

Beyond Anthropocentrism: A Value-Theoretic Approach to Nonhuman Animal Ethics

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Abstract

The ethical considerability of nonhuman animals remains a central debate in moral philosophy, often constrained by anthropocentric frameworks that prioritize human interests and rationality. Traditional ethical theories, particularly Kantian deontology and classical utilitarianism, have historically relegated animals to mere instrumental value, denying them intrinsic worth. This paper addresses a critical gap in value theory—the absence of a rigorous philosophical foundation for recognizing nonhuman animals as moral subjects in their own right. Employing the conceptual analysis method, this study critically examines the distinction between intrinsic/inherent and extrinsic value, exploring how a value-theoretic approach can redefine our ethical obligations toward animals. Drawing on the works of Tom Regan, Peter Singer, and Paul Taylor, the paper challenges speciesist assumptions and advocates for an ethical model that extends moral status beyond human boundaries. Through insights from environmental ethics, virtue ethics, and contemporary debates on sentience, this study highlights the philosophical and practical implications of acknowledging nonhuman animals as ends in themselves. The paper concludes that embracing a non-anthropocentric perspective in moral philosophy is essential for fostering a more inclusive and just ethical order.

Keywords: Value Theory, Intrinsic Worth, Nonhuman Animal Ethics, Moral Considerability.

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INTRODUCTION

Context and Background

The question of the moral considerability of the nonhuman animals has remained a central debate in ethical discourse, particularly within the domains of moral philosophy and animal ethics. Historically, dominant moral frameworks such as Kantian deontology and classical utilitarianism have prioritized human rationality and interests, relegating animals to mere instrumental value. This anthropocentric perspective has shaped legal, social, and philosophical approaches to nonhuman animals, often denying them intrinsic worth (Regan, 1983; Singer, 1975). However, contemporary ethical discussions increasingly challenge these assumptions, advocating for a more inclusive moral framework that acknowledges the intrinsic or inherent value of nonhuman animals (Taylor, 1986). The implications of this discourse extend beyond philosophical debates, influencing environmental ethics, animal rights advocacy, and policy-making.

A critical issue in moral philosophy is the lack of a robust theoretical foundation for recognizing nonhuman animals as moral subjects in their own right. Despite growing recognition of their sentience and cognitive abilities, mainstream ethical theories have yet to fully integrate nonhuman animals within a value-theoretic framework that affirms their moral considerability. This paper seeks to address the following question: Do nonhuman animals possess intrinsic value, and if so, what are the ethical implications of recognizing their moral considerability?

This paper therefore asserts that nonhuman animals have intrinsic value or inherent worth and should thus be regarded as morally significant. By challenging anthropocentric biases and integrating insights from value theory, this study advocates for a paradigm shift toward a more inclusive ethical model that acknowledges the inherent worth of nonhuman animals.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the ethical and philosophical discourse on value theory, which explores the intrinsic and extrinsic worth of entities. A central question in moral philosophy is whether nonhuman animals possess intrinsic value, meaning they are valuable in and of themselves, or extrinsic value, meaning their worth is derived solely from their utility to humans (Taylor, 1986).

One of the most impactful ethical theories in this discussion is utilitarianism, especially in the form advanced by Jeremy Bentham (1781) and Peter Singer (1975). Bentham's seminal work introduced the idea that the capacity to suffer, rather than rationality, should be the basis for moral consideration. Singer (1975) built upon this notion, arguing that failing to extend moral consideration to animals constitutes speciesism, an unjustifiable bias similar to racism or sexism. His work remains foundational in the field of animal ethics, as it challenges anthropocentric perspectives and calls for an expansion of the moral circle to include all sentient beings.

Another key framework is deontological ethics, particularly Immanuel Kant's (1785) position that moral worth is tied to rationality. Kant (1786) contended that only rational beings—humans—can be ends in themselves, while nonhuman animals exist merely as means to human ends. However, critics such as Tom Regan (1983) argue that rationality should not be the sole criterion for moral worth. Regan argues that nonhuman animals, as "subjects-of-a-life," have intrinsic value and therefore hold rights that should be respected.

In contrast to both utilitarian and deontological positions, Paul Taylor (1986) advances a biocentric ethical framework, which holds that all living organisms, not just sentient beings, have intrinsic value. Taylor's life-centered ethics challenge the human-centered perspective by arguing that nonhuman animals have moral standing based on their ability to pursue their own good. This framework aligns with environmental ethics, which further extends moral consideration to entire ecosystems (Callicott, 1992).

Nevertheless, the literature highlights an ongoing gap: although numerous scholars advocate for the moral considerability of nonhuman animals, there is no unified ethical framework that systematically integrates value theory into the discourse on animal rights. This paper seeks to fill this gap by offering a value-theoretic approach that extends moral consideration beyond the human species.

