groups within the animal rights movement. Some advocate the abolition of any animal use, while others condone limited and humane use; some groups espouse violence, while others are pacifist. Jerrold Tannenbaum suggests 4 positions common to all animal rights activist
groups; most mammals have rights, some of which are equal to moral rights ascribed to humans; these rights are granted because many mammals have similar activities to humans; the use of animals as means to an end without their consent violates their rights; and the law should support the animals’ rights by enabling owners to sue on their animals’ behalf.  

Many veterinarians believe that animals have certain rights, but most of us do not subscribe to all of the conclusions of the animal rights activists. This does not, however, mean we should deny ourselves the challenge of advocating for animal rights, especially when these rights lead to welfare consideration and humane treatment of animals. By claiming the concept of animal rights, we remove it from the hands of radicals and empower ourselves to act as positive ambassadors for animals.

**Veterinary Rights for Patients**

Jacob Antelyes, a small animal practitioner and writer, stated that there may be a limit as to how much we can change the attitudes of the extremists in the animal rights movement, but there may be a way to find some common ground. He outlined 5 basic guidelines for veterinary practitioners in hopes that “[i]f we can arrive at even the most general agreement between all the mutual disdainers it will be a clear victory for cooperation over strife.”

Most Americans agree that animals have a right to veterinary care. Dr. Antelyes’s 5 basic rights for all veterinary patients are the following: respect (dignified nursing and medical care); privacy (separate, well-lit, and ventilated housing); purposeful death (without frivolous pain or death for amusement); effective and prompt pain relief; and appropriate nutrition.

**Veterinarians as Advocates for Animal Rights**

That animals themselves cannot speak out on their own behalf, that they cannot organize, petition, march, exert political pressure or raise our level of consciousness—all this does not weaken our obligation to act on their behalf—if anything their impotence makes our obligation the stronger.  

—Tom Regan

The concept of advocacy is based on the assumption of an imbalance of power. An advocate is an individual who seeks to rectify the power imbalance by speaking on behalf of an oppressed being that lacks the power or voice to express its claims to others. The oppressed being can be another person, or in this case, an animal. Rights are granted not because all individuals are equal, but rather, rights protect those who may suffer oppression from those in power. As veterinarians, we can choose to speak up for the powerless directly in our care, our patients, who cannot speak for themselves.

As veterinarians, we are privileged in that we can actually do much good for those creatures that we count on as friends and as providers of food, fiber, and pleasure, as well as for those that give their lives for science. We have the education and eloquence to speak up for these animals, and I believe we must do what we can to promote their interests. Despite the fact that many believers in the animal rights movement also desire to help animals, veterinarians have been distancing themselves from discussions with these people. There is a chasm between these 2 groups of well-intentioned people. Rather than continuing to travel separate paths towards a common goal, I believe we can find common ground if we state our terms clearly and are willing to engage in conversation. If veterinarians reclaim the idea of promoting basic animal rights, we will have gained as allies those moderates in the animal rights movement. Working together, we can be advocates for the powerless as we promote the interests of animals within our society.

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**References**