Theories of Value and Moral Considerability Value Theory

Value theory, commonly referred to as axiology, is the philosophical study of the nature, classification, and justification of values, including

moral, aesthetic, and intrinsic worth (Frankena, 1973). It examines the principles by which actions, objects, and beings are assigned intrinsic or extrinsic value—a distinction central to ethical discourse (Taylor, 1986). Intrinsic value denotes something that is valuable in and of itself, regardless of any external purposes, while extrinsic (instrumental) value is derived from its usefulness in achieving another end (Regan, 1983).

In moral philosophy, value theory plays a crucial role in deontological ethics (Kant, 1785), utilitarianism (Bentham, 1781; Singer, 1975), and virtue ethics (Aristotle, 350 BCE). Kantian ethics emphasizes rationality and autonomy as the underlying basis for moral worth, whereas utilitarianism assesses value based on the capacity to experience pleasure and pain (Bentham, 1781). Conversely, biocentric and environmental ethics assert that all living organisms have intrinsic worth, extending moral consideration beyond humans (Callicott, 1992; Taylor, 1986).

Thus, value theory provides the foundation for ethical evaluations by determining what is worth pursuing, preserving, or respecting, shaping debates on human rights, animal ethics, and environmental responsibility (Regan, 1983; Singer, 1975).

Intrinsic Value vs. Extrinsic Value in Moral Philosophy

The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value is fundamental to ethical discussions on the moral status of nonhuman animals. Intrinsic value refers to worth that an entity possesses in itself, independent of its usefulness to others, whereas extrinsic (or instrumental) value is assigned based on how well an entity serves another's interests (Taylor, 1986). Traditional moral frameworks have predominantly viewed animals as possessing only instrumental value, primarily in relation to human needs (Regan, 1983).

Philosophers such as Tom Regan (1983) and Paul Taylor (1986) have opposed this view, arguing that nonhuman animals have inherent worth and should be morally considerable. Regan's rights-based approach asserts that animals are "subjects-of-a-life" with intrinsic value, making their exploitation morally indefensible. Taylor (1986), adopting a biocentric perspective, extends intrinsic worth not only to animals but to all living organisms, advocating for a life-centered ethics that challenges the anthropocentric bias in moral philosophy.

Speciesism and the Anthropocentric Bias

The concept of speciesism, coined by Richard Ryder (1979) and popularized by Peter Singer (1975), critiques the unjustified preference for human interests over those of nonhuman animals. Singer (1975) equates speciesism to other forms of discrimination, such as racism and sexism, arguing that moral considerability should be based on sentience—the capacity to

experience pain and pleasure—rather than species membership.

Kantian ethics, however, has traditionally upheld a hierarchical moral order, where moral worth is linked to rationality and autonomy (Kant, 1785). Kant (1786) argues that only rational beings can be taken as ends in themselves, while nonhuman animals exist as mere means. This view has been widely critiqued for failing to justify why rationality should be the sole criterion for moral worth, particularly in light of scientific findings on animal cognition and emotions (Bekoff, 2007; Panksepp, 2011).

The Intrinsic Value of Nonhuman Animals

Having elaborated on the notion of intrinsic value, we now turn to the question of whether nonhuman animals can rightfully be ascribed such value. Some moral philosophers argue that only human beings possess intrinsic value, primarily because they are the only rational beings in the world (Kant, 1785). To claim that a being has intrinsic worth is to assert that it is morally considerable, meaning that moral agents have obligations toward it (Warren, 1977). A key challenge in contemporary animal ethics is establishing whether nonhuman animals warrant moral consideration and, if so, on what basis. This can be framed as a fundamental question: Are we justified in regarding nonhuman animals as moral agents? Put differently, do nonhuman animals have moral standing comparable to that of humans?

To address these issues, George Graham (1993) posed a critical question: What does it mean to possess moral standing? In response, Mary Ann Warren (1977) argues that moral status is tied to moral considerability—that is, an entity is morally considerable if moral agents have obligations toward it. The criteria for moral considerability, she argues, lie in the intrinsic value or inherent worth of the entity (Warren, 1977). If an entity holds moral status, it is valued for its own sake rather than merely for its utility to others. This signifies that it is inherently good or desirable, rather than being valued solely as a means to an end (Regan, 1983).

Furthermore, Tom Regan (1983) supports this perspective by asserting that an animal's moral claim is equivalent to a moral right. Consequently, any action that disregards an animal's inherent worth infringes upon its rights and is therefore morally unacceptable (Regan, 2004). From this perspective, treating animals as mere instruments for human benefit, whether for food, scientific research, or entertainment, constitutes a moral violation of their rights (Regan, 1985). Regan (1985) asserts that animals are consistently and systematically treated as if their value is merely defined by their usefulness to others; they are repeatedly subjected to disregard and lack of respect, resulting in the frequent and systematic violation of their rights.

Anti-speciesists further argue that nonhuman animals deserve moral consideration because they are ends in themselves, not merely means to human ends (Singer, 1975). They argue that their moral worth is not determined by their usefulness to humans, but rather on their intrinsic value as sentient beings. Supporting this notion, Elizabeth Anderson (2004) affirms that animals possess intrinsic value, meaning they have worth in their own right, independent of their usefulness to humans. In fact, all living beings inherently hold value, both as individual organisms and as interconnected components of the ecosystem and the biosphere as a whole.

To reiterate, the concept of ends and means is crucial to understanding moral considerability. Ends are sought after because of their inherent value, whereas means are valuable only in relation to their ability to achieve an end (Echekwube, 1999). Many ethicists, from Jeremy Bentham (1781) to Peter Singer (1975), consider nonhuman animals as possessing intrinsic value. They argue that when humans use animals as food, for research, or for recreation, they exploit them as mere means to human ends.

Another argument for recognizing the moral considerability of nonhuman animals is based on the principle of respect for nature. This principle upholds a moral duty to safeguard the well-being of living beings as ends in themselves, rather than merely in relation to human interests (Taylor, 1986). According to this perspective, regarding nonhuman animals as possessing inherent worth is a commitment to both moral consideration and intrinsic value (Taylor, 1981).

Intrinsic Value as a Justification for the Moral Considerability of Nonhuman Animals

Paul Taylor (1986) asserts that the moral attitude of respect for nonhuman animals is founded on two fundamental principles:

1. The good (well-being or welfare) of a living thing
2. The idea of an entity possessing inherent worth

The first principle asserts that every living organism possesses a good of its own, meaning it can experience benefit or harm independently of its relation to other entities (Taylor, 1986). Having a good of its own implies that an organism has interests that can either be advanced or obstructed. What benefits an entity contributes to its life and well-being, whereas what harms it threatens its survival (Taylor, 1986).

For a nonhuman animal, its good lies in the full realization of its biological potential, allowing it to remain strong, healthy, and capable of flourishing within its environment (Taylor, 1981). However, human intervention has often disregarded this good, subjecting animals to conditions that serve human interests while disregarding their inherent worth. The widespread practice of genetically modifying, domesticating, and

confining animals for human consumption and experimentation exemplifies how humans appropriate the intrinsic value of animals for their own ends (Taylor, 1986).

Taylor (1986) emphasizes that having a good of its own does not necessarily imply conscious awareness of that good. A being does not need to have interests in the same way as humans to warrant moral consideration. For instance, a trapped cat may lack awareness of its predicament, yet humans can either assist or harm it, thereby affecting its good. Therefore, moral agents are obligated to take the well-being of nonhuman animals into account, even if those animals lack the ability to comprehend or express their interests (Taylor, 1986).

The second key principle underlying the moral considerability of nonhuman animals is the concept of inherent worth. This perspective toward wild living beings emerges only when we recognize them as having intrinsic value (Taylor, 1986). Recognizing inherent worth is what compels moral agents to assume ethical responsibilities toward nonhuman animals.

Taylor (1986) argues that two general principles underlie the recognition of nonhuman animals as having inherent worth:

1. The principle of moral consideration or moral regard – Nonhuman animals are morally considerable and should be factored into ethical decision-making.
2. The principle of intrinsic value or inherent worth – Nonhuman animals have worth independently of their utility to humans.

These principles establish moral obligations toward nonhuman animals as integral members of the Earth's biotic community, emphasizing that their well-being is valuable in itself rather than solely serving human interests (Taylor, 1986).

Analysis of Ethical Perspectives on Nonhuman Animal Consideration

Utilitarianism and the Argument from Sentience

The utilitarian framework, especially as developed by Jeremy Bentham (1781) and Peter Singer (1975), bases moral considerability on the ability to suffer rather than rationality. Bentham famously stated: *"The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? But, Can they suffer?"* (Bentham, 1781, p. 17).

Singer (1975) expands on this, arguing that ignoring animal suffering is ethically unjustifiable. He proposes that moral decision-making should weigh human and nonhuman interests equally, leading to the principle of equal consideration of interests. Empirical studies on animal cognition and emotions further support this view, demonstrating that many species exhibit pain responses, social bonding, and problem-solving abilities (Goodall, 2000; Bekoff & Byers, 1998).

Deontological Ethics and Animal Rights

While Kantian ethics denies animals moral status due to their lack of rational autonomy (Kant, 1785), Tom Regan (1983) challenges this view by arguing that nonhuman animals are not mere things but subjects-of-a-life with their own preferences, desires, and experiences. According to Regan: *"Animals are consistently and systematically treated as if their value is limited to their usefulness to others, leading to the routine and systematic violation of their rights"* (Regan, 1983, p. 41).

Regan's rights-based approach asserts that nonhuman animals, like humans, have inherent dignity and moral rights, making their use for food, research, or entertainment ethically impermissible.

Biocentric Ethics and Environmental Perspectives

Moving beyond anthropocentrism, Paul Taylor's (1986) biocentric egalitarianism argues that all living beings have an equal right to exist and flourish. In contrast to Singer and Regan, who emphasize sentience, Taylor expands moral considerability to include plants, ecosystems, and non-sentient life forms, advocating for a life-centered ethical approach. Similarly, J. Baird Callicott's (1992) environmental ethics highlights the interconnectedness of species and argues that moral duties should extend beyond individual animals to entire ecosystems.

Empirical Evidence Supporting Moral Considerability

Animal Cognition and Emotional Capacities

Recent research in cognitive ethology and neuroscience provide compelling evidence that nonhuman animals exhibit self-awareness, problem-solving skills, and emotional depth (Bekoff, 2007; Panksepp, 2011). Research shows that:

- Elephants mourn their dead and exhibit long-term grief responses (Bekoff & Byers, 1998).
- Dolphins and primates use tools and demonstrate social intelligence (Goodall, 2000).
- Neuroscientific findings indicate that mammalian brains share similar structures responsible for experiencing pain and pleasure (Panksepp, 2011).
- Igbo Philosophy of Egbe bere Ugo bere (Live and let live) and Ugwu Anu (Animal Integrity) (Metuonu, 2024).

These findings undermine Kantian arguments that only humans possess moral worth due to their rationality, providing empirical support for utilitarian and rights-based perspectives on animal ethics.

Addressing Counter Arguments and Alternative Perspectives

Kantian Rationality vs. Sentience as a Moral Criterion

Kantian ethicists argue that rationality, not sentience, should determine moral considerability (Wood, 1998). However, critics highlight that this excludes many humans, such as infants and individuals with cognitive impairments, creating a marginal cases problem (Gruen, 2012). If these humans are considered morally considerable despite lacking rational autonomy, the same logic should extend to sentient nonhuman animals (Singer, 1975).

The Human Utility Argument

Some argue that humans require animal products for survival and that human interests outweigh those of nonhuman animals (Francione, 2008). However, modern research in nutrition and alternatives to animal testing suggests that exploiting animals is unnecessary for human well-being (Singer, 1975). Additionally, adopting a non-anthropocentric ethical model aligns with broader sustainability goals, promoting environmental conservation and ecological balance (Callicott, 1992).

CONCLUSION

This paper has critically analyzed the philosophical and empirical basis for recognizing the moral considerability of nonhuman animals, advocating for a value-theoretic approach that moves beyond anthropocentric biases. The discussion has engaged with utilitarianism, deontological ethics, and biocentric perspectives, highlighting how each ethical framework approaches the question of intrinsic value and moral status. Utilitarian arguments, particularly those advanced by Bentham (1781) and Singer (1975), highlight sentience as the foundation for moral consideration, while deontological perspectives, notably Kant (1785), have historically restricted moral worth to rational beings. This paper has challenged these anthropocentric assumptions, drawing on Tom Regan's (1983) rights-based approach and Paul Taylor's (1986) biocentric ethics, both of which advocate for recognizing the intrinsic value or inherent worth of nonhuman animals.

A key resolve of this study is that nonhuman animals possess intrinsic value independent of their utility to humans. By demonstrating cognitive complexity, emotional depth, and self-awareness, various species meet the criteria for moral considerability (Bekoff, 2007; Panksepp, 2011). Empirical research in animal cognition and neuroscience further reinforces the argument that rationality should not be the sole determinant of moral worth, thereby dismantling traditional speciesist perspectives.

This study therefore contributes to the growing field of animal ethics and environmental philosophy, advocating for a shift toward a non-anthropocentric ethical paradigm. The recognition of nonhuman animals

as moral subjects has profound implications for legislation, conservation policies, and ethical decision-making in scientific research, food production, and environmental management. By rejecting speciesism and instrumentalist views of nonhuman animals, this paper calls for an ethical model that upholds autonomy and well-being of all living beings.

The moral consideration of nonhuman animals is not merely a theoretical concern but a pressing moral imperative. As moral agents, humans are obligated to extend ethical regard beyond their species, fostering a more just, inclusive, and ecologically responsible world. By embracing a value-theoretic approach, we move toward an ethical model that respects all forms of life as inherently valuable, ensuring a more balanced moral order for future generations.

